



Balancing ecotourism and biodiversity conservation in a fragile territory: The case of Mogador Island

Khalid El Housni ¹, Çağdan Uyar ^{2*}, Jihane Benmassoud ³, Kamal Mouhibi ¹, Milca Osly Mina ¹

¹Cadi Ayyad University (UCA), Essaouira Higher School of Technology, Interdisciplinary Laboratory for Research in Environment, Management, Energy and Tourism (LIREMET). Essaouira, Morocco

²İstanbul University-Cerrahpaşa (İUC), Vocational School of Forestry, Department of Forestry, İstanbul, Türkiye

³Cadi Ayyad University (UCA), Higher Institute of Education. Language, Culture and Text Laboratory (LCTLab). Marrakech, Morocco

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*Corresponding author:

cagdanuyar@iuc.edu.tr

ABSTRACT

Background and Aims Based on a qualitative case study conducted using interviews, field observations, and documentary analysis, this study aims to assess the region's ecotourism potential, identify environmental and socio-regional risks associated with tourism development, and discuss the applicability of a sustainable tourism development model based on integrated governance, regulation of uses, and stakeholder participation. In doing so, it contributes to current debates on the management of fragile regions and the limits of ecotourism as a tool for conservation and

development. Eleonora's falcon, a species rarely seen and rarely studied worldwide, has also been examined in this regard.

Methods A total of 22 stakeholders with diverse profiles, representing the city's ecotourism ecosystem, were interviewed. Using semi-structured interviews, field observations, and documentary review, the study examines how stakeholders view ecotourism, governance, and conservation priorities.

Results The results reveal that ecotourism is more of a contested area driven by differing values and power dynamics than a shared solution. While institutions and economic players focus on regulated access and funding, community groups and environmental experts warn about habitat damage and the symbolic commodification of nature. The findings reveal that, for certain institutional and economic stakes, the island of Mogador has become a strategic tool for regional diversification and economic development.

Conclusion The study suggests that successful ecotourism in fragile environments relies on participatory governance, regulated use, and respect for ecological boundaries, fueling ongoing debates on wildlife conservation and sustainable tourism. It has been found that discrepancies between theory and practice in management need to be resolved.

Keywords: Ecotourism, biodiversity conservation, flagship species, Eleonora's falcon, fragile ecosystems, Mogador Island

Hassas bir bölgede ekoturizm ve biyoçeşitlilik korumasını dengelemek: Mogador Adası örneği

ÖZ

Giriş ve Hedefler: Bu makale, mülakatlar, saha gözlemleri ve doküman analizleri kullanılarak gerçekleştirilen niteliksel bir vaka çalışmasına dayanarak, bölgenin ekoturizm potansiyelini değerlendirmek, turizm gelişimi ile ilişkili çevresel ve sosyo-bölgesel riskleri belirlemek ve entegre yönetim, kullanımların düzenlenmesi ve paydaş katılımına dayalı sürdürülebilir turizm geliştirme modelinin uygulanabilirliğini tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır. Böylelikle, hassas bölgelerin yönetimi ve koruma ve kalkınma aracı olarak ekoturizmin sınırları konusunda güncel tartışmalara katkıda bulunmaktadır. Eleonora şahini gibi dünyada nadir görülen ve az araştırılmış türe de dikkat çekilmiştir.

Yöntemler: Kentteki ekoturizm ekosistemini temsil eden, farklı profillere sahip toplam 22 paydaşla görüşülmüştür. Yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler, saha gözlemleri ve doküman incelemeleri kullanılarak, paydaşların ekoturizm, yönetim ve koruma önceliklerini nasıl değerlendirdikleri incelenmiştir.

Bulgular: Araştırma sonuçları, ekoturizmin ortak bir çözümünden çok, farklı değerler ve güç dinamikleri tarafından yönlendirilen tartışmalı bir alan olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Kurumlar ve ekonomik aktörler düzenlenmiş erişim ve finansmana odaklanırken, topluluk grupları ve çevre uzmanları habitatın zarar görmesi ve doğanın sembolik olarak metalaştırılması konusunda uyarıda bulunmaktadır. Bulgular, belirli kurumsal ve ekonomik çıkarlar için Mogador adasının bölgesel çeşitlilik ve ekonomik kalkınma için stratejik bir araç haline geldiğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Sonuçlar: Çalışma hassas ortamlarda başarılı ekoturizmin; katılımcı yönetim, kontrollü kullanım ve ekolojik sınırlara saygı üzerine dayandığını öne sürerek yaban hayatı koruma ve sürdürülebilir turizm konusunda süregelen tartışmaları körüklemektedir. Yönetişel açıdan teoride ve pratikteki uyumsuzlukların giderilmesi gerektiği görülmüştür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ekoturizm, biyolojik çeşitliliğin korunması, önemli türler, Eleonora şahini, hassas ekosistemler, Mogador Adası

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1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, ecotourism has emerged as an alternative to dominant forms of mass tourism, which have been widely criticized for their environmental, social, and cultural impacts (Honey, 2008; Weaver, 2001). Promoted as a model of responsible tourism, ecotourism aims to reconcile biodiversity conservation, local development, and the quality of the tourist experience (Buckley, 2009; Fennell, 2020). However, this promise remains contested in scientific literature, particularly in ecologically fragile areas, where even minor disturbances can have irreversible effects.

Sensitive natural areas, such as islands, wetlands, and nature reserves, are where tensions between tourism development and conservation imperatives are most pronounced. Owing to their high ecological, landscape, and symbolic value, these areas are particularly exposed to the dynamics of heritage preservation and commodification (Bramwell and Lane, 2011; Saarinen, 2006). According to Butler (1980), a lack of regulation in the early stages of tourism development encourages overcrowding, ecological degradation, and the commodification of tourist experiences.

