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Research Article

A Proposal for an Ecotourism Route for Sustainable Ecotourism in Giresun

Giresun'da Sürdürülebilir bir Ekoturizm için Ekoturizm Rotası Önerisi

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Abstract

The traditional mass tourism approach has led to the emergence of the concept of ecotourism as a result of increasing environmental awareness among individuals and the search for alternatives to the negative impacts of mass tourism. Ecotourism, which has important features such as environmental conservation and enhancing the welfare of local communities, can facilitate regional development. Although Giresun possesses natural elements suitable for ecotourism activities, its tourism development is weak and there is a lack of information and promotion. In this context, the study aims to evaluate the ecotourism potential of Giresun and to create an ecotourism route based on this evaluation. The study, conducted using a qualitative research design, involved face-to-face interviews with 22 experts in the field of tourism. Data were collected from the participants using the Ecotourism Opportunity Spectrum (ECOS) method. As a result of the research, two routes were developed for the ecotourism resources found in Giresun. The established routes aim to offer a new tourism product to individuals participating in ecotourism activities. This initiative is expected to increase the feasibility of these routes and serve as a guiding framework for local governments responsible for implementing the necessary infrastructure and superstructure Works.

Keywords: *Ecotourism, Tourism Route, ECOS, Giresun*

Özet

Geleneksel kitle turizmi yaklaşımı, bireyler arasında artan çevresel farkındalık ve kitle turizminin olumsuz etkilerine alternatif arayışı sonucunda ekoturizm kavramının ortaya çıkmasına yol açmıştır. Çevresel koruma ve yerel toplulukların refahını artırma gibi önemli özelliklere sahip olan ekoturizm, bölgesel kalkınmayı kolaylaştırabilir. Giresun, ekoturizm faaliyetleri için uygun doğal unsurlara sahip olmasına rağmen, turizm gelişimi zayıf olup bilgi ve tanıtım eksikliği bulunmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, çalışma, Giresun'un ekoturizm potansiyelini değerlendirmeyi ve bu değerlendirme doğrultusunda bir ekoturizm rotası oluşturmayı amaçlamaktadır. Nitel araştırma deseni kullanılarak gerçekleştirilen çalışmada, turizm alanında uzman 22 kişiyle yüz yüze görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Veriler, katılımcılardan Ekoturizm Fırsatları Spektrumu (ECOS) yöntemi kullanılarak toplanmıştır. Araştırma sonucunda, Giresun'da bulunan ekoturizm kaynakları için iki adet ekoturizm rotası geliştirilmiştir. Oluşturulan rotalar, ekoturizm faaliyetlerine katılan bireylere yeni bir turizm ürünü sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu girişimin, söz konusu rotaların uygulanabilirliğini artırması ve gerekli altyapı ile üstyapı çalışmalarını yürütecek yerel yönetimler için yol gösterici bir çerçeve oluşturması beklenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Ekoturizm, Turizm Rotası, ECOS, Giresun*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the early stages of tourism development, the tourism sector was primarily considered for its economic growth and employment benefits. Over time, this situation has led to negative social, environmental, and cultural impacts. The construction of accommodations, infrastructure services, and other social facilities for visitors has displaced local communities and altered their lifestyles. Additionally, the increase in the number of tourists has negatively affected wildlife and threatened animal life (Ahmadova and Akova, 2016: 16). The sustainability of the tourism sector can be achieved by preserving and utilizing the historical, natural, and cultural values specific to regional and local areas that serve as sources of tourism (Akpınar and Bulut, 2010: 1578). With the growing importance of the relationship between tourism and the environment, discussions on sustainability have introduced the concept of ecotourism, which has subsequently become popular. (Karacaoğlu et al., 2013: 95).

Ecotourism forms a part of nature tourism within the tourism market. The supply and demand of ecotourism constitute the elements that make up the ecotourism market. The supply of ecotourism encompasses the natural and cultural resources at the destination, as well as the businesses that produce and provide all the goods and services required by tourists during their travels. (Demir and Çevirgen, 2006: 113). From this perspective, ecotourism is among the fastest-growing elements of the tourism sector. It has become particularly popular and preferred as a tourism activity over the past 10 years (Kasalak, 2015: 24). As a result of the increasing preference for ecotourism, the formation of ecotourism markets is accelerating both globally and in Turkey. To create new markets for ecotourism, the Turkey Tourism Strategy 2023 has identified "Thematic Regions" and "Thematic Tourism Corridors." Through these designated regions and corridors, the goal is to develop alternative routes and pathways to create new niche markets.

A tourism route is a market-oriented approach for the development of a tourism destination. The concept of a tourism route can be expressed with different terms in various parts of the world. These terms include "themed routes," "trails," "scenic byways," and other similar concepts (Rogerson, 2007: 50). According to Lourens (2007), a tourism route is a type of travel that revitalizes regional tourism by bringing together various activities and attractions around a unified theme, thereby facilitating the development of supplementary products and services. The main purpose of creating a tourism route is to form a synthesis by linking tourist destinations and activities, each of which alone may not have sufficient appeal, to ensure that tourists spend time and money in the region. In this way, more attractive attractions can be created for tourists, transforming small tourism centers into more comprehensive tourism destinations and contributing to the regional economy through tourism revenue (Türker, 2013: 99).

Although Giresun province, which is the focus of this study, possesses natural elements suitable for ecotourism activities, its tourism development remains weak, and there are deficiencies in information dissemination and promotion. Promoting the region is only possible by identifying its existing potential. The implementation of ecotourism activities in touristic destinations depends on the identification of areas where such activities can be carried out within the specified destination (Paslı and Paslı, 2019: 304). Additionally, the underdevelopment of industry in the province causes employment difficulties for the local population and leads to unemployment problems. Issues such as the population's limited livelihood sources and the underdeveloped tourism sector necessitate the effective utilization of tourism resources and the evaluation of ecotourism potential in the province. The aim of this study is to assess Giresun's ecotourism potential and to develop an ecotourism route for sustainable tourism. It is expected that the study will contribute to the development of the tourism sector in Giresun and that the province may gain greater prominence through ecotourism activities.

