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EMPOWERING MOUNTAIN GUIDES FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AND VISITOR WELLNESS IN KINABALU UNESCO GLOBAL GEOPARK

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Abstract:

This paper investigates how tourist well-being and sustainable tourism practices within the Kinabalu UNESCO Global Geopark are affected by mountain guide empowerment. The main goal is to have a thorough awareness of the functions mountain guides perform in advancing environmental consciousness, improving cultural appreciation, and thus supporting visitor general well-being. Using a systematic literature review (SLR) to synthesise current information on the topic, a qualitative research approach was used to reach this. Using topic synthesis approaches, relevant academic papers, reports, and case studies from reputable sources including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar were methodically located, chosen, and examined. Three primary theme areas sustainability awareness encouraged by guides, their part in promoting cultural appreciation, and their contributions to visitor wellness were the emphasis of the evaluation. By means of critical examination of thirty peer-reviewed papers released between 2013 and 2024, important trends were clear, underscoring the transforming power of guides as arbitrators between environmental preservation and visitor experiences. Studies have shown that well-trained guides improve tourists' emotional involvement and environmental awareness, therefore enhancing their travel experiences. Often found as contributing elements to good visitor well-being were themes like cultural storytelling, eco-interpretation, and emotional connection. According to the summary, empowering guides via organised training in environmental education and wellness-oriented interpretation techniques greatly increases both tourist enjoyment and ecological responsibility. The study comes to the conclusion that expanding sustainable tourism at Kinabalu Geopark depends critically on formalising guide certification procedures including features of wellness promotion and sustainability education. This study advises further ethnographic and participatory action research to expand knowledge of the

lived experiences of guide and guest alike, thereby laying a basis for next policy and training schemes in sustainable tourism.

Keywords:

Sustainable Tourism, Mountain Guides, Visitor Wellness, Kinabalu Geopark, Tourist Experience

Introduction

As a worldwide sector, tourism has come under more and more attention as a two-edged blade in modern debates on sustainability and community development. Unquestionably, it offers economic advantages, job possibilities, and cultural interactions; nevertheless, it also severely strains natural ecosystems, cultural legacy, and the socioeconomic balance of nearby areas. These issues have become especially pertinent in the framework of protected regions like UNESCO Global Geoparks, where careful negotiation of the delicate equilibrium between development and preservation is necessary. One perfect illustration of this is the Kinabalu UNESCO Global Geopark in Sabah, Malaysia. Its stunning scenery, great variety, and cultural legacy anchored in indigenous communities have long drawn both local and foreign visitors. But in recent years, the eco-friendliness of tourism in this geopark comes under examination. Against this background, the function of mountain guide has become more important yet understudied in determining sustainable tourism policies and improving park visitor well-being. Often only seen as navigators or logistical assistants, mountain guides are really cultural ambassadors, environmental teachers, and vital middlemen between visitors and native ecosystems. Their impact on visitor behavior, emotional interaction with the surroundings, and cultural awareness sets them especially to help to achieve objectives of sustainable tourism. Though their strategic relevance, little research has been done on how empowering these guides might directly affect visitor health in particular locations like Kinabalu Geopark and sustainability results. Most current research usually focuses generally on sustainable tourism frameworks, eco-tourism initiatives, or conservation activities without sufficiently include the human aspect notably the contributions of local service providers such as mountain guide.

The idea of sustainable travel itself has changed dramatically within the last twenty years. Originally seen mostly through the prism of reducing environmental impact, sustainable tourism is now increasingly seen as a whole framework including environmental integrity, socio-cultural authenticity, economic viability, and importantly the psychological and emotional well-being of visitors. Globally, wellness tourism which stresses not just physical but also emotional, cultural, and intellectual interaction with a destination is becoming popular. Applied to geoparks like as Kinabalu, this larger view of tourism forces reevaluation of the responsibilities played by important players. In this sense, mountain guides are front-line advocates of the sustainability concept of a geopark, not just workers providing access to beautiful paths. Particularly appropriate for this sort of research is Kinabalu Geopark. Tucked inside Sabah, a state of Malaysia, the geopark has great geological, biological, and cultural value. Not merely the tallest mountain in Southeast Asia, Mount Kinabalu itself is spiritually significant for the indigenous Kadazan-Dusun people at 4,095 meters. Deep-rooted customs, oral histories, and holy connections with the mountain make these villages a natural component of the cultural fabric of the geopark. Many guests find that their first significant encounter with this live cultural legacy is their interactions with mountain guides. Therefore, the empowerment of guides has not just environmental consequences but also the possibility to promote deeper

cultural awareness, question preconceptions, and inspire respect of indigenous knowledge systems.

