



Evaluation of Socio-economic Impacts of Ecotourism Routes in Türkiye's Forests and Protected Areas

Türkiye'nin Ormanlarında ve Korunan Alanlarındaki Ekoturizm Rotalarının Sosyo-Ekonomik Etkilerinin Değerlendirilmesi

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Öz

Bu çalışmanın temel katkısı, Türkiye'de ekoturizm sektörünün gelişimi için mevcut sosyoekonomik durumun iyileştirilmesine odaklanmasındır. Bu sayede kentsel alanlarda yaşayan ekoturistlere bir rota katkısı olacağı da düşünülmüştür. Bu çalışmada Türkiye'nin ekoturizm rotalarının değerlendirilmesi amaçlanmıştır. Ekoturizm rotaları verilerine dayanarak, ekoturizm alanlarının adı, bulunduğu il ve yapılabilecek aktiviteler listelenmiştir. Korunan alanlardaki her bir ekoturizm rotası harita üzerinde belirlenmiştir. Ayrıca 2018-2023 yılları arasında Türkiye'deki ziyaretçi sayısının 28.318.588, ziyaretçi harcamalarının 599.677.838 ABD doları artarken; korunan alan gelirlerinin 1.172.067 ABD doları azaldığı tespit edilmiştir. Bu alanlarda uygulanacak akılcı ve düzenli planlama çerçevesinde gerçekleştirilecek eğitim faaliyetleri, mevcut değerlerin korunması, bölgenin tanıtımı ve yerel ekonominin geliştirilmesi için kamuoyu oluşturulmasına ve doğal değerlerin farklı gruplar tarafından tanınmasına katkı sağlayacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ekoturizm aktiviteleri, sürdürülebilir topluluklar, korunan alanlar, seyahat tercihleri, doğa temelli turizm

ABSTRACT

The main contribution of the present study is its focus on improving the current socio-economic situation for the development of the ecotourism sector in Türkiye. In this way, it is also thought that it will contribute to provide a route for ecotourists living in urban areas. This study aims to evaluate the ecotourism routes of Türkiye. Based on the ecotourism routes data, the name of the ecotourism areas, the province where it is located and the activities that can be done are listed. It was determined each ecotourism route in protected areas on the map. It was also determined that between 2018-2023, the number of visitors in Türkiye increased by 28.318.588 and visitor expenditures increased by 599.677.838 USD, while protected area revenues decreased by 1.172.067 USD. Educational activities to be carried out within the framework of rational and regular planning to be implemented in these areas will contribute to the creation of public opinion for the protection of existing values, the promotion of the region and the development of the local economy, as well as the recognition of natural values by different groups.

Keywords: Ecotourism activities, sustainable communities, protected areas, travel preferences, nature-based tourism

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism, which is a travel and temporary accommodation made for the purpose of meeting needs such as vacation, rest and entertainment outside the place where people live in general, has an important share in the economy of developed or developing countries, especially due to its contribution to the employment, income level and balance of payments of developing countries (Mihalic, 2002).

In line with the social, political, economic and technological advances in the countries of the world, there have been significant changes in tourism and especially ecotourism in recent years. This change in the usual holiday understanding is especially manifested in the direction of moving away from tourism centers. In parallel with these changes, the expectations of tourists can be expressed as spending a holiday in a clean environment by getting closer to nature, in holiday destinations and facilities based on environmental harmony, taking into account the protection of the environment. Thus, tourism movements, which have an important place in the Turkish economy, are increasing day by day (Şengül & Çora, 2020). Tourism and ecotourism expenditures create mobility and vitality in the national economy, thus affecting the economy in different ways.

Ecotourism is a low-visitor program that promotes recreation, understanding and protection of nature and cultural resources. impact and socio-economic benefits to local people ecotourism is defined as environmentally responsible travel and visitation to unspoiled natural areas. Ecotourism is a set of environmental, economic and social relations that should be considered more comprehensively than the movements of nature lovers and environmentally conscious people.

Cultural tourism, an important component of the overall tourism industry, is of great interest due to the complex interplay between cultural heritage and tourism experiences. This type of tourism enriches intercultural encounters by inviting tourists to explore the arts, traditions and lifestyles of different societies (Benhaida et. al., 2024). In this context, the elements of Turkish cultural routes are determined as; historic cities, rural localizations, traditional life, ancient settlements, unique historical buildings, natural environment and wildlife. Today, these types of tourism, which include both individual walkers and groups, have become a professionalized field and the need for tourist guides has increased. If cultural routes are not seen as a specialty, this need will be quickly filled by other alternatives. It is necessary to create an infrastructure and prepare an assistive resource for this area of specialization, which is not yet known even among tourist guides. Tourist guides, who should be one of the components of an ecologically based integrity, are not yet included in all routes (Tanrısever, 2020). Ecotourism activities based on forests and wildlife in national parks and forest reserves and community-based natural resource management programs are not considered environmental services, but they share the basic philosophy behind payments for environmental services (Gondo, 2010).

The components of ecotourism, which is one of the components of sustainable tourism, can be explained as the protection and continuity of biodiversity, taking into account the welfare of local people, raising awareness of tourists and local people, accommodation and food and beverage type services are provided by small and medium-sized enterprises, natural and non-renewable resources are consumed as minimally as possible, participation in ecotourism management according to local conditions is encouraged, and employment and labor opportunities are not to the detriment of local people. One of the areas where ecotourism activities are carried out is undoubtedly forest areas. However, the areas where these activities are carried out and developed are protected areas (national parks, nature parks, nature conservation areas, nature monuments, wildlife development areas etc.) and forest parks and special environmental protection zones (Küçükosmanoğlu & Arslangündoğdu, 2003).

The most intense and interesting provinces of Türkiye's ecotourism routes are located in; *Mersin, Osmaniye, Trabzon, Bursa, Muğla, Mardin, Denizli, Kahramanmaraş, Amasya, Yalova, Kayseri, İzmir, İstanbul, Kütahya, Bartın, Kocaeli, Sivas, Konya, Eskişehir, Karabük, Balıkesir, Bilecik, Artvin and Bolu.* In addition, the protected areas where ecotourism activities are frequently seen are *Akdağlar National Park, Altınbeşik Cave, Bey Mountains, Gala Lake, Hatıla Valley, Kaçkar Mountains National Park, Uludağ National Park, Köprülü Canyon, Sultan Reeds and Yedigöller National Park* (TRT, 2022). These ecotourism provinces are marked on the map (Figure 1) in terms of the regions where they are located.