This research is important in terms of evaluating the existing ecotourism potential in Giresun to economically benefit the local community, create new job opportunities, increase awareness of ecotourism, identify the province's ecotourism potential, and offer a new tourism product through the established routes. Moreover, the identification of ecotourism areas and the creation of a tourism route in Giresun will enhance the attractiveness of the region by connecting tourism resources that are insufficiently appealing on their own. The study is also expected to guide local authorities in formulating tourism plans and policies by encouraging them to consider the proposed ecotourism route during the decision-making process.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Accurate analyses are essential for determining tourism potential. Factors such as supply and demand, market dynamics, and competition influence this potential. Correctly identifying tourism potential allows for assessing a location's suitability for tourism, determining its sustainability, and deciding whether it can be opened to tourism. Additionally, it facilitates the accurate determination of strategies and planning for tourism development (Emekli and Soykan, 2007). Determining tourism potential also paves the way for improvements in health services, infrastructure, and regional development. The inclusion of identified potential areas in tourism increases tourism demand, promotes and markets local products, and creates new employment opportunities.

A review of the literature reveals numerous studies on identifying ecotourism potential. Apalı (2015) approached ecotourism from a sociological perspective and examined Ardahan's ecotourism potential, offering suggestions for its development. Kaya et al. (2015) aimed to reveal the ecotourism potential of Altınbeşik National Park. Field studies identified possible ecotourism activities in the park, such as hiking, cycling tours, angling, wildlife observation, caving, and plant study. The study concluded that the main problems were a lack of promotion and infrastructure suitable for nature, and it proposed solutions accordingly. İlhan et al. (2017) applied a SWOT analysis to evaluate the ecotourism potential of Cehennem Deresi Canyon and provided recommendations based on the findings. Aytuğ (2019) conducted a SWOT analysis to assess Kuşadası's ecotourism potential. The study concluded that if appropriate policies are developed at both national and local levels, the weaknesses of Kuşadası's ecotourism can be addressed. Bozkurt (2019) inventoried Gürün district's natural and cultural assets, performed a SWOT analysis, and examined the district's ecotourism potential. The study recommended addressing deficiencies and ensuring sustainable use of ecotourism resources without harming the ecological balance. Kılıç et al. (2019) aimed to identify Amasya's ecotourism potential and possible activities in the area. They found that Amasya possesses rich potential for activities such as hunting, sport fishing, mountain biking, botanical tourism, nature sports, hiking, birdwatching, orienteering, paragliding, plateau tourism, farm and agricultural tourism, camping-caravan tourism, photo safaris, and festival tourism. Nişancı and Tatkan (2020) used SWOT analysis to assess Yenişarbademli's ecotourism potential. They identified areas suitable for mountain trekking, birdwatching, camping-caravan tourism, mountaineering, and cycling. The study also offered solutions for the region's weaknesses. Tanç and Bilici (2020) conducted SWOT analyses for the districts of Oltu, Olur, Narman, and Şenkaya, providing recommendations based on their findings. Doğan and Yamak (2021) performed a SWOT analysis of Elazığ İçme town's ecotourism potential and proposed strategies to transform the region into an ecotourism center. Kement (2021) evaluated Akkuş destination's ecotourism potential with SWOT analysis, identifying forested lands as its strongest asset and lack of tourism facilities and education as weaknesses. Öztekin (2021) analyzed Zonguldak's ecotourism potential through SWOT analysis and concluded that addressing weaknesses and effectively using opportunities would make ecotourism feasible in the region.

Yalçınkaya (2021) used SWOT and TOWS analyses to assess Kozan's ecotourism potential, presenting an evaluation based on a sustainable tourism approach. Tuncer and Gürdal (2022) studied the ecotourism potential of the Sille dam and park area, aiming to identify the expectations of tourists visiting the region. They found that the area is suitable for various ecotourism activities. Paksoy and Açıksarı (2023) examined Başkonuş Plateau and Yavşan Nature Park in Kahramanmaraş province within the scope of ecotourism. Their study emphasized the need for promoting plateaus, developing social areas, and diversifying ecotourism activities. Avşin and Aras (2024) revealed the ecotourism value of the Kağızman/Avşin-Aras basalt columns, aiming to contribute to scientific literature and urban tourism. Kırmacı (2024) applied SWOT analysis to assess Mudurnu district's ecotourism potential and found that Mudurnu has sufficient resources for ecotourism.

Today, developed and developing countries have hundreds of tourism routes. These routes provide significant economic benefits to settlements and local people along the way (Çelik and Kadırhan, 2024, p. 127). Many studies on tourism routes exist both in Turkey and globally. Alkan (2018) conducted field research along the Kurtalan Express railway route and proposed it as an alternative tourism route. Nemutlu (2018) created a tourism-recreation route in the rural areas at the entrance of Çanakkale, located between Istanbul and Bursa. Arslan (2019) and Akın and Gül (2020) used network analysis to propose nature-focused tourism routes: four routes in Burdur and short, medium, and long routes in Isparta/Atabey, respectively. Güngör (2022) mapped cultural heritage sites in Cappadocia using GIS and performed a SWOT analysis of the proposed Cappadocia Culture Route. Karataş and Şengel (2022) selected destinations related to the Bithynia region and suggested a two-night cultural tour route. Gündoğan and Körmeçli (2023) created green space routes for nature tourism in Çankırı province. Ayaz Dönmez and Helvacıoğlu (2023) proposed a tourism route named "Apirota" in Marmaris as an alternative to sea, sand, and sun tourism. Their aim was to create alternative routes attracting visitors through beekeeping activities. Halaç and Kelkit (2023) developed a cultural route in Sivas city center to raise awareness of cultural heritage and provide visitors with the experience of intangible cultural assets. Türk (2023) evaluated rural tourism potential in Muş and proposed a tourism route. Adıgüzel and Doğan (2024) analyzed travel times and distances to tourist centers in Tarsus and proposed a route based on the most highly rated centers on Tripadvisor. Şahin and Ünver (2024) assessed Bandırma's tourist attractions and potential, proposing a route to activate active tourism. Tunç and Yıldırım (2024) evaluated tourism potential in Finike and surrounding areas, identifying two alternative bicycle routes, two Yörük migration routes, and nine hiking trails as alternatives to existing routes like the Lycian Way.

