ASSESSING THE CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS WITH SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN GHANA

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Abstract:

This study examines environmental tourism promoted in Ghana as a means of biodiversity conservation, employment generation, and the livelihoods of rural communities. Environmental tourism, commonly referred to as ecotourism, has emerged as a sustainable alternative to mass tourism by promoting conservation, community participation, and environmental awareness. Despite its intended sustainability objectives, environmental tourism has increasingly been associated with a range of environmental, socio-cultural, and economic challenges that undermine its core principles. This study assesses the challenges and constraint with sustainable tourism in Ghana and examines how poor management practices and weak regulatory frameworks contribute to these challenges. The study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach, including thematic analysis, to identify recurring themes and patterns in the data, drawing on secondary data from academic literature, policy documents, and case studies from developing and developed countries. Findings reveal that increased tourist activities often lead to habitat destruction, soil erosion, water pollution, and excessive waste generation, particularly in destinations lacking proper infrastructure and visitor control mechanisms. The assessment further highlights governance-related challenges, including inadequate policy implementation, insufficient funding for conservation, lack of skilled personnel, and weak stakeholder

collaboration. In conclusion, while environmental tourism holds significant potential for sustainable development, its effectiveness is constrained by multiple interrelated problems. Addressing these challenges requires integrated planning approaches, strong institutional frameworks, community-based tourism models, environmental education, and strict enforcement of conservation regulations.

Introduction

Tourism is a worldwide phenomenon that has the highest and deepest aspirations of all people and is sensitive to its natural, cultural and environmental factors. Tourism is predominantly regarded as a positive contribution to urban development (European Commission, Tourism Unit, 2000). It is an important element of socioeconomic and political development in many countries, and it is unclear whether tourism contributes positively to socio-economic and cultural achievement, while also degrading the environment and eroding local identity (Chan, 2010).

Indeed, the concept of sustainability is often perceived as a resource development and management philosophy that permeates all levels of policy and practice relating to tourism. Globally, sustainable tourism development is subject to a range of factors that are becoming increasingly complex. These factors (economy, environmental, political and social) are presumed to have a strong influence and independent effect on tourism development, yet they said factors are, at the same time, interrelated. Thus, it is argued that sustainable tourism management of the natural and physical environment must co-exist with economic, socio-cultural, and health and safety objectives of localities and nations (Chan, 2010).

This study is critical in nature as it questions dominant development narratives that portray tourism as inherently sustainable, highlighting contradictions between economic growth objectives and environmental protection, unequal distribution of tourism benefits, and institutional inefficiencies that allow environmental degradation to persist in Ghana's tourism sector (Gössling, Hall & Weaver, 2009). Consequently, by diagnosing root causes, evaluating policy effectiveness, and critically interrogating governance structures and sustainability claims, such assessments provide a comprehensive analytical foundation for improving environmental tourism planning and promoting sustainable resource management in Ghana.

Policy failure, management practice, and environmental impact are closely interconnected concepts in environmental tourism governance because they represent the governance process through which tourism activities are assessed, managed, and evaluated within ecological systems. The assessment of environmental tourism problems functions as a management practice by providing systematic tools for planning, monitoring, and regulating tourism activities to minimise ecological degradation (Hall, 2008). Through environmental assessments conducted by institutions such as the Environmental Protection Agency, Ghana and the Ghana Tourism Authority, managers identify issues including waste generation, biodiversity disturbance, and ecosystem pressure at tourism destinations (Mensah, 2017). These identified challenges constitute environmental impacts, defined as measurable changes in environmental quality resulting from human activities such as tourism development (Glasson, Therivel, & Chadwick, 2013).

However, when assessment findings and management strategies fail to translate into effective enforcement, coordination, or sustainable outcomes, persistent environmental degradation reflects policy failure, which occurs when public policies do not achieve their intended objectives despite available knowledge and regulatory frameworks (Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2013). In the Ghanaian context, ongoing environmental pressures at ecotourism sites demonstrate that, although assessments guide management practices and reveal environmental impacts, weaknesses in implementation capacity and in the integration of governance limit policy effectiveness. Consequently, environmental impacts provide evidence, assessment operates as a management practice, and policy failure emerges when governance systems are unable to transform assessment outcomes into sustainable environmental protection.