In this context, islands serve as ideal laboratories for examining the paradoxes of ecotourism. Their insularity, fragile ecosystems, and attractive landscapes make them particularly vulnerable to tourism pressures (Baldacchino, 2006). Several studies indicate that, despite the normative discourse surrounding ecotourism, certain practices reproduce extractive logics, transforming nature into a consumable resource rather than a common good to be preserved (Duffy, 2013; Fletcher, 2019).

In addition, Essaouira is committed to a tourism diversification strategy that moves beyond the traditional seaside resort model by integrating cultural, heritage, and environmental dimensions. Ecotourism is thus leveraged as a driver of sustainability and territorial resilience. However, this approach raises a key question: to what extent can an ecologically sensitive site be integrated into tourism dynamics without compromising its fundamental biological balance?

This issue is closely tied to the debate over the compatibility of tourism and conservation. Some studies highlight the educational, financial, and political potential of ecotourism (Goodwin, 2011; Weaver, 2012), while others warn of the risks of misuse when regulatory mechanisms are insufficient (Duffy, 2015). The presence of an iconic species is thus an ambivalent factor, serving both as a tool to raise awareness and as a potential source of increased pressure on habitats.

Ecotourism is increasingly seen as a way to balance biodiversity preservation with local development in sensitive areas. However, its implementation often leads to conflicts between ecological needs and economic goals. This study investigates these issues through a qualitative case study of Mogador Island near Essaouira, Morocco, a location of high ecological importance associated with Eleonora's falcon.

Based on a qualitative case study using interviews, field observations, and documentary analysis, this study aims to assess the site's ecotourism potential, identify the environmental and socio-territorial risks associated with tourism development, and discuss the feasibility of a sustainable tourism development model grounded in integrated governance, regulation of uses,

and stakeholder participation. It thus contributes to contemporary debates on the management of fragile territories and the limits of ecotourism as a tool for conservation and development.

1.1 Literature gap

Mogador Island has attracted scholarly attention for its ecological significance and rich historical heritage. Existing studies have primarily focused on three areas. First, historical and archaeological research has highlighted the island's Phoenician, Roman, and maritime heritage. Second, ecological and biological studies have examined biodiversity conservation, particularly seabird populations and the protection of Eleonora's falcon (Qninba et al., 2015; Bellout et al., 2021). Third, tourism-related studies in the Essaouira region have primarily focused on heritage promotion, sustainability, and coastal management.

More broadly, the ecotourism literature highlights the complex relationship between tourism development and environmental conservation. Although ecotourism is often presented as a means to reconcile economic development with biodiversity protection, several scholars have noted tensions among market interests, governance arrangements, and ecological imperatives (Duffy, 2013; Hall, 2011; Bramwell and Lane, 2011). These challenges are especially evident in island ecosystems, which are ecologically fragile and increasingly vulnerable to human pressures (Baldacchino, 2006).

Despite these broader debates, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how tourism development and biodiversity conservation are perceived and negotiated among local stakeholders on Mogador Island. Existing studies provide valuable ecological and historical knowledge; however, the social, institutional, and governance dimensions of ecotourism remain underexplored. In particular, little is known about how institutional actors, tourism professionals, researchers, and community organizations perceive the opportunities, risks, and conditions associated with the potential development of ecotourism in such a sensitive environment. This gap is especially important given the recognized role of stakeholder participation in environmental management and sustainable development processes (Reed, 2008).

This study addresses this gap through a qualitative case study using semi-structured interviews, field observations, and documentary analysis. By examining competing visions and governance challenges surrounding Mogador Island, the study contributes to ongoing debates about balancing ecotourism and biodiversity conservation in fragile territories.

Experiences from island and coastal protected areas in Africa and North Africa illustrate that tensions between tourism development and biodiversity conservation are not unique to Mogador Island. Studies in Mauritania's Banc d'Arguin National Park, the Bijagós Archipelago in Guinea-Bissau, and Mediterranean island environments have shown that ecotourism initiatives often face challenges stemming from governance fragmentation, competing stakeholder interests, and the need to reconcile economic opportunities with ecological constraints (Campredon, 2000; Badola et al., 2012). Similar dilemmas have been observed in protected island ecosystems, where flagship species and cultural heritage serve as both assets for tourism promotion and vulnerable elements requiring strict conservation

measures (Walpole and Leader-Williams, 2002; Jepson and Barua, 2015). These examples suggest that sustainable tourism in fragile territories depends not only on ecological carrying capacity but also on participatory governance and adaptive management that balance conservation priorities with local development objectives.

The vast majority of tourism-focused studies focus on resolving the conflict between the island being a bird sanctuary and the pressure of tourism. Because Island has been a permanent biological reserve since 1980 and a RAMSAR site since 2005 (ONP, 2020). In addition, studies on Integrated Coastal Zone Management, which argue that not only the island but also the ancient Medina (city center) on the opposite shore should be managed as a whole, are frequently seen. In publications after 2001, the impact of UNESCO World Heritage status on management strategies in the area is predominant. For example, when searching Web of Science articles for Mogador Island, the publication by Bellout et al. (2021) is the only Web of Science article available on the island, and it concerns the biodiversity conservation (Bellout et al., 2021).

1.2 Ecotourism, conservation, and fragile territories

1.2.1 Defining ecotourism and its core principles

Ecotourism emerged in the 1980s as a direct response to the environmental and social damage caused by mass tourism. According to the definition proposed by The International Ecotourism Society, this practice is characterized by responsible travel to natural areas that seeks to protect the environment and enhance the well-being of local populations (TIES, 2026). The concept is grounded in the synergy among conservation, environmental education, and sustainable socioeconomic benefits for host communities.

