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The Environmental Consequences of Extreme Tourism in Fragile Ecosystems

Khayriniso Ganieva [1*], Durdona Madaminova [2], Nodir Karimov [3], Anastasiya Seytasmanova [4], Shakhnoza Nashirova [5], Mohinur Nizomova [6], Aziza Zoirova [7], Sevara Khamidova [8]

[1*] Jizzakh State Pedagogical University, Uzbekistan. E-mail: khayrinisoganiyeva@gmail.com

[2] Tashkent State Law University, Uzbekistan. E-mail: d_madaminova@mail.ru

[3] Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, Uzbekistan. E-mail: nodir-karimov@list.ru

[4] Jizzakh State Pedagogical University, Uzbekistan. E-mail: anastasiasejtasmanova@gmail.com

[5] Karshi State University, Uzbekistan. E-mail: shakhnozanashirova99@gmail.com

[6] Karshi State University, Uzbekistan. E-mail: mohinurnizomova90@gmail.com

[7] Karshi State University, Uzbekistan. E-mail: azizazoirova112@gmail.com

[8] Jizzakh State Pedagogical University, Uzbekistan. E-mail: khamidova@jspi.uz

Abstract

Extreme tourism, typically featuring high-intensity activities in isolated or pristine areas of nature, is becoming much more popular. This trend has engendered concerns over its implications for fragile ecosystems. The environmental impacts of extreme tourism are the concern of this study, with special reference to those ecosystems that are most susceptible to ecological disruption. The analysis looks into the various implications that take place in regard to soil erosion, habitat disturbance, pollution, and loss of biodiversity, events that gain intensity with increasing footfall and infrastructural demands in these regions. The paper further discusses the contribution of inadequate regulatory measures and non-existent sustainable practices within the tourism industry to environmental degradation. The present case studies and the recent data explain in detail the urgent need to establish eco-friendly policies and sustainable tourism models that balance recreational demands with environmental preservation. Results stress the importance of policy makers, tour operators, and local

*Corresponding Author: Khayriniso Ganieva, E-mail: khayrinisoganiyeva@gmail.com

communities joining hands to diminish the detrimental effects of extreme tourism and ensure the resiliency of these fragile ecosystems for future generations.

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Physical contact, ecological integrity, ecosystem, biodiversity loss, pollution and waste buildup, cultural integrity.

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Introduction

Extreme tourism attracts the adventurers among the tourists to the most virgin and unreachable territories: mountain peaks, deserts, polar regions, and deep-sea sites. While these destinations represent a source of something that evokes a feeling of wonderful beauty and thrill, they are generally ecologically sensitive and even susceptible to minimal human intervention. Ecosystems like the Arctic tundras, coral reefs, tropical rainforests, and deserts have unique, often endemic species that have adapted to those specific conditions over long periods. These sudden influxes of tourists can disrupt these delicate balances, leading to habitat degradation, pollution, and loss of biodiversity (Gladkova & Gladkov, 2021).

Physical contact and pollution caused by diving, for instance, can easily damage the marine life supported by coral reefs. Equally, trekking and climbing in mountainous areas disturb the wild animals and result in soil erosion and loss of vegetation, thus affecting the whole ecosystem. All these environmental impacts, among others, therefore call for responsible tourism. This increase in extreme tourism, if not well managed, could bring permanent damage to these fragile ecosystems, reducing their ecological integrity and natural experiences. For conservation, sustainable tourism strategies will be needed that enable people to responsibly experience such beauty (Farfoura et al., 2023).