Sustainable tourism has received a growing amount of attention over the years as travellers have become more conscientious of their environmental impact (Luong, 2023). For instance, ecotourism offers tourists a sustainable alternative to enjoy unique experiences while minimizing environmental impact (Shasha et al., 2020). However, ecotourism's success relies on tourists' attitudes and behaviors toward sustainable tourism practices.

Despite its intended sustainability objectives, environmental tourism has increasingly been associated with a range of environmental, socio-cultural, and economic challenges that undermine its core principles. Again, regardless of the existence of numerous academic studies on the causes of environmental tourism behaviour, the comprehension of the factors that drive environmental tourism demand remains limited. Furthermore, previous studies have focused on the benefits of ecotourism rather than systemic failures. Environmental tourism management in Ghana provides multidimensional benefits by promoting environmental conservation, economic development, community empowerment, cultural preservation, and improved governance structures, as observed in the work of Holden (2016), Honey (2008), Mensah (2017), and Scheyvens (1999). Effective environmental tourism management practices help protect biodiversity and natural ecosystems by regulating tourist activities and generating conservation funding for protected areas, thereby reducing environmental degradation and encouraging sustainable resource use (Holden, 2016; Honey, 2008).

Economically, environmental tourism creates employment opportunities in guiding services, hospitality, transportation, and local craft industries, contributing to rural income diversification and poverty reduction while supporting national revenue generation (Mensah, 2017; United Nations World Tourism Organisation [UNWTO], 2018). Furthermore, well-managed environmental tourism enhances community participation through benefit-sharing

schemes and local decision-making processes, fostering local ownership of conservation initiatives and improving livelihoods (Scheyvens, 1999).

Therefore, additional research is required to identify these unaddressed structural and governance-related shortcomings in Ghana's ecotourism model to stimulate travellers' intentions to visit environmental tourism destinations. Its growth can be promoted more effectively through such research, thereby leading to a better understanding of environmental tourism intentions. Therefore, this study assesses the major problems associated with environmental tourism and examines how poor management practices and weak regulatory frameworks contribute to these challenges.

Literature Review

Definition of Environmental Tourism

Environmental tourism in Ghana is championed as a means of conserving biodiversity, generating employment, and improving the livelihoods of rural communities. Environmental tourism, commonly referred to as ecotourism, has emerged as a sustainable alternative to mass tourism by promoting conservation, community participation, and environmental awareness. It is widely regarded as a tool for balancing economic development with environmental protection, particularly in ecologically sensitive areas such as forests, wildlife reserves, wetlands, and waterfalls. According to The International Ecotourism Society (TIES, 2015), environmental tourism is defined as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people, and involves interpretation and education."

Benefits of Environmental Tourism

In terms of social and economic impacts, environmental tourism has been found to influence the distribution of benefits within communities. Many studies suggest that when ecotourism is embedded into local development strategies, it can enhance residents' life satisfaction, environmental attachment, and cultural pride (Shi & Chen, 2024). These positive social effects are particularly pronounced when local residents have decision-making power and share in the economic benefits (Thompson, 2022). However, other scholars caution that environmental tourism may exacerbate social inequalities by unevenly distributing resources and commodifying culture, leading to tensions and conflicts within communities (Thompson, 2022).

From an economic development standpoint, environmental tourism is increasingly viewed as a promising strategy for promoting green growth in underdeveloped regions. It stimulates the development of related sectors, such as agri-processing, cultural and creative industries, and ecological agriculture, thus enhancing economic diversification and regional resilience. Empirical evidence from Rahimian et al. (2022) demonstrates the significant role of ecotourism in improving incomes and creating employment in impoverished areas, particularly in parts of Africa and Latin America. Additionally, environmental tourism can enhance regional attractiveness, stimulate infrastructure development, and attract investment, thereby strengthening overall economic sustainable development capacity. It exhibits a complex set of mechanisms across multiple dimensions. On the one hand, its benefits include contributions to environmental protection, economic growth, and community development (Yan, 2025). On the

other hand, without adequate institutional support and mechanisms for benefit-sharing, it may also increase pressure on natural resources and exacerbate social inequalities (Yan, 2025).

