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INTEGRATIVE REVIEW ON VALUE CO CREATION IN ECOTOURISM INDUSTRY

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Abstract:

This article presents an integrative review of literature on value co-creation in the eco-tourism industry between 2020 and 2025. Value co-creation is a collaborative process where tourists, local communities, enterprises, and governance structures engage to generate shared benefits across ecological, social, and economic dimensions. In eco-tourism, this process aligns with principles of sustainability, cultural preservation, and community empowerment, while shifting tourists' roles from passive consumers to active participants in shaping experiences. Despite growing scholarly attention, existing studies remain fragmented across contexts such as heritage tourism, community-based conservation, and post-pandemic recovery, with limited synthesis of how co-creation is implemented, operationalized, and evaluated. Using Torraco's (2016) integrative review framework, this article systematically identified, screened, and analyzed 17 peer-reviewed articles from major academic databases and snowball searches. Findings highlight five dominant themes: (1) stakeholder engagement in conservation and cultural exchange, (2) the role of digital platforms in extending collaboration, (3) governance and policy as both enablers and barriers, (4) crisis adaptation in contexts such as COVID-19, and (5) emerging tools for measurement and evaluation of co-creation outcomes. The review underscores that value co-creation enhances visitor satisfaction, environmental stewardship, and community empowerment, yet faces challenges including inclusivity gaps, governance rigidity, and tensions between economic and ecological objectives. This article concludes that value co-creation is a strategic pathway toward sustainable eco-tourism, but requires strengthened policy support, digital inclusivity, standardized measurement, community empowerment, and crisis-

resilient strategies. These insights hopefully provide a foundation for advancing both research and practice in sustainable tourism development.

Keywords:

Value Co Creation, Ecotourism Industry, Integrative Review, Sustainability Development, Community Empowerment

Introduction

This article reviews the existing literature on value co creation in the ecotourism industry. Value co creation is an active, creative, and collaborative process in which firms and multiple stakeholders such as customers, partners and communities engage. This is often done via shared platforms, both physical and virtual to integrate resources and exchange value between the stakeholders, ultimately generating benefits perceived at individual, organizational, or societal levels (Bal et al., 2023; Ribeiro et al., 2023). Value co creation uphold collaboration and stakeholder engagement, firms as enablers of co-creation environments, resource integration and dynamic interaction, and value realized and perceived across various perspectives and contexts.

On the other hand, ecotourism is defined as environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and local community involvement which has emerged as a promising model for sustainable tourism development (Fennell, 2021). Fundamentally, value co-creation in ecotourism incorporates collaborative engagement between tourists, service providers, local communities, and public institutions to design and deliver experiences to yield collective benefits (Guerra & Gonçalves, 2024). On the contrary to conventional mass tourism, ecotourism put focus on participatory development and aims to integrate the values of sustainability, equity, and authenticity into tourism experiences (Carvalho & Alves, 2023).

Recent studies indicate that value co-creation in ecotourism can increase visitor satisfaction, environmental awareness, and community empowerment, contributing to the long-term sustainability of tourism destinations (Kusumawati et al., 2025; Noor et al., 2024). However, the implementation of value co-creation is differs based on type of tour, destination and community. This is made more complicated by the rich interconnection of ecological, socio-political, and institutional factors.

Despite this complexity of interconnection, eco-tourism is among the fastest-growing segments in the global tourism industry, emphasizing responsible travel to natural areas, environmental protection, and cultural preservation (Adie et al., (2023). As a vital addition, value co-creation has emerged as a central mechanism for delivering meaningful eco-tourism experiences (Nie & Tang, 2022) due to eco-tourism emphasise on sustainability which fosters active collaboration among tourists, local communities, and service providers.

One of the important aspects of value co-creation in the eco-tourism industry is role shifting of tourists from passive consumers to active participants in shaping experiences, meanings, and benefits. Within the eco-tourism contexts, the value co creation can occur through conservation activities, cultural exchange, and the integration of digital platforms that enhance interaction (Hernandez-Lopez, Del Barrio-Garcia, & Prados-Pena, 2023). Due to this collaborative role, it not only enriches tourist experience and satisfaction but also contribute to community empowerment and environmental sustainability.