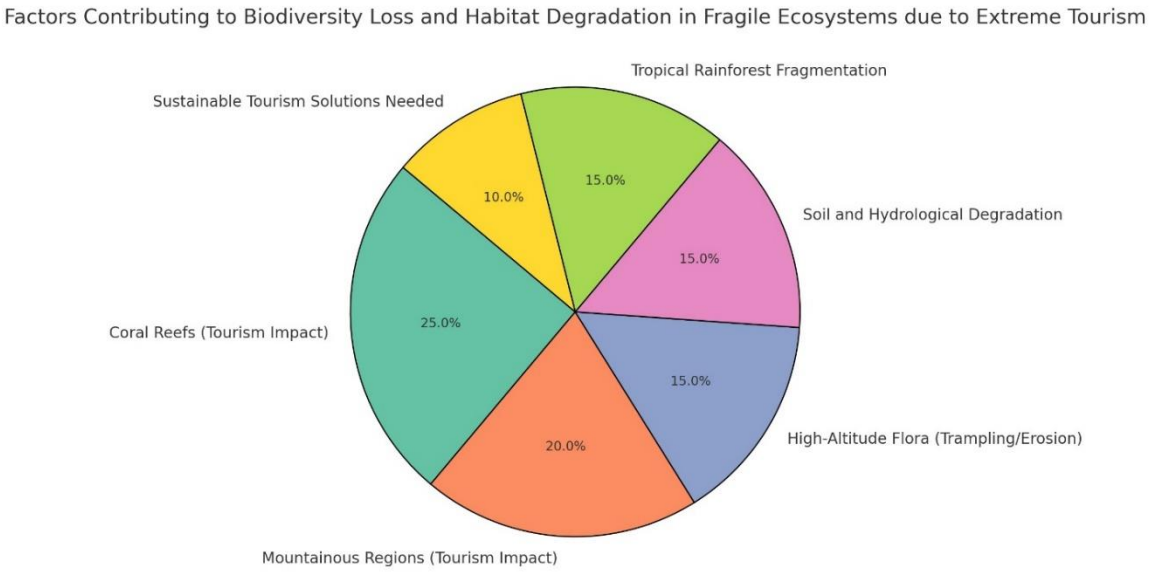
Biodiversity Loss and Habitat Degradation

Fragile ecosystems found around the world are, by and large, harbors of rare and endemic species that have adapted to specific conditions of the environment and usually exist in isolation from the rest of the world. Human intrusion, including tourism, has brought a very serious threat to the fragile ecosystem, resulting in the loss of biodiversity and degradation of habitats. Unlike resilient areas, these cannot bear or withstand even minor disturbance or imbalances in nature, which in the normal case would have been established through a long process of evolution over thousands of years (Buckley, 2000).

This is appropriately reflected by coral reefs alone, which sustain almost 25% of all marine species and form a habitat or breeding ground for manifold types of marine life. Tourism activities include snorkeling, diving, and recreational fishing, all of which apply tremendous pressure to marine life underwater. This is where the corals get easily damaged due to physical contact-usually by the tourists or their accessories. Simple contact can break or bruise the tissue of the coral, which opens avenues to infection and interferes with nutrient cycling in the reef. Often, the effect is bleaching of the coral-a sudden exodus of the symbiotic algae, the true source of a coral's color and very basis of life on the reef. Without these algae, corals lose color and energy sources, leading to widespread coral mortality. This, in turn, affects all of the marine ecosystem from the small fish that use the corals as shelter right up to the big predators feeding on them and down the oceanic food chain.

In fact, the mountainous regions, especially the Himalayas, are also victimized with tourism development. With increasing interest in trekking, mountaineering, and adventure tourism, previously remote areas have now become more accessible. Fragmentation of habitats occurs as trails, campsites, and other development has interfered with wildlife migration and feeding patterns. They are losing their homes due to climate change, while the human activity increasingly forces them out of their home ground. Further population declines are threatened due to disrupted patterns in the movement and breeding of such species (Belsoy et al., 2012).

Apart from fauna, the invasion of tourists in mountain areas influences local flora. Most of the plants inhabiting high-altitude zones are adapted to slow growth on nutrient-poor soils and therefore are particularly susceptible to trampling. The repeated blows of feet in trails and campsites compact the soil, reduce its water-holding capacity, and destroy its structure. This often results in heavy soil erosion that can take away whole layers of topsoil, making regeneration for native plants impossible (Cohen, 1978). Loss in plant life then serves as a snowball effect-with inadequate vegetation, the stability of the soil becomes very low, which results in further erosion and runoff during rainfall, possibly affecting the quality of downstream water and reducing the retention of water within the ecosystem. Along with the decrease in plant diversity, there is also a loss of food sources for herbivores and indirectly to predator populations that feed on those animals. Factors driving biodiversity loss and habitat degradation in vulnerable ecosystems as a result of excessive tourism shown in Pie Chart 1.