In academic discourse, ecotourism is often described as a niche segment that attracts travelers seeking authenticity and proximity to biodiversity (Weaver, 2001; Fennell, 2020). However, this classification remains contested. Some researchers argue that ecotourism is not a uniform entity but an aggregation of diverse practices, ranging from local community projects to large-scale, standardized tourism offerings (Buckley, 2009).

Ecotourism implementation is guided by four normative principles: reducing ecological impacts, raising traveler awareness, actively involving local populations, and providing financial support for nature conservation (Honey, 2008; Weaver, 2012). Although these criteria are reflected in public policies and certification schemes, their practical application remains uneven (El Housni, 2024).

A growing body of critical literature underscores the gap between ethical discourse and on-the-ground realities. Duffy (2013) argues that some projects treat nature as a mere commodity, reproducing extractive models under the guise of sustainability. These tensions show that ecotourism is not a panacea but a conflictual space where conservation ideals and market logics collide. In vulnerable ecosystems, this dynamic calls for strict regulation of uses and in-depth analysis of the power relations among the actors involved.

1.2.2 Tourism development in sensitive natural areas

The concept of “tourism development” refers to the process by which an area initially non-touristic or marginal for mobility is gradually integrated into promotion, storytelling, and consumption (Knafou, 1992). In sensitive natural areas, this process is often accompanied by heritage preservation measures that aim to transform ecosystems into objects of contemplation, discovery, or experience.

One of the central concepts used to analyze these dynamics is carrying capacity, defined as the maximum number of visitors a site can accommodate without compromising its ecological, social, or cultural integrity (Saveriades, 2000). Although widely used in tourism policy, this concept has been criticized for its technocratic and reductive nature, as it tends to naturalize political and social choices under the guise of scientific thresholds (Lindberg et al., 1997).

Many risks are associated with tourism development in fragile areas. Environmentally, overuse can cause soil erosion, wildlife disturbance, increased pollution, and habitat fragmentation (Buckley, 2011). Socially, it may foster exclusion, gentrification, or symbolic dispossession, particularly when local populations are marginalized in the governance of tourism projects (Bramwell and Lane, 2011).

The distinction between nature tourism and mass tourism is another point of debate. While the former is often portrayed as more respectful and sustainable, several studies suggest that this distinction is sometimes more rhetorical than substantive (Fletcher, 2019). In the absence of regulation, even modest tourist flows can have significant impacts on fragile environments, such as islands, coral reefs, and nesting areas for protected species.

In this context, governance is a central issue. Hall (2011) emphasizes that sustainable tourism depends not only on individual tourist behavior but also on institutional frameworks, regulatory mechanisms, and power relations among stakeholders. Therefore, tourism development in sensitive areas cannot be considered independently of public policy, regulatory instruments, and participatory mechanisms.

1.2.3 Biodiversity and flagship species

A third key factor in understanding ecotourism dynamics concerns the role of emblematic species, often called flagship species. These species, which are generally rare, charismatic, or symbolically powerful, are frequently mobilized in communication, awareness-raising, and conservation funding strategies (Walpole and Leader-Williams, 2002).

In ecotourism, flagship species fulfill several functions. They serve as narrative anchors, enabling storytelling, evoking emotions, and strengthening visitors' attachment to a territory. They also play an educational role, facilitating the transmission of knowledge about ecosystems and environmental issues (Ballantyne and Packer, 2011).

However, this symbolic mobilization is not without risks. Some authors caution against an excessive focus on a few “star” species at the expense of a systemic approach to biodiversity (Jepson and Barua, 2015). In some cases, media and tourist attention may even intensify pressure on habitats, particularly when protection measures are inadequate.

The ambivalence of flagship species lies at the heart of contemporary conservation debates. On the one hand, they can reinforce the political legitimacy of environmental policies and mobilize financial resources. On the other hand, they may contribute to the spectacularization of nature, in which the tourist experience takes precedence over ecological imperatives.

On Mogador Island, the presence of Eleonora's falcon offers a particularly relevant illustration of this ambivalence (Figure 1). This rare and emblematic species offers significant ecotourism potential, yet its sensitivity to human disturbance imposes strict constraints on access, visitor numbers, and development. Examining this tension is a central focus of this study.



Figure 1. Eleonora's falcon. Adapted from Grepom (2021)

Effective conservation approaches are closely related to a thorough understanding of species biology, ecology, and the specific threats they face. Most island raptors remain understudied, highlighting an urgent need for increased research efforts (Balza et al., 2025).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Study area: Essaouira and Mogador Island

This study adopts this perspective by examining the island of Mogador, located off the coast of Essaouira on Morocco's Atlantic seaboard (Figure 2). The site is of major ecological importance, particularly because it hosts Eleonora's falcon, a rare and protected migratory species whose reproduction is closely dependent on the tranquility of island habitats (Qninba et al., 2015). The island is also a key element of Essaouira's tourism and heritage image.

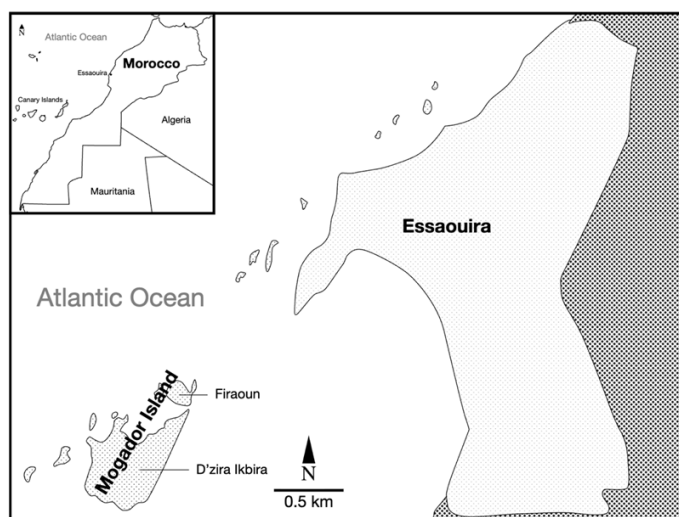


Figure 2. Essaouira and Mogador Island on the west-central coast of Morocco. Adapted from Bellout et al. (2021)