Figure 1. Türkiye Ecotourism Routes Map (generated by authors).

The main ecotourism activities in Türkiye are paragliding, mountaineering, nature and culture walks, horseback tours, bicycle tourism, orienteering, bird watching, butterfly watching, plant observation and identification, nature photography, river tourism, plateau tourism, cave tourism and sport fishing (Küçükosmanoğlu & Arslangündoğdu, 2003; Kasalak & Sarı, 2023).

According to the Ecotourism Action Plan prepared by the General Directorate of Forestry (GDF), there are 110 ecotourism areas in Türkiye, 50 of which are integrated into recreation areas and 60 of which are new, within 30 Regional Directorates of Forestry. It is estimated that these ecotourism areas will contribute 250 million Turkish (18.722.384 USD⁴) liras to the country's tourism destinations (TOD, 2021). For example, with the ecotourism areas and routes established in 2021, tourism opportunities were diversified and increased, contributing approximately 231 million Turkish Liras (7.832.818 USD) to the national economy in 2023. In addition, while the number of national and foreign ecotourists was around 30 million in 2020, this number reached 63 million in 2023.

Türkiye has a great importance in terms of forest cover, with forest cover covering 29% of the Country's surface area. Türkiye's geography offers many advantages and potentials for ecotourism by combining rich flora and fauna biodiversity, forest cover and local cultural values (Güneş, 2018; Ilgar, 2018; Action Plan, 2021).

The positive contributions that ecotourism can make to natural areas will only become operational if the concept and content of ecotourism are perceived and used appropriately and correctly. Raising awareness of ecotourists and local people is very important for ecotourism development. Educational activities to be carried out within the framework of rational and regular planning to be implemented in these areas will contribute to the creation of public opinion for the protection of existing values, the promotion of the region and the development of the local economy, as well as the recognition of natural values by different groups.

⁴ USD: United States Dollar.

Prior to this study, a detailed literature review was conducted and studies with limited scope and old data on the subject were found.

When the literature on the socio-economics of ecotourism in Türkiye is examined, it is determined that studies have been conducted in the following scope:

- 2000-2006 study of ecotourism visitor numbers in Kastamonu, Kure Mountains province (Gunes & Hens 2007).
- Regional ecotourism area fauna and flora studies (Özcan et. al., 2009).
- A SWOT analysis examined action plans and policies between 2007 and 2013, analyzing the questionnaires and plans that determine the demographics of a regional area together with the historical background (Kaplan, 2015).
- Forest villager's questionnaire in 2014 (Türker et. al., 2014).
- Local SWOT analyses (Kiper et. al., 2016).
- The most recent study on ecotourism revenues and visitors for Türkiye covering the years 2003-2017 (Ünal et. al., 2018).

It is expected to fill the gap in the literature on the publication of a socio-economic approach to the quantitative data of ecotourism areas in Türkiye today. Since the monetary data obtained in this study requires special permission, it will provide data for other studies. This study will also provide data on the current legal situation. In general, it is aimed to provide a better understanding of its conceptual value.

1. Conceptual Framework

The ecotourism concept is analyzed in this section under the headings of definition of ecotourism and its importance in tourism activities, distinguishing characteristics of ecotourism, components and application principles of ecotourism, general characteristics of ecotourism, and ecotourism activities and routes.

1.1 Definition of Ecotourism and Its Importance in Tourism Activities

It is also necessary to point out the main differences between nature-based tourism and ecotourism. Nature based tourism is any kind of tourism activity in natural areas for recreation, entertainment or adventure. It does not have a specific focus on sustainability or environmental impacts. For example, this includes camping, fishing, hiking, skiing or beach vacations. There are no specific ethical or sustainability requirements. Often, it has the potential to harm the environment. Appeals to a wide audience and is often targeted at individuals with a more general interest in nature. Ecotourism is tourism that includes environmental education and awareness-raising activities aimed at nature conservation, environmental sustainability and contribution to local communities. For example, wildlife observation, guided ecological tours, environmental education/workshops, carbon footprint reduction practices. Ecotourism is often associated with nature conservation and sustainable development goals. It adopts environmentally friendly practices and contributes to the economic and social well-being of local people. It is aimed at a more informed audience, sensitive to nature conservation and sustainability issues. nature-based tourism researchers and managers need to provide an approach to generate critical insights to properly understand the factors that influence ecotourism behavior. Managers of nature-based tourism destinations should increase and improve the levels of perceived ecotourism benefits, biospheric value, ecotourism self-identity, environmental

attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control and help develop sustainable tourism (Weaver, 2001; Buckley, 2009; Newsome et. al. 2012).

Sustainable tourism can generally be pursued in various environments such as coastal, island, rural, mountainous or urban ecosystems, whereas ecotourism consists only of nature-based activities. However, while ensuring the continuity of tourism, ecotourism is seen as a separate type of tourism with its own characteristics, although it covers all types of tourism that comply with the principle of sustainability. Ecotourism has been defined similarly by various authors. One of the definitions is as; "activities that aim to protect natural and cultural values, include promotional and educational activities that will enable people to recognize these values with their functions and values, and encourage small and individual activities instead of large group activities" (Simpson, 1993). On the other hand; "ecotourism is a type of tourism that encourages and enlightens experiences consisting of nature travel, provided that it respects local values and contributes to ecosystem protection" (Wight, 1995). In these definitions, it is stated that ecotourism is not only a tourism activity in nature, but should actively contribute to the protection of nature and natural resources. Finally, ecotourism is seen as an important tool of environmental education by another author, and it is argued that the knowledge and appreciation of natural and cultural values is the main feature that defines ecotourism (Kuvan, 2012).