3. THE ECOTOURISM POTENTIAL OF GIRESUN

Destinations evaluated in the research from the Giresun Province Nature Tourism Master Plan 2013-2023 include the following:

3.1. Kümbet Plateau

Kümbet Plateau is a highland located 30 km from Dereli district and 59 km from the city center of Giresun. The average altitude of Kümbet Plateau is 1640 meters (Aydınözü and Solmaz, 2003). By a decision of the Council of Ministers dated May 21, 1990, Kümbet Plateau was declared a tourism zone. Recently, Kümbet Plateau has gained more popularity with Kümbet Plateau Festivals, attracting a wider audience. Near the plateau, there are remnants of a church from the Byzantine era, Kuşluhan Castle, the Monastery of Virgin Mary, and stone bridges (Bayram, 2001).

3.2. Bektaş Plateau

Bektaş Plateau is located at the intersection of Bulancak and Dereli districts. The highland houses, constructed in harmony with the natural environment, visually enhance the tourist appeal for visitors. Additionally, the plateau's spring waters (such as Hz. Ali Suyu, Çatal Oluk, Kebap Oluk, Çoban Bağırtan) serve as another attraction for day visitors. The Kurttepe area on the plateau is suitable for skiing in winter, and efforts are underway to facilitate grass skiing in the summer months. Besides highland tourism, Bektaş Plateau offers opportunities for mountain hiking, horseback riding, camping, and hunting (Bekdemir and Özdemir, 2002).

Figure 1. Bektaş Plateau
Source: (Giresun Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, 01.06.2025)

3.3. Paşakonağı Plateau

Paşakonağı Plateau is located within the boundaries of Kovanlık Town in the Bulancak district. It is a highland with high tourism potential, frequently visited for its rich vegetation, clean air, and natural spring waters, which contribute to its appeal for highland tourism. Due to its suitable terrain, Paşakonağı Plateau offers opportunities for ecotourism activities such as jeep safaris, off-road adventures, cycling tours, horseback riding, and nature walks. Additionally, it contributes to tourism through activities like nature photography and botanical studies (Sezer, 2016a).

Figure 2. Paşakonağı Plateau
Source: (Giresun Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, 01.06.2025)

3.4. Kulakkaya Plateau

Kulakkaya Plateau is designated as a highland tourism center. The rugged terrain and visually appealing topographic features of the plateau make it suitable for mountain tourism, nature walks, jeep safaris, and nature photography. Another attraction of the plateau is its rich fauna and flora. In addition to activities such as highland tourism, botanical studies, and bird watching, Kulakkaya Plateau is also favorable for health tourism. The climatological effects of the highland air contribute to strengthening human health by regulating blood pressure and circulation. Every year, on the first Sunday of July, the Kulakkaya-Ağaçbaşı International Highland Culture and Arts Festival is held at Kulakkaya Plateau (Sezer, 2015a). Besides highland tourism, the plateau offers suitable conditions for off-road activities such as horseback nature walks, mountain biking, trekking, and other activities.

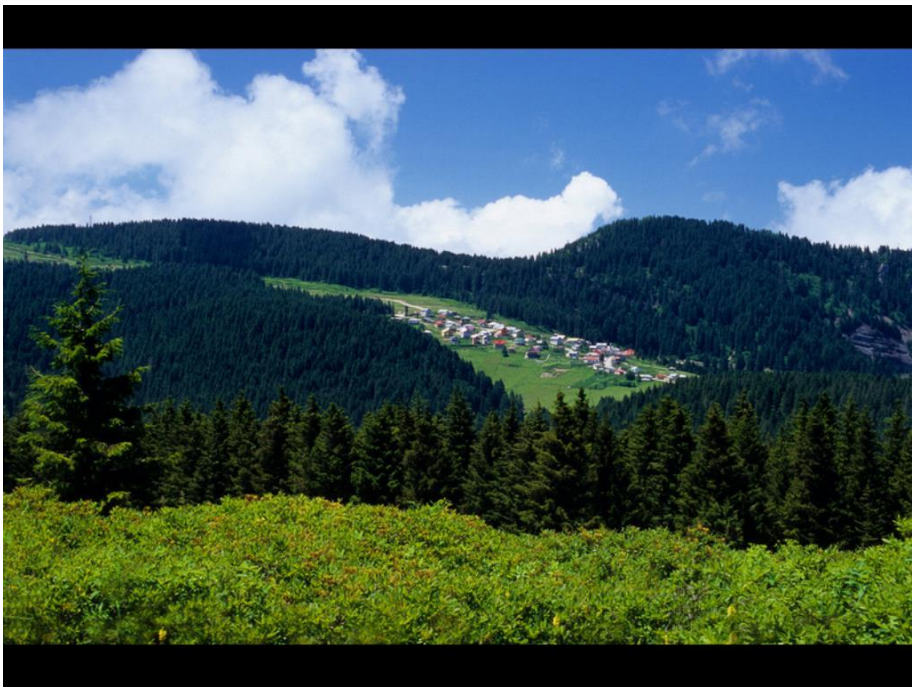

Figure 3. Kulakkaya Plateau
Source: (Giresun Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, 01.06.2025)

3.5. Sis Mountain Plateau

The elevation of the plateau center is 1950 meters. Sis Mountain has over twenty shepherd's huts (oba) located on it. Due to its highest point accessible from sea level, the significance of Sis Mountain is heightened. Every year, on the 4th Saturday of July, Sis Mountain Festivals are organized (DOKA, 2017: 27).