Located on Morocco's Atlantic coast, Essaouira is a port city with a rich historical, cultural, and scenic heritage. It is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its fortified medina and stands out as a distinctive tourist destination, shaped by a maritime, artistic, and cosmopolitan identity. Unlike other tourist hubs in Morocco that are strongly oriented toward mass seaside tourism, Essaouira has gradually developed a positioning centered on culture, authenticity, and the valorization of local resources (Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3. The Mogador Island. Adapted from L'Opinion (2022)

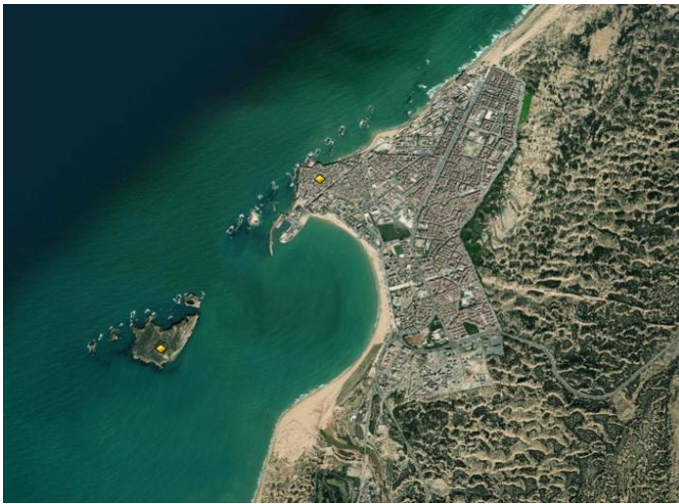


Figure 4. Geographical location of Mogador Island and Essaouira. Adapted from Google Maps (2025)

This positioning is part of a national context of tourism diversification encouraged by Moroccan public policies that aim to move beyond dependence on standardized seaside tourism toward cultural, rural, and nature-based forms. In this framework, ecotourism emerges as a strategic lever to enhance regional attractiveness while meeting sustainability objectives (Berriane, 1993).

The Essaouira region offers several assets conducive to the development of ecotourism. It is characterized by diverse landscapes, a coastline, dunes, argan groves, and rural areas, as well as a strong concentration of local expertise, particularly in crafts and local products. The argan forest, designated a UNESCO biosphere reserve, is a striking example of the interplay among natural heritage, the local economy, and tourist appeal.

However, this potential is constrained by structural factors. Infrastructure remains unevenly developed, particularly in surrounding rural areas, and coordination among stakeholders remains fragmented. Several studies indicate that ecotourism initiatives in Essaouira are often driven by individual entrepreneurs, associations, or small organizations, yet they do not consistently benefit from an integrated strategic framework (Berriane and Moizo, 2014).

In this context, Mogador Island occupies a distinctive position. Visible from the medina, it is a central feature of the urban landscape and the local imagination, yet it remains largely inaccessible to the public. This tension between symbolic visibility and physical inaccessibility fuels multiple representations and projections among both residents and visitors.

2.2 Mogador Island: Between natural heritage and tourist imaginaries

Mogador Island lies a few hundred meters off the coast of Essaouira. Small in size, it features rocky terrain, steep cliffs, and near-total absence of permanent human settlement. Historically, it served as a strategic observation point and occasionally hosted human activity, but today it is primarily recognized for its ecological value.

From a landscape perspective, the island is a prominent visual landmark in the Essaouira panorama. It is frequently depicted in tourism communications, artistic works, and travel narratives. This strong symbolic presence contributes to its heritage status, even without structured tourist access. As Gravari-Barbas and Guichard-Anguis (2003) note, heritage status does not necessarily imply physical visitation but may instead be constructed through storytelling, sacralization, and imaginative projection.

From an ecological perspective, the island features habitats adapted to maritime conditions and low anthropogenic pressure. This relative state of preservation makes it a refuge for several species, including Eleonora's falcon, which finds favorable conditions for reproduction. The island's limited accessibility has thus far served as a protective factor, yet some stakeholders view it as a "missed opportunity" for tourism development.

This ambivalence lies at the heart of local debates. On the one hand, the island is viewed as a natural sanctuary whose preservation must take precedence over all other considerations. On the other hand, it is seen as a potential "flagship product" for Essaouira's ecotourism, capable of reinforcing the destination's green and sustainable image. These two visions are not necessarily incompatible, but they entail choices about governance, regulation, and the prioritization of uses.

2.3 Eleonora's falcon: Ecological sensitivity and conservation stakes

Eleonora's falcon is a rare migratory species distinguished by its late breeding season, which is synchronized with the autumn migrations of the small birds it feeds on. This biological specificity makes the species particularly sensitive to human disturbance, especially during the nesting period (Ristow and Wink, 2024).

Breeding sites of Eleonora's falcon are generally located on islands or coastal cliffs that are difficult to access, providing a natural protective barrier. However, increasing tourist flows in coastal areas, the expansion of water-based recreational activities, and the proliferation of observation devices can disrupt this balance (Westrip, 2022).

On Mogador Island, the presence of this species confers exceptional ecological value on the site and entails specific conservation responsibilities. These responsibilities are not solely biological; they also encompass political, ethical, and territorial dimensions. Protecting Eleonora's falcon entails land-use decisions, access restrictions, and trade-offs among competing uses of space.

From a symbolic perspective, birds serve as powerful vehicles for territorial storytelling. They embody notions of rarity, freedom, and naturalness that align with many ecotourists' expectations. However, this symbolism carries risks. As several studies have shown, excessive media exposure of a species can intensify tourist pressure on its habitats, particularly when regulatory measures are insufficient (Jepson and Barua, 2015).