1.2 Distinguishing Characteristics of Ecotourism

At the World Ecotourism Summit held in Quebec, Canada in 2002 with the participation of UNEP (United Nations Environment Program) and WTO (World Tourism Organization), the different characteristics of ecotourism were described as active contribution to the conservation of cultural and natural heritage; contribution to the well-being of local people and inviting local people to the planning, development and operation phases; informing visitors about natural and cultural heritage and providing good opportunities for independent tourists as well as those participating in organized tours in small groups (Nayir et. al., 2008).

The meeting recognized the important role of ecotourism in the realization of sustainable activities in the field of tourism, with the aim of ensuring equitable distribution of social-economic and environmental benefits from ecotourism. In recent years, the function of ecotourism in improving the living standards of local people has attracted attention. Local people can earn income by providing accommodation and catering services to ecotourists who come to the region for ecotourism activities, selling a wide variety of vegetables and fruits and handicrafts, working in jobs related to protected areas, local guiding and pension management. In ecotourism activities, it is important to ensure effective cooperation between protected area managers, local people, researchers, relevant government and private sector units and tourism agencies. The participation of all persons and organizations involved in ecotourism in planning and implementation activities with an understanding of inclusion in the process is important in achieving the goals related to ecotourism. (Nayir et. al., 2008; Kuvan, 2012).

1.3 Components and Application Principles of Ecotourism

Ecotourism is grouped according to various metrics. These vary such as the nature and natural resources of the travel destination, the nature of the activity, etc. Some authors group ecotourism as active and passive ecotourism. Active ecotourism is aimed at developing the destination and is based on sustainability. These ecotourists have high environmental awareness, do not attempt to change the environment, stay in natural accommodations suitable for ecology, and their needs and equipment are kept to a minimum. Passive ecotourism, on the other hand, takes into account that tourism activities that do not have a negative physical and cultural impact on the environment are necessary. This type

of tourism is more tolerant of preserving the current state of natural resources and is more widespread in terms of services and equipment (Orams, 1995; Kasalak & Sarı, 2023).

The main components and implementation principles of ecotourism, which is one of the sub-components of sustainable tourism, are explained below. The components of ecotourism can be explained as contributing to the conservation of biodiversity, protecting the welfare of local people, raising awareness of tourists and local people, providing services to small groups of tourists by small-scale organizations and companies, ensuring that tourists and local people act responsibly about the tourism sector, minimizing the consumption of non-recyclable resources as much as possible, giving importance to local participation in tourism management and ensuring the development of job opportunities and property in favor of local people.

Minimizing the harm that tourism causes to the natural and traditional environments, educating visitors and locals about the conservation of natural resources and the traditional socio-cultural environments, making sure that tourism is promoted as a responsible industry that satisfies local needs and grows in collaboration with the public and local government, and allocating funds for the management of protected areas (natural and traditional socio-cultural sites) are the implementation principles of ecotourism. In order to reduce the negative effects of tourism, it is important to support long-term and evaluation programs for socio-cultural and natural resources, make sure that tourism is developed in a way that boosts the local economy, ensure that tourism is developed in a way that increases the region's capacity for social and environmental issues, invest in tourism infrastructure that is environmentally friendly, integrates with the local way of life, and protects the local flora and wildlife. Even if ecotourism activities have a positive environmental and socio-economic impact, in the absence of a good organization, they can cause environmental damage at the rate of mass tourism. This is because ecotourism routes are sensitive ecosystems (forests, protected areas, etc.) and tourism activities in these areas cause environmental pollution as well as damage to natural resources (air, water, soil, vegetation, animals, mines etc.). Ecotourism at high economic levels depends on the organization and communication between the tourism industry, private sector and public institutions, local people and ecotourists (Küçükosmanoğlu & Arslangündoğdu, 2003; Kasalak & Sarı, 2023).

Ecotourism in Türkiye has become more legally grounded in recent years. It would be useful to summarize the legal studies on this subject in order to see the general framework and institutional awareness⁵. In the Regulation on Forest Parks published in the Official Gazette dated May 28, 2022 and numbered 31849 stipulating that "In order to support ecotourism activities, ecotourism routes can be planned together with forest parks and their activities can be managed together. Works and procedures related to ecotourism routes are carried out according to the procedures and principles to be determined by the General Directorate". Also, ecotourism route is defined as; "Routes in forest areas that serve for people's physical and mental health, happiness, love of nature and spiritual renewal, and provide opportunities for alternative tourism activities such as trekking, rock climbing, bird watching, sports and similar alternative tourism activities". According to Article 15 of the same regulation; "The General Directorate is authorized to charge entrance fees to visitors to forest parks and ecotourism routes". According to Article 338 of the Decree of the Presidency of the Republic on the Organization of Ministries, Related, Affiliated Institutions and Organizations and Other Institutions and Organizations, updated in 2022; regulating the procedures and principles for the support and development of ecotourism is among the duties of the GDF, Department of Ecosystem Services. According to the Communiqué on the Procedures and Principles for the Management of Ecotourism Areas No. E-81227594-010.05-9048307 (314) of the Department of Ecosystem Services of the GDF; planning and implementation principles have been determined. Official Gazette Date: 08 November 2004 Official Gazette No 25637 According to the Regulation on Wildlife Protection and Wildlife

⁵ Accessed online: Official Gazette, <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/> Accession 22 Nov 2024.

Development Areas; "All kinds of activities other than scientific studies and research and ecotourism are prohibited in Wildlife Protection and Development Areas". According to the Regulation on the Qualifications of Tourism Facilities, Official Gazette Date June 01, 2019 and Official Gazette Number 30791; mobile homes are defined and it is stated that they can be arranged in areas reserved for camping or rural/ecotourism uses in zoning plans. According to the Law No. 17635 dated March 16, 1982 on Tourism Incentives; protection of natural tourism resources and nature-friendly materials to be used are specified and the allocation procedures of some areas that allow ecotourism are determined. In addition, the application research and development centers of some universities in Türkiye have published separate regulations to develop practices to promote nature-sensitive ecotourism⁶ (Table 1).

Table 1. Ecotourism Regulations of Turkish Universities (generated by authors).