Pie Chart 1. Factors contributing to biodiversity loss and habitat degradation in fragile ecosystems due to extreme tourism

These effects also extend to the balance of soil health and hydrology. Soil in sensitive ecosystems helps to store nutrients and also absorb water critical for plant life and, consequently, wildlife. In cases of degraded soil through erosion or compaction, its capabilities of holding moisture become compromised and add to increased runoff, possibly leading to flooding in nearby areas. Nutrient depletion from soil erosion, for example, further leads to stunted development of plant species that may have only adapted to the mineral composition present in a given locality. It is with reduced vegetation diversity and density that the ecosystem likewise loses its capacity to buffer environmental changes, such as fluctuating temperatures or variable rainfall (Hanski, 2011).

Human intrusion into areas, such as the Amazon, which exhibit exceptionally high levels of biodiversity, has led to extreme reductions in species diversity owing to habitat fragmentation. Tropical rainforests house millions of species; owing to exotic tourism, tourists have encroached on those regions. Trails cut out for visitors reduce forest continuity, and thus susceptible species will fall victim to predation and are less able to feed and mate. For some species, such as several birds, reptiles, and insects, a very small reduction in forest cover is sufficient to bring about population collapse.

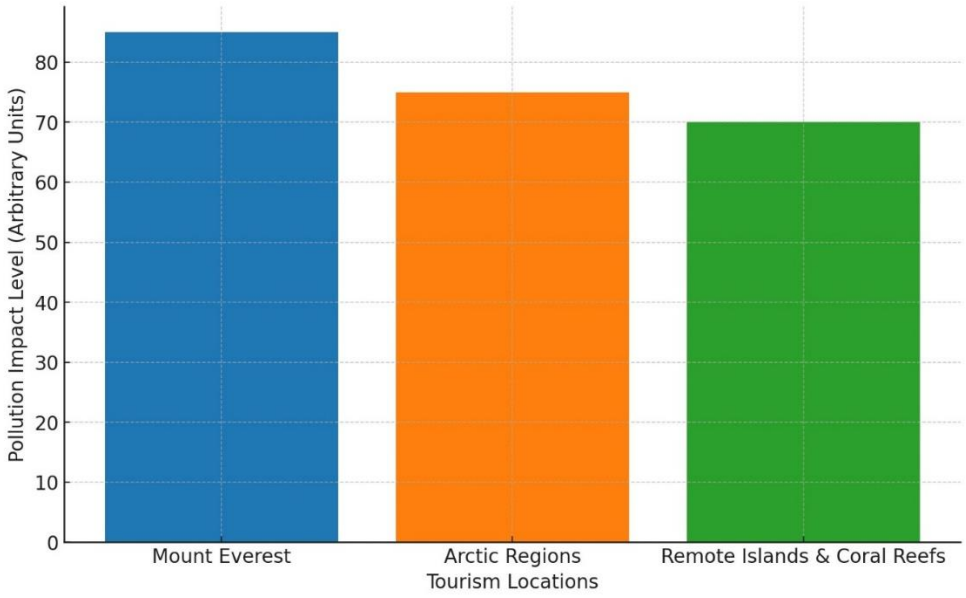
These environmental challenges call for a concerted effort at managing tourism in a sustainable way. Restrictions on the number of visitors into fragile areas, stringent guidelines on how to treat the wildlife, and the creation of trails can reduce these impacts to just a few. Educating the tourists about the impacts of touching coral or leaving the trails is very essential. Regulations, which should go hand in hand with sustainable tourism practices, mark the way for protection of these ecosystems into the future. Not taking any genuine measures for taming the pressures of extreme tourism, biodiversity in fragile ecosystems will just not stop declining further and irrecoverably lose unique species and habitats that have evolved over millennia.

Pollution and Waste Buildup

Tourism to these remote and extreme environments creates a serious burden of pollution to which the ecosystem is poorly adapted. Tourists visiting high-altitude regions, polar zones, and isolated marine areas deposit much waste that often accumulates and persists long after the mission, disrupting the local ecology. Such pollution is of particular concern in fragile ecosystems where wastes cannot be readily absorbed or degraded because the climate is harsh, few microorganisms are present, or infrastructure for waste management does not exist.