From this standpoint, Eleonora's falcon is not only a biological entity but also an indirect actor in territorial dynamics. It shapes discourse, influences perceptions, and contributes to the construction of Mogador Island as a space that is both desirable and vulnerable.

2.4 Research design and epistemological position

This research adopts an interpretive stance, recognizing that territorial realities are not merely objectively given but are constructed through discourse, practices, and power relations (Crotty, 1998). Ecotourism is understood not as a neutral category but as a field of representations, norms, and interests that can be contradictory.

The qualitative approach thus enables an understanding of the meanings local actors ascribe to Mogador Island, biodiversity, and tourism development projects. It also provides a framework for examining the tensions between global sustainability imperatives and local development constraints.

The case study of Essaouira and Mogador Island is therefore conceived as an “instrumental case” (Stake, 1995) that sheds light on broader issues of the governance of fragile territories, the commodification of nature, and the limitations of ecotourism as a development model.

The authors gathered up-to-date information on the subject through both field visits and theoretical research throughout the Autumn of 2025. Consequently, it became clear that there was a need for a publication on tourism potential that also addressed biodiversity conservation concerns.

2.5 Data collection

Three main data collection tools were employed: semi-structured interviews, field observations (during Autumn, 2025), and document analysis, within a methodological triangulation framework. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders involved in tourism, environmental, and territorial dynamics in Essaouira. This approach combines a common thematic framework with sufficient flexibility to encourage diverse discourses, experiences, and perceptions (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

Consistent with a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2002), participants were selected based on involvement in tourism activities, environmental management, or local development, or on expertise regarding Mogador Island and the Essaouira region. The objective was not statistical representativeness but to capture a diversity of viewpoints and interests among actors directly or indirectly concerned with ecotourism and conservation issues. The sample comprised tourism business managers ($n = 13$), institutional actors ($n = 2$), researchers and specialists in ecotourism and marine ecosystems ($n = 4$), representatives of local development associations ($n = 2$), and a local nature guide ($n = 1$). Data collection proceeded iteratively and was discontinued once thematic saturation was achieved, as additional interviews revealed recurring patterns and no significant new themes emerged (Guest et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2018). While local associations and the nature guide provided community-based perspectives, direct representation of the broader local population remained limited. This constitutes a limitation of the study and highlights the need for future research involving a broader range of residents and community stakeholders. The sample was designed to reflect the diversity of positions and interests within the local tourism system. A total of 22 stakeholders with diverse profiles, representing the city's ecotourism ecosystem, were interviewed, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Profiles of interviewed stakeholders

Stakeholder position	Participant codes	Number
Executives and managers of tourism businesses	T1–T13	13
Nature guide	G1	1
Institutional actors	I1–I2	2
Researchers and specialists in ecotourism and the marine environment	R1–R4	4
Local development associations	A1–A2	2

This composition facilitates the exchange of perspectives among actors from the commercial sector, public institutions, associations, and informal networks, while highlighting power asymmetries, divergent representations, and tensions that shape debates about promoting tourism on Mogador Island.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) to ensure representation of the various actors involved in the local ecotourism system. The first author conducted semi-structured interviews between Autumn 2025 and January 2026. Interviews were conducted in Arabic or French, depending on participants' preferences, and lasted approximately 30–60 minutes. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, that is, when additional interviews no longer yielded substantially new insights (Guest et al., 2006).

This study received submission authorization from "Cadi Ayyad University, Marrakech, Morocco" on 19th January 2026 prior to manuscript submission. Formal institutional ethics approval was not required under the applicable institutional and national regulations. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the research process.

The interview guide was designed to explore stakeholders' perceptions of ecotourism development, biodiversity conservation, governance arrangements, and the opportunities and challenges associated with the potential valorization of Mogador Island. The semi-structured format's flexibility allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences and viewpoints while ensuring consistency across interviews.

The interviews were organized around the following thematic axes:

- Stakeholders' visions of ecotourism and territorial differentiation strategies.
- Perceptions of Mogador Island and its ecological value.
- Analysis of controversies between tourism development opportunities and the risks of biological degradation.
- Governance and regulatory arrangements are considered desirable for a potential tourism development process.

The analysis of the collected discourse seeks to elucidate the rationales for action, trade-offs, and representations underlying the positions adopted by the various actors, and to better understand the social, institutional, and environmental conditions under which a strategy for promoting ecotourism at the site could be implemented.

The interviews were complemented by direct observations at various ecotourism sites in the Essaouira region, including

beaches, rural areas, cooperatives, and natural spaces. These observations documented actual tourism practices, interactions between visitors and residents, and environmental mediation measures such as signage, guidance, and interpretive tools. They also contextualized interview data and compared actors' representations with actual spatial uses, in line with the approach advocated by Whyte (1984).

Finally, a documentary analysis was conducted, drawing on public policy documents, institutional reports, publications by environmental organizations, scientific literature on ecotourism, conservation, and fragile territories, and tourism communication materials. This analysis positioned actors' discourses within broader normative and institutional frameworks and identified discrepancies between stated intentions and actual practices, in line with the principles of methodological triangulation (Denzin, 2017).

2.6 Data Analysis

The data from interviews and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This method involves identifying, coding, and interpreting recurring patterns in the corpus to generate relevant analytical categories.

The analysis was conducted in several stages:

1. Full transcription of the interviews.
2. Exploratory reading and open coding.
3. Grouping codes into themes.
4. Interpretation of themes in light of the theoretical framework.

Themes were generated inductively through repeated reading of the interview notes and identification of recurring ideas and patterns across participants' accounts. Similar codes were grouped into broader categories and then refined into themes that reflected the main issues discussed by stakeholders, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) principles of thematic analysis. To enhance interpretive validity, the emerging themes were continuously compared with field observations and documentary sources as part of the study's triangulation strategy (Denzin, 2017). The analysis was conducted manually, without using qualitative data analysis software.