Problem Statement

Although the concept of value co-creation is increasingly acknowledged in eco-tourism research, studies are dispersed across contexts such as heritage tourism (Adie -et al., 2023), community-based conservation (Tauro et al., 2021), and post-pandemic recovery (Kusumawati, et, al, 2025). There is still a lack of collective understanding of how value co-creation is implemented and operationalized, the challenges it faces, and the outcomes it generates for stakeholders. Moreover, the role and interconnection between governance, digital technology, and cultural context in solidifying value co-creation remains underexplored. This study aims to synthesize the emerging literature on value co-creation in eco-tourism.

Methodology

This article adopts an integrative literature review approach to analyze recent studies on value co-creation in eco-tourism. The process involved three main stages:

1. **Identification** – Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2025 were selected based on relevance to eco-tourism and co-creation.
2. **Screening** – Articles that did not explicitly address value co-creation in eco-tourism contexts were excluded.
3. **Eligibility and Synthesis** – Key findings were extracted and organized thematically to identify patterns, gaps, and contributions.

After final selection, only 17 journal articles were included. The results are presented in the Table of Findings 1, followed by thematic synthesis.

This article adopted the integrative review method developed by Torraco (Torraco, 2016). An integrative review concentrated on an active topic and showed rapid growth in the literature. The entire literature was examined in an integrative review method, and only influential, original, controversial, or provocative was reviewed, (Webster, & Watson., 2002). The integrative review in the literature is important to capture the complexities of the phenomena (Whittemore, & Knafl, 2005). In this case, value co creation is evolving and has garnered attention across the ecotourism industry. However, the implementation of value co creation in the eco-tourism industry needs further discussion.

Furthermore, the stakeholders within eco-tourism industry need to adapt to their role in the value co creation dynamic to increase efficiency in managing and operation of the eco-tourism especially in the digital era. To enable a justified analysis of the literature, this article utilizes an integrative review, (Torraco, 2016). The main steps in the integrative review preparation include identification, screening, and eligibility and synthesis.

Identification

This article relies on two major sources to identify relevant literature: 1) electronic databases and 2) snowball searching. The electronic database is the common technique used in literature searches. The electronic database allows reviewers to filter the most relevant searches by inserting relevant keywords. However, not all databases include the exact topics relevant to this article. Therefore, the reviewer will draw a literature search in multiple databases. For example, Web of Science, Scopus, Emerald, and Taylors and Francis are among the reputable journals that often issue topics related to value co creation in ecotourism. Other than journals, the reviewer also heavily relies on Google Scholar as the major source of relevant literature. Google Scholar is an open-access database that captures multidisciplinary materials in different

journals and provides ease of access in directing the reviewer to relevant articles in one click, without searching for articles separately in different online databases. However, Google Scholar and online journal database are equally important and pose advantages to the reviewer.

The second source is snowball searching. Snowball searching involves identifying relevant studies based on the reference list in the current article currently evaluated and studied. Snowball searching allows the reviewers to select relevant studies based on the citations in the current articles. The snowball search will benefit the reviewers in many ways. First, the citation from the current articles will direct the reviewer to other relevant articles, thus providing the reviewer with larger access to information related to the topics. The potential articles in the reference list were evaluated to ensure that no relevant articles were neglected. Second, the citation in the literature linked to the reference list will allow the reviewer to access the articles in a shorter timeframe. Third, the citation will be linked to the references. The reviewer will be directed to the exact article without going through many clicks in a single database by clicking the hyperlink.

Initially only 56 articles on the topic of value co creation in the ecotourism industry were identified through the electronic databases and the snowballing technique.

Screening

The next step in conducting an integrative literature review is screening. According to Xiao, & Watson, (2019), the screening process involves analyzing the abstracts of the potential studies. The combination of keywords and the final count aforementioned found a total of 56 articles. However, after careful reading and analysis, the researchers only select 17 articles due to failure in finding the nexus between value co creation and ecotourism. The screening also excluded duplicate records since a few online journal platforms are used. This is probably because the Scopus data and Web of Science journal are linked to different online databases. The keywords used in the journal search were “value creation”, “value co creation”, and “value co creation in ecotourism”.

We select specific inclusion criteria to build a comprehensive database of articles on risk in implementing blockchain technology in the supply chain. We first constructed a time frame for our literature search to align with our research questions, starting from 2020 to 2025. Next, we focused on identifying the research articles, book chapter and proceeding paper.

