

Exploring Constraints on Sustainability Practices Among Coffee Farmers in Yunnan Province, China: Insights From Grounded Theory

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ABSTRACT

The sustainable development of rural tourism increasingly depends on the participation and transformation of smallholder farmers, yet their roles and constraints remain underexplored in the context of coffee-producing regions. Focusing on Yunnan, China, this study investigates the structural barriers that hinder farmers from adopting sustainable practices within the emerging coffee tourism sector. Drawing on grounded theory, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 participants, including small-scale coffee farmers, tourism-involved producers, and local policymakers—from Purer, Baoshan, and Lincang, collecting approximately 193,000 words of qualitative data. Through open, axial, and selective coding, the study identifies six interrelated constraint categories: financial insecurity, policy inaccessibility, capacity and knowledge gaps, environmental pressures, labor shortages, and limited integration into tourism governance. These constraints are not isolated but form an interlocking system that restricts farmers' agency in navigating the shift toward sustainability.

KEYWORDS

Coffee Tourism, Sustainable Agriculture, Grounded Theory, Smallholder Farmers, Structural Barriers

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INTRODUCTION

The world currently faces multifaceted challenges, including climate change, resource scarcity, biodiversity loss, and increasing social inequalities (Parsons et al., 2024). Sustainable tourism aims to balance economic benefits, social well-being, and ecological preservation (Pai et al., 2025). However, numerous challenges remain, including reducing carbon emissions, fostering community cohesion, promoting rural revitalization, and alleviating poverty. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive efforts, from policy formulation to the practical implementation of solutions (Chan, 2023; Islam, 2024; Litvinenko et al., 2022).

Coffee tourism, an emerging form of tourism combining coffee culture, agricultural production, and experiential travel, has gained significant traction worldwide in recent years (Chen et al., 2021a). Approximately 25 million smallholder farmers are engaged in coffee cultivation, with each farm typically covering less than 2 hectares. These smallholder farmers collectively account for around 70% of the world's coffee production (Giller et al., 2021; Lerner et al., 2021). Given that the average household size among coffee farmers is estimated to be five individuals, it is projected that over 100 million people globally depend on coffee cultivation for their livelihood (Dupre et al., 2022; Rhiney et al., 2021). However, comprehensive data on the number of people relying specifically on coffee tourism as a source of income remain unavailable.

Yunnan Province has solidified its position as a pivotal coffee production hub in China, with cities such as Pu'er, Baoshan, and Lincang leading in cultivation scale, output, and economic benefits. As of 2024, Yunnan's coffee cultivation area has stabilized at over 1.7 million acres, with an expected production of approximately 500,000 tons and sales projected to surpass 100 billion yuan (Li et al., 2024a; Shao et al., 2025; Shaohui & Liping, 2022).

Pu'er City is recognized as the largest coffee cultivation area in the nation, contributing significantly to the province's coffee industry with an annual production accounting for 48% of the province's total. The city has successfully integrated coffee production with cultural tourism, generating substantial employment and boosting tourism revenues. This integration is not only enhancing local economic development but also promoting sustainable agricultural practices (Ma et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2023). Baoshan and Lincang have also shown remarkable growth in the coffee sector. Baoshan's industry has evolved with a significant increase in the premium coffee ratio and deep processing rate, leading the province in both aspects (Wang et al., 2024). Lincang, known for its premium coffee production, has adopted innovative models such as the company + cooperative + base + farmer model to enhance farmers' incomes and integrate coffee with tourism, thus fostering a synergistic development between coffee production, culture, and tourism (Li & Liu, 2023). These developments underline the importance of Yunnan as a major coffee-producing region that not only supports the domestic market but also enriches the cultural tourism landscape. The robust growth of the coffee industry and coffee tourism in Yunnan highlights the need for further research into sustainable practices among coffee farmers in these tourism destinations (Ouyang & Phakdeephrot, 2024; Shaohui & Liping, 2022). This research could provide insights into sustainable agricultural practices that could be replicated in other coffee-growing regions, enhancing both economic and environmental sustainability.

Farmers play a pivotal role in maintaining the ecological balance of coffee-growing regions through sustainable land management, water conservation, and organic farming techniques (Poncet et al., 2024). Their practices directly influence the environmental sustainability of coffee tourism by minimizing resource depletion and preserving biodiversity. Additionally, farmers' engagement in sustainable tourism initiatives enhances local economic resilience by generating diversified income streams and fostering community-driven development (Cavalleri et al., 2022). Understanding how farmers adopt and adapt sustainable practices within coffee tourism is therefore critical for developing inclusive policies that empower rural communities, promote environmental stewardship, and ensure the long-term viability of coffee tourism as a sustainable economic model. Therefore, a comprehensive

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