This approach goes beyond descriptive reporting to provide an analytical interpretation of the observed dynamics, linking discourse, practices, and structures.

3. Results

Four major themes emerged from the thematic analysis: (1) ecotourism as a strategy for territorial differentiation; (2) ecotourism as a driver of local development and social inclusion; (3) Mogador Island as both an economic opportunity and an ecological risk; and (4) governance tensions related to tourism development.

3.1 Ecotourism as a strategy for territorial differentiation

Insights from economic and institutional stakeholders converge on the view that ecotourism is a strategic alternative to the dominant seaside model historically associated with Essaouira. Among the interviewed stakeholders, the majority of tourism business managers and both institutional actors

emphasized destination diversification and expressed reservations about mass tourism models.

As one guesthouse manager explains, "the shift to ecotourism is seen as a strategic break with mass seaside tourism," and adds that innovation is grounded in "creating immersive experiences (hikes through argan groves, craft workshops) that showcase the local area in order to attract a more discerning and respectful clientele" (Table 2). This testimony illustrates a redefinition of the tourism value proposition, shifting from space consumption to experience, learning, and connection to place.

Table 2. Stakeholder themes and representative quotes

Theme	Stakeholder code	Representative quote
Territorial differentiation through ecotourism	T5 (Guesthouse manager)	<i>"The shift to ecotourism is seen as a strategic break with mass seaside tourism."</i>
Experiential tourism	T5 (Guesthouse manager)	<i>"Creating immersive experiences such as hikes through argan groves and craft workshops attracts a more respectful clientele."</i>
Digital marketing and sustainability branding	I1 (Tourism official)	<i>"The strategy is based on a digital transition in regional marketing."</i>
Green destination image	I1 (Tourism official)	<i>"Social media and digital platforms promote Essaouira as a green destination."</i>

This differentiation strategy is also supported by institutional actors, who frame ecotourism within an international context. According to a tourism official, "the strategy is based on a digital transition in regional marketing," mobilizing social media and digital platforms to promote Essaouira's image as a "green" destination (Table 2). Environmental and cultural authenticity thus become a competitive advantage in European niche markets, where demand for destinations perceived as sustainable and responsible is growing.

These findings indicate that ecotourism is viewed as a tool for the symbolic reconfiguration of the region, enabling Essaouira to distinguish itself amid intensifying competition among destinations. However, this discursive construction of a "sustainable" destination raises questions about discrepancies between the representations promoted and actual practices.

While tourism operators emphasized market differentiation and visitor experiences, institutional actors highlighted regional competitiveness and destination branding. Despite these differences, both groups viewed ecotourism as a strategic tool to strengthen Essaouira's attractiveness.

3.2 Ecotourism as a driver of local development and social inclusion

Beyond tourism positioning, the findings highlight strong expectations for the social benefits of ecotourism, particularly among local associations and cooperatives. For these stakeholders, ecotourism is not merely an alternative tourism offering but a lever for inclusive local development.

As the president of a local argan oil cooperative explains, “ecotourism is a vehicle for social emancipation here,” emphasizing that cooperatives promote “fair tourism where human interaction is paramount, ensuring that income directly benefits women and that traditions are respected rather than distorted.” This discourse reflects a normative vision of ecotourism grounded in social justice, local income redistribution, and recognition of traditional skills.

Local guides also play a key role in this dynamic. As one nature guide notes, his professional role has evolved: “Local guides are no longer simply tour leaders but conveyors of knowledge (botany, history, daily life).” This form of territorial mediation is seen as adding value, enhancing visitors’ cultural immersion while contributing to the transmission of local knowledge. Although both groups viewed ecotourism positively, local associations primarily emphasized social

inclusion and income redistribution, whereas guides emphasized education and the transmission of local knowledge.

The Mogador case shows that ecotourism should not be treated as inherently sustainable compared with mass tourism. Rather, its sustainability depends on governance arrangements, stakeholder participation, and recognition of ecological limits. The study therefore supports critical perspectives that view ecotourism not as a universal remedy but as a contested, politically mediated process in which conservation objectives may conflict with economic aspirations. In this sense, the value of Mogador Island lies not only in its tourism potential but also in its capacity to expose the limits of market-oriented approaches to nature conservation and to highlight the need for governance models that place ecological integrity at the center of development strategies. The stakeholders’ main ideas regarding the development of tourism have been categorized in Table 3.

Table 3. Stakeholder perspectives on tourism development on Mogador Island

Stakeholder category	Position toward tourism development	Main argument	Illustrative quote
Hotel operators (T1–T13)	Conditional support	Tourism can generate jobs and conservation funding	<i>“A quota-regulated management model would allow revenues to be reinvested in conservation.”</i>
Researchers (R1–R4)	Highly cautious	Human disturbance threatens Eleonora’s falcon and biodiversity	<i>“The risk of biological loss justifies a total closure during sensitive periods.”</i>
Local associations (A1–A2)	Opposition	Tourism may damage the symbolic and sacred value of the island	<i>“Any form of tourism development represents a threat to this heritage.”</i>

These findings indicate that, for some stakeholders, Essaouira’s ecotourism potential depends primarily on the ability to integrate tourism activities, valorize local resources, and empower the community. However, this vision remains contingent on regulatory mechanisms that ensure a fair distribution of benefits.

3.3 Mogador Island: Economic opportunity and ecological risk

Mogador Island lies at the center of intense debates about the practical implementation of ecotourism. For some economic stakeholders, its controlled opening is seen as a potential catalyst for regional growth. One hotelier describes it as “a catalyst for jobs and economic growth,” and proposes “a quota-regulated management model in which entrance fees would be directly reinvested in conservation.”