University Regulation	Date of Official Gazette	Official Gazette Issue of the Regulation
Pamukkale University Flora and Fauna Research, Development Application and Research Center Regulation	09 June 2014	29025
Trakya University Balkan Arboretum and EDTU Herbarium Application and Research Center Regulation	24 February 2014	28923
Düzce University Biodiversity Application and Research Center Regulation	03 January 2011	27804
Bursa Technical University Forestry Application and Research Center Regulation	26 September 2021	31610
Iğdır University Biodiversity Application and Research Center Regulation	27 June 2020	31168
Artvin Çoruh University Ali Nihat Gökyiğit Botanical Garden Application and Research Center Regulation	19 December 2018	30630
Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University Biodiversity Application and Research Center Regulation	14 August 2017	30154
Karabuk University History, Culture, Art Researches Application and Research Center Regulation	12 April 2017	30036

⁶ Accessed online: <https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/> Accession: 22 Nov 2024. Searched as: *ekoturizm, eko-turizm, ekolojik turizm*.

Çankırı Karatekin University Wildlife Application and Research Center Regulation	10 June 2019	30797
Istanbul Technical University Climate Change Application and Research Center Regulation	17 May 2019	30775
Ataturk University Oltu Basin Application and Research Center (Oltumer) Regulation	11 November 2018	30592
Mersin University Sea Turtle Application and Research Center Regulation	28 July 2015	29428
Kırıkkale University Kızılırmak Research and Application Center Regulation	26 December 2007	26738

These legal infrastructure works and practices are good developments for Türkiye, where one third of the country is a forest. There is no legislative arrangement that includes a title focused entirely on ecotourism. Existing regulations will be examined in a separate study in terms of effective management, monitoring and reporting.

1.4 General Characteristics of Ecotourism

After various definitions and evaluations of ecotourism, it would be appropriate to briefly explain the general characteristics of ecotourism as follows:

- An effort to learn about the structure and continuity of nature and cultural values and to try to transform this effort into a contribution to conservation.
- Minimizing the negative effects on the natural and sociocultural environment.
- Encouraging activities to be carried out in small groups or with individual participation.
- Keeping artificial factors and physical facilities to a minimum and building them in a simple form, in accordance with the natural environment and local architecture.
- Adopting a participatory view in relation to this by giving special importance to training and promotional activities.
- To have a positive impact on the development of the economic level of local people.
- To give priority to quality in the selection of touristic areas.
- To prefer new and undestroyed places, to the diversity of ecotourism activities such as; paragliding, mountaineering, nature and cultural trekking, horseback tours, bicycle tourism, bird and butterfly watching, plant observation and identification, nature photography, river tourism, plateau tourism, cave tourism, adventure tourism, underwater diving tourism, ecological farm/hotel tourism, etc.

- Encouraging more functional events.

The most important function of ecotourism in protected areas is that it is included in the management tactics of these areas. Generally, ecotourism is seen as a protection tactic. The preference of ecotourism-oriented uses over traditional tourism in protected areas is important for the sustainability of the area. The tourism industry ensures the development of the local economy by employing the people living around the protected areas, using local products and services and supporting the economic activities and handicrafts carried out traditionally in the area. In this way, it contributes positively to the establishment of more proper relations between the management of protected areas and local communities. Protected area managers should take an active role in communicating with the people and institutions organizing ecotourism activities to ensure that the natural, historical and cultural texture of these areas is not damaged (Kuvan, 2012; Kasalak & Sarı, 2023).

1.5 Ecotourism Activities and Routes

Forest areas, which are renewable natural resources, are important for all tourism activities with their unique life communities, flora and fauna, magnificent natural landscapes, in-forest water resources and primarily for all tourism activities and creating a touristic region. Considering the increasing desire for nature and natural resources in tourism activities today, it is clear that forests and protected areas are extremely important in terms of tourism and ecotourism. In order for forestry services related to tourism to be continuous, versatile and healthy, it is essential that forestry and tourism organizations work in coordination. In addition to the fact that forests are direct resources for tourism, villages in and around forests have a rich potential for various recreational activities, accommodation, transportation, food and beverage, sale of equipment and various materials, etc. The development and popularization of tourism and ecotourism through Turkish forestry will have a positive impact on the socio-economic development of villages in and around forests as well as the national economy.

However, in the relations between forest-protected areas, tourism and ecotourism; efforts should be made not only to benefit tourism but also to ensure the sustainability of forest resources by protecting them from biotic and abiotic damages in a conscious, planned, scientific manner and to leave forest assets with a richer potential in terms of material and spiritual functions to future generations (Özdönmez et. al., 1996; Akesen, 2011).

In recent years, while the main purpose of nature visitation has been stated as nature/rural experience and recreation/holiday, the primary motivation of the majority has been to take and share photos via social media tools (Giray et. al., 2019).

With its forests containing a large proportion of flora and fauna species suitable for ecotourism and its ecosystems covering rich biodiversity, Türkiye provides opportunities for ecotourism activities. As in many other countries around the world, the increasing tendency towards ecotourism in Türkiye, the formation of new markets, and the development of ecotourism have provided socio-economic contributions to the local people with the income obtained from ecotourism in addition to the income obtained from forestry activities.

Today, in the planning and management of forest resources, it is necessary to identify areas suitable for ecotourism within the forest and offer them to the service of ecotourists. The importance of ecotourism in Türkiye, which has a large number of natural resources in terms of ecotourism, is increasing day by day due to its infrastructure, resource value, diversity of activities and geographical and geopolitical position. While preparing ecotourism management and implementation plans, it is aimed that ensuring that villagers living in and around forests participate in ecotourism activities and earn economic income, determining what these activities will take part in (mountaineering, nature and culture trekking, horseback tours, bird watching, plateau tourism, cave tourism, etc.), ensuring the

order and continuity of how unfixed structures and facilities will be built and managed within the scope of a management plan.

GDF of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry launched the "Ecotourism Action Plan" in 2021 to ensure the continuity of the socio-economic and socio-cultural needs of the people and to ensure that forests are preserved for future generations. The largest share (expenditures) in the action plan budget is allocated to the identification and planning of areas suitable for ecotourism, preparation of integrated ecotourism plans for forest parks, development and promotion of ecotourism opportunities, meetings and trainings with relevant individuals and organizations. Ecotourism concept is also included in the Türkiye 2023 Tourism Strategy of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (Action Plan, 2021).