To ensure the long-term success of environmental tourism, sustainability principles must be followed. These include limiting visitor numbers to carrying capacity levels, enforcing environmental regulations, engaging local communities in decision-making, and promoting eco-friendly practices such as recycling, energy conservation, and responsible wildlife viewing (Mensah, 2019). When properly managed, environmental tourism can serve as a tool for both conservation and development, providing a balance between human needs and environmental protection.

Environmental tourism, also known as ecotourism, has been recognised worldwide as an innovative and sustainable way to promote tourism growth while preserving the environment and supporting local communities (Pham & Khanh, 2021). Ecotourism has been advocated as a beneficial phenomenon, but it has also been condemned for the lack of precision in its many definitions (Butler, 2018). From a human development perspective, Butcher (2007) analysed ecotourism's potential as a strategy for integrated conservation and development (ICDP) in rural developing countries from the standpoint of human development.

Challenges of Environmental Tourism

According to the United Nations SDGs Report (United Nations, 2022), around 70 million indigenous people rely on forests for their livelihoods. In underdeveloped nations, 80% of rural people use traditional plant-based remedies for basic healthcare. Moreover, protected areas currently cover 15% of terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems and 7% of marine regions, but they encompass only a portion of critical biodiversity sites. These regions are not yet fully biologically representative or successfully maintained. Also, poor rural women rely heavily on common-pool resources and are particularly vulnerable to their decline. Furthermore, approximately 7,000 species of flora and fauna are documented in illicit commerce, affecting 120 nations, whereas unlawful poaching and wildlife trafficking continue to obstruct conservation efforts. Again, the allocation of ecotourism profits indicates major disparities between the indigenous population and external stakeholders (He et al., 2008). Also, a typical issue among developing nations is that rules are not consistently followed due to insufficient labour, technology, financial and administrative resources (Agrawal & Redford, 2006). First, according to Coria and Calfucura (2012), the relationship between environmental tourism and indigenous people in developing nations is primarily influenced by the unequal distribution of economic gains, which favours stakeholders outside of the protected area. Second, indigenous groups are discouraged from engaging in environmental tourism due to a lack of community sovereignty over land and resources. Moreover, the uneven power relationships between stakeholders and indigenous people delineate that the latter have no genuine say in management choices. Finally, successful environmental tourism initiatives may become victims of their success if visitor numbers are not rigorously managed.

Environmental tourism also faces challenges, including poor management of tourist activities, which can lead to environmental degradation such as pollution, habitat destruction, and waste accumulation (Gössling & Hall, 2019). In some cases, tourism infrastructure, such as hotels and roads, intrudes on sensitive ecosystems, undermining conservation goals. Additionally, the growth of tourism can disrupt local cultures when traditional practices are commercialised for tourists (Scheyvens, 2018).

Empirical Review

Several empirical studies have examined the problems associated with environmental tourism and the possible solutions for promoting sustainability in Ghana and other parts of Africa. These studies provide valuable insights that explain the current research on environmental tourism in Ghana. One such researcher is Afenyo (2011), in a study on Community-Based Ecotourism at the Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary in Ghana, found that while the project contributed to local development through income generation, scholarships, and improved environmental awareness, community participation remained limited. Barriers such as low education levels, weak institutional support, and limited financial resources hindered broader involvement. The study concluded that for environmental tourism to be sustainable, there must be inclusive governance, capacity building, and stronger government support to empower local communities.