Figure 4. SisMauntain Plateau
Source: (Giresun Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, 01.06.2025)

3.6. Giresun Castle

Located at the highest point of the peninsula dividing Giresun into two. Giresun Castle's exact construction date is uncertain, but it is believed to have been built by the Pontus people in the 2nd century BC. Initially used for observation and refuge before the Ottoman era, the castle later housed settlements after the city came under Ottoman rule (Işık and Gürsoy, 2007). Cisterns, wells, and water troughs are found in various parts of the castle. Giresun Castle is designated as a first-degree archaeological site (İltar, 2014). Due to its easy accessibility, Giresun Castle serves as a popular destination for day trips and picnickers.

3.7. Yedi Değirmenler and Cave Nature Park

Located 64 km from the city center of Giresun, Yedi Değirmenler and Cave Nature Park boasts significant ecotourism potential due to its natural beauty. Within the nature park lies Yedi Değirmenler Cave, which spans approximately 207 meters and features a continuously flowing underground stream. The cave contains stalactites and stalagmites reaching heights of 1.5-2 meters. Apart from cave tourism, the moist air inside the cave contributes to its potential for health tourism. The area is rich in seasonal rivers and natural springs. Particularly, Karadona Creek, a tributary of Gelevera Creek, has a high flow rate due to its steep gradient, making it suitable for rafting. The nature park and its surroundings are home to a total of 9 waterfalls, making it a popular destination for nature photography and trekking. Yedi Değirmenler and Cave Nature Park boasts rich biodiversity, offering opportunities for botanical studies, wildlife observation, birdwatching, and photo safaris. One of the prominent cultural attractions in the area includes seven historical mills, which are still operational. The settlements surrounding the nature park harmonize with the natural environment, featuring structures made of wood and stone, facilitating recreational activities for visitors (Sezer and Bekdemir, 2017).

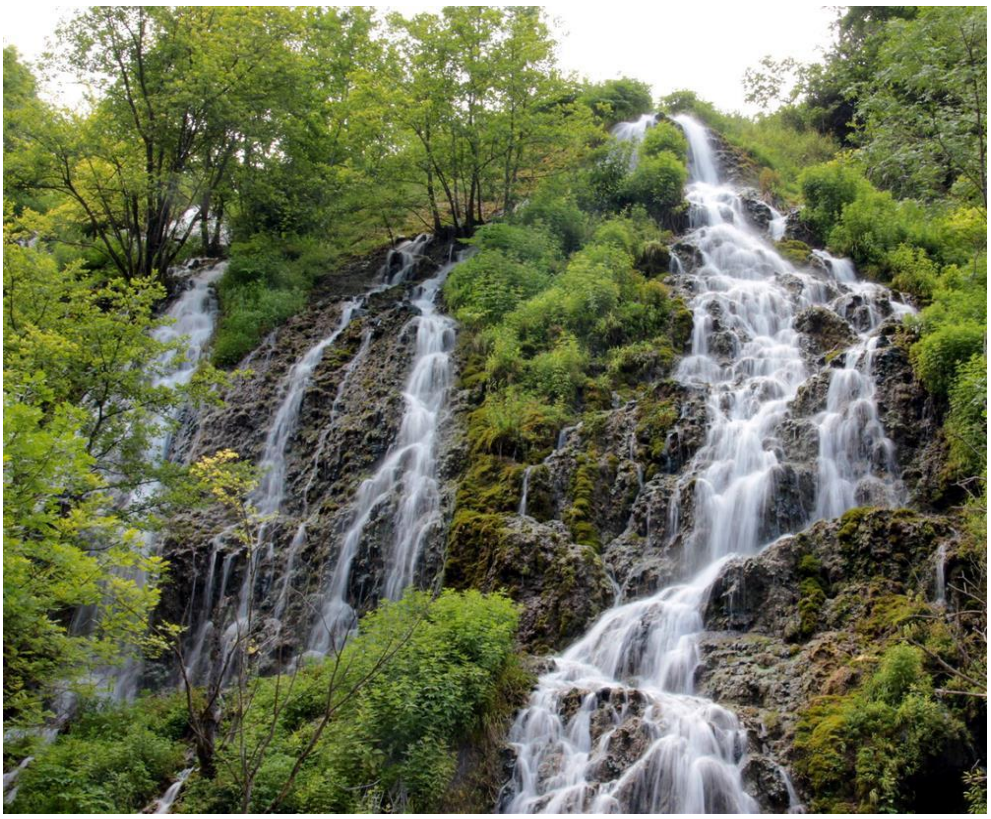

Figure 5. Yedi Değirmenler Nature Park
Source: (Giresun Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, 01.06.2025)

3.8. Giresun Island

Giresun Island has a history dating back to the 3rd century BC and is unique as the only inhabitable island in the Black Sea. Situated 1,6 km off the coast, Giresun Island covers an area of 46,000 square meters. Studies conducted as part of the "Biological Diversity Inventory and Monitoring Project for Giresun Province's Terrestrial and Inland Water Ecosystems" have identified 171 plant species on the island. In addition to plant species, the island is home to 26 different bird species and serves as a resting place for migratory birds. The island also holds historical value with remnants of chapels, walls, and a fortress (İncekara, 2017: 67; İltar and Temür, 2018). During the summer months, daily tours are organized to the island, where tourism activities such as botanical studies and birdwatching can also be enjoyed.

3.9. Kuzalan Waterfall Nature Park

Kuzalan Waterfall Nature Park holds a significant place due to its aggregation of numerous natural wonders, a feature often scattered across many destinations. Within the nature park, there are multiple waterfalls and cascades, caves, travertine formations, soda-rich waters, historical mills, hiking trails, and lakes. The most visited areas within the nature park include Kuzalan Waterfall and Blue Lake. Travertine formations are found as one progresses towards the upper parts of the waterfall. Approximately 100 meters beyond the waterfall lies Blue Lake, known for its soda-rich waters, where tourists visit during summer months to both find healing and cool off. Activities available at Kuzalan Waterfall Nature Park include day trips, nature photography, botanical studies, birdwatching, mountain biking, and trekking (Koday et al., 2018).