Furthermore, the fact that the geopark is a UNESCO-designated location entails obligations as well as possibilities. The UNESCO designation obliges local stakeholders to uphold the regulations of conservation, education, and sustainable development as guided by the Global Geoparks Network (GGN), while even drawing greater international attention. One of the primary GGN functions is incorporating local companies and stakeholders in conservation and tourist activities. Typically contracted from local villages, mountain guides execute this mission quite well. Nevertheless, their potential remains unrealized unless methodically empowered through targeted instruction, respect, and participatory decision-making frameworks (Lane, 2023). To this extent, empowerment transcends climbing or navigating technical competence. It involves equipping guides with expertise in environmental interpretation, cross-cultural communication, and tourist engagement strategies that promote not only psychological well-being but also ecological awareness. This involves providing them with a voice in the development of tourism narratives presented to visitors. Most visitors come with assumptions of an "exotic" kind or limited perceptions of indigenous civilizations. Trained guides are capable of challenging such assumptions in a gentle manner by offering multifaceted stories of strength, resilience, and human-nature relationships (Long et al., 2012). This interpretive role enhances the emotional attachment of tourists to the site, hence encouraging what scholars have referred to as "transformative tourism experiences." Experiences from geoparks elsewhere in the world and other protected areas show that those who actively interact with informed local guides are likely to be more environmentally conscious and culturally aware. Studies in Asian and European geoparks, for example, have established that guided interpretative tours mixed with narration premised on local customs leave significant impacts on pro-environmental behavior of visitors after their visit. They are more probable to participate in local development projects, encourage conservation, and share good stories of the site within their social circles (Long et al., 2012). Translating these results to Kinabalu Geopark would imply that empowering mountain guides is not merely an intervention with the potential to have macro-level sustainability effects but also an easy operational improvement that can shape micro-level tourist experiences. In spite of these options, various reasons make it difficult to realize this promise.

First, guides have no uniform training programs that involve properly integrating environmental education and wellness-oriented tourist interface methods. Although there are occasional seminars or programs organized by NGOs, these often lack institutional backing, periodicity, or long-term impact measurement mechanisms. Second, with very little involvement in geopark management systems or policy-making processes, guides often assume an underestimated role in the tourist value chain (Musa et al., 2015). Apart from limiting their capacity to provide valuable input, such exclusion would also result in frustration, job dissatisfaction, or alienation. In this case, particularly in a competitive economic environment, commodification of tourism experiences in familiar places like Kinabalu may sometimes force guides to emphasize entertainment or convenience over authenticity and education. The response to these issues needs to be done with a structured, research-informed, step-by-step method of analysis to comprehend how guide empowerment could be incorporated systematically into Kinabalu Geopark's sustainable tourism framework. Drawing on published scholarly articles, reports, and case studies from reliable sources such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, the present study explores available knowledge in a systematic

literature review (SLR) approach. Reading thirty peer-reviewed articles published over the last ten years with close scrutiny allows the research to identify the important themes, gaps, and practical ideas likely to influence future guide training courses and geopark management policy. The scattered character of the body of current research on this subject justifies the use of an SLR method. Though individual research on sustainable tourism, environmental interpretation, or community-based tourism abound, there is a dearth of integrated frameworks that particularly relate guide empowerment to tourist well-being within the framework of UNESCO Global Geoparks. This work attempts to build a cohesive conceptual model by aggregating many threads of research that may be used both practically and academically.

