



COMPENDIUM OF BEST PRACTICES FOR **ECOTOURISM** IN THE ECO REGION



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Compendium of Best Practices for Ecotourism in the ECO Region

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Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO)

Postal Address: Golbou Alley No:1, Kamraniyeh Street 1951933114 Tehran, Iran

Phone: +98 (21) 22831733-4

Website: www.eco.int

Email: registry@eco.int

Table of Contents

Foreword	3
INTRODUCTION.....	3
Relevance to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).....	4
ECO's Vision for Sustainable Tourism	4
SECTION I: MAIN PILLARS OF ECOTOURISM	5
Environmental Sustainability	5
Cultural and Community Engagement.....	5
Economic Viability and Local Benefit	5
Education and Interpretation	5
Responsible Travel Practices	5
Infrastructure and Eco-Friendly Innovation	6
SECTION II: Country-Specific Best Practices.....	7
AZERBAIJAN	7
IRAN	8
KAZAKHSTAN	8
KYRGYZ REPUBLIC	9
PAKISTAN.....	10
TAJIKISTAN.....	12
TÜRKIYE	13
TURKMENISTAN.....	14
UZBEKISTAN.....	15
SECTION III: Cross-Country Insights and Recommendations	17
Recommendations.....	18
REFERENCES	20
ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS.....	21

Foreword

By Dr. Asad M. Khan

Secretary General,
Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO)



It is with great pleasure that I present the Compendium of Best Practices for Ecotourism in the ECO (Economic Cooperation Organization) Region, a collective effort to showcase successful ecotourism models across our Member States. This Compendium aims to serve as a practical reference for policymakers, tourism stakeholders, and communities seeking to advance sustainable tourism practices in line with ECO's broader goals.

Ecotourism holds significant promise for the ECO Region. Rich in biodiversity, cultural heritage, and diverse landscapes, our Member States are uniquely positioned to benefit from ecotourism's potential to promote environmental sustainability, economic resilience and community empowerment. By embracing responsible travel models, we not only protect our shared ecosystems but also create meaningful livelihoods and deepen cultural understanding across borders.

4th Experts Group Meeting on Ecotourism held in November 2024 in Turkish Cypriot State recommended for compilation of such a document and 35th Regional Planning Council mandated the Secretariat to complete this task with the support of the Member States. The Compendium was compiled through close coordination of the Tourism Directorate of the Secretariat with national tourism authorities and ecotourism related institutions. It draws on real-life case studies and initiatives that reflect the key pillars of ecotourism; sustainability, community engagement, conservation, and cultural preservation. Each entry highlights innovative practices, outcomes, and lessons learned to support mutual learning among ECO countries.

I commend all contributors for their valuable inputs and commitment to advancing sustainable tourism in the ECO region. I hope this Compendium will inspire continued cooperation and innovation toward a greener and more inclusive tourism future.

INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is a form of responsible travel that emphasizes the conservation of natural environments, respects local cultures, and promotes sustainable development for host communities. Unlike mass tourism, ecotourism seeks to minimize environmental impact while offering educational and meaningful travel experiences that foster environmental and cultural awareness. Typically centered around ecologically sensitive areas, ecotourism includes nature-based activities such as trekking, wildlife observation, cultural immersion, and rural community engagement, all while adhering to principles of sustainability and ethical travel.

Relevance to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Ecotourism is strongly aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 15 (Life on Land). By encouraging the responsible use of natural resources, creating employment opportunities in rural and underdeveloped regions, and promoting cultural preservation,

ecotourism can play a transformative role in achieving inclusive and sustainable development across ECO Member States.

ECO's Vision for Sustainable Tourism

The ECO recognizes tourism, and particularly ecotourism, as a key sector for regional cooperation and sustainable economic growth. In line with ECO Vision 2025 and the forthcoming "Strategic Goals for Economic Cooperation for 2035", ECO places a strong emphasis on enhancing sustainable tourism practices, promoting intra-regional travel, and strengthening tourism-related infrastructure and human capacity. Through initiatives such as the ECO Tourism Capital Program, the ECO Tour Operators' Network and targeted capacity-building activities, ECO aims to position the region as a leading destination for environmentally conscious and culturally enriching travel experiences.