3.10. Koç Kayası Nature Park

Koç Kayası Nature Park is located within Kümbet Plateau. Its rugged terrain, consisting of hills and valleys, makes it suitable for ecotourism activities such as photo safaris, nature walks, paragliding, skiing, and grass skiing. The nature park boasts rich biodiversity with 90 species of

birds and 30 species of mammals. This diversity makes it ideal for wildlife observation, botanical studies, and birdwatching. Additionally, the park offers activities such as horseback riding, trekking, jeep safaris, mountain biking, plateau tourism, and health tourism. On average, the nature park receives around 7,000 visitors annually (Sezer, 2015b: 180).

Figure 6. Koç Kayası Nature PArk
Source: (Giresun Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, 01.06.2025)

3.11. Ağaçbaşı Nature Park

Ağaçbaşı Nature Park is situated near Ağaçbaşı Plateau, after which it is named. Other plateaus in close proximity to the nature park include Kulakkaya Plateau, Aylık Plateau, Samanlık Plateau, Akkaya Plateau, Kavraz Plateau, and Kızlarçukuru Plateau. With these features, the nature park is highly suitable for plateau tourism. It offers a conducive environment for nature walks, particularly along routes such as Kulakkaya-İnişdibi Obası-Çaldağ, which is categorized as an easy trail for hiking. Along these hiking routes, activities like horseback riding, jeep safaris, and bicycle tours are also available. The surroundings of the nature park include notable geological features such as Çaldağ, Gelin Kayası, and Desput Kayası, which attract visitors. Within the nature park, there exists a diverse range of wildlife, including 90 species of birds and 30 species of mammals. This diversity supports ecotourism activities such as wildlife observation, photo safaris, and birdwatching (Sezer, 2016b).

Figure 7. Ağaçbaşı Nature Park
Source: (Giresun Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, 04.06.2025)

3.12. Şeyhli Ecotourism Village

Located amidst the valleys formed by the rivers originating from the north of the Giresun Mountains. Due to the sloping terrain and rugged landscapes formed by the valleys, it is highly suitable for hiking activities. In addition, activities such as mountain biking and photo safaris can also be carried out. Moreover, places like Bendehor Castle, Sheikh İdris Shrine, and Sheikh İdris Tekke located near Şeyhli Village are also worth visiting. Şeyhli Village itself provides an opportunity to experience rural village life, taste local cuisine, and engage in ecological farming activities in the gardens of villagers, surrounded by natural beauty (Sezer, 2016b).

3.13. Gelevera Stream

Gelevera Stream originates from the Balaban Mountains and flows east of the Espiye district into the Black Sea. It spans approximately 80 kilometers in length. Situated within the Karadona Valley, Gelevera Stream has a notably high discharge. Moreover, it is fed by several tributaries including Karadona, Karaovacık, and Çukur Streams (Yıldız, 2013: 37).

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this section, the research questions, methodology of the study, and findings are presented.

4.1. Purpose and Problem

Giresun province is economically developing; however, its rugged terrain hinders many industrial investments. Existing industrial ventures are mostly reliant on hazelnut cultivation. Limited livelihood opportunities for the populace contribute to unemployment issues. This problem could potentially be alleviated through alternative sectors such as tourism, particularly ecotourism.

Although tourism in the Eastern Black Sea region is relatively less developed compared to other areas, it presents an opportunity for both regional and Giresun province development. Harnessing Giresun's ecotourism potential can contribute to local development by generating tourism revenue. Consequently, increased employment opportunities in the region could reduce

migration to more industrialized areas, enhance purchasing power, and stimulate infrastructure investments in the province.

In this context, the research seeks to answer the following questions and propose solutions:

- Does Giresun have sufficient ecotourism potential for development?
- What are the ecotourism resources and areas in Giresun with potential?
- How should areas with ecotourism potential be utilized effectively?

The study aims to identify the ecotourism potential in Giresun and create an ecotourism route to foster sustainable tourism development, thereby contributing to the province's economic growth.

4.2. Methodology of the Research

Giresun, the subject of this research, possesses natural and historical assets suitable for ecotourism activities. Within this framework, the "Giresun Province Nature Tourism Master Plan 2013-2023" has identified 13 natural and historical resources (plateaus, waterfalls, islands, streams, etc.) that can be utilized for ecotourism purposes.

A qualitative research method has been employed in this study. Adopting a qualitative research approach, the study utilized the ECOS (Ecotourism Opportunity Spectrum) scale adapted from Boyd and Butler (1996) by Türker (2013). The ECOS scale was developed to provide a conceptual framework for ecotourism destinations (Boyd and Butler, 1996: 560). This scale includes 6 main factors and 27 sub-criteria: (1) accessibility to ecotourism resources, (2) physical attractiveness of the resource, (3) infrastructure facilities, (4) superstructure facilities, (5) socio-cultural structure, and (6) economic structure. In applying these criteria specifically to Giresun, factors such as the presence of sufficient natural attractions for ecotourism, accessibility to these attractions, and available infrastructure (including a bed capacity of 1710) were taken into account. The detailed results obtained are explained below.

Empirical data were collected through face-to-face interviews with 22 experts selected purposively from the tourism sector. The expert group included academics, forestry management officials, provincial culture and tourism directorate representatives, national park managers, as well as hotel, restaurant, and travel agency employees.

Participants in the expert group were asked to provide ratings ranging from 1 to 4 in the questionnaires. In this scoring system, (1) represents the lowest, (2) medium, (3) high, and (4) very high values. Based on the ratings obtained, the arithmetic mean was calculated for each destination. The arithmetic mean is determined by dividing the total sum of all values in a dataset by the number of data points in that series (Çiçek, 2018: 51). Findings were interpreted based on the obtained averages.