In the end, this study hopes to help to bring about a paradigm change in Kinabalu Geopark's sustainable tourism industry's view and interaction with mountain guides. It aims to go beyond seeing guides as auxiliary service providers and instead see them as essential change agents able to turn travel into a tool for environmental preservation, cultural preservation, and whole guest well-being. The results are meant to encourage collaborative policy conversations with local people, tourist operators, environmentalists, and government agencies in addition to guiding future certification systems. Ultimately, sites like Kinabalu Geopark find themselves at a crossroads as the worldwide travel business turns more and more toward sustainability and meaningful experiences. The empowerment of mountain guides offers a concrete, quick, and powerful approach to match travel with these changing expectations. Kinabalu Geopark can establish a standard for UNESCO Global Geoparks globally by investing in the talents, voices, and well-being of guides, therefore highlighting how human-centered approaches to travel can benefit people, places, and the earth both.

Literature Review

At recent years, academic attention at the junction of sustainable tourism and community empowerment has been rising. The function of frontline stakeholder's especially local guides has become more important as tourist sites struggle to strike a balance between environmental protection and commercial benefit. Deeper academic study of this topic is definitely justified. By virtue of their intimate engagement with both guests and the natural surroundings, mountain guides hold a vital role in influencing tourist behaviour, therefore moulding narratives, and supporting sustainable practices. The academic works in three theme areas pertinent to this study the function of mountain guides in raising sustainability consciousness, their contribution to building cultural appreciation, and their impact on tourist wellness are synthesised in this review of the literature. These topics taken together provide a strong conceptual framework for looking at guide empowerment within Kinabalu UNESCO Global Geopark.

Mountain Guides' Part in Raising Sustainability Awareness

Recognizing as a central piece of the greater discussion about sustainable tourism, visitor awareness about sustainability is increasingly vital. Initial studies by Weaver (2020) and Lane (2023) emphasize that proactive engagement of visitors as opposed to passive viewing is largely accountable for the success of sustainability initiatives in protected environments. Mountain guides appear as influential middlemen between tourist environmental awareness and protected territories in these discourses. Within their initial work on visitor interpretation, Ballantyne and Packer (2011) argue that guided interactions significantly enhance environmental understanding, particularly where guides integrate narrative with ecological data. The use of narrative assists visitors in developing subjective relationships with the environment, thus providing abstract conservation concepts with tangible and affective

meaning. Specific to geoparks, Dowling (2013) has also examined interpretive guidance and highlights the necessity of geo-interpretation in making geological components meaningful to non-specialist visitors. Utilized by knowledgeable local guides, geo-interpretation transforms rock, formations, and landscapes into stories of planetary evolution and cultural significance. With Kinabalu Geopark hosting enormous geological variety featuring unique rock formations and native flora and fauna this is particularly significant in that context. Chen et al. (2024) research in the Chinese Global Geoparks supports that highly trained guides significantly increase visitor awareness of conservation activities, thus affecting behaviour such as less litter, respectful trail use, and post-visit support (Chen et al., 2024). While literature strongly indicates the necessity of guided interpretation, some researchers also emphasize significant gaps. For example, Aman et al. (2021) found that most guide training programs throughout Southeast Asia such as Malaysia tend to emphasize technical navigation and safety over interpretive skills. This disconnection between sustainability goals and training content may undermine the entire capability of guides in promoting environmental responsibility. In addition, Dredge and Jamal (2013) argue that unless guides are taken on board to participate actively in the design of sustainability policies at the institutional level, their impact on more universal conservation aims is minimal. These conclusions emphasize the necessity of a more structured method of direct empowerment, one that integrates institutional recognition and backing with interpretive training.