This Compendium represents one of ECO's strategic efforts to document, share, and promote best practices in ecotourism across Member States, fostering collaboration, innovation, and mutual learning for a greener and more inclusive future.

Tourism Directorate of the ECO Secretariat

SECTION I: MAIN PILLARS OF ECOTOURISM

Ecotourism, as defined by the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), is "environmentally responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people, and involves interpretation and education". [1]

The following six pillars provide a comprehensive framework for implementing ecotourism practices that align with international sustainability standards and the ECO's strategic objectives.

Environmental Sustainability

Environmental sustainability is the cornerstone of ecotourism. It involves minimizing negative impacts on natural ecosystems and promoting conservation efforts. Key practices include conducting environmental impact assessments, implementing waste reduction strategies, and using renewable energy sources. Such measures ensure that tourism activities do not compromise the ecological integrity of destinations. [2]

Cultural and Community Engagement

Engaging local communities and respecting cultural heritage are vital for authentic ecotourism experiences. This pillar emphasizes the inclusion of

indigenous knowledge, traditions, and participation in tourism planning and operations. By involving local populations, ecotourism fosters cultural preservation and socio-economic benefits for host communities. [3]

Economic Viability and Local Benefit

For ecotourism to be sustainable, it must contribute to the economic well-being of local communities. This includes creating employment opportunities, supporting local businesses, and ensuring that a significant portion of tourism revenue remains within the community. Economic viability also entails developing tourism products that are competitive and adaptable to market changes. [4]

Education and Interpretation

Educational components enhance the value of ecotourism by fostering environmental and cultural awareness among tourists. Interpretive programs, guided tours, and informational materials help visitors understand the significance of conservation efforts and cultural practices, leading to more meaningful and responsible travel experiences. [1]

Responsible Travel Practices

Responsible travel involves ethical behavior by tourists, such as adhering to local customs, minimizing

environmental footprints, and supporting conservation initiatives. Tour operators and destination managers play a crucial role in promoting responsible practices through codes of conduct, visitor education, and monitoring systems. [2]

Infrastructure and Eco-Friendly Innovation

Developing infrastructure that aligns with ecological principles is essential for sustainable ecotourism. This includes constructing eco-lodges using sustainable materials, implementing efficient waste management systems, and utilizing renewable energy technologies. Innovative approaches to infrastructure development can enhance visitor experiences while preserving natural and cultural resources. [5]

By adhering to these pillars, ECO Member States can develop ecotourism strategies that promote environmental conservation, cultural integrity, and economic development, contributing to the broader goals of sustainable development in the region.

SECTION II: Country-Specific Best Practices

AZERBAIJAN

Ecotourism holds significant importance for Azerbaijan by leveraging its diverse ecosystems, unique biodiversity, and rich cultural heritage. The country's varied landscapes and rare species provide ideal conditions for nature-based tourism, while its cultural sites and ancient villages offer enriching experiences. Ongoing efforts, such as joining the UNESCO Global Geoparks Network, further underscore Azerbaijan's commitment to sustainable tourism and international recognition.[6]

Best Practice Case Study: Shahdag National Park



Location: Northeastern Azerbaijan, covering parts of Gusar, Quba, and Khachmaz districts

Pillar(s) Addressed: Environmental Sustainability, Education and Interpretation, Responsible Travel Practices

Brief Description: Shahdag National Park is the largest in Azerbaijan, established to protect alpine ecosystems, glaciers, and rare wildlife species. It serves as a model for balancing conservation and ecotourism through nature trails, guided tours, and awareness activities, while maintaining strict environmental protection measures.

Stakeholders Involved: Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, State Tourism Agency, Azerbaijan Tourism Board, local municipalities, conservation NGOs (Non-Governmental Organization), eco-guides and local communities

Outcomes Achieved: Increased public awareness of biodiversity, sustainable visitor management practices, development of eco-friendly tourism infrastructure, and community involvement in conservation efforts

Challenges and Opportunities: Despite the fact that there are seasonal access limitations, need for enhanced visitor education and infrastructure maintenance in remote areas Shahdag National Park with new infrastructure investments has potential for expansion of community-based

tourism, development of educational programs, and enhanced cross-border ecotourism cooperation in the region.