4.3. Findings

In this section, the results of interviews conducted with 22 experts using the ECOS scale are presented to determine Giresun's ecotourism potential. Additionally, two proposed ecotourism routes have been outlined.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Institution or Sector	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Experience Duration
Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism	Male	47	Married	5 years
Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism	Male	42	Married	9 years
Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism	Female	28	Single	3 years
Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism	Female	36	Married	8 years
Nature Conservation and National Parks	Female	44	Married	16 years
Nature Conservation and National Parks	Female	41	Married	18 years
Nature Conservation and National Parks	Female	36	Married	12 years
Nature Conservation and National Parks	Male	34	Married	10 years
Academician	Male	34	Married	7 years
Academician	Male	33	Married	8 years
Hotel	Male	30	Single	6 years
Hotel	Male	28	Single	5 years
Hotel	Female	32	Married	4 years
Forestry Administration	Male	35	Married	11 years
Forestry Administration	Male	38	Married	15 years
Forestry Administration	Male	44	Married	20 years
Travel Agency	Female	34	Single	16 years
Travel Agency	Female	37	Married	4 years
Travel Agency	Male	28	Single	5 years
Restaurant	Male	38	Married	20 years
Restaurant	Male	31	Married	11 years
Restaurant	Male	48	Married	35 years

Table 1 presents the demographic information of the participants. The average age of the participants is 36.27 years. The average professional experience of the participants is 11.27 years. This indicates that the participants possess sufficient professional experience and expertise in their respective fields.

Table 2. Average Evaluation Scores of the ECOS Model

Resources	Accessibility	Physical Attractiveness	Infrastructure Facilities	Superstructure Facilities	Socio-cultural Structure	Economic Structure	Overall Average
Kümbet Plateau	3	4	4	2	3	3	3.16
Bektaş Plateau	3	4	4	1	3	3	3.00
Paşakonağı Pl.	3	4	3	1	3	3	2.83
Kulakkaya Pl.	3	4	3	1	3	3	2.83
Sis Mountain Pl.	3	4	2	1	3	3	2.66
Giresun Castle	3	4	4	3	3	2	3.16
Yedi Değirmenler Nature Park	3	4	4	1	3	3	3.00
Giresun Island	3	4	1	1	3	1	2.16
Kuzalan Waterfall Nature Park	3	4	4	1	3	3	3.00
Koç Rock N. P.	3	4	4	1	3	3	3.00
Ağaçbaşı N. P.	3	4	4	1	3	3	3.00
Şeyhli Eco. Vill.	3	4	4	2	3	3	3.16
Gelevera Creek	3	4	3	1	3	1	2.50

In Table 2, the average scores given by participants for ecotourism resources in Giresun are displayed. Considering the "Accessibility" criterion, it can be observed that transportation facilities are "High" for all ecotourism resources. Therefore, it can be said that these resources are easily accessible.

When examining the "Physical Attractiveness" criterion, it is observed that the resources are quite attractive. This indicates that the resources are appealing in terms of various features (flora and fauna composition, forest values, landscape, etc.). The high scores for the Physical Attractiveness of the resources suggest that the natural areas have not been degraded and that the flora and fauna structure has been preserved intact. This situation can be interpreted as the local population's sensitivity towards the environment in a region where pastoral activities have been carried out for many years. Additionally, the small land area of the province also leads to the proximity of ecotourism resources to each other, thus facilitating the visitation of these resources.

In terms of "Infrastructure Facilities" criterion, it is observed that there are variations in the averages among ecotourism resources. Generally, participants have evaluated the infrastructure facilities as "High" or "Very High"; however, Sis Mountain Plateau and Giresun Island have been rated as "Medium" and "Low" respectively in terms of infrastructure facilities. The reason for this could be that Sis Mountain Plateau is relatively more distant compared to other areas, making access more difficult. Regarding Giresun Island, the evaluation suggests that the presence of historical remnants on the island and the overall lack of promotion and marketing for ecotourism purposes have resulted in it not being widely preferred, leading to a lack of infrastructure investments as well.

When examining the criterion of "Infrastructure Facilities," it is observed that ecotourism resources within Giresun are generally evaluated as "Medium" to "Low" in terms of infrastructure facilities. Şeyhli Ecotourism Village and Kümbet Plateau have an overall average of "Medium" level. The proximity of Şeyhli Ecotourism Village to Piraziz district and Kümbet Plateau being the most preferred plateau in the region may be reasons why they are relatively more developed in terms of infrastructure compared to other ecotourism centers. Additionally, Giresun Castle has been evaluated as "High" in terms of infrastructure facilities due to its central location in the city. The presence of residential areas around Giresun Castle in the city center is believed to have contributed to its "High" rating. On the other hand, other ecotourism resources have been evaluated as "Low" in terms of infrastructure criteria. The rugged terrain where many resources are located, reluctance of investors to make necessary investments in these areas, and the seasonal population increase only during the summer months in plateaus suggest that infrastructure development efforts may have been overlooked.

When examining the criterion of "Socio-Cultural Structure," it is observed that the average evaluations of ecotourism resources are rated as "High." This indicates that the local population in the region possesses awareness of ecotourism, holds positive attitudes towards tourists, exhibits higher levels of education, and has sufficient personnel available for employment. This socio-cultural perspective suggests that the local community holds a positive outlook and attitude towards the development of ecotourism in the region.

In Table 2, the "Economic Structure" criterion indicates that Gelevera Stream and Giresun Island are evaluated as "Low." Specifically, for Gelevera Stream, the limited scope of ecotourism activities, inadequate infrastructure for rafting, and absence of food and beverage services along the riverbank are considered key reasons for this evaluation. Similarly, Giresun Island receives low ratings due to limited sea transport services only during the summer months and lack of infrastructure facilities for visitors on the island, prompting participants to rate it poorly. Conversely, other ecotourism destinations are rated as "High." These areas offer facilities where

visitors can engage in various activities, spend time, and purchase local products, leading to positive economic evaluations. This reflects that businesses operating in these areas (such as restaurants, souvenir shops, etc.) generate income from visitors and contribute positively to the local economy through tourism activities.

