

## CURRENT STATUS OF ECOTOURISM IN UZBEKISTAN

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**Abstract.** Ecotourism in Uzbekistan is emerging as a key sector within the broader tourism industry, driven by the country's diverse natural ecosystems, mountainous regions, deserts, and rich biodiversity. This article analyzes the current trends, government initiatives, statistical data, and challenges in the development of ecotourism in Uzbekistan. The study is based on recent government reports and international tourism data to provide an evidence-based assessment of the sector.

**Key words:** Ecotourism, sustainability, Aral Sea, protected areas, Tourism infrastructure, Tourist arrivals, economic impact, government policies.

**Annotatsiya.** O'zbekistonda ekoturizm mamlakatning turli xil tabiiy ekotizimlari, tog'li hududlari, cho'llari va boy biologik xilma-xilligi tufayli turizm sohasining muhim yo'nalishlaridan biriga aylanmoqda. Ushbu maqolada O'zbekistonda ekoturizmni rivojlantirishdagi mavjud tendensiyalar, hukumat tashabbuslari, statistik ma'lumotlar va muammolar tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot so'nggi hukumat hisobotlari va xalqaro turizm statistikasi asosida sohaning holatini dalillarga tayangan holda baholaydi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** ekoturizm, barqarorlik, Orol dengizi, muhofaza qilinadigan hududlar, turizm infratuzilmasi, sayyohlar oqimi, iqtisodiy ta'sir, hukumat siyosati.

**Аннотация.** Экологический туризм в Узбекистане становится ключевым направлением в рамках широкой туристической отрасли благодаря разнообразным природным экосистемам страны, горным регионам, пустыням и богатому биоразнообразию. В статье анализируются текущие тенденции, правительственные инициативы, статистические данные и проблемы в развитии экотуризма в Узбекистане. Исследование основано на последних государственных отчетах и международных данных по туризму для представления обоснованной оценки состояния сектора.

**Ключевые слова:** экотуризм, устойчивость, Аральское море, охраняемые территории, туристическая инфраструктура, туристический поток, экономическое влияние, государственная политика.

**Introduction.** Uzbekistan, nestled in the heart of Central Asia, has long been celebrated for its rich cultural heritage and historical Silk Road cities like Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva. However, in recent years, the country has increasingly turned its attention to ecotourism, leveraging its diverse natural landscapes – ranging from arid deserts to towering mountains – to attract environmentally conscious travelers. As of

2025, ecotourism in Uzbekistan is gaining momentum, supported by government initiatives, international partnerships, and a growing global interest in sustainable travel. Uzbekistan's geographic diversity – including the Tien Shan and Pamir-Alai mountain ranges, the Kyzylkum desert, and a variety of protected natural reserves – makes it a strong candidate for ecotourism development. As global tourism trends shift toward sustainable and experience-based travel, Uzbekistan is positioning itself to attract ecologically minded tourists.

In 2023, Uzbekistan recorded over 6.6 million foreign tourists, with 773,200 (approximately 11.7%) citing vacation as their primary purpose, a category that includes nature-based and ecotourism activities [5]. This marks a steady recovery from the pandemic downturn and suggests a revived interest in the country's natural attractions. Average tourist stay increased to 4 days. According to the Ministry of Economy and Finance, export earnings from tourism services reached \$1.83 billion in the first ten months of 2023 [6]. Ecotourism is a key contributor, particularly in rural and mountainous regions such as Surkhandarya, Fergana Valley, and Jizzakh.

The government has recognized ecotourism's role in sustainable development. The “Uzbekistan – 2030” Strategy, launched in 2023, emphasizes environmental protection and sustainable economic growth, with tourism – including ecotourism – playing a pivotal role. This aligns with global trends, as the Travel & Tourism market in Uzbekistan is projected to grow by 9.91% annually from 2024 to 2029, reaching a market volume of US\$720.60 million by 2029. While this figure encompasses all tourism sectors, ecotourism's contribution is increasingly significant as the country diversifies its offerings beyond historical sites.