IRAN

Iran's diverse landscapes and rich cultural heritage offer vast ecotourism potential, with initiatives focusing on community-based tourism and conservation.

Best Practice Case Study: Qeshm Island Geopark [7]



Location: Qeshm Island, Hormozgan Province, Southern Iran

Pillar(s) Addressed: Environmental Sustainability, Cultural and Community Engagement, Economic Viability and Local Benefit, Education and Interpretation

Brief Description: Qeshm Island Geopark, the first UNESCO-recognized geopark in Iran, integrates geodiversity, cultural heritage, and biodiversity into a comprehensive ecotourism model. The initiative supports local livelihoods through eco-lodges, handicrafts, and guided tours while preserving

geological and ecological sites such as the Valley of Stars and Hara Mangrove Forests.[7]

Stakeholders Involved: Qeshm Free Zone Organization, Department of Environment, UNESCO, Local communities, NGOs, and eco-tour operators

Outcomes Achieved: Enhanced local employment, increased international recognition, conservation of unique natural and geological assets, and empowerment of women through eco-enterprises.

Challenges and Opportunities: Managing tourism pressure, climate impacts, and ensuring consistent community benefits could be seen as challenges however it presents a great example of the geopark model across other regions of Iran, strengthened regional cooperation under ECO, and capacity building in sustainable tourism practices.

KAZAKHSTAN

Kazakhstan is promoting ecotourism by developing its national parks and protected areas, aiming to balance tourism growth with environmental conservation. [8]



Best Practice Case Study: Katon-Karagay National Park [9]

Location: East Kazakhstan Region, bordering Russia, China, and Mongolia

Pillar(s) Addressed: Environmental Sustainability; Cultural and Community Engagement; Education and Interpretation; Infrastructure and Eco-Friendly Innovation

Brief Description: Established in 2001, Katon-Karagay National Park is Kazakhstan's largest national park, encompassing over 643,000 hectares of the Southern Altai Mountains. Recognized as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, the park is renowned for its diverse ecosystems, including alpine meadows, glaciers, and endemic flora and fauna. Recent initiatives have introduced virtual tours and sustainable tourism models to balance ecological preservation with visitor engagement.

Stakeholders Involved: Committee of Forestry and Wildlife of the Ministry of Agriculture of Kazakhstan; UNESCO;

local communities; conservation NGOs; and eco-tour operators

Outcomes Achieved: The park has seen increased public awareness of biodiversity, implementation of sustainable visitor management practices, development of eco-friendly tourism infrastructure, and enhanced community involvement in conservation efforts.

Challenges and Opportunities: Main challenges are managing seasonal access limitations, ensuring consistent visitor education, and maintaining infrastructure in remote areas. The Katon-Karagay National Park has a potential of expanding community-based tourism initiatives, developing educational programs, and enhancing cross-border ecotourism cooperation in the Altai region of Kazakhstan.

KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

Kyrgyz Republic has made ecotourism a national priority, highlighting its alpine landscapes, nomadic culture, and community-based hospitality as key assets.

Best Practice Case Study: Community-Based Tourism in Arstanbap [10]



Location: Arstanbap Jalal-Abad Region

Pillar(s) Addressed: Cultural and Community Engagement, Economic Viability and Local Benefit, Environmental Sustainability, Education and Interpretation

Brief Description: Arstanbap, renowned for its ancient walnut forests and mountainous landscapes, has become a model for community-based ecotourism in Kyrgyzstan. Initiated in 2001, the Community-Based Tourism (CBT) program in Arstanbap offers homestays, guided treks, and cultural experiences that allow visitors to immerse themselves in local traditions while contributing to the conservation of natural resources.