Eligibility and Synthesis

In total, 56 full-text articles were evaluated for eligibility and synthesis. Surprisingly, only 17 articles met the inclusion criteria and 39 of the articles were excluded. Concerning the requirements, this article includes three inclusion criteria in screening the most relevant articles. First, the selection of research articles was only published in reputable journals, including Scopus, Web of Science, Emerald, Elsevier, Science Direct, SAGE, Taylors and Francis, and Wiley. The major reason is that we want to capture the quality journals to ensure that the research objectives of the study can be achieved. Second, the inclusion criteria for this article are the language. In this case, we will only select articles that were published in English language. Third, the inclusion criteria also consider the timeline of the article searches. We selected the articles from 2020 to 2025 only. The reason for selecting only the latest articles is to analyze the current trend of value co creation in the ecotourism. Therefore, collecting the latest articles will help the reviewers to identify the trends related to the value co creation in ecotourism context and recognize the research gap that requires special attention.

This article also considers two exclusion criteria in selecting articles. The first exclusion criteria are non-English language journals. For instance, we excluded articles written in German or any language other than English Language due to the language barrier and translating issues. Therefore, this article only considers relevant articles written in English for ease of use and understandable language across the world. The second criteria that also require exclusions are the timeline of the articles that range from 2020 until 2025.

Findings

Table of Findings 1: Findings

Author(s) & Year	Context	Key Findings on Value Co-Creation
Adie et al., (2023)	Natural heritage tourism	Co-creation enhances visitor satisfaction and conservation awareness.
Albaladejo-Garcia et al., (2025)	Peri-urban protected areas	Economic value co-created through conservation-recreation balance.
Chan & Saikim (2022)	Eco-tourism service experiences	Motivation and expectations drive co-creation of meaningful experiences.
Coda et al., (2024)	Brazil, COVID-19 context	Interactive value formation adapted through resilience and digital tools.
Hernandez-Lopez et al., (2023)	Digital platforms	Ecotourists co-create value online; typology moderates engagement.
Kansra et al., (2024)	Punjab, India	Innovation, policy, and social media drive sustainable co-creation.
Kusumawati et al., (2025)	Indonesian eco-tourism, post-COVID	Co-creation fosters tourist citizenship behavior but faces challenges.
Liu et al., (2023)	Psychological contracts	Violations reduce eco-tourists' willingness to co-create.
Lunden et al., (2025)	Finland protected areas	Governance limits opportunities for co-creation.
Nie & Tang (2022)	Protected area enterprises	Developed a measurement scale for ecological value co-creation.
Patwal et al., (2023)	Homestays	Host–guest interaction is central to value co-creation.
Pu et al., (2023)	Tibet tour guides	Host–guest interactions foster sustainable tourism practices.
Sorensen et al., (2025)	Nature tourism entrepreneurs	Business model frameworks integrate co-creation for sustainability.
Tauro et al., (2021)	Chile, biocultural ethics	Co-creation applied to education and eco-tourism sustainability.
Tawata et al., (2025)	Thailand national parks	Planning models boost resident engagement in co-creation.
Xu et al., (2023)	Wetland tourism in China	Service quality linked to post-trip intention and value co-creation.
Zhu et al., (2022)	Chinese wetland parks, COVID-19	Residents as tourists co-create resilience-driven value.

Summary of Findings

The synthesis revealed five key themes:

1. **Stakeholder Engagement** – Co-creation occurs through collaboration between tourists, residents, and enterprises in conservation and cultural exchange (Pu et al., 2023; Tawata et al., 2025).
2. **Digital Platforms** – Online tools and communities enable ecotourists to actively engage in co-creation (Hernandez-Lopez et al., 2023).
3. **Governance and Policy** – Institutional frameworks can either support or constrain co-creation (Lunden et al., 2025; Kansra et al., 2024).
4. **Crisis Adaptation** – The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted co-creation's role in resilience and adaptation (Coda et al., 2024; Kusumawati et al., 2025; Zhu et al., 2022).
5. **Measurement and Evaluation** – Emerging tools and frameworks assess ecological and experiential dimensions of co-creation (Nie & Tang, 2022; Sorensen et al., 2025).

The reviewed articles highlight that stakeholder engagement plays a crucial role in value co-creation within eco-tourism. Tourists, local residents, and tourism enterprises actively participate and collaborate with each other in shaping eco-tourism experiences via joint involvement in conservation, cultural exchange, and service delivery. For example, Pu et al., (2023) found that interactions between host and guest in Tibet encouraged sustainable tourism practices, while Tawata et al., (2025) put highlight on how resident participation in Thailand's national parks foster stronger community ownership of eco-tourism initiatives. Such engagement showcases that value co-creation flourishes when related stakeholders collaborate to balance environmental, social, and experiential outcomes.

