
Ecotourism Development in Russia: Analysis of Best Regional Practices

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Abstract

The article focuses on the study of the aspects of ecotourism development in the regions of Russia, which have a significant natural tourist potential. Based on the best practice of ecotourism identified by the Russian Ministry of Culture, the authors of the study have shown that the availability of tourist resources in a region does not imply a high level of effective tourist activity. The methodology of the study included a scientific and practical grouping of ecotourism sites and the development of an algorithm to evaluate regional practices. The expert assessment was based on general and internal criteria, allowing the identification of the best ecotourism destinations, the compilation of best practices, and the creation of a system of flaws in environmental programs. The findings of the study showed that a greater number of best ecotourism practices were identified in the regions, having a modern tourist infrastructure and apply a systematic approach to ecotourism development. According to the authors, the use of the selective approach does not only make it possible to diagnose the state of ecotourism development in the regions of the Russian Federation, but also to develop new methods of promoting the most successful ecotourism practices.

Keywords: ecotourism, regions of the Russian Federation, best practices, evaluation criteria

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INTRODUCTION

An increased interest in outdoor recreation was a contributing factor toward the emergence of ecotourism, a rapidly growing and popular type of tourism. Like any interesting and complex phenomenon, ecotourism has become the object of research for a number of experts who tried to identify its specific features, which formed a holistic view of the ways of ecotourism development in different regions of the world, taking into account the resource potential of the territories. Analyzing conceptual aspects of the theory of ecotourism helps highlight the fundamental approaches which determine its essence, role and value. Thus Krippendorf (1982) described the ecotourism as a calm activity providing a lot of physical and spiritual recreation for people in contact with the terrain in the interests of the local community.

P. Hasslacher, in his turn, identified special strategic components, the presence and interaction of which are defined by the so-called "soft tourism". These components emphasize the need for independent

regional development, high social and cultural accountability aimed at limiting the technical and technological component (Mose Ingo 1988). A further developed idea of the soft tourism gives a definition of a quantitatively moderate tourism, which creates economic benefits for local residents and ensures mutual understanding between guests and locals, while not damaging either the landscape or the local social and cultural environment (Kramer 1988). At the same time, a number of authors emphasize the need to compensate for the inevitable damage to the ecosystems of the territory by using a part of the profits from tourism activities for that purpose (Leiper 1973, Tribe 1995).

A significant complement to the above conceptual approaches should also include the idea of humanizing tourism through a targeted public influence on the policy of the tourist business, primarily aimed at obtaining stable profits, rather than a balanced approach to the exploitation of natural tourist resources (UN General Assembly 2012).

UNESCO Sites (2018)

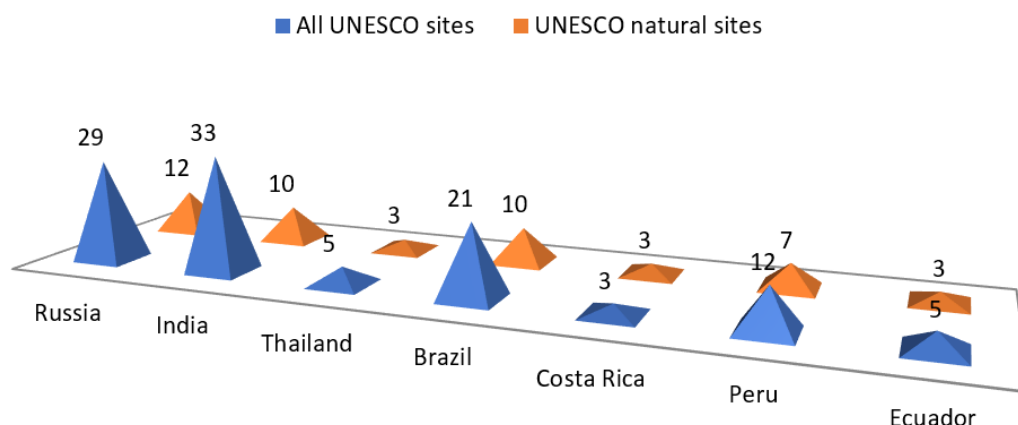


Fig. 1. The number of UNESCO sites by country (2017)

The humanization of tourism activities is the essence of the fundamental principles of ecotourism promotion established by the American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA):

- Respect the frailty of the earth.
- Leave only footprints.
- Take only photographs. Do not take away “souvenirs” from historical sites and natural areas.
- Make your travels more meaningful educate yourself about the geography, customs, manners and cultures of the region you visit. Respect the privacy and dignity of others.
- Walk or utilize environmentally-sound methods of transportation whenever possible
- Do not buy products made from endangered plants or animals.
- Learn about and support conservation-oriented programs and organizations.

If these principles are organized into a system, one can identify the main purposes of ecotourism development. On the one hand, ecotourism helps people of today relax, experience pleasure and sometimes excitement, learn interesting information, test themselves and their strength, and on the other hand, ecotourism makes remote and unexplored parts of nature popular and creates an opportunity to save them, avoid damage and destruction (Dzhandzhugazova et al. 2018).

The study of the conditions and factors of ecotourism development evidences that it grows most

actively in the countries with significant natural resources, including natural landmarks of great international and national importance (Dzhandzhugazova 2017).

The Russian Federation, as the largest country with a unique variety of landscapes, has very good prospects for the development of various ecotourism programs (Chernikova et al. 2015).

In this regard, there is a number of developing countries, such as Kenya, Costa Rica, India, Brazil, Thailand, Peru and Ecuador, which, along with the Russian Federation, have a significant resource potential for the development of ecological tourism, because the share of heritage sites either prevails or is quite significant within UNESCO. The number of UNESCO protected sites by country is shown in **Fig. 1**.

The data in the chart show that such large countries as Russia, India and Brazil, which have several dozens of UNESCO sites, of which 30% to 50%, are natural heritage sites, have an overall tourist potential conducive to the development of various types of tourism, including nature-oriented tourism. Whereas Thailand, Costa Rica, Peru and Ecuador have predominantly natural heritage sites, which makes it possible to focus on ecotourism development using the potential of conservation areas: national parks, reserves, etc. However, it should be said that the successful development of ecotourism programs at the international as well as the national level does not only depend on the resource component, but there should be a competent administrative approach to the development of tourism in particular territories,

Table 1. Criteria for assessing ecological tourism

| General criteria | Internal criteria |
|--|---|
| C1 – planning and management of sites; | – presence of the attributes of ecotourism (GOST R system) – form of interactions with authorities – membership in non-commercial organizations – evidence of public recognition |
| C2 – site compliance with safety requirements; | – certification of ecotourism safety services (GOST R system) – suitability of sites to disabled people – availability of qualified talent pool – availability of certified tourist guides – application of unique methods – availability of approved safety rules – access to medical aid – interaction with emergency services |
| C3 – availability of ecotourism infrastructure; | – accommodation options for tourists – availability of food facilities for tourists – availability of additional infrastructure |
| C4 – sustainability of infrastructure