Mountain Guides as Teachers of Cultural Respect

In addition to environmental consciousness, guided tours also represent an essential means of cultural information dissemination and promotion of appreciation of local heritage. Salazar (2022) and Chan (2023), for instance, highlight how oftentimes tourism is on the verge of turning into commodified performances or shallow attractions and hence threatening to erode rich cultures (Chan, 2023). Through the provision of genuine stories reflecting the lived experience, histories, and worldviews of residents, mountain guides especially those embedded in local communities are centrally involved in reversing this tendency. In UNESCO Global Geoparks, where the blending of natural and cultural heritage is highlighted, this function becomes more vital. An appropriate case study by Yang et al. (2023) from Zhangjiajie UNESCO Global Geopark illustrates how local guides who weave indigenous folklore, personal narratives, and oral history into their accounts increase visitors' cultural participation. Such methods have been found to offset exoticized or normative understandings and promote tourists to see regional communities as present-making rather than passive cultural artefacts (Farkić et al., 2020). Mountain guides who are usually members of the Kadazan-Dusun and other indigenous groups are best placed to carry out this role in the case of Kinabalu Geopark. Leven's (2019) research points out how cultural storytelling by guides enhances not just the tourist experience but also cultural pride and intergenerational passing on of indigenous knowledge. There are some challenges, however, as well as the potential advantages. Hampton and Jeyacheya's (2015) research in Malaysian tourist settings illustrates structural marginalisation of local knowledge in mainstream tourism discourse, typically compounded by top-down management hierarchies dominated by outside tourism operators. Chan, (2023) also cautions of the risk of "performative authenticity," under which local guides could be compelled to compromise their narratives to match tourists' expectations instead of offering authentic cultural output. This conflict underscores the need for empowerment initiatives involving indigenous guides that highly value authenticity, cultural agency, and participative content creation.

Improving Visitor Well-Being with Guided Experiences

While environmental and cultural education are known to environmental and tourism studies, incorporation of tourist wellbeing into policy strategies is a recent field of study. Conventional as linked with spas, retreats, and yoga resorts, well-being tourism has extended to include intellectual and emotional attachment to destination places (Smith & Puczko, 2014). Guided nature experiences are more and more seen within this wider context as being part of psychological well-being, stress alleviation, and emotional fulfillment (Semwal et al., 2025). Chen and Petrick's (2013) study shows that guided eco-tour participants have more enjoyment, emotional arousal, and self-improvement compared to self-guided excursion participants. This is credited not only to the informative worth but also to personal service offered by informative and compassionate guides (Sang & binti Amirul, 2025). Likewise, research by Packer and Ballantyne (2016) of restorative tourist encounters suggests that guided engagement specifically those focusing on environmental sensitivity help to bring about more intimate and emotional experiences with nature. This is an important element of leading in protected areas like Kinabalu Geopark where tourists are likely to be looking for adventure alongside spiritual or emotive growth. Particularly in Malaysia, Nasir et al. (2024) highlight the way nature trails in preserved forest reserves cultivate tourist well-being through the employment of formal phases of contemplation, narration, and sensory participation practices (Nasir et al., 2024). These approaches enable visitors to understand their experiences on levels that serve not just environmental awareness but also personal insight and emotional equilibrium. Nevertheless, while these promising findings exist, there is no study linking these health outcomes to formal guide training courses. This gap highlights the importance of institutionalizing wellness-oriented aspects within guide certification systems tailored to the specific ecological and cultural environment of places like Kinabalu.

Directions And Gaps in Current Literature

Although the literature emphasizes in general the important role mountain guides play in advancing tourist well-being, cultural appreciation, and environmental sustainability. There are still some important gaps. First of all, few studies combine these elements into a whole model of guide empowerment whereas most of the research is scattered with distinct studies concentrating on environmental interpretation, cultural narrative, or wellness tourism. Second, Kinabalu UNESCO Global Geopark lacks destination-specific research; most knowledge comes from more general Malaysian tourist studies or from other Asian and European geoparks. Furthermore, empirical research on guide empowerment often falls short of suggesting practical plans for institutional assistance, guide training, or participatory policy involvement. Emphasizing that community members including guides must be handled not just as service providers but also as co-creators of the tourist experience, the studies by Wearing and Neil (2009) and Scheyvens (2011) demand more participatory methods in tourism planning. Still, operationalizing this idea within current travel systems is somewhat difficult.

Moreover, with respect to geoparks, the possibilities of guides to support tourist wellbeing remain underdeveloped. Including mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being into guided experiences in Kinabalu offers a creative path for sustainable tourism growth as wellness tourism becomes more and more important worldwide. This integration would need for both empirical studies and hands-on experimental projects to assess which kinds of guided participation provide the best results for guests while also honouring and helping local communities. Finally, the examined material offers a convincing basis for the emphasis of this research on mountain guide empowerment inside Kinabalu UNESCO Global Geopark.