This perspective reflects an instrumental view of ecotourism, conceived as a means of financing environmental protection. However, this position is strongly qualified, if not contested, by scientific experts and community stakeholders.

A researcher specializing in the marine environment takes a cautious stance, arguing that “the risk of biological loss and disruption to migratory species justifies a total closure.” However, he also envisions a compromise involving tightly supervised tourism, strictly prohibited during the critical breeding periods of Eleonora’s falcon and confined to non-sensitive peripheral areas.

Conversely, the president of a local association adopts a more radical position, rejecting all forms of tourism development. He considers the island “the pillar of Essaouira’s visual and historical identity” and maintains that “any form of

tourism development, even if regulated, represents a threat through the desecration of a sacred material and natural heritage.” This stance reflects a heritage-based, symbolic conception of nature that is incompatible with any logic of commodification.

To provide a comprehensive overview of the institutional conflicts, the core themes emerging from the thematic analysis and the main concerns of each stakeholder are outlined in Table 4.

Although several tourism stakeholders supported controlled access to the island, researchers and local associations voiced stronger concerns about biodiversity conservation and the site’s symbolic value. The main disagreements focused on visitor access, the acceptable level of human intervention, and the balance between economic development and ecological protection.

These perspectives reveal clear differences among stakeholder groups. Economic actors viewed controlled access as an opportunity for regional development and for financing conservation, whereas researchers and community representatives expressed greater concern about ecological degradation and the island’s symbolic value. Consequently, perceptions of ecotourism ranged from cautious support to outright opposition.

Table 4. Main governance tensions identified through thematic analysis

Theme	Stakeholders involved	Main concern
Economic development	Tourism businesses, institutions	Diversification and local growth
Biodiversity conservation	Researchers, environmental actors	Protection of habitats and migratory species
Heritage preservation	Local associations	Avoiding commodification of heritage
Governance mechanisms	All categories	Need for participation and regulation
Visitor management	Institutions and experts	Quotas and restricted access

3.4 A key controversy in territorial governance

Analysis of the findings shows that ecotourism, far from being a consensual issue, serves as a catalyst for power struggles, divergent values, and competing visions of regional development. Mogador Island thus emerges as a site of controversy, where economic, ecological, scientific, and identity-based rationales intersect and clash.

The themes identified in the interviews show that ecotourism is understood differently depending on stakeholders' positions,

interests, and relationships with the territory. Economic, ecological, scientific, and identity-based considerations coexist and sometimes conflict, underscoring the complexity of governance in fragile environments.

These tensions directly challenge existing governance arrangements for ecotourism in Essaouira. The findings suggest that the feasibility of an ecotourism project depends less on the site's attractiveness alone and more on stakeholders' capacity to build institutional compromises grounded in regulating uses, participatory governance, and recognition of the territory's ecological limits.

Moreover, the Mogador case challenges the widespread assumption that ecotourism automatically yields mutually reinforcing outcomes for conservation and local development. Our findings indicate that, in fragile island ecosystems, sustainability depends not only on visitor management but also on the capacity of governance arrangements to recognize ecological thresholds and accommodate conflicting stakeholder values. In this respect, ecotourism emerges not as a universal solution but as a negotiated process whose success depends on institutional legitimacy, adaptive governance, and the prioritization of ecological limits over short-term economic interests. The comparative positions of Mogador Island stakeholders are outlined in Table 5.

Table 5. Comparative Overview of Stakeholder Positions Regarding Mogador Island

Stakeholder group	Main position	Main arguments	Preferred management approach
Tourism operators and accommodation managers	Generally supportive of controlled opening	Economic diversification, employment opportunities, enhancement of destination image	Visitor quotas and reinvestment of revenues into conservation
Institutional actors	Supportive with regulation	Regional development and sustainable tourism objectives	Controlled access and governance mechanisms
Researchers and environmental specialists	Cautious or restrictive	Protection of Eleonora's falcon and ecosystem integrity	Seasonal restrictions and strict monitoring
Local associations	Mostly opposed to tourism development	Preservation of the symbolic and natural value of the island	Conservation priority and limited human intervention
Nature guide	Supportive of environmental education	Awareness raising and knowledge transmission	Supervised and low-impact visitation

The analysis revealed that disagreements were particularly pronounced between economic actors advocating for regulated tourism development and conservation-oriented stakeholders emphasizing ecological limits and heritage preservation. These differences illustrate the complexity of establishing governance arrangements that reconcile competing interests. In this sense, ecotourism is both an opportunity and a risk: an opportunity to renew the local tourism model and strengthen social inclusion, but a risk of conflict, ecological degradation, and loss of meaning if sustainability principles are not effectively implemented.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Economic development, management of human pressure (tourism/urbanization), and coastal planning in Essaouira to protect the marine ecosystem are all key priorities for the region. Mogador Island is both a wetland conservation area (Ramsar) and part of a cultural heritage site (UNESCO). More studies are expected to compare the tourist influx seeking to see the cultural heritage with the visit-ban policies proposed by scientists

seeking to protect nature, with concrete steps to be taken in management plans.

The central issue addressed in this study concerns how tourism development on Mogador Island is perceived, envisioned, and contested by various local stakeholders, in a context where the imperatives of regional development collide with the requirements of ecological and heritage preservation. Through analysis of the collected discourse, the research demonstrates that Mogador Island crystallizes contrasting visions of ecotourism development, thereby revealing both the limits and the conditions of sustainable tourism in sensitive natural areas.

Conservation concerns affecting predatory bird species and populations on islands remain an ongoing challenge and pose a global threat to many endemic island species. Based on numerous summarized scientific data, combating the threats faced by the island falcon will enable its long-term coexistence with humans (Balza et al., 2025).