Waste from tourism can be better contextualized using Mount Everest. Over several decades, several thousand pounds of garbage left by climbers, including plastic, cans, used oxygen cylinders, and human waste, had been difficult to collect and dispose of due to extreme altitude and treacherous conditions (Camarda & Grassini, 2003). It results in various forms of hazards to the ecosystem. For example, oxygen canisters left at high altitudes can allow residual chemicals to seep into the environment over time, thus polluting the local flora and soil. Plastic waste decomposes very slowly, and due to limited microbial activity at such altitude, these plastics remain there almost for ever, posing a long-term threat to vegetation and animals that might come across them while moving down the slopes. The open defecation of human waste permeates into snow and soil, poisoning local water supplies and tainting it with pathogens that can harm wildlife dependent upon glacial runoff.

The Arctic is no different as tourism increases. With the promise of unique wildlife and dramatic landscapes, the tourists visiting this region have been on the rise, and this traffic has left behind pollutants that persist in a slow environment to break down synthetic materials. Microplastics from clothing and packaging, fuel residues from cruise ships, and sunscreen chemicals build up in the water system of the Arctic and disrupt local marine life. In the case of microplastics, for instance, after these are taken in by small fish, they build their way up into the food chain until affecting larger predators such as polar bears and seals. Residues of fuel and other chemicals further pollute the water, putting these animals in graver danger of survival upon already suffering due to shrinking sea ice. Second, many forms of pollutants can exhibit compounding effects as such chemicals become more concentrated up the food chain and can lead to undermined health and reproductive capabilities in larger predators. Pollution and waste buildup in destinations affected by extreme tourism shown in Bar Chart 1.



Bar Chart 1. Pollution and waste accumulation in extreme tourism destinations

Remote islands and coral reefs attract not only adventure tourists but also divers. These places are facing severe affects of pollution caused by plastics, fuel leakage, and chemicals that could annihilate the marine ecosystem altogether. Sunscreens applied by snorkelers and divers contain chemicals like oxybenzone, which harm the coral polyps and can lead to bleaching and reduced resistance against diseases of the coral. Boats and jet-skis shoot fuel residues and heavy metals into the water, which end up settling on reefs and ingested by fish and other marine organisms. Over time, these poisons kill coral colonies, diminishing their ability to reproduce and regenerate. In general, fuel and chemical pollutants interfere with normal behaviors of marine life such as feeding and breeding, thus de-stabilizing the entire ecosystem (Palennari et al., 2023).

One of the most upsetting things to take into consideration regarding pollution in these environments is how perpetual it has become. Due to frigid climates and lack of microbial activity, waste does not decompose fast enough. Items left in places such as the Arctic or Everest could take centuries to fully degrade-meaning each tourist's waste leaves a mark. The lingering presence of waste in these fragile ecosystems not only endangers local plant and animal life but also changes the character of these landscapes, detracting from their pristine quality and undermining ecological integrity (Mohanty et al., 2024).

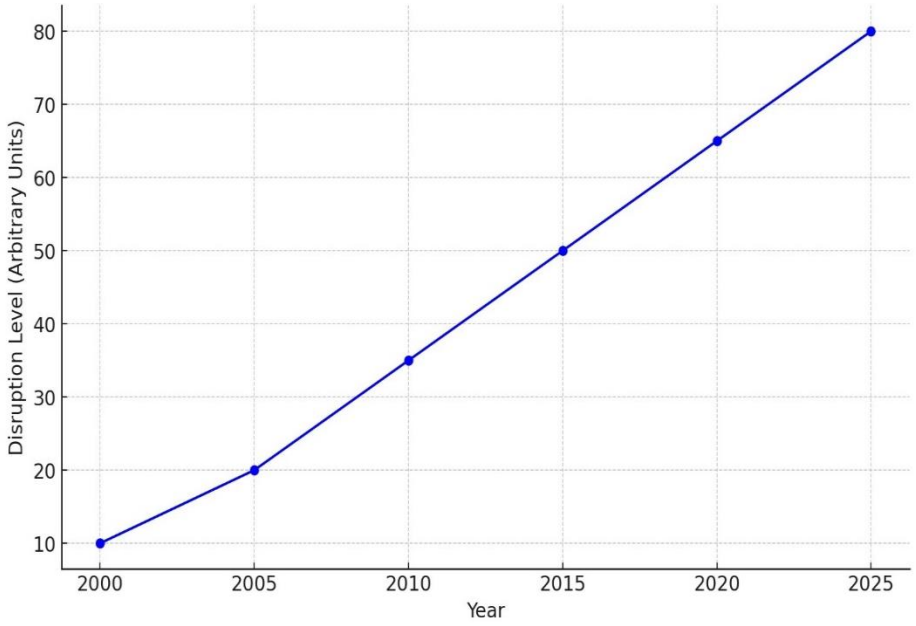
The only solution that might hope to battle this is with increased regulations to cope with the waste generated in such intense environmental conditions. In fact, several expeditions to high altitude and Arctic cruises have instituted policies of carrying out all waste that a participant brings in. Expanding these regulations, along with enforcing them more strictly, could reduce accumulation (Weber, 2013). Then, eco-tourism operators can be compelled to invest in technologies which mitigate their pollution footprint, such as nontoxic, biodegradable alternatives to conventional products and cleaner, low-emission transportation options. It can further make a difference with the public education of the lasting impact of litter and pollution in these environments, encouraging tourists to adopt an increasingly respectful approach towards nature.