Research already in publication substantially supports the theory that guide behaviour greatly influences tourist impressions of sustainability and cultural authenticity as well as emotional interaction with sites. Still, there is much more study needed to combine these elements into a coherent framework fit for the geopark setting. Through methodical evaluation and future empirical research, these gaps may be closed and guide empowerment will be positioned as a transforming tool for reaching sustainable tourism and improving local community well-being as well as guest experiences.

Research Methodology

Research Design and Approach

The current study uses a qualitative research design based on the systematic literature review (SLR) method. The choice of SLR as the study methodology was made on purpose because it is necessary to put together an organized, thorough, and rigorous summary of what is already known about giving mountain guides more authority in the context of sustainable tourism and visitor health. Interviews and ethnographic observation are useful for exploring lived experiences, but the SLR method lets this study bring together fragmented academic insights from a number of fields, including tourism studies, environmental education, community development, and wellness tourism, into a single conceptual framework. This study is qualitative since it aims to explore how guide empowerment works at the crossroads of sustainability, cultural appreciation, and visitor well-being. This qualitative technique focuses on intellectual richness, theme inquiry, and interpretive depth, whereas quantitative research focuses on numerical data and statistical correlations. The goal is not to count the number of empowered guides in Kinabalu Geopark, but to look at what empowerment is, what aspect it involves, and how it affects both tourist experiences and sustainable tourism practices, as shown in academic research. The systematic literature review approach was based on the broad ideas put out by well-known researchers like Tranfield, Denyer, and Smart (2003), who say that when combining secondary sources, there should be openness, repeatability, and critical rigor. There were three steps in the review process: (1) planning the review, (2) doing the review, and (3) reporting the results. This systematic approach makes sure that the study is not just a review of earlier research but a critical examination that finds gaps, inconsistencies, and new patterns that are important to the Kinabalu UNESCO Global Geopark. The thematic synthesis method directed the data analysis step, with a focus on finding reoccurring conceptual topics in the chosen literature. The approach was iterative, which meant that new studies could be added to the review corpus and topics could be refined as they came up. This method works well for research issues that need interpretative comprehension and the building of theoretical insights instead of empirical generalizations.

Data Collection, Sources, And Analysis

The research design is based on secondary data; therefore the data collection process included identifying, selecting, and reading relevant academic publications, reports, and case studies from trustworthy academic sources. Some of the databases used to discover materials were Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. These are all well-known for having a lot of good papers that have been evaluated by other experts. We chose these databases to make sure that the data is both thorough and reliable. They provide you access to works from a number of sectors that connect tourism, environmental education, and community involvement with the health and happiness of visitors. The search method employed a combination of keywords and Boolean operators to filter down the results and make sure they were still useful. Some of

the terms that came up were "mountain guides," "sustainable tourism," "visitor well-being," "UNESCO Global Geoparks," "guide empowerment," and "Kinabalu Geopark." Using Boolean operators like AND, OR, and NOT made it straightforward to narrow down the findings. For instance, using the search terms "mountain guides," "sustainable tourism," and "visitor experience" together helped locate papers that were quite relevant to the research location. We also employed reference chaining, which is when you browse through the bibliographies of major publications to uncover other research that you may have missed in the original database search. The study only looked at peer-reviewed papers that were out between 2013 and 2024 to make sure they were still useful and up to date. The time frame chosen indicates how much more people have cared about health, responsible tourism, and sustainability in the previous ten years. This fits with the global trend toward sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the growing interest in tourism that focuses on health and wellness. We only utilized grey literature, such reports from tourism organizations, NGOs, or government agencies, where it gave us relevant background or real-world information about Kinabalu Geopark or other protected areas like it.