Stakeholders Involved: Local community members; Kyrgyz Community-Based Tourism Association (KCBTA); Helvetas Kyrgyzstan; local and international NGOs; regional tourism authorities

Outcomes Achieved: The CBT initiative in Arstanbap has led to increased income for local families, preservation of cultural heritage, and heightened environmental awareness. Over 150 community members are involved, offering a range of services that have attracted both domestic and international tourists, thereby boosting the local economy and promoting sustainable practices.

Challenges and Opportunities: Managing seasonal tourism fluctuations; ensuring consistent quality of services; maintaining infrastructure in remote areas might be challenging. CBT initiative has also potential of expanding marketing efforts to attract a broader audience; developing training programs to enhance service quality; leveraging digital platforms for promotion and booking; fostering partnerships with international ecotourism networks.

PAKISTAN

Pakistan has immense potential for ecotourism with its mountains, rivers, deserts, forests, and coastlines. Government efforts and private sector partnerships are being directed toward sustainable tourism growth.

Best Practice Case Study: Ecotourism Along the Indus River [11]



Location: Chashma and Taunsa Barrage Dolphin Sanctuary, Punjab Province

Pillar(s) Addressed: Environmental Sustainability, Education and Interpretation, Cultural and Community Engagement

Brief Description: The Chashma and Taunsa Barrage Dolphin Sanctuary, established in 1972, is a critical habitat for the endangered Indus River dolphin, an endemic species to Pakistan. This sanctuary not only protects a significant population of these dolphins but also serves as a vital breeding and wintering ground for over 20,000 waterfowl. The area offers substantial potential for ecotourism development, focusing on dolphin watching, bird observation, and environmental education, thereby promoting conservation awareness and sustainable tourism practices.

Stakeholders Involved: Ministry of Climate Change and Environmental Coordination; Punjab Wildlife and Parks Department; World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Pakistan; local

communities; and ecotourism operators.

Outcomes Achieved: The sanctuary has witnessed a significant increase in the Indus dolphin population, from approximately 150 individuals in 1974 to over 1,400 by 2019. This growth is attributed to concerted conservation efforts, including habitat protection and community engagement. Additionally, the area has become a focal point for environmental education and has the potential to contribute to local economies through sustainable tourism initiatives. [12]

Challenges and Opportunities: This area needs sustainable tourism practices to prevent habitat disturbance; mitigating pollution and water management issues affecting the Indus River ecosystem and balancing conservation efforts with community development needs. On the other hand, there is also opportunity for developing community-based ecotourism programs that provide alternative livelihoods enhancing environmental education and awareness through visitor centers and guided tours and integrating the sanctuary into broader conservation initiatives like the Living Indus Initiative, which aims to restore the ecological health of the Indus River basin. [13]

TAJIKISTAN

Tajikistan's breathtaking landscapes, towering peaks, fast-flowing rivers, and mineral-rich springs make it an ideal destination for ecotourism. The country's diverse ecosystems and varying climates offer tourists the unique opportunity to experience both the snow-covered Pamir Mountains and the warm Vakhsh Valley in a single day. The mountainous regions and their surroundings provide countless scenic vistas.

Ecotourism in Tajikistan promotes travel beyond urban centers into its extensive network of protected areas, which make up 22% of the national territory. Key sites such as Dashti Jum, Romit, Tigrovaya Balka, Zorkul Reserves, and the UNESCO-listed Tajik National Park are valued for their ecological importance and natural beauty. These areas are also home to many rare and protected species, including the Bukhara deer, Indian goose, Marco Polo sheep, markhor, snow leopard, Tien Shan bear, and urial, many of which are listed in Tajikistan's Red Book.[14]

Best Practice Case Study: Pamir Eco-Cultural Tourism Project



Location: Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO)

Pillar(s) Addressed: Environmental Sustainability, Community Engagement, Economic Viability and Local Benefit

Brief Description: The Pamir Eco-Cultural Tourism Association (PECTA), established in 2008 with support from the Aga Khan Foundation's Mountain Societies Development Support Programme (MSDSP), aims to promote sustainable tourism in the Pamir region. PECTA focuses on developing community-based tourism by training local residents in hospitality, guiding, and environmental conservation. The initiative encourages the use of homestays, trekking routes, and cultural experiences to attract tourists, thereby fostering economic development while preserving the region's natural and cultural heritage.[15]

Stakeholders Involved: Aga Khan Foundation, local NGOs particularly

PECTA, Local community members, including homestay operators, guides, and artisans.