Dislocation of Local Communities and Loss of Cultural Integrity

Indigenous communities often live in remote, ecologically sensitive areas and are attached to their lands through generations of cultural, spiritual, and economic practices. Tourist inflows into these areas shake the very foundations of life in these communities and introduce alien practices that are often at variance with local

mores. This disruption has probably been most keenly felt in places such as the Amazon rainforest, with indigenous communities faced by pressures wrought by tourism, having to adapt their lifestyles or risk displacement. The commercialization of local cultural practices for tourism purposes more often than not leads to traditions once integral to community life being commodified. Such commodification may cause a practice to lose its meaning and authenticity, as this is then substituted with performative display before the expectations of tourists (Dragouni, 2017).

There is physical relocation for the indigenous people with tourists coming in, which has been forced upon them and has made them give up their ancestral lands and the way of life. All this is increased by demands for infrastructural development to accommodate and provide for tourists with things like hotels, roads, and restaurants. For instance, in the Amazonian area of Peru, building roads and tourism infrastructure has intruded into indigenous land, bringing with it land ownership conflicts, hence creating an opportunity for conflict between indigenous communities and tourism developers. The dependence on local resources-water, arable land-forces the natives often either to adapt their style of living or to migrate. This displacement is extremely costly psychically, as the cultural identities of indigenous peoples often are irretrievably entangled with their lands, places of spiritual importance, and unique ecosystems. Loss of access to these areas can lead to disruption in the life of the community, a disturbance in the traditional forms of governance, and loss of knowledge accrued over generations. Long-term disruption of local communities and cultural integrity caused by extreme tourism shown in Line Graph 1.



Line Graph 1. Disruption of local communities and cultural integrity over time due to extreme tourism

Tourism-related economic incentives could induce major lifestyle changes. In places like the Maasai Mara, local Maasai communities have experienced pressures to move away from their traditional pastoralist lifestyle into tourism-related employment. Guided tours, cultural performances, and hospitality often boast better immediate incomes than pastoralism, thus encouraging a shift away from land-based pursuits. But this change, in the longer term, may have a negative impact on ethnographic heritage (Bhattacharya, 2020). While the Maasai are working in tourism-oriented jobs, parts of their traditional knowledge, land-use practices, and even languages will be irretrievably lost. Younger generations may focus more on acquiring skills for working in the tourism industry, rather than cultural knowledge, thus weakening the community's cultural integrity.

Besides, tourism-based sources of income are seasonal and precarious; this means economic instability apart from the more self-sustaining lifestyle once provided by the traditional practices (Cárdenas et al., 2015).

Peculiar tourism can also pose a set of challenges in the social integrity of indigenous peoples. The coming of outsiders, often without any respect for local values, brings in foreign attitudes and expectations that may be incompatible with indigenous tradition. Tourist behavior, on occasions, has offended cultural traditions and infringed upon sacred sites, alienating these very peoples from their culture. For instance, in Polynesian Islands, people have raised concerns over violations in areas of scared sites and cultural protocol by tourists. These actions desacralize such places, hence demeaning cultural and spiritual importance attached to them within the community.

Climate Change and Carbon Footprint

Most of the extreme tourism activities require long-distance traveling either by plane, boat, or all-terrain vehicle-each one contributing to the emission of greenhouse gases responsible for accelerating climate change. This carbon footprint is very much worse because these emissions build up through time, increasing the warming effect on the planet. For instance, frequent flights to far-flung destinations such as the Arctic or Antarctic bring with them numerous emissions of carbon, which contribute to enhanced warming in these susceptible regions. It is this warming that is having a direct impact on the tourism-flung environments, thus engendering a paradox whereby tourism speeds up the deterioration of the very attractions that attract visitors.