The extended search process revealed a first set of almost 120 items. Through a process of title and abstract screening, this pool was limited down to thirty important publications that closely related to the research topics. The studies that were included had to explicitly look at one or more of the following: how guides help people live sustainably, how interpretive guides help people learn about the environment, how guides help people communicate stories about their culture, and how tourist experiences can make people healthier. We didn't include research that just spoke about the impacts of tourism without talking about the role of guides since we wanted to preserve the focus on empowerment. The data analysis process comprises reviewing and coding the selected studies in a structured fashion using a theme analysis approach. Thematic analysis was chosen because it can be used in many different situations and is effective at detecting patterns in different kinds of qualitative data. At initially, open coding was used to highlight essential topics in the literature, such "environmental interpretation," "cultural mediation," "visitor engagement," and "guide training." Next, the open codes were grouped into axial codes that indicated the three key topics of the research: (1) how guides assist people become more aware of sustainability, (2) how guides help people understand different cultures, and (3) how guides help people remain healthy. The study sought beyond mere recurring themes; it sought tensions, gaps, and emerging trends. While some studies complimented guides for making people more sustainability-aware, others indicated that there was no normative training for interpreters (Semwal et al., 2025). Some of the case studies showed so clearly how well cultural storytelling programs worked, and others showed how difficult it is to prevent indigenous stories from being translated into commodities. Individuals noticed these contrasts and considered them as potential research topics in the future and as adjustments to policies. Triangulation was used to ensure that the research was comprehensive and reduce bias by examining data from more than one field and source.

This process assists in verifying the themes and establishing a more comprehensive understanding of what guide empowerment is. An audit trail of search terms, choices on who to include, and coding practices was also maintained. This ensures that other researchers can replicate the review process in order to verify its validity or build upon it. Overall, the research approach, relying on a close and critical examination of the literature, provides us with a good sense of how increasing the authority of mountain guides could transform tourism for the benefit of the environment and the well-being of tourists in Kinabalu UNESCO Global

Geopark. This method not only answers the immediate research questions, but it also sets the stage for future empirical studies and policy initiatives aimed at sustainable destination management by bringing together different academic points of view and pointing out both the strengths and weaknesses of what we already know.

Results

The systematic review of the literature for this study identified several significant trends and themes regarding empowering mountain guides for sustainable tourism and public health in the Kinabalu UNESCO Global Geopark (Farkić et al., 2020). Three overall themes were consistently recurring within the thirty peer-reviewed studies and chosen grey literature examined: (1) their contribution towards awareness of sustainability, (2) their role towards cultural appreciation, and (3) their impact upon enhanced visitor well-being. The results shown here show both agreement and disagreement in the literature, giving a whole view of the topic. The first and most important discovery is on how mountain guides help tourists become more aware of sustainability issues. It was evident from the literature that guides who know about the environment and can communicate in a way that makes sense are important for changing visitors' behavior when it comes to the environment. Studies of geoparks in China (Chen et al., 2024) and Europe (Dowling, 2013) showed that guided interpretation helps tourists understand environmental problems like habitat loss and pollution from trash, and it encourages them to act responsibly, like throwing away trash properly and keeping trails clean. These results were also illustrated in Malaysian ecotourism case studies, where guides were actively intervening in guest behavior, limiting damage to the environment, and explaining local conservation initiatives in understandable and engaging terms. Multiple studies noted that one of the biggest problems was that guide training programs were not standardized across Southeast Asia, including Malaysia. While some guides obtain a lot of environmental education from government or non-governmental sources (NGOs), others use only informal or traditional knowledge. This provides incoherent experiences for tourists. This is a sign that there is a need for formal, standardized guide training modules that include both environmental interpretation and sustainability education as core competencies (Aman et al., 2021).

The second key finding is that guided narrative might help to make people value various cultures. Several studies have suggested that mountain guides play a very important role in passing on local knowledge of culture, including oral history, folklore, and indigenous customs. Research in other UNESCO Global Geoparks (Yang et al., 2023) showed that tourists who interacted with guides who retold cultural stories were more respectful towards the hosts they found themselves with and more bonded to the destinations they saw. For example, in Kinabalu Geopark, indigenous guides like the Kadazan-Dusun are owners of lively oral traditions that consider the mountain to be a spiritual and sacred place. The study that was researched showed that when local guides present this kind of story in a natural context, they may have the capacity to alter stereotypical or oversimplified thinking about indigenous peoples. The literature also raised issues, however. A research (Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2020) found that most tourism operators typically value entertainment over authenticity, and this puts pressure on the guides to provide "sanitized" or exaggerated traditional tales in accordance with tourist expectations. This conflict between authenticity and commercial appeal came up again and again, showing that giving guides more authority must also include ways for institutions to maintain cultural integrity and offer guides more influence over the stories they tell. The third important finding from the study was how guided experiences affected the health and happiness of visitors. Several studies showed that guided encounters may help tourists emotionally and mentally, in