Secondly, Acquah et al. (2016) investigated Nature-Based Tourism in Mole National Park and revealed that most visitors were motivated by wildlife and nature experiences, especially the opportunity to view elephants. The study also showed that although tourism in Mole had grown by about 10% annually since 2001, inadequate infrastructure, poor marketing, and unequal distribution of benefits limited its contribution to sustainable development. They concluded that sustainable tourism in Mole requires improved facilities, better visitor management, and equitable benefit-sharing among stakeholders.

Similarly, Cobbinah et al., (2017) examined Ecotourism in the Kakum Conservation Area and reported mixed outcomes. While the park has succeeded in attracting visitors and generating revenue, local communities have felt excluded from decision-making processes. The study emphasised that ecotourism management often lacked participatory structures, resulting in social tensions and unequal economic benefits. They concluded that stakeholder negotiation, transparency, and inclusive governance were essential for achieving genuine sustainability in ecotourism.

Comparatively, Mbaiwa (2005) studied Enclave Tourism and Its Socio-Economic Impacts in the Okavango Delta, Botswana, offering lessons applicable to Ghana. His findings indicated that enclave-style tourism—where foreign investors dominate, and local communities benefit little—creates social inequality and environmental strain. He concluded that for tourism to effectively support conservation and development, it must be integrated with local economies and community participation mechanisms.

Finally, in another related study, Appiah-Opoku (2011) assessed Protected Areas as Tools for Biodiversity Conservation and Ecotourism in Kakum National Park. The study found that residents living around the park had limited access to forest resources after the area was declared a protected zone. Although conservation goals were achieved, the local people did not receive the expected economic benefits from tourism activities. The study concluded that unless benefit-sharing mechanisms are made fair and participatory, community support for conservation initiatives may decline, thereby threatening both biodiversity protection and tourism sustainability.

The assumptions underlying the study are (a) the available literature provides sufficient evidence to assess the impact of unhealthy environmental practices on the Ghanaian economy. (b) Policy interventions have been implemented to address the unhealthy environmental

tourism practices, although their effectiveness may vary; and (c) The findings from the selected studies are reliable and representative of the broader context of unhealthy environmental practices in Ghana. The challenges of the study are (a) the review relies on existing literature and may be subject to publication bias or data limitations present in the selected studies, and (b) the review may not include all relevant studies, as it is limited by the availability of literature and the search strategy employed. The research scope is (a) The systematic review focuses specifically on the impact of illegal mining on the Ghanaian economy. (b) It includes studies that analyse the economic implications of the unhealthy environmental practices in terms of GDP, government revenue, employment, foreign exchange earnings, and sectoral impacts; and (c) The review encompasses various sources, including academic journals, reports, and policy documents, to provide a comprehensive overview of the topic.

Methodology

Study Area

Ghana is a West African nation. It is bordered to the South by the Gulf of Guinea, to the East by Togo, to the West by Cote divoire, and to the North by Bourkina Faso. The country presents a multifaceted socio-economic profile characterized by significant natural resources, a diverse population, and ongoing economic reforms. Population of the country is estimated to be approximately 34.6 million (2024 estimate). Ethnic Composition includes predominantly Akan (45.7%), followed by Mole-Dagbon (18.5%), Ewe (12.8%), and Ga-Adangbe (7.1%). Religious affiliation includes majority Christian (71.3%), with Muslims constituting 19.9%, traditional faiths at 3.2%, and others.

The population of Ghana is predominantly farmers with agriculture accounting for 18.3% of GDP, with cocoa being a significant export commodity. Industry contributes 24% to GDP, including mining and manufacturing sectors. Approximately 46.7% of the population experienced multidimensional poverty in 2022. Projections indicate that poverty may rise again, reaching 51.2% by 2027, though this is partly due to inflation, currently at 21% (GSS, 2025).

The northern region faces significant challenges, including high poverty rates, limited infrastructure, and lower educational attainment. Income inequality remains a concern, with a significant gap between the rich and poor. Gaps exist also in access to social services and infrastructure, affecting different income groups.

Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach, including thematic analysis, to identify recurring themes and patterns in the data, drawing on secondary data from academic literature, policy documents, and case studies from developing and developed countries. Secondary data studies. Policy documents, environmental reports, and institutional records that provide extensive evidence on tourism–environment interactions.

Environmental tourism studies often require longitudinal and contextual information can be effectively captured from previously collected data. Reports and statistics produced by institutions such as the Ghana Tourism Authority and the Forestry Commission of Ghana provide reliable datasets on tourism development, protected area management, and

environmental conservation efforts, allowing researchers to evaluate recurring challenges, including biodiversity degradation, waste management problems, infrastructure pressure, and limited community participation.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, including data familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting, thematic analysis allows scholars to link experiential evidence to broader governance and sustainability debates. In the Ghanaian context, emergent themes commonly highlight ecological degradation, institutional and management constraints, socio-economic inequalities, and inadequate environmental education, demonstrating how tourism activities can undermine conservation goals when management systems are weak (Agyeman, Amuquandoh & Mensah, 2019; Cobbinah, Black & Thwaites, 2015). Consequently, thematic analysis provides a rigorous interpretive framework for understanding complex environmental tourism problems and generating evidence-based recommendations for sustainable tourism planning and policy reform (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mensah, 2017). Qualitative evidence often reveals gaps between policy intentions and practical outcomes, including weak enforcement mechanisms, limited institutional capacity, insufficient community participation, and poor inter-agency coordination.

The assessment focuses on key problem areas, including environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, cultural disruption, economic leakage, and inadequate community participation, weak enforcement mechanisms, and limited Institutional capacity. The study employed purposive sampling to select the unit of analysis, thereby facilitating the collection of appropriate data from the respondents.

Findings

Findings reveal that despite the fact that increased tourist activities result in direct tourism benefits, the immediate positive economic and social gains generated from tourism activities for local communities and national economies include employment creation, income generation, infrastructure development, support for local enterprises, and revenue from park entrance fees and tourism services. For instance, environmental tourism sites such as protected areas contribute directly to livelihoods through guiding services, accommodation, handicraft sales, and transportation opportunities, thereby enhancing local economic resilience and community welfare (Akyeampong, 2011; Mensah, 2017). It also contributes to habitat destruction, soil erosion, water pollution, and excessive waste generation, particularly in destinations lacking proper infrastructure and visitor control mechanisms. These impacts are intensified when carrying capacity limits are ignored or poorly enforced. This aligns with Yan's (2025) assertion that, without adequate institutional support and mechanisms for benefit-sharing, it may increase pressure on natural resources and exacerbate social inequalities.

Governance failures occur when regulatory frameworks fail to control visitor pressure, manage waste, protect biodiversity, or ensure equitable distribution of tourism benefits. Studies show that despite existing environmental regulations managed by agencies such as the Forestry Commission of Ghana, challenges such as inadequate monitoring, limited funding, weak institutional coordination, and insufficient community participation often undermine sustainability goals (Agyeman et al., 2019; Mensah, 2017). As a result, environmental degradation, resource conflicts, and unequal highlighting a gap between policy intentions and actual outcomes.

While direct tourism benefits measure positive developmental impacts, policy or governance failure explains the structural causes of persistent environmental tourism problems. In the context of Ghana's environmental tourism, both concepts are interconnected because governance weaknesses can unevenly distribute tourism benefits, ultimately threatening long-term sustainability. Effective assessment requires examining not only economic gains but also how governance systems influence environmental protection and community empowerment outcomes (Hall, 2011; Akyeampong, 2011).

Additionally, the study identifies socio-cultural problems such as the erosion of traditional values, and conflicts between tourists and host communities. While environmental tourism is expected to empower local the benefits are frequently unevenly distributed. External investors and tour operators often capture a significant share of tourism revenues, resulting in economic leakage and limited local development. This situation breeds resentment among host communities and reduces their willingness to support conservation initiatives. This aligns with Thompson's (2022) argument that environmental tourism may exacerbate social inequalities through unequal resource distribution and cultural commodification, leading to tensions and conflicts within communities.