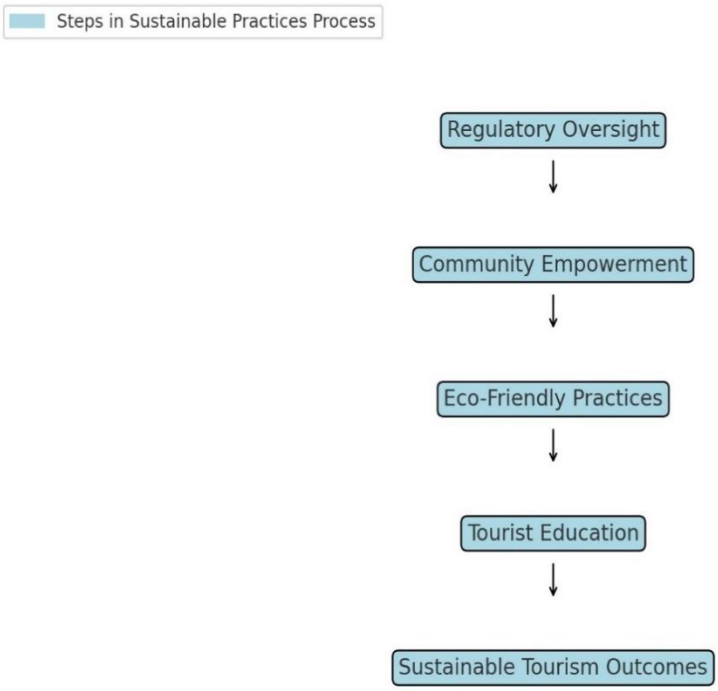
Indeed, the Arctic presents a perfect example of the effects of carbon emissions resulting from tourism. This has also caused a thaw of permafrost in the region: emissions from travel and local activities disrupt a sensitive balance in the ecosystem, which previously kept much of the tundra region frozen. In a feedback loop, thawed permafrost gives off methane, a very potent greenhouse gas that then accelerates the global warming process. This also contributes to destabilizing the local ecosystems and human communities through its effects on the ground, in turn causing structural damage and changes to the water systems on which indigenous populations rely for drinking and fishing. The irony of tourism in the Arctic is that visitors travel specifically to see its stark, frozen beauty, while their very act of traveling there inadvertently contributes to its transformation.

Analogously, tourism to Antarctica faces a similar environmental concern, with strict regulations set up for this unique environment. Where there is tourism, there is always a risk of invasive species that can hitch a ride on boats and equipment and unbalance the ecosystem. This can threaten local species even in regulated tourism, carrying potential pollution due to fuel spills from ships or foreign materials introduced by accident. Changes like these easily disturb very sensitive penguins and other natives. Besides, proximity to humans and exposure to pollutants can alter their breeding and feeding habits. This Antarctic environment, with such extreme isolation, is indeed so sensitive to such changes because there is no biological diversity and resilience that might be present in less extreme conditions (Karimov et al., 2024). Every single visitor to the continent of Antarctica leaves his or her carbon footprint, not only from travel but also from logistics support that enables safe operations in such a very remote area: fuel, supplies, and waste management.

With acceleration in climate change, more stress on fragile ecosystems can be expected, and there is an urgent need to re-think extreme tourism in light of its environmental cost. The effects of carbon emissions from tourism extend to most ecosystems and communities, far from the tourists themselves. Such efforts might focus on encouraging low-carbon transport modes, flying less frequently to remote sites, shifting tourism to less carbon-intensive activities or alternative sites, and so on.

Solutions and Sustainable Practices

These environmental and cultural disruptions must be dealt with through regulatory oversight at both the community and tourist education levels. It is within the powers of governments and tour operators to devise mutually agreeable policies that take into account cultural preservation as well as environmental concerns. This may be as simple as establishing limits on the number of visitors into sensitive areas, thereby easing the environmental burden and lessening wear and tear on cultural sites. This calls for indigenous communities to be involved in the planning and management of tourism in their areas, such that tourism development becomes responsive to the values and priorities of indigenous peoples. Community-based tourism enterprises provide opportunities for economic benefits along with cultural preservation, where the residents can determine how tourism relates to their culture and environment (Karimov et al., 2024). Strategies and sustainable practices to mitigate the impact of extreme tourism shown in Process 1.