Outcomes Achieved: Establishment of over 150 homestays, with approximately 90% operated by women, leading to increased household incomes and women's empowerment. Pamir Mountains was recognized as a top sustainable destination, winning 1st place in the ITB Berlin 2018 Sustainable Top 100 Destination Awards for the Best of Asia-Pacific category. [15] This also enhanced preservation of cultural heritage and natural resources through community involvement and education as well as cross-border tourism initiatives in collaboration with partners in Afghanistan was developed. [16]

Challenges and Opportunities: While infrastructure limitations and accessibility in remote areas exist, Tajikistan's pristine environment and growing interest in eco-trekking present significant potential for future development leveraging international recognition to attract funding and support for sustainable tourism projects.

TÜRKİYE

Türkiye has prioritized sustainable tourism, integrating ecotourism into its national strategy to preserve biodiversity and cultural heritage.

Best Practice Case Study: Küre Mountains National Park [17]



Location: Kastamonu and Bartın Provinces

Pillar(s) Addressed: Environmental Sustainability, Cultural and Community Engagement, Economic Viability and Local Benefit

Brief Description: Established in 2000, Küre Mountains National Park (KMNP) spans approximately 37,753 hectares and is recognized for its rich biodiversity, including old-growth forests, deep canyons, and endemic species. The park is part of the Black Sea Moist Karst Forest ecosystem and has been designated as one of the WWF's 100 Forest Hotspots in Europe requiring urgent protection. In 2012, KMNP achieved certification under the PAN Parks network, highlighting its commitment to wilderness conservation and sustainable tourism. [18]

Stakeholders Involved: Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, WWF-

Türkiye, Local municipalities and community organizations, Kastamonu Foundation for Development, Health, Environment, Education, and Tourism, Local entrepreneurs and homestay operators.

Outcomes Achieved: Eco-friendly accommodations by converting traditional wooden houses into family-run pensions, preserving local architecture and culture was developed. [19] Stakeholders organized training of local residents as nature guides, enhancing employment opportunities and fostering environmental stewardship. Education on biodiversity conservation among local communities and visitors increased the awareness. Eco-tourist visits have grown, contributing to the local economy and promoting sustainable livelihoods.

Challenges and Opportunities: Balancing tourism growth with conservation efforts and addressing infrastructure limitations to accommodate increasing tourist numbers without compromising environmental integrity remain as challenges. Opportunities exist in expanding eco-friendly accommodations and promoting lesser-known ecotourism sites with guided hikes, wildlife observation, and cultural experiences. In addition, there is a potential for promoting lesser-

known ecotourism sites within the park to distribute tourist impact more evenly and strengthening community involvement in park management and decision-making processes.

TURKMENISTAN

Turkmenistan is exploring ecotourism development by leveraging its unique natural and cultural sites, focusing on sustainable tourism practices.

Best Practice Case Study: Köýtendag Nature Reserve [20]



Location: Lebap Region

Pillar(s) Addressed: Environmental Sustainability, Cultural and Community Engagement

Brief Description: Established in 1986, the Köýtendag Nature Reserve encompasses approximately 27,100 hectares in Turkmenistan's easternmost region. The reserve is renowned for its unique geological formations, including over 300 caves, and is home to Turkmenistan's highest

peak, Aýrybaba (3,137 meters). It harbors diverse flora and fauna, including rare species such as the Heptner's markhor. [21]

Stakeholders Involved: Ministry of Environmental Protection of Turkmenistan, Public Association Enterprise "Tebigy Kuwwat", Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), Center for Large Landscape Conservation (CLLC) and local communities and conservation organizations