The assessment further highlights governance-related challenges, including inadequate policy implementation, insufficient funding for conservation, a lack of skilled personnel, and weak stakeholder collaboration. In many cases, environmental tourism projects are driven by economic motives rather than sustainability goals, leading to over-commercialisation of natural sites, as corroborated by the argument advanced by Scheyvens (2018) that the growth of tourism can disrupt local cultures when traditional practices are commercialised for tourists. When local communities are excluded from tourism governance, conservation rules may lack local support, increasing pressure on natural resources through alternative livelihood activities that contribute to environmental degradation (Hall, 2011).

Again, the assessment reveals that although Ghana has established environmental and tourism policies aimed at protecting natural resources, ineffective governance structures often undermine their practical outcomes. For example, degradation of ecosystems in protected areas and ecotourism sites, including deforestation, trail erosion, biodiversity disturbance, and waste accumulation, has been associated with insufficient monitoring and enforcement capacity among regulatory institutions such as the Forestry Commission of Ghana and the Ghana Tourism Authority. Limited funding, inadequate staffing, and logistical constraints reduce the ability of authorities to control visitor behaviour and enforce environmental regulations effectively (Mensah, 2017; Agyeman et al., 2019).

Finally, the assessment reveals that absence of effective evaluation systems also makes it difficult to measure environmental impacts and ensure compliance with sustainability standards. To ensure the long-term success of environmental tourism, sustainability principles must be followed. These include limiting visitor numbers to carrying capacity levels, enforcing environmental regulations, engaging local communities in decision-making, and promoting eco-friendly practices such as recycling, energy conservation, and responsible wildlife viewing (Mensah, 2019).

Conclusion

The study concludes that while environmental tourism holds significant potential for sustainable development, its effectiveness is constrained by multiple interrelated problems. Again, environmental tourism problems in Ghana are multidimensional and require integrated governance responses. Policy reforms establish sustainability frameworks, institutional improvements ensure effective implementation, and community participation enhances local ownership and environmental protection. Together, these interconnected interventions provide a holistic pathway toward sustainable environmental tourism development. Therefore, addressing these challenges requires integrated planning approaches, strong institutional frameworks, community-based tourism models, environmental education, and strict enforcement of conservation regulations.

Recommendations

The study recommends that, first, the government of Ghana should strengthen environmental tourism policies by integrating clear sustainability standards and visitor carrying capacity limits for protected areas and ecotourism sites. Research shows that uncontrolled tourist numbers contribute to ecosystem degradation and disturbance of biodiversity (Mensah, 2017). Second, environmental policies should incorporate mandatory environmental monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure compliance with conservation objectives. Finally, policy reforms should promote participatory policymaking to align national conservation goals with local development priorities, thereby reducing resistance to environmental regulations (Hall, 2011). The study again recommends that government institutions responsible for environmental tourism, particularly the Forestry Commission of Ghana, should receive increased logistical support, training, and funding to enhance monitoring and enforcement activities. Improved ranger training and digital monitoring systems can help control illegal activities and visitor misconduct. Additionally, institutional collaboration between environmental authorities, district assemblies, and tourism operators should be formalised through joint management frameworks to ensure consistent implementation of sustainability measures. Studies indicate that institutional capacity building significantly improves conservation outcomes in protected tourism areas (Agyeman et al., 2019).

Finally, the study recommends that local communities should be actively involved in tourism planning and decision-making through community-based ecotourism models. Evidence from Ghana shows that when communities benefit economically from tourism, they are more likely to support conservation initiatives (Akyeampong, 2011). Additionally, capacity-building programs should train residents in sustainable tourism enterprises such as eco-guiding, handicraft production, and waste management initiatives. Environmental education campaigns can also improve responsible tourist and resident behaviour, reducing littering and habitat destruction. Furthermore, revenue-sharing mechanisms should be strengthened to ensure equitable distribution of tourism income, thereby minimising conflicts and promoting stewardship of natural resources (Mensah, 2017).

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