2. Materials and methods

After the conceptual place of ecotourism was clarified, Turkish legislation was searched and examined from the official search engine to determine the place of ecotourism in Turkish legislation. It was investigated whether there is consistency in the income data obtained and the task definitions in the law. Since the types of income obtained are in Turkish Lira, all of them were calculated and determined as USD selling value for the period 2018-2023 according to the last day of each year. Accordingly, USD selling values according to the years are (Year/Turkish Liras); 2018/5.2905, 2019/5.9507, 2020/7.4327, 2021/13.3530, 2022/18.7320, 2023/29.4913.

A literature review on the subject was conducted for Türkiye. It has been observed that there is a gap in current national data on the subject. The aspects that need to be developed in Türkiye in this regard have been identified. In this respect, all ecotourism activities from past to present have been examined. For this purpose, ecotourism activities carried out by public institutions and organizations, universities and the private sector form the basis of the material and method.

The research, which was conducted to investigate the effects of ecotourism activities on the socio-economic structure of the people in Türkiye, focused on the importance of ecotourism in tourism activities, the definition of ecotourism, ecotourism activities and routes, and the effects of ecotourism activities on the socio-economic structure of the people.

The research was also carried out in order to provide a comprehensive survey to ecotourists living in urban areas and to facilitate their decision-making on their visits. Priority and important information was obtained by visiting the authorized institutions on site for this research. For this reason, examining the statistics of ecotourism activities in Türkiye, the distribution of ecotourism activities in Türkiye and their relations with forests and protected areas were explained.

In particular, Ecotourism Action Plans made by the GDF were utilized. For this purpose, the regions where ecotourism activities are carried out and their economic returns are explained in detail by creating figures and tables.

All ecotourism areas announced within the scope of the research were identified in terms of their location. The activities that are suitable for each site are listed. Ecotourism revenues obtained as a result of the determined activities were analyzed. The number of local and international ecotourists over the years was determined and graphed. The economic return to the protected areas where these sites are located was determined.

Ecotourism in Türkiye has started to strengthen as a managerial infrastructure especially since 2021. The fact that more and more of these areas have been established and their visitor contributions have not been measured by researchers has brought this research to this study. It is expected that examining Table 2 and Figure 1 will serve as a data source for visitors and especially for decision-makers and

researchers. It is also hoped that the visitor numbers and economic evaluations can be used as a source for an official annual report to be written on this subject. The purpose is to contribute to sustainability by ensuring that the importance of natural areas is understood and preferred by the public.

3. Results

The results are given as general evaluations on ecotourism routes and activities that can be preferred in each route. The effects of ecotourism activities on the socio-economic structure of the public are analyzed with the data obtained from the managers of ecotourism areas.

There are ecotourism routes covering almost all geographical regions of Türkiye, enabling the realization of one or more of various ecotourism activities. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, GDF started active work on ecotourism in 2017 (TOD, 2021). The featured routes of ecotourism activities in Türkiye so far are shown in the Table 2.

Table 2. Ecotourism Routes of Türkiye (generated by authors)⁷.

City	Route	Activities
Mersin	Çamlıyayla Beştepe	Picnic, Photography, Hiking, Nature Tourism, Nature Sports
Osmaniye	Karaçay Waterfall	Photography, Hiking, Nature Tourism, Nature Sports, Scientific Tour
Trabzon	Hıdırnebi Plateau	Photography, Nature Tourism
Bursa	Oylat	Photography, Hiking, Nature Tourism, Nature Sports
Muğla	Çandır	Fishing, Photography, Swimming, Outdoor Sports
Mardin	Antik Dara	Photography, Nature Tourism, Nature Sports, Scientific Tour
Denizli	Acıpayam Çatak Canyon	Fishing, Photography, Hiking, Nature Tourism, Nature Sports, Mountain Biking, Nature Sports, Scientific Tour
Kahramanmaraş	Başkonuş Plateau	Photography, Hiking, Nature Tourism, Mountain Biking, Scientific Tour
Amasya	Şehzadeler Road	Mountain Biking, Hiking, Running
Bursa	Suuçtu	Photography, Nature Tourism, Mountain Biking, Botanical Excursions
Yalova	Termal	Hiking, Outdoor Sports, Mountain Biking
Mersin	Karabucak Eucalyptus Forest	Outdoor Sports, Photography, Mountain Biking
Kayseri	Erciyes Titrek Kavak	Nature Sports, Photography, Mountain Biking, Nature Tourism, Scientific Tour and Sports Event
İzmir	Nazarköy	Hiking, Cycling tours
İstanbul	Büyükkada	Scientific Tour, Photography, Nature Tourism, Nature Sports, Mountain Biking
Kütahya	Domaniç Migration Path	Picnic, Photography, Nature Tourism, Mountain Biking

⁷ It is worth mentioning that since it was announced after the completion date of the research; Düzce, Aktaş Waterfall ecotourism route was announced as Türkiye's 64th ecotourism route in April 2024. Photography, hiking, nature tourism is possible for the visitors in the area.

Mardin	Karasu	Photography, Nature Tourism, Nature Sports, Scientific Tour
Muğla	Kavakarası Sığla	Fishing, Photography, Nature Tourism, Mountain Biking, Scientific Tour
Bartın	Ulukaya	Hiking, Nature Tourism
Kocaeli	Kartepe	Photography, Nature Tourism, Mountain Biking
Artvin	Çoruh	Hiking, Nature Tourism, Nature Sports
Denizli	Çameli	Mountain Biking, Hiking, Paragliding, Orienteering
Bolu	Seben Taşlıyayla Pond	Photography, Hiking, Fishing, Nature Tourism, Nature Sports, Mountain Biking
Denizli	Eskere	Mountain Biking, Hiking, Photography, Nature Tourism
Sivas	Kardeşler	Photography, Hiking, Mountain biking, Nature tourism
Konya	Akçapınar	Nature tourism, photography, Hiking
İzmir	Çiçekliköy for educational purposes	Horseback riding, hiking, sport event, scientific tour, nature sports, adventure area, nature tourism, photography, picnic
Eskişehir	Kocakır Therapy Forest / Hippotherapy Center	Horseback riding, hiking, photography, nature tourism, mountain biking, scientific tour, sport event
Karabük	Yenice Göktepe	Cycling, hiking, photography, nature tourism, scientific tour, picnic
Balıkesir	Erdek Kapıdağ	Photography, hiking, nature tourism, mountain biking
Mersin	Kayacı Valley	Photography, nature tourism, mountain biking
Bilecik	Pelitözü Selöz	Photography, hiking, nature tourism, mountain biking
Mardin	Beyazsu	Picnic, photography, hiking, nature tourism, adventure area, nature sports, scientific tour, sport event