Outcomes Achieved: Enhancements at key tourist sites have been achievement, such as the "Kyrk Gyz" grotto and Dinosaur Plateau, including the construction of rest areas, water reservoirs, and informational signage to improve visitor experience and environmental protection. Educational seminars and tree-planting events organized to raise awareness about sustainable tourism and conservation among local residents.[22] SMART (Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool) system for effective wildlife monitoring was established and reserve staff collected data on the reserve area. Köýtendag Nature Reserve was applied to get recognition of a transnational UNESCO World Heritage Site in collaboration with Uzbekistan's Surkhan State Nature Reserve. [23]

Challenges and Opportunities:

Addressing threats such as agricultural encroachment, illegal hunting, and unmanaged tourism that impact the reserve's ecological integrity, enhancing infrastructure and providing training for ecotourism to ensure sustainable visitor management are the main challenges. On the other hand, there is opportunity of strengthening cross-border conservation efforts with neighboring countries to promote regional biodiversity connectivity as well as leveraging the reserve's unique geological and ecological features to attract eco-tourists and promote environmental education.

UZBEKISTAN

Uzbekistan is integrating ecotourism into its national tourism strategy, focusing on preserving natural reserves and promoting community-based tourism. On January 12, 2024, Uzbekistan enacted Presidential Resolution titled "On Measures for the Accelerated Development of Ecological Tourism in the Republic of Uzbekistan." This strategic initiative aims to diversify the nation's tourism offerings and expedite investment projects by leveraging the country's abundant natural resources. The resolution focuses on attracting foreign direct investment into the ecotourism sector and enhancing employment opportunities and income

sources for populations residing in remote mountainous and desert regions through the creation of new business ventures.[24]

Best Practice Case Study:
Community-Based Ecotourism in the Nuratau Mountains [25]



Location: Nuratau Mountains, Navoi Region

Pillar(s) Addressed: Environmental Sustainability, Community Engagement, Cultural Preservation, Economic Viability and Local Benefit

Brief Description: The Nuratau Mountains region has been a focal point for community-based ecotourism initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable tourism while preserving the area's unique natural and cultural heritage. Local communities have developed hiking and horseback riding tours that allow visitors to experience the natural beauty of the region and learn about traditional practices. These tours are led by local guides, and the proceeds go directly to the local communities, fostering economic development and cultural exchange. [26]

Stakeholders Involved: Local communities and tour operators, ACTED (Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development), Government agencies, international donors and NGOs

Outcomes Achieved: The initiatives have provided alternative livelihoods for rural communities, reducing reliance on traditional agriculture and promoting economic diversification. By involving local communities in tourism activities, traditional practices and crafts have been preserved and showcased to visitors. The focus on sustainable tourism practices has led to increased awareness and efforts to protect the region's natural resources.

Challenges and Opportunities: Limited infrastructure in remote areas poses challenges for accessibility and service delivery. Ongoing training and support are needed to ensure quality service provision and sustainable practices. Leveraging digital platforms to market ecotourism offerings can attract a broader audience. Government initiatives, such as the Presidential Resolution on ecotourism development, provide a supportive framework for scaling up successful models.

SECTION III: Cross-Country Insights and Recommendations

This section synthesizes comparative insights from ECO Member States, identifies replicable models of ecotourism, and outlines recommendations for regional cooperation and harmonized standards to advance sustainable tourism across the ECO region.

The region showcases a rich tapestry of ecotourism initiatives, each reflecting the unique ecological and cultural landscapes of its member states. These endeavors not only promote sustainable tourism but also foster community engagement and environmental conservation.

Azerbaijan focused on sustainable tourism development in national parks, balancing ecological preservation with visitor access. Shahdag National Park combines alpine meadows, glaciers, and diverse wildlife, offering eco-friendly tourism activities that support local economies.

Iran developed eco-lodges in protected areas, promoting conservation and providing educational programs for tourists. As the first UNESCO Global Geopark in Iran, Qeshm Island integrates geological heritage with community-based tourism,

emphasizing education and conservation.

Kazakhstan emphasized ecotourism in mountainous regions, offering trekking and wildlife observation while implementing conservation measures. As the country's largest national park, Katon-Karagay offers diverse ecosystems and promotes eco-tourism activities that support conservation.