When evaluated based on the overall averages of ecotourism resources, Kümbet Plateau, Giresun Island, and Şeyhli Ecotourism Village are observed to have the same average score of 3.16. As indicated by the criterion-based assessment above, these areas achieve higher averages compared to other ecotourism resources due to their proximity to the city center and their ability to attract more visitors. Bektaş Plateau, Koç Plateau Nature Park, Kuzalan Waterfall Nature Park, Yedi Değirmenler Nature Park, and Ağaçbaşı Nature Park have a "High" average score. Despite weak infrastructure facilities, their high physical attractiveness and infrastructure capabilities have elevated their evaluation averages. Paşakonağı Plateau and Kulakkaya Plateau both have the same average score of 2.83. Their overall averages are reduced due to the "Low" infrastructure facilities, yet other criteria are rated as "High" and "Very High." The "Low" and "Medium" ratings for infrastructure facilities have led to Sis Mountain Plateau being evaluated with an overall average of 2.66. Its remote location compared to other areas and the absence of other nearby attractions pose obstacles to investment in this region. Gelevera Stream has an overall average of 2.5. With investments, the area could be considered a new attraction center. However, the lack of infrastructure investments also hinders its economic development. Giresun Island has the lowest average score of 2.16. The primary reasons for this are the absence of infrastructure and superstructure, resulting in its poor evaluation in terms of ecotourism potential.

The evaluation of potential ecotourism resources in Giresun resulted in the establishment of the "Giresun Ecotourism Route," depicted in Figure 8.

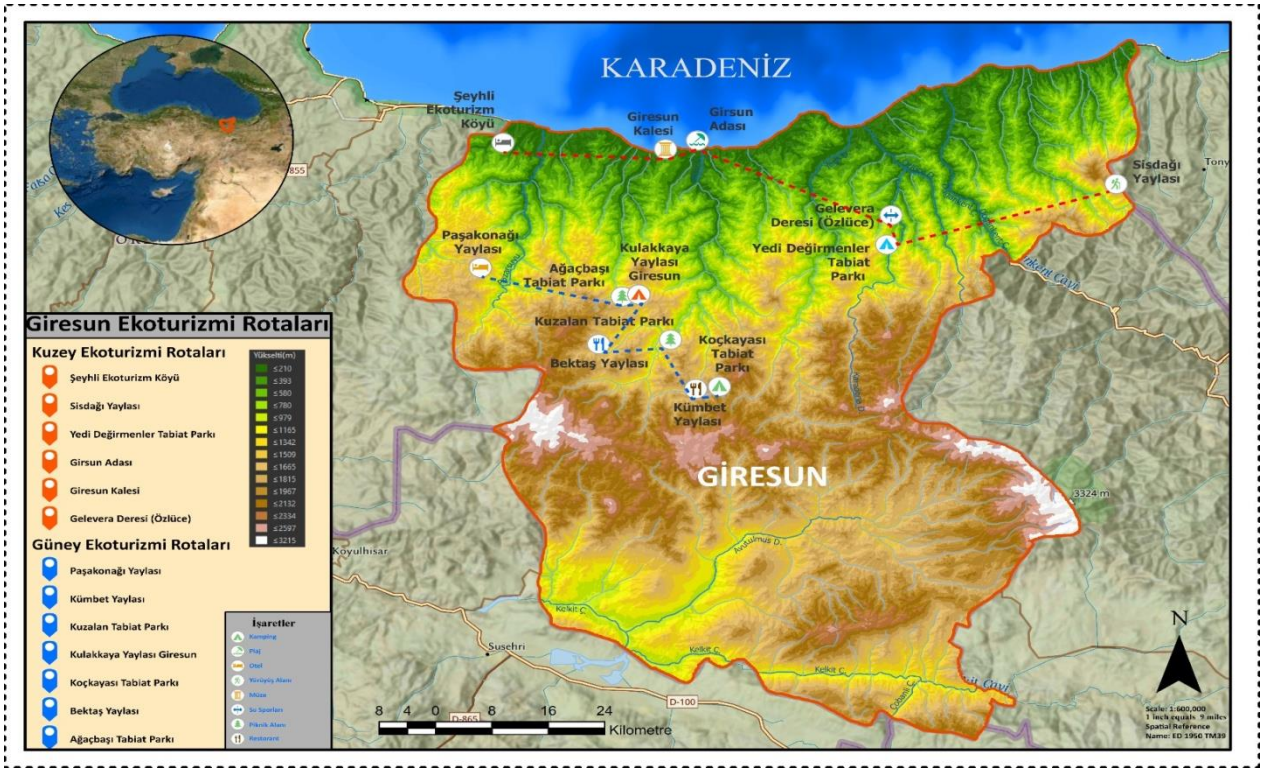

Figure 8. Ecotourism Routes in Giresun

In Giresun, areas with ecotourism potential have been marked on the map and two routes have been established. These routes are named the Northern Ecotourism Route and the Southern Ecotourism Route. The starting point of the Northern Ecotourism Route is Şeyhli Ecotourism Village, continuing sequentially through Giresun Castle, Giresun Island, Gelevera Stream, Yedi

Değirmenler Nature Park, and ending at Sis Mountain Plateau. The total length of this route is 194 km. The Southern Ecotourism Route starts from Paşakonağı Plateau and continues sequentially through Bektaş Plateau, Ağaçbaşı Nature Park, Kulakkaya Plateau, Kuzalan Waterfall Nature Park, Kümbet Plateau, and ends at Koç Kayası Nature Park. This route has a total length of 58.4 km.

On the routes, locations such as hotels, restaurants, beaches, and camping areas have been marked, indicating areas suitable for water sports, hiking, and picnicking. Near Şeyhli Ecotourism Village in Piraziz district and at Paşakonağı Plateau, there are hotels available for overnight stays. Along Gelevera Stream, there are areas suitable for water sports, and camping areas can be found near Yedi Değirmenler Nature Park, Koç Kayası Nature Park, and Kulakkaya Plateau. Restaurants offering local cuisine are located at Bektaş Plateau and Kümbet Plateau. Additionally, picnic and recreation areas are available for visitors at Kulakkaya Plateau and Kuzalan Nature Park. Various beaches are located between Giresun Castle and Giresun Island.

The Southern Route is richer in terms of plateaus compared to the Northern Route. The Southern Ecotourism Route offers advantages for hiking in natural beauty, off-road activities, photography, and botanical observation. However, the Northern Route allows for observing rural village life, nature walks, birdwatching, rafting, and botanical observation. Despite being longer in distance, the Northern Route offers easier access to the city center compared to the Southern Route. Additionally, the climate along the Southern Route is more rainy and cooler than along the Northern Route.