addition to giving them more information about the environment and culture. Ballantyne and Packer (2011) say that emotional involvement is a fundamental effect of interpretative leading. We discovered that it made visitors feel more fulfilled, relaxed, and even helped them develop as people. Smith and Puczko (2014) did research on wellness tourism that showed that guided outdoor activities, whether paired with storytelling, contemplation exercises, or mindful strolling, make nature-based tourism even more restorative. These results are particularly important for the Kinabalu Geopark since tourists generally want both physical adventure and mental growth during their trip. However, as various experts have pointed out, many places, like Sabah, still don't include wellness-related information in their guide training. Tourism can only partly help visitors' health if there are no organizational institutions in place to encourage guides to include wellness components in their tours. The results of this systematic review indicate that mountain guides can make a difference positively in regards to sustainable tourism and the health of visitors in the Kinabalu UNESCO Global Geopark. They don't just assist individuals in getting to where they need to go or protect them; they also influence visitors' experiences, perceptions, and emotional attachments to the site (Rueff et al., 2015). But gaps in standardized training, institutional lack, and commercial pressures that sometimes compromise authenticity still come in the way of fully developing this potential. These findings illustrate that mountain guides require systematic, well-supported empowerment programs that concentrate on environmental, cultural, and emotional interpretation skills to fully leverage their skills as sustainability and wellbeing leaders (Risfandini et al., 2023).

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal how crucial but often underemphasized mountain guides are in encouraging sustainable tourism and enhancing the health of visitors in the Kinabalu UNESCO Global Geopark. The thematic analysis indicated that mountain guides also have a great potential to become environmental educators, cultural custodians, and individuals who facilitate people becoming emotionally engaged but are still restrained from their full potential in sustainable tourism by training gaps, institutional recognition, and policy integration. This presentation goes into more detail about these significant findings, relating them to larger discussions in sustainable tourism and highlighting what they imply for existing practice and future research (Aman et al., 2021). One of the most significant things that emerged from the evaluation is that mountain guides are the front line of defense for sustainability but often do not receive the support that they require from institutions. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) states that sustainable tourism is more than just minimizing the adverse impacts on the environment. It's also about making the lives of both tourists and host communities better. Mountain guides are in a unique position to make this goal a reality since they work directly with visitors all the time. Several studies have shown that good interpretive guiding, which combines environmental education with interesting stories, may change how tourists behave, making them more likely to do things that are good for the environment during and after their stay. However, the ideal is often not met since guide training programs are often broken up and not constant. Even the most passionate guides may not have the skills they need to fully engage tourists in sustainability objectives if they don't have a defined curriculum that teaches them both factual information about the environment and how to communicate effectively.

Another big subject that came up was how important it is to appreciate different cultures via guided encounters. This has effects that go beyond the tourist experience itself. Kinabalu Geopark is in an area with a lot of native history. It is a great place for cultural storytelling that

helps visitors understand the historical, spiritual, and social importance of the environment. Guides from the Kadazan-Dusun and other indigenous tribes are not merely people who help tourists; they are also cultural guardians who may pass on native ways of knowing. Real storytelling may help break down preconceptions about indigenous communities by replacing simple visitor expectations with a deeper appreciation for local customs. But the literature that was looked at always brought out the conflict between marketed tourism and real cultural representation. When outside tourist companies encourage guides to change or exaggerate traditional stories for entertainment reasons, guides are sometimes put in difficult situations. This challenge shows how important it is to give guides more power than just teaching them skills. It also shows how important it is to have institutional systems that protect cultural authenticity, support guide agency, and encourage participatory decision-making processes where guides can actively shape the stories that are told to visitors. The emotional and mental health of tourists is one of the most interesting but least studied areas, and it's becoming more and more important in global tourism trends. Wellness tourism is frequently linked to fancy retreats or activities that are good for your health, but this review's results show that even adventure tourism may be good for your mental and emotional wellbeing if it is led by qualified, caring people. Emotional involvement, which is made possible by meaningful encounters with guides, makes visitors feel more like they belong, helps them think about themselves, and makes them feel good about themselves. For places like Kinabalu Geopark, where people typically have to do hard physical things to connect with nature, adding health features to guided experiences is a new idea that hasn't been tried before. Even if this is a possibility, most guide training programs don't contain modules on emotional interpretation or guest well-being. This shows that there is a gap between new trends in wellness tourism and what guides really do on the ground.