In addition to the ecotourism areas described in detail in the Table, Diyarbakır-Ambarvadisi/Sinekçayı Gelincik Mountain, Kastamonu-Başkonuş Plateau, Adıyaman-Waterfall, Antalya-Topçu Yolu/Alanya Sapadere Canyon/Selçuklu Caravan Road, Ordu-Akkuş, Konya-Selçuklu and Derbent, Uşak-Clandras Pepouza Ancient City, Siirt-Baykan, Tokat-Düden Lake, Eskişehir-Çatacık Hiking Trail, Samsun-Canik, Ankara-Karacaören/Beypazarı, Çanakkale-Biga, Batman-Mereto Mountain, Kars-Sarıkamış/Keklik Creek, Isparta-Eğriyol, Aksaray-Hasandağı, Tekirdağ-Naip Waterfall, İzmir-Zeytinalanı for Educational Purposes, Çanakkale-Kalkım, Adana-Meydan Plateau, Zonguldak-Gökçebey Süzek Canyon, Bilecik-Söğüt/Domaniç Ottoman Migration Route, Erzurum-Abdurrahman Gazi ecotourism areas were also declared by GDF, providing opportunities for various ecotourism activities such as mountain climbing, paragliding and canoeing. It is estimated that the diversification of ecotourism activities in these areas will contribute up to 2 billion Turkish Liras per year to Turkish tourism destinations. In line with the Ecotourism Action Plan put into practice by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry GDF in order to benefit from Turkish forest resources in a qualified and productive manner; it is envisaged that the attractiveness of existing ecotourism areas will be increased through integrated studies in protected

areas by identifying, planning and implementing ecotourism areas. With the development and popularization of ecotourism activities in Türkiye, it is aimed to increase the diversity and production of collective benefits (hydrological, anti-erosional, nature conservation, aesthetic, recreation, etc.) of wood raw material of the forest. Ecotourism, which is based on the protection and sustainability of nature and natural resources, aims to utilize local resources with techniques and technologies that do not harm the environment.

3.1 The Effects of Ecotourism Activities on the Socio-Economic Structure of Public

Ecotourism is broader than the actions of nature lovers and environmentally sensitive ecotourists. It is in fact a set of environmental, economic and social links. Ecotourism, which is preferred especially by high-income individuals and groups and many middle-income consumers, is a type of tourism that gives visitors the opportunity to get to know, enjoy, behave appropriately, be sensitive to the environment and reduce harmful effects, and take local economic revenues into account the most. Ecotourism is based on the realization of economic development and utilization objectives by protecting. It should have minimal negative impacts on society and natural resources, actively involve local people and provide economic benefits. In addition to recognizing and appreciating nature, ecotourists use environmentally friendly technologies and protect and benefit from natural resources (Kasalak & Sarı, 2023).

Tourism has become one of the fastest growing sectors in the world as a result of social, economic, demographic, political and technological developments. Factors such as increasing incomes and free time, increasing transportation and communication opportunities, excessive urbanization, shrinking family structure, increasing social and personal freedoms, friendship and intimacy between countries, increasing diversification of people's life expectations are effective in this progress (Khan et. al., 2020).

Today, people are moving away from the traditional and customary understanding of vacation and prefer much more adventurous activities. The national and international tourist type is experienced and responsible, cares about understanding and knowing, is more independent, free, and has a high level of consciousness, and is pickier (Corbisiero et. al., 2022).

Due to these trends in the field of tourism, it can be said that in addition to the increasing competition to gain a larger share of the increasing and diversifying tourism activities, the type and quality of service will be focused on meeting the demands of these tourists. Due to the increasing interest in nature and natural resources in tourism activities, it can be stated that there will be a tendency towards facilities that are in harmony with their surroundings and have simple forms. Thus, activities in natural areas will gain priority as tourists seek adventure and excitement. The conservation and development objectives of sustainable tourism should be compatible with each other and should be based on the usage of cultural and natural assets utilized in the realization of tourism activities without jeopardizing the benefit and capacity of the natural and cultural assets used today and in the future. In the meeting held at the World Ecotourism Summit, it was recognized that ecotourism has an important role in the realization of sustainable activities in the field of tourism; it was emphasized that the social-economic and environmental benefits from ecotourism should be distributed equally and environmental sensitivities should be taken into consideration in the choice of location, travel type, accommodation and preferred activities of tourists.

Today, the function of ecotourism in improving the living standards of local people is emphasized. During ecotourism activities, local people can earn money by selling local vegetables, fruits, various foods, handicrafts to visitors, working in jobs related to protected areas, local guiding and pension management. At this stage, it is imperative to establish effective cooperation between the managers of protected areas, local people, researchers, relevant government and private sector representatives and tourism agencies. Ensuring the participation of all relevant people and institutions in ecotourism

activities and their presence in the planning and implementation processes will be important in achieving the goals of conservation and sustainability of ecotourism. Thanks to tourism, local people living in the vicinity of protected areas will be employed, local products and services will be provided, traditional economic activities and skills will be supported and the local economy will be contributed. This creates a favorable environment for cooperation and greater connections between protected area managers and local people. Tourism can be developed that is compatible with natural, environmental and landscape qualities and where artificial features are taken into account at a minimum level. In this way, it is important for the management to prioritize promotional and marketing activities by understanding its qualities and providing more detailed information (Kuvan, 2012).

On the other hand, it is crucial for the future of humanity to be cautious about uncontrolled and excessive use of plants and wild animals. Tourism scholars should begin to turn their attention to how the psychology and emotional dynamics of environmental distress affect tourists' experiences and decision-making, particularly in relation to sustainable wildlife tourism (Uyar, 2022).