The North Ecotourism Route and the South Ecotourism Route proposed in the study are established along main roads, trails, and gravel roads. Within the North Ecotourism Route, the stretch between Yedi Değirmenler Nature Park and Sis Mountain Plateau constitutes the most rugged terrain on the route. Access between these areas can be facilitated more easily with off-road vehicles and can also accommodate bicycles or ATV-style vehicles. On the other hand, transportation along the South Ecotourism Route is generally facilitated by stabilized and asphalt roads. Throughout the route, there is a risk of landslides, and access to ecotourism resources involves navigating steep, winding roads.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In regions rich in ecotourism potential, failure to identify or capitalize on this potential results in many areas remaining underutilized. It is not only crucial to identify the tourism potential of an area but also to evaluate and capitalize on this potential. Understanding how to leverage this potential requires investment in both infrastructure and superstructure, along with necessary advertising, promotion, and marketing activities. A review of the literature reveals that many studies (e.g., İlhan et al., 2017; Aytuğ, 2019; Bozkurt, 2019; Nişancı and Tatkan, 2020; Tanç and Bilici, 2020; Doğan and Yamak, 2021; Kement, 2021; Öztekin, 2021) have identified ecotourism potential through SWOT analysis and proposed solutions to utilize this potential.

Despite having a rich potential for ecotourism, Giresun has not fully benefited from the tourism industry like neighboring provinces such as Rize, Ordu, and Trabzon. Limited livelihood opportunities in Giresun have resulted in outward migration. The province faces deficiencies in tourism-related infrastructure and superstructure. Based on the fundamental issue identified in this research, the aim is to determine Giresun's ecotourism potential and create an ecotourism route for sustainable tourism, with the goal of increasing income sources, achieving local development, and enhancing the tourism sector.

In the study conducted using the ECOS method, 22 experts living in Giresun evaluated 13 ecotourism resources located in the region. The evaluated destinations include Kümbet Plateau,

Bektaş Plateau, Paşakonağı Plateau, Kulakkaya Plateau, Sis Mountain Plateau, Giresun Castle, Yedi Değirmenler Nature Park, Giresun Island, Kuzalan Waterfall Nature Park, Koç Kayası Nature Park, Ağaçbaşı Nature Park, Şeyhli Ecotourism Village, and Gelevera Stream. After scoring and averaging, it was concluded that these resources have similar averages in terms of "Accessibility," "Physical Attractiveness of the Resource," and "Socio-Cultural Structure." The factors of "Accessibility" and "Socio-Cultural Structure" averaged at "3," indicating "High," while the factor of "Physical Attractiveness of the Resource" averaged at "4," indicating "Very High." Although the average for "Infrastructure Facilities" is generally "High" to "Very High," Sis Mountain Plateau scored "Medium," and Giresun Island scored "Low." This suggests a need for investment in infrastructure facilities for Sis Mountain Plateau and Giresun Island. The factor of "Superstructure Facilities" averaged as "Low" to "Medium" overall, indicating inadequate or insufficient investment in this area, particularly in accommodation facilities and food and beverage services, which are notably lacking. In terms of "Economic Structure," the arithmetic averages for the areas are generally high, indicating significant economic activity generated by visitors. However, Gelevera Stream and Giresun Island scored low averages, suggesting these areas attract fewer visitors and consequently contribute less economically, likely due to relatively fewer recreational activities and deficiencies in advertising and promotion. This underscores the need for promotional activities, enhanced marketing strategies, and incentives to attract investors.

One of the most significant benefits of the study is the transformation of tourism resources in the region that individually lack sufficient appeal and are overlooked into interconnected routes, thereby creating an alternative tourism activity. By highlighting and connecting these undervisited and neglected resources, it is possible to attract more attention and interest.

Various solutions need to be developed to enhance ecotourism in Giresun. Transportation among ecotourism resources is generally provided along main roads. Visitors without off-road vehicles encounter difficulties when traversing through paths or gravel roads. Improving gravel and path roads will facilitate easier access between routes. Additionally, main roads tend to be winding with insufficient warning signs and lighting. Addressing these issues and improving road quality can resolve transportation-related challenges.

The most significant barrier to the development of ecotourism in Giresun is the inadequate infrastructure and facilities in many ecotourism areas. Throughout the route, there are no establishments where visitors can stay overnight or access food and beverage services. Investments in this area could increase the number of visitors staying overnight. Encouraging local residents to convert their homes into guesthouses could also be promoted. Additionally, the absence of camping areas prevents visitors interested in activities such as camping and caravan tourism from staying in the area. Adequately equipped camping facilities created by local authorities or national park administrations could ensure visitors camp safely.

Rest areas, water fountains, and toilet facilities should be established along the routes for visitors engaging in nature hikes. Ecotourists participating in nature hikes require area guides or guides. In this context, departments at Giresun University that offer guidance training could open guide and area orientation courses, while institutions such as public education directorates, the governorship, or National Parks could organize area orientation courses. This initiative would create new job opportunities within the local community. The Giresun Tourism Infrastructure Services Union is currently working on a QR code-based tour guide project, which is still in its trial phase. However, the project's limitation to a few areas prevents other regions from benefiting from these technologies. Such efforts should be expanded to encompass other areas as well.

The development of recreational outdoor sports such as rafting, off-road driving, cycling, and paragliding can be facilitated by inviting relevant federations to Giresun to promote these

activities. This initiative, implemented specifically in Giresun, can also be applicable to different cities or regions. Similar efforts can be undertaken in provinces like Rize, Ordu, and Trabzon, which share similar geographical features, to create ecotourism routes. Additionally, this study can be expanded to create ecotourism routes that connect neighboring provinces. This expansion would allow provinces like Trabzon, Ordu, and Rize, which are adjacent to Giresun, to benefit socio-culturally and economically from ecotourism. It would particularly contribute to local development by creating new employment opportunities and facilitating the promotion and marketing of regional products. In this context, this study can serve as an example for other provinces and future initiatives.

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