To understand the scale and impact of ecotourism in Uzbekistan, several key statistics stand out:

1. **Foreign Tourist Arrivals:** In 2022, Uzbekistan welcomed 5.2 million foreign tourists, a sharp rise from 1.88 million in 2021, though still below the pre-pandemic peak of 6.75 million in 2019. While cultural tourism dominates, ecotourism is gaining traction, particularly in regions like the Aral Sea and the Chatkal Biosphere Reserve.
2. **Tourism Revenue:** Tourism exports reached US\$1.6 billion in 2022, with a target of US\$2.5 billion by 2024. Ecotourism contributes a growing share, driven by activities like desert safaris, birdwatching, and mountain trekking.
3. **Protected Areas Coverage:** As of 2023, Uzbekistan's protected natural areas span over 4% of its territory, including the Ugam-Chatkal National Park and the Kitab Nature Reserve. These areas are critical for ecotourism development.
4. **Hotel Utilization:** The coefficient of space fund utilization in hotels and similar accommodations varies by region, with ecotourism hubs like the Nuratau

Mountains showing increased demand. In 2023, the national average was approximately 60%, with rural ecotourism zones trending higher.

**Accommodation infrastructure expanded** significantly:

- **183 new hotels**
- **215 hostels**
- **356 family guest houses**

These establishments added **5,477 new accommodation facilities**, with a total capacity of **142,720 beds**[4;14].

The Uzbek government has undertaken several reforms to stimulate tourism:

- **Visa-free regime** for citizens of 91 countries[2;3]
- **Creation of 20 ecological routes** within protected areas like the Nuratau-Kyzylkum Biosphere Reserve and Ugam-Chatkal National Park[1; 22]
- Investment in **green infrastructure**, such as eco-lodges and sustainable transport

The *State Committee for Ecology and Environmental Protection* has also developed guidelines for sustainable tourism management in collaboration with international organizations such as UNDP and GIZ.

Despite progress, several challenges hinder ecotourism's full potential:

- Inadequate **waste management** in natural parks
- Limited **local community training** in sustainable hospitality
- **Lack of digital platforms** promoting eco-destinations in international markets

Nevertheless, Uzbekistan is well-positioned to benefit from global ecotourism trends if it continues integrating sustainability into its development strategy. Recent developments underscore Uzbekistan's commitment to ecotourism. Community-based tourism initiatives, such as homestays in the Nuratau Mountains and yurt camps near the Aral Sea, empower local communities while preserving traditional lifestyles. Partnerships with organizations like Purdue University's STARTlab are enhancing ecotourism education through programs like the online Ecotourism MOOC, launched in 2024. Infrastructure improvements, including the reconstruction of Samarkand International Airport in 2022, also facilitate access to remote ecotourism sites.

However, challenges persist. The Aral Sea region, while a poignant ecotourism draw, highlights the environmental degradation that ecotourism seeks to mitigate, requiring careful management to avoid further harm. Limited awareness among local tour operators and insufficient investment in rural infrastructure also hinder growth. Addressing these issues will be critical to sustaining ecotourism's upward trajectory.

An academic from Urgench State University, Saidmamatov has led research on ecotourism's sustainability potential, particularly in the Aral Sea region. His 2021 study with co-authors in *Sustainability* provides a quantitative analysis of stakeholder perceptions, noting that "local tourism businesses highly value ecotourism's role in

environmental conservation” [3; 12]. His collaboration with international scholars underscores Uzbekistan’s integration into global ecotourism research networks.

Another significant contribution comes from Saidmamatov and Matyakubov, who collaborate with Purdue University’s Sustainable Tourism and Responsible Travel (START) lab. Their work, detailed in a 2025 publication, focuses on developing ecotourism education through an online Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) launched in 2024. They argue that “ecotourism can be a positive foundation for future tourism growth in Uzbekistan and across Central Asia”, stressing its role in minimizing environmental impacts while enhancing visitor experiences. This initiative reflects a proactive approach to building capacity among tourism operators.

Future research directions, as suggested by these scholars, include deeper studies on ecotourism’s economic impacts, community involvement, and ecological outcomes. The collaboration between Uzbek researchers and international institutions, like Purdue University, signals a promising trajectory for advancing scientific knowledge and practical implementation.

**Conclusion.** Uzbekistan's ecotourism sector shows promising growth driven by policy reforms, investment in infrastructure, and increasing international interest. Strategic focus on sustainability, community involvement, and international promotion could transform the country into a leading ecotourism destination in Central Asia. With strategic investments and a focus on conservation, Uzbekistan is poised to become a leading ecotourism destination in Central Asia, offering travelers a chance to explore its wild landscapes while supporting its ecological and cultural preservation.

### References

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