As in many countries around the world, ecotourism activities in Türkiye are developing in forest areas and especially in protected areas (National Parks, Natural Parks, Nature Reserves, Nature Monuments, Wildlife Development Areas, etc.). For this very reason, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, GDF has implemented the ecotourism action plan with the aim of ensuring the continuity of the social, economic, and cultural needs of the local people and transferring the sustainability of forests to future generations. In order to develop and increase ecotourism activities, which have a positive impact on the socio-economic and cultural structure of countries, it is imperative to eliminate the deficiencies in infrastructure, accommodation, transportation, tools and equipment, etc. in Türkiye. In this way, by increasing the income level of the local people in terms of accommodation, foodstuffs, sale of tools and various materials, transportation, etc., the negative effects on forests and protected areas will be reduced.

A balance between the right to a clean environment, climate change and green logistics solutions for sustainable tourism should also be considered (Perkumienė et. al., 2020). In addition, the impact of tourism activities on local quality of life should be monitored and managed (Cetin & Okumus, 2019).

The revenues generated from ecotourism, which is a sub-component of tourism, and its contribution to the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, and thus to the local communities in forests and protected areas, are shown in the figures below by years (Figure 2, 3, 4). Ecotourism revenues obtained by tourism agencies are not added to these revenues. These data obtained from the General Directorate of Nature Conservation and National Parks (2024) are not the revenues collected by the General Directorate, but the estimated revenues of the land owners who operate the area. Official national numerical data on ecotourism was obtained through an appointment with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, General Directorate of Nature Conservation and National Parks, Department of Nature Conservation on July 5, 2024 to confirm compliance with open access data.

Figure 2 shows that as the number of ecotourism areas declared in forest areas increases, the number of visitors also increases.

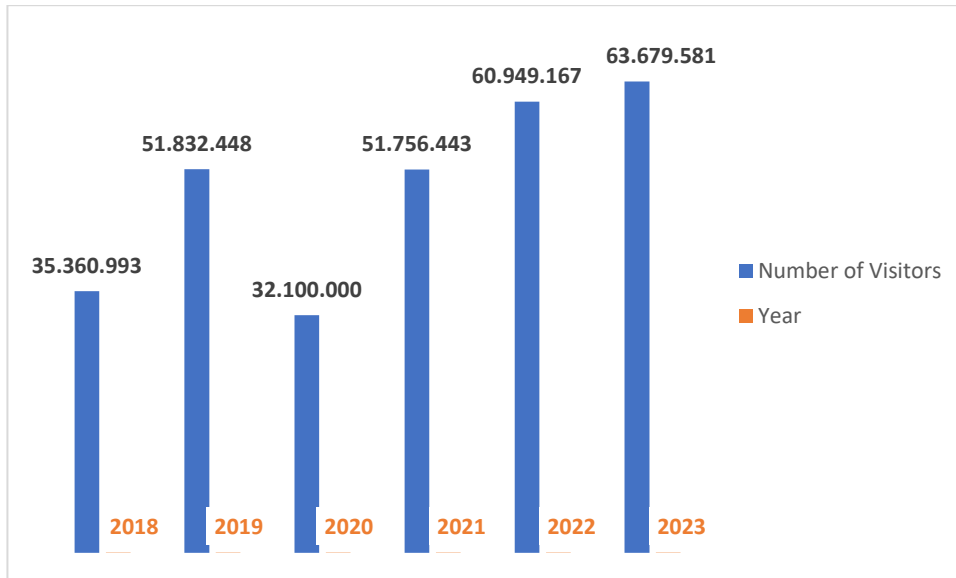


Figure 1. Visitor numbers between 2018 & 2023 (generated by authors).

Figure 2 shows the number of ecotourists visiting Türkiye's ecotourism areas between 2018 and 2023. It is seen that the number of domestic and international visitors in 2023 increased by 28.318.588 compared to 2018. In order to improve these numbers, the criteria described above for site rehabilitation should be evaluated by the management.

Ecotourism areas in Türkiye, which have developed especially after 2021, have also improved the options and opportunities for visitors. The increasing economic return as a result of this development is shown in Figure 3.

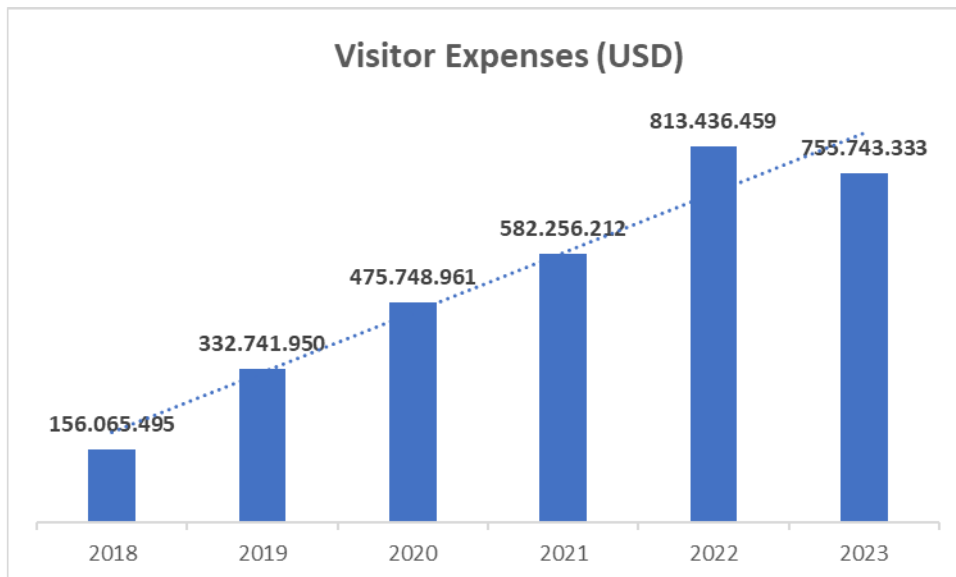


Figure 2. Visitor expenditures as USD between 2018 & 2023 (generated by authors).