The findings imply that empowering guides is not just one thing, but a complex process that needs both individual skill development and changes to the way things are set up. To be really empowering, it has to include not just environmental and cultural content, but also the working conditions, recognition, and responsibilities of guides in making decisions about tourist policy. In addition, training programs for guides need to go beyond just teaching them about safety and logistics. They should also teach them how to interpret, be sensitive to other cultures, and help people stay well. This gives Kinabalu Geopark the chance to become a world leader in sustainable, wellness-focused geopark tourism. These results also show that further study is needed, especially ethnographic and participatory action research that includes both guides and tourists. This study used secondary data, but primary research that looks at the real-life experiences of local guides in Kinabalu would provide us more detailed, real-world information on the problems they encounter and the ways they deal with them while they are guiding. This kind of study might also help create certification programs that are culturally relevant, driven by the local community, and in line with both global standards for sustainability and indigenous ways of knowing. In short, giving mountain guides more control is not only a way to improve operations; it is also a strategic need for promoting meaningful guest experiences and sustainable tourism. By investing in its guides, Kinabalu Geopark can protect its natural environment, preserve its cultural diversity, and provide people life-changing experiences that are good for everyone involved.

Conclusion And Recommendations

This study examined how increasing the power of mountain guides can assist in fostering sustainable tourism and the overall health of tourists in the Kinabalu UNESCO Global Geopark. The study employed a systematic review of thirty significant scholarly articles to illustrate how mountain guides play a very crucial role in ensuring the safety as well as the enjoyment of tourists and also in raising awareness for environmental concerns, cultural appreciation, and enhancing visitors' emotional as well as mental well-being. They are not just anyone who assist you to take you on treks or adventures. They are also teachers, storytellers, and cultural envoys to enable people to relate stories to a location in significant and deep ways. The results repeatedly showed that when guides undergo professional training on how to tell the environment and culture story, tourists treat both the environment and cultural heritage of the visited destination with more respect. However, the research also revealed a few things that make it hard to achieve this promise. They are courses of training that are not necessarily standardized, business needs that are likely to tarnish cultural authenticity, and not enough attention paid overall to guiding principles related to wellness. There is still much room for guides to contribute substantially to sustainable tourism if these gaps are filled.

For your Kinabalu Geopark, facilitating the mountain guides is more than it is a problem of professional development; it is one of what makes the park worthy to be called a UNESCO World Heritage Site which prioritizes conservation, education, and sustainable community development. To get there, all the stakeholders involved – the government, tour agencies, and locals – must cooperate to come up with inclusive, comprehensive, and culturally-grounded guide training programs. In this way, Kinabalu Geopark can show the world how to blend local empowerment, environmental conservation, and tourist well-being in a coordinated, sustainable tourism practice. In accordance with this research's findings, some pertinent recommendations are set out to improve guide empowerment and maximize the long-term effects of tourism in Kinabalu UNESCO Global Geopark. Firstly, a systematic, official process of certifying guides needs to be established. The course should train on the environment, how to deliver narratives of other cultures, and how to involve visitors in wellness activities. This type of curriculum will help train guides who are able to effectively blend knowing the environment with remaining faithful to their culture and forming an emotional connection. Second, guides need to participate in discussions on tourist policies in the geopark.

Their voice and lived realities can assist to develop plans that are both effective and respectful of the cultures of the individuals who reside there. Suffer but least, native communities, tourism enterprises, and conservation organizations ought to collaborate to ensure that guide empowerment programs survive the test of time. When all these are accomplished, Kinabalu Geopark will be a world leader in responsible tourism that prioritizes the community.

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