Another major theme is the undeniable role of digital platforms in fostering value co creation in the tourism industry. The ever-increasing online communities and social media platform has provided ecotourists with new mediums to share experiences, exchange knowledge, and influence service innovation. Hernandez-Lopez, Del Barrio-Garcia, & Prados-Pena (2023) demonstrated how ecotourist typologies moderated participation on digital platforms, strengthening the increasing significance of online value co-creation in boosting eco-tourism value. This finding suggests that digital platforms not only function as a socialising platform but also extends value co-creation beyond physical mediums, offering channel for continuous engagement before, during, and after eco-tourism activities.

The literature also emphasises the importance of governance and policy support in developing value co-creation practices. On one perspective, supportive policies and innovative governance models encourage sustainable collaboration among stakeholders, as illustrated by Kansra et al., (2024) in the case of eco-tourism development in Punjab, India. On the other side, Lunden, Saarinen, & Hall (2021) showed that institutional constraints within Finland's protected area governance constrained opportunities for value co-creation, signalling inflexible policy structures may hinder collaborative outcomes. This duality showcases that governance frameworks can act as both enablers and barriers in correspond to the flexibility, inclusiveness, and responsiveness to stakeholder needs within the ecosystem of the ecotourism industry.

The next identified theme is the role of crisis adaptation, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic or any other kind of crisis in general. Several studies (Coda, Farias, & Dias, 2024; Kusumawati, et, al, 2025; Zhu et al., 2022) exposed how eco-tourism stakeholders redefined value co-creation during the pandemic to ensure resilience and continuity of the ecotourism industry. For example, Zhu et al., (2022) emphasised how local residents in China became domestic tourists during lockdowns, co-creating new forms of value that sustained their existing wetland parks. Another example is Kusumawati et al., (2025) which reported that Indonesian eco-tourism leveraged value co-creation to encourage tourists' citizenship behavior in the post-pandemic recovery period. These examples demonstrate the adaptability of value co-creation during crises and encouraging resilience in ecotourism industry.

Final identified theme is increasing interest in measurement and evaluation of value co-creation. Researchers, have begun developing tools and frameworks to assess ecological, social, and experiential outcomes of collaborative value co creation practices within the context of ecotourism. Nie & Tang (2022) suggested a measurement scale for ecological value co-creation in protected areas. While another study by Sorensen et al., (2025) proposed a business model framework to evaluate entrepreneurial practices in nature tourism. Such efforts indicative towards a shift of a more systematic and standardized approaches to capturing the impacts of value co-creation, which will be paramount for guiding policy, management, and future research in eco-tourism value co creation.

Discussion

The reviewed literature demonstrates that value co-creation enhances eco-tourism industry through visitor satisfaction enhancement, community empowerment, and environmental stewardship. However, several tensions arise:

- **Inclusivity vs. Exclusivity** – While digital platforms expand opportunities, they may marginalize groups with limited access (Hernandez-Lopez et al., 2023).
- **Economic vs. Ecological Goals** – Balancing revenue generation with conservation priorities remains challenging (Albaladejo-Garcia et al., 2025).
- **Trust and Motivation** – Psychological contract violations reduce tourist willingness to value co-create, highlighting the need for transparent management (Liu et al., 2023).
- **Cultural Contexts** – Practices differ widely across regions, requiring localized approaches (Kusumawati et al., 2025; Lunden et al., 2025).

The literature reviewed in this article clearly demonstrates that value co-creation enhances eco-tourism industry by visitor satisfaction enhancement, empowering local communities, and promoting environmental stewardship. Tourists are no longer viewed merely as consumers of services but as active partners who shape the quality and meaning of their experiences. This collaborative approach allows for richer and real interactions between visitors and tour service provider, which, in turn, encourages long-term support for conservation and sustainable development initiatives (Adie et al., 2023; Pu et al., 2023). However, the evidence also reveals that value co-creation processes are complex, with several tensions that influence their effectiveness and inclusivity.

