


Chapter 36


Tourist Influx in Mountainous Areas: Threats and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

Mountains have a timeless appeal that draws tourists, often inspired by the feeling that “the mountains are calling.” This deep connection frequently influences travel decisions, bringing visitors to these majestic landscapes. When tourists flock to mountain regions, they do more than just explore—they help boost the local economy and contribute to broader growth through cultural exchange, learning, and development. Even lesser-known, untouched areas in the mountains can become popular destinations thanks to the rise in tourism. However, the flip side of this growing interest in mountain tourism is the impact it can have on the environment. It explores the delicate balance between the opportunities and challenges that come with the increasing number of tourists in mountainous regions. It offers a global perspective on mountain tourism, reflecting on its history and examining the effects of tourism on both the environment and the local communities. The discussion goes beyond just highlighting the benefits, also addressing the potential harm that can come from too much tourism.

INTRODUCTION TO MOUNTAIN TOURISM

Mountain tourism has become increasingly popular worldwide, accounting for a significant 15-20% of the global tourism market (Kruk et al., 2007; Ng, 2022). This growth has drawn attention to key areas like sustainable development, tourism expansion, and the unique appeal of mountain destinations (Ng, 2022). With climate change and environmental conservation becoming more pressing, the conversation around mountain tourism is evolving (Zeng et al., 2022). The impacts of global warming, the increase in tourist numbers, and the need to balance development with environmental stewardship are all challenges that the industry faces (Romeo et al., 2021; Upadhayaya, 2015). At the same time, trends like the concentration of tourists in specific areas, changes in the demographics of travellers, and innovations in winter tourism are shaping the future of the industry (Meyer-Cech & Pröbstl, 2006). The COVID-19 pandemic, while disruptive,

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-8764-1.ch036

has also opened doors for more sustainable tourism practices (Romeo et al., 2021). As research in this field continues to grow, especially in Europe, the focus is shifting toward creating year-round mountain tourism experiences, improving infrastructure, fostering partnerships, and conducting regular impact assessments to ensure a sustainable future (Dornier & Mauri, 2018; Romeo et al., 2021).

Mountain tourism has a rich history. What began as early exploration and adventure has grown into a massive global industry, with mountains now playing a significant role in local economies, social life, and environmental health (Apollo & Wengel, 2021). The beauty of mountain landscapes, from the Alps to the Giant Mountains, was central to tourism's early development, as people flocked to these areas for their scenic appeal (Stibral & Faktorová, 2021). Activities like mountaineering have also played a key role in defining tourist destinations and driving local economic growth (Schut, 2013). However, this growth hasn't been without its challenges. The concentration of tourists in specific areas and shifts in the types of visitors require thoughtful management to ensure that these regions can sustain both the people and the environment (Meyer-Cech & Pröbstl, 2006). To address these challenges, researchers have developed frameworks that take into account the unique resources and needs of mountain areas (S. K. Nepal & Chipeniuk, 2005). As mountain tourism continues to evolve, there's an increasing focus on preserving these fragile ecosystems while promoting sustainable development (Aleksandr N. et al., 2019; Richins et al., 2016).

For many mountain communities, tourism isn't just an industry—it's a lifeline. In areas with limited economic opportunities, tourism has become a critical source of income (Debarbieux et al., 2014). Over time, global trends, particularly those seen in the Alps, have influenced the way mountain tourism has developed (Milijic et al., 2017). While it brings economic benefits, tourism also poses risks to the unique and delicate landscapes of mountain regions (S. K. Nepal & Chipeniuk, 2005). Despite these challenges, tourism has also played a key role in modernizing many mountain regions, supporting efforts to preserve both cultural heritage and the natural environment (Martin, 2008). The need for careful management of the economic, social, and ecological impacts of tourism is more important than ever (Meyer-Cech & Pröbstl, 2006). Current trends continue to show a concentration of tourism in specific areas, changes in visitor demographics, and innovations in winter tourism (Meyer-Cech & Pröbstl, 2006). Projects like the one in Upper Svaneti, Georgia, which integrates natural beauty with cultural heritage, demonstrate the potential for mountain regions to offer more than just scenic views—they can be destinations rich in history and culture (Cappucci et al., 2015).

In recent decades, mountain regions have undergone significant economic transformation. Communities that once relied heavily on agriculture and forestry have turned to tourism as a way to survive and thrive (Lundmark, 2005). This shift has led to the growth of various types of tourism, including eco-tourism and mountaineering tourism, which cater to travellers looking for adventure and sustainability (Apollo & Wengel, 2021; Zaburaeva et al., 2020). However, the rapid growth of tourism in these regions is a double-edged sword. While it offers the promise of economic development, it also threatens the ecosystems and cultural heritage that make these destinations so special (Debarbieux et al., 2014; S. K. Nepal & Chipeniuk, 2005). Global trends, especially those from the Alps, have shaped the evolution of mountain tourism (Meyer-Cech & Pröbstl, 2006; Milijic et al., 2017). To navigate these challenges, experts emphasize the need for sustainable tourism planning that takes into account the unique characteristics of mountain environments, ensuring they can be enjoyed by future generations (Aleksandr N. et al., 2019; S. K. Nepal & Chipeniuk, 2005).

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF TOURIST INFLUX

As tourism continues to grow in mountain regions, ecosystems face increasing threats. Research shows that the more tourists trample through these areas, the more damage they cause—widening trails, eroding soil, and destroying vegetation (Fidelus-Orzechowska et al., 2021; Tomczyk & Ewertowski, 2023). In high-altitude environments, where nature recovers slowly, these effects can be long-lasting (Tomczyk & Ewertowski, 2023). Wildlife is also impacted. Sensitive species often retreat or disappear entirely from areas disturbed by tourism (Tolvanen & Kangas, 2016). The challenge is finding a way to balance tourism growth with the protection of biodiversity, especially in mountain areas where the environment is particularly fragile (Hall, 2010; Poyyamoli, 2008). Some researchers believe the solution lies in

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