Kyrgyz Republic has encouraged yurt-based tourism in alpine meadows, fostering cultural exchange and environmental awareness. CBT model like the one in Arstanbap leverages the region's natural beauty and cultural heritage, providing sustainable income sources.

Pakistan has advanced ecotourism in various regions, integrating conservation efforts with local community development. Pakistan focuses on sustainable tourism development, balancing environmental conservation with community benefits such as the Indus River initiative.

Tajikistan has promoted eco-tourism in the Pamir Mountains, focusing on community involvement and sustainable trekking routes. Focusing on trekking and cultural tourism, Pamir eco-cultural tourism project trains local communities in hospitality and environmental conservation.

Türkiye has implemented community-based ecotourism projects in rural areas within national parks, integrating local traditions and crafts to enhance visitor experiences and support local economies. Recognized for its old-growth forests and biodiversity, ecotourism projects in national parks like Küre Mountains National Park involve local communities in conservation efforts, providing alternative livelihoods.

Uzbekistan promotes cultural heritage tourism in historical cities, incorporating sustainable practices to preserve architectural sites. Political will with the ecotourism dedicated Presidential Resolution and examples such as Nuratau would empower local communities through sustainable tourism, preserving cultural heritage and generating income.

Turkmenistan has developed ecotourism experiences in various natural reserve areas, highlighting unique ecosystems and traditional nomadic lifestyles. Home to unique flora and fauna, Köýtendag Nature Reserve offers guided nature walks and cultural experiences, promoting biodiversity conservation.

These initiatives demonstrate a regional commitment to integrating environmental sustainability, cultural

preservation, and economic development in tourism practices.

Recommendations

Based on successful practices within the ECO region, the following models are recommended for replication:

Community-Based Ecotourism: Engaging local communities in tourism planning and operations ensures cultural authenticity and equitable economic benefits.

Eco-Lodge Development: Establishing accommodations that adhere to sustainable building practices and environmental standards enhances the eco-tourism experience.

Protected Area Tourism: Implementing visitor management plans in national parks and reserves balances conservation objectives with tourism activities.

Cultural Heritage Integration: Incorporating traditional crafts, music, and cuisine into tourism offerings enriches visitor experiences and supports cultural preservation.

Environmental Education Programs: Providing interpretive services and educational materials fosters environmental awareness among tourists.

These models align with global best practices and can be adapted to local

contexts within the ECO region. To enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of ecotourism across the ECO region, the following recommendations are proposed:

Regional tourism standardization efforts could be extended by formulating a dedicated common criterion for ecotourism practices, drawing from international frameworks such as the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) Criteria [27].

ECO Secretariat, in collaboration with the relevant stakeholders in the ECO Member States could organize workshops and conferences elevating the current Expert Group on Ecotourism in a larger perspective to share best practices, research findings, and innovations in ecotourism among Member States to facilitate knowledge exchange.

The national tourism authorities, non-profit organizations along with the

support of private sector could collaborate on marketing campaigns to position the ECO region as a premier ecotourism destination, highlighting its diverse offerings.

More training and resources for interested tourism stakeholders to enhance skills in sustainable tourism management and operations in the ECO Member States could be provided.

The ECO Secretariat also strongly advises the Member States to establish systems to assess the environmental, social, and economic impacts of ecotourism projects, ensuring continuous improvement.

By adopting these recommendations, ECO Member States can foster a cohesive and sustainable ecotourism sector that contributes to regional development and environmental conservation.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACTED: Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development

CBT: Community-Based Tourism

CEPF: Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund

CLLC: Center for Large Landscape Conservation

ECO: Economic Cooperation Organization

GBAO: Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region

GSTC: Global Sustainable Tourism Council

KCBTA: Kyrgyz Community-Based Tourism Association

KMNP: Küre Mountains National Park

MSDSP: Mountain Societies Development Support Programme

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

PECTA: Pamir Eco-Cultural Tourism Association

SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals

SMART: Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool

UNEP: United Nations Environmental Programme

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

WWF: World Wide Fund for Nature



**Economic
Cooperation Organization**