One significant issue is the tension between inclusivity and exclusivity in value co-creation practices within ecotourism industry. On one aspect, digital platforms and online communities have opened up new spaces for ecotourists to engage in value co creation, exchange knowledge, and influence service innovation (Hernandez-Lopez et al., 2023). Nevertheless, even these

tools increase opportunities for participation, they also risk excluding stakeholders with minimal or nonexistence digital literacy or access to technology, particularly in rural eco-tourism destinations. This creates a delineation between those who can actively engage in digital value co-creation and those who remain marginalized, raising questions about equity and representation in sustainable tourism in the long run.

Another key challenge lies in balancing economic and ecological objectives. On one side, eco-tourism enterprises and local communities often rely on tourism revenue for economic survival. But on the other hand, the very sustainability of eco-tourism depends on maintaining ecological integrity and minimizing negative environmental impacts. Albaladejo-Garcia, Pleite, & Martinez-Paz (2025) highlighted that economic value in protected areas can be co-created through conservation-recreation balance, but mismanagement or over-commercialization can haphazardly undermine ecological goals. This situation underscores the need for meticulously designed governance structures that take care natural resources while allowing communities to benefit economically.

The literature also seamlessly reveals the importance of trust and motivation in sustaining value co-creation. Liu et al., (2023) reported that psychological contract violations, such as unmet expectations or broken promises by tourism providers, reduce eco-tourists' willingness to participate in value co-creation activities. This highlights that value co-creation depends not only on structural opportunities but also on relational trust and transparent communication between stakeholders. Absent of mutual trust, value co-creation risks becoming superficial or transactional, limiting its potential to foster sustainable outcomes.

Finally, the review highlights that value co-creation practices are highly context-dependent, shaped by socio-cultural norms, governance models, and environmental conditions. For instance, Kusumawati, et, al, (2025) highlighted that post-pandemic value co-creation in Indonesia ecotourism emphasized tourists' citizenship behaviors, while Lunden et al., (2025) noticed that rigid governance structures in Finland's protected areas minimised opportunities for value co creation collaboration. These findings suggest that there is no one-size-fits-all model of value co-creation in eco-tourism. Instead, practices must be adapted to local cultural values, institutional arrangements, and ecological contexts in order to be effective.

Overall, the literature suggests that value co-creation is not merely a tool for enhancing tourist experiences but a strategic pathway toward sustainable eco-tourism industry. Its potential can be realised by integrating economic, social, and ecological objectives while addressing challenges related to inclusivity, trust, and adaptability. To fully materialise this potential, eco-tourism stakeholders must acknowledge and actively manage the tensions inherent in value co-creation processes.

Conclusion

This review concludes that value co-creation is a central driver of sustainable eco-tourism industry, connecting tourists, local communities, tourism enterprises, and governance structures. Every stakeholder contributes unique resources, knowledge, and motivations that, when combined through value co-creation processes, generate outcomes that go beyond individual benefits. Tourists gain real and memorable experiences, local communities achieve empowerment and economic opportunities, enterprises enhance competitiveness and innovation, while governance frameworks ensure ecological protection and long-term sustainability.

Through the findings in this study, value co-creation is not a linear process but rather a dynamic system of interactions where stakeholder contributions converge to shape a better eco-tourism outcome for each stakeholder involved. Importantly, these findings demonstrate that sustainability, enriched tourist experiences, and community empowerment are interdependent results of effective value co-creation. However, the literature also underscores challenges such as governance constraints, technological inclusivity gaps, and the difficulty of balancing ecological and economic objectives.

Therefore, for eco-tourism to realize its full potential, future strategies must focus on strengthening collaborative governance, enhancing digital inclusivity, building community capacities, and ensuring transparent stakeholder relationships. By addressing these challenges, value co-creation can serve as a transformative pathway toward resilient, equitable, and sustainable eco-tourism systems.

Recommendations

Based on the review several recommendations can be made to strengthen value co-creation in the eco-tourism industry:

1. **Strengthen Policy Support** – Design governance frameworks that actively facilitate, rather than restrict, co-creation.
2. **Leverage Digital Tools** – Expand the use of inclusive platforms that allow diverse ecotourist typologies to participate.
3. **Empower Local Communities** – Ensure equitable distribution of benefits and capacity building for residents.
4. **Standardize Measurement** – Adopt tools for systematically evaluating ecological, social, and economic impacts of co-creation.
5. **Develop Crisis-Resilient Models** – Prepare adaptive co-creation strategies to mitigate disruptions such as pandemics or climate risks.

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