Figure 3 shows the expenditures of ecotourists visiting Türkiye's ecotourism areas between 2018 and 2023 in USD. It is seen that the expenditures of domestic and international visitors in 2023 increased by 599.677.838 USD compared to 2018. In order to increase the economic return of these areas, it is seen that the budget allocated for international advertising should also be evaluated.

The ecotourist must have prior knowledge about the characteristics, social, economic and physical structure of the destination so that they can fully participate in the environment of the place.

Preliminary information is mandatory, especially in order to avoid disturbances with the local people in the region they will visit. Ecotourist means a person who has general ecological knowledge together with the area they will visit. Thus, they engage in voluntary behavior in the protection of environmental values.

A well-protected and promoted ecotourism area can generate an economic return that is sufficient for its own protection and development activities. Figure 4 shows the increased area revenues that have resulted from increased conservation and sustainability approaches in recent years.

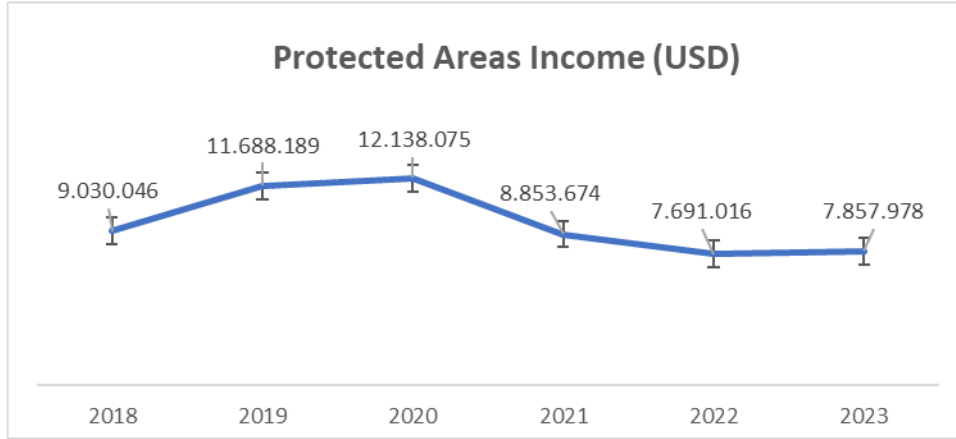


Figure 3. Protected Area Revenues as USD between 2018 & 2023 (generated by authors).

Figure 4 shows the Protected Area Revenues generated in Türkiye's ecotourism areas between 2018 and 2023 in USD. In 2023, it is seen that protected area revenues increased by 183.968.542 Turkish Liras and decreased by 1.172.067 USD compared to 2018 (income chart increased in Turkish Lira currency, but depreciated in USD currency). It is predicted that the revenues and added value of these areas will increase even more with the sustainability of these areas by giving importance to biorestitution and maintenance.

Conclusions

In this study, the socio-economic contributions realized in recent years, especially in existing ecotourism areas, were expected to help future annual management plans. The results obtained in this direction are as follows:

- As can be understood from the analysis of Türkiye's ecotourism developments between 2018-2023, the revenues from ecotourism activities carried out without harming natural resources and nature are considerable and increasing year by year. Continued development of these areas will contribute to raising local, national and global awareness of nature conservation.
- Ecotourism is a concept that is gaining importance in Türkiye, but legal and administrative regulations in terms of concept content and implementation have not yet been grounded. Türkiye is a very rich country in terms of ecotourism supply with regard to natural and cultural resources. In order to reveal both the ecological and economic benefits of ecotourism, it is necessary to plan according to the characteristics of the area and to put it into practice, and its activities should be strictly separated from classical tourism activities or other types of tourism.
- Specific policies and strategies should be developed for each state, region and area. National regional and local strategic ecotourism planning should be made and be integrated with

tourism planning. Although it is known that the GDF has the authority as stated in the legislation, ecotourism income data was obtained from the General Directorate of Nature Conservation and National Parks. If there is a division of authority on this issue, it should be recognized in the legislation.

- It should be made compulsory for tour operators and agencies organizing ecotourism activities to have technical guides specialized in nature-related issues in natural areas. Authorized official institutions (Ministry and University) should organize ecotourism guide certification courses. Ecotourism should not be misidentified with nature-based tourism.
- Relevant stakeholders should be identified for ecotourism activities and their responsibilities and duties should be clearly defined. In areas where ecotourism activities will be carried out, local people should be included at every stage from the planning scale to the implementation scale.
- When the number of ecotourists for 6 years is analyzed, it is seen that there was a decrease of 19.732.448 people in 2020. This number may be thought to be due to the Corona pandemic that started at that time. However, the fact that there was an increase again in 2021 may require that if there are other factors in this decline, these factors should be identified and measures should be taken.
- When the ecotourism routes determined on the map are examined, it is seen that especially in the Eastern Anatolia Region and some provinces in the Central Anatolia Region, studies should be carried out for favorable ecotourism activities.
- It is also seen that if decision-makers and researchers take a sustained interest in ecotourism areas, these areas will have about a double amount of visitor expenditure each year. It is also seen that protected areas income generated in ecotourism areas will contribute more and more to the sustainable conservation of ecotourism areas. It is thought that achieving all these conditions is directly related to informing the public about the established areas and the activities that can be carried out in each area.

Etik Standartlara Uyum

Çıkar Çatışması

[TR] Yazar(lar), kendileri ve/veya diğer üçüncü kişi ve kurumlarla çıkar çatışmasının olmadığını veya varsa bu çıkar çatışmasının nasıl oluştuğuna ve çözüleceğine ilişkin beyanlar ile yazar katkısı beyan formları makale süreç dosyalarına ıslak imzalı olarak eklenmiştir.

[EN] The author(s) declare that they do not have a conflict of interest with themselves and/or other third parties and institutions, or if so, how this conflict of interest arose and will be resolved, and author contribution declaration forms are added to the article process files with wet signatures.

Etik Kurul İzni

[TR] Bu çalışma için etik kurul iznine gerek yoktur. Buna ilişkin ıslak imzalı onam formu, makale süreç dosyasına eklenmiştir.

[EN] Ethics committee approval is not required for this study. The original signed consent form is attached to the article process file.

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