Process 1: Solutions and sustainable practices for extreme tourism impact

It can also be greener by slashing carbon emissions through carbon offset programs, sustainable materials, and low-impact alternatives to popular tourist activities. Responsible travel behavior, in respect of cultural sites and following local guidelines, can be taught to tourists, though that is a partial attempt at mitigating some of the negative impacts of extreme tourism.

Sustainable Solutions Responsible Tourism

The challenges of extreme tourism call for sustainable tourism practices that will conserve both the environment and culture. For that matter, it is important to note that sustainable tourism aims to minimize ecological disruption, protect the cultures of the hosts, and promote environmentally responsible behavior in all phases of a tourist's experience. It goes without saying that such a situation can be accomplished through proper coordination between governments, agencies of tourism, operators, and communities for the implementation of the ideas mentioned above in order for them to ensure protection of fragile ecosystems and their cultures for a long period.

1. Regulatory Environmental Protection

The establishment of strict regulations governing the activities of tourists in ecologically sensitive areas remains one of the most important instruments of sustainable tourism. This may entail cooperation between and within governments, possibly through environmental agencies, which will demarcate specific zones in line with ecological studies determining the carrying capacity of the area. For instance, places such as coral reefs are extremely sensitive to human interference and could have quotas in the number of divers and snorkelers (Ruzibaeva et al., 2024). In this case, in places such as the Great Barrier Reef, the application of visitor quotas and mandatory permits has reduced the level of physical damage and coral bleaching associated with high volumes of tourists. This sets a limit on the number of visitors to specific natural reserves, such as the Galápagos Islands, for instance, and enforces seasonal closures to allow wildlife an opportunity to recover from the human disturbances.

Indeed, regulations about how waste is treated, prohibition against the use of single-use plastics, and limited use of chemicals that harm the environment-specific types of sunscreen-can help reduce pollution in these sensitive ecosystems. In doing so, the governments will ensure that tourism does not damage those natural resources and biodiversity that make destinations appealing to visit in the first place.

2. Ecological Certification for Responsible Tourism Operators

Eco certifications have assisted in providing a mechanism that could help tourists identify and support operators committed to sustainability. The certifications evaluate companies on energy usage, waste management, carbon emissions, and environmental stewardship. That ensures the operators with eco-certification adopt practices aimed at reducing their impacts on the natural environment. Programs such as the Global Sustainable Tourism Council and Green Globe Certification identified international standards of sustainable tourism that enable certified operators to communicate their commitment to responsible practices.

Pernicious forms of tourism can, in many respects, benefit from certification programs where eco-certified companies offer low-impact activities that respect environmental constraints. For example, eco-certified operators in the Arctic and Antarctic try to use cleaner sources of energy, manage waste properly, and obey strict environmental rules that limit the scope of their carbon footprint. When tourists travel with certified operators, they are-by every measure-enabling demand for greener business practices, thereby reinforcing the important principle that environmental protection be enshrined as part of a company's core values.

3. Low-Emission Transportation and Technology Adoption

One of the major contributors to a carbon footprint in extreme tourism is transportation. Long-distance flights, boats, and all-terrain vehicles emit enormous amounts of GHGs, which enhance global warming and threaten fragile ecosystems. Sustainable tourism enterprises can reduce emissions by promoting low-impact transportation options, such as hybrid or electric vehicles, biofuel-powered boats, and shared transportation arrangements. In these destinations, which are coastal or island areas, electric boats and yachts are used for transferring the tourists without causing pollution to sensitive marine environments.

Other tools used to balance out the emissions are carbon offset programs, which tourism operators and travelers can utilize. The offset programs invest in renewable energy, reforestation, and carbon capture to neutralize the emission produced by the traveling activities. Several countries and companies operating

eco-tourism have already integrated such programs into their services, hence allowing tourists to calculate and offset their carbon footprint upon booking trips.