The findings suggest that ecotourism on Mogador Island should not be viewed merely as a technical mechanism for reconciling conservation and development. Rather, the case reveals the inherently political nature of sustainability, in which

competing actors ascribe different meanings and priorities to the same territory. While institutional and economic stakeholders frame ecotourism as a tool for territorial differentiation and economic diversification, environmental experts and community actors emphasize ecological integrity and symbolic values that resist commodification. This divergence shows that ecotourism is less a consensual model than a contested arena shaped by power relations, conflicting rationalities, and differing perceptions of sustainable development.

The findings indicate that for some institutional and economic actors, Mogador Island is a strategic lever for territorial differentiation and economic revitalization. Implementing regulatory measures, such as visitor quotas or mechanisms to reinvest revenues in conservation, is seen as a way to reconcile tourism development with environmental protection. This approach aligns with a strategy of “sustainability through management,” grounded in controlling visitor flows and regulating uses. Conversely, community groups and environmental experts express strong reservations, and in some cases radical opposition, arguing that any opening to tourism entails an irreversible risk of biological degradation and symbolic trivialization of the island. For these stakeholders, Mogador’s value lies precisely in its inaccessibility and its status as a protected area.

This polarization of discourse underscores that tourism development on Mogador Island is not solely an economic or environmental issue but also a deeply political debate tied to identity. These findings contribute to the ecotourism literature in several ways. First, they support critical perspectives on ecotourism that should not be viewed as inherently consensual or universally sustainable (Duffy, 2013; Fletcher, 2019). The Mogador Island case shows that ecotourism can generate competing interpretations of conservation and development among stakeholders with divergent interests.

Second, the findings reinforce the importance of participatory governance emphasized in sustainable tourism studies (Hall, 2011; Bramwell and Lane, 2011). Rather than depending solely on ecological carrying capacity, the sustainability of tourism initiatives also depends on the capacity of institutions and local actors to negotiate acceptable forms of use and management.

Third, the study highlights the ambivalent role of flagship species in ecotourism. Although Eleonora's falcon enhances the ecological and symbolic value of Mogador Island, its presence also creates restrictions and tensions over access and tourism development. This finding supports arguments that flagship species can function both as conservation assets and as sources of conflict within protected areas (Walpole and Leader-Williams, 2002; Jepson and Barua, 2015). The island is perceived as a shared asset with strong symbolic significance, and its legitimate uses are subject to conflicting interpretations. Ecotourism, often presented as a consensual solution, reveals its ambiguities in this context: while it holds promise for local development and social inclusion, it may also become a vehicle for the commodification of heritage perceived as sacred.

Despite the relevance of these findings, this research has certain limitations. The qualitative methodology, while appropriate for capturing the richness of perceptions and representations, does not permit quantitative assessment of the potential impacts of tourism development on the island.

Furthermore, the study focuses on a limited number of actors, which warrants caution when generalizing the conclusions to the entire territory or to other island contexts.

In addition, the sample was predominantly composed of tourism-related stakeholders, reflecting the study's focus on the local ecotourism system. Although efforts were made to include actors from diverse institutional and community backgrounds, some groups, such as local residents, fishermen, visitors, and birdwatchers, were underrepresented. Future research could include a broader range of stakeholders to capture additional perspectives on the relationship between tourism development and biodiversity conservation.

These limitations, however, open promising avenues for future research. Subsequent studies could adopt mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative analyses with environmental and economic impact modeling. Comparative analyses with other protected islands facing similar dilemmas would also enrich debates about governance models suited to sensitive ecotourism areas. Finally, a longitudinal approach would enable the evaluation of the concrete effects of management choices over time, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the conditions required for truly sustainable tourism on Mogador Island.

Beyond the specific case of Mogador Island, this study contributes to the broader understanding of ecotourism in fragile territories by showing that sustainability is not solely a technical issue tied to visitor numbers or carrying capacity. Rather, it is a social and political process shaped by competing values, stakeholder relationships, and governance arrangements. The findings suggest that conservation and tourism objectives can be reconciled only through participatory approaches that recognize ecological limits while incorporating the perspectives of local actors.

4.1 Policy implications and recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that sustainable management of Mogador Island requires a precautionary, participatory approach that prioritizes ecological integrity while recognizing the socioeconomic aspirations linked to ecotourism. Drawing on empirical evidence from stakeholders, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers and territorial managers:

Visitor Management

Maintain strict protection of the island during Eleonora's falcon's breeding season by prohibiting public access during critical nesting periods.

- Before pursuing tourism development, conduct environmental impact assessments and carrying-capacity studies to determine acceptable levels of human activity.
- If access is authorized in the future, implement a quota-based system that permits only limited, supervised visits.
- Restrict tourism activities to designated areas and periods that do not impact sensitive habitats and breeding sites.
- Promote indirect forms of ecotourism, such as mainland birdwatching, interpretation centers, digital experiences, and environmental education programs, to reduce pressure on the island.

Conservation and Governance

- Establish a multi-stakeholder governance framework that includes public authorities, researchers, conservation organizations, tourism operators, and local associations to ensure participatory decision-making.
- Strengthen ecological monitoring programs and scientific research to assess the long-term impacts of management decisions and to adapt conservation measures as needed.
- Ensure that future revenues from ecotourism activities are reinvested in biodiversity conservation, habitat restoration, scientific research, and local community initiatives.
- Improve coordination among heritage, tourism, and environmental institutions to overcome fragmented governance and advance integrated coastal management.
- Recognize that the ecological and symbolic value of Mogador Island extends beyond its tourism potential, and that conservation objectives should remain the primary criterion for future development.

These recommendations highlight that ecotourism in fragile island ecosystems should not be viewed as an end in itself but as a carefully regulated and adaptive process whose legitimacy depends on its ability to preserve biodiversity and sustain the ecological functions that underpin the territory's long-term resilience.

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