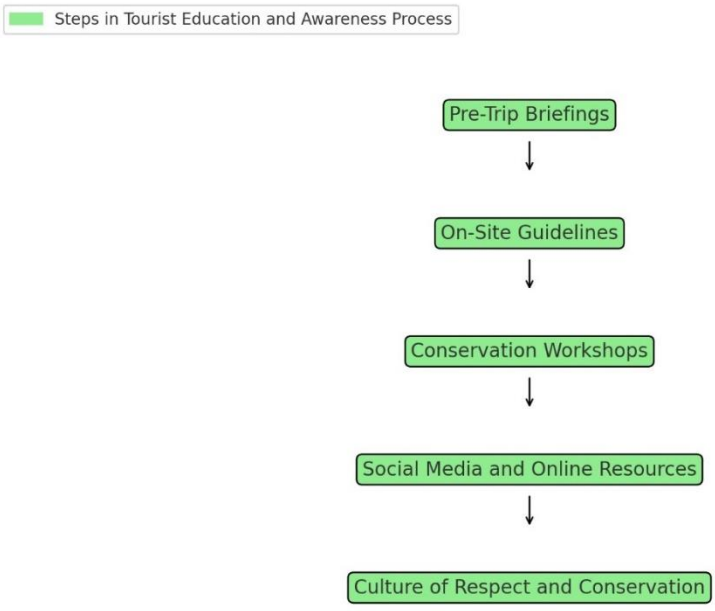
4. Community-led tourism and Cultural Preservation

It is vital during tourism development and management that local communities are involved to ensure equal distribution of proceeds and respect for traditional practices. This is the means through which indigenous-led tourism initiatives give the leading role to local people in having full control over how tourism affects the environment and cultural heritage. For example, in the case of the Amazon, indigenous cooperatives organize guided tours as a kind of tourism representative of their culture and bringing awareness about environmental concerns. Such tours often bring to light indigenous knowledge in the management of land and conservation for sustainability, hence bridging the gap in culture and respect.

Community-owned tourism initiatives could also avoid cultural commodification since locals can present their traditions according to their own terms rather than according to the outsider's expectations. Most community-managed projects reinvest a portion of their proceeds in additional conservation, including reforestation, care for wild animals, and sustainable agriculture, for the benefit of the local ecology and citizens. By having just wage policies and reinvesting into the growth of communities, such initiatives provide models that favor cultural identity and good management of the environment (Kurbanazarova et al., 2024).

5. Tourism Education and Awareness Programs

Such misunderstanding widens their ecological footprint, which can be reduced when tourists are educated on responsible behavior in the respective ecosystems they will visit. This can be imparted as pre-trip briefings, simple guidelines on the site, and workshops focused on conservation at the site of tourism. A number of national parks and operators of eco-tourism have already been able to educate their guests through visitor education programs where one is educated on issues like proper waste disposal, use of design trails, avoiding disturbance to animals, and not tampering with specific cultural spots. Programs for educating tourists and raising awareness about responsible tourism shown in Process 2.



Process 2. Tourist education and awareness programs for responsible tourism

Social media and online resources can be tapped in the campaign for responsible tourism. Every tourist is encouraged to share their experiences in responsible travel and advocate the principle of "leave no trace" to fellow travelers. By installing a culture of respect and conservation among tourists, education efforts will lessen the cumulative impact brought by tourism on a fragile environment.

Conclusion

Extreme tourism, as a form of travel to fragile ecosystems, epitomizes the paradox of human curiosity with environmental vulnerability. Unique for their striking beauty, biodiversity, and cultural richness, these ecosystems are susceptible to degradation because of tourism practices that are non-viable. Loss of biodiversity, pollution, cultural disruption, and contribution to climate change are critical issues that threaten the survival of these ecosystems and communities they support. Provided that sustainable tourism practices and conservationist policies are taken up, then there will be the possibility of protecting these environments for years to come.

Such can be the force of tourism with regulatory measures, eco-certifications, low-emission transport, community-led tourism, and traveler education. Indeed, each stakeholder—governments, businesses, local communities, and tourists themselves—plays a crucial role in the promotion of responsible tourism. It is only thus that the magic of extreme tourism can be married to the urgent imperatives of protecting the world's most fragile ecosystems and cultural legacies. It is sustainable tourism that opens the route for responsible journeys, where human curiosity coincides in harmony with the care of the environment.

Author Contributions

All Authors contributed equally.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declared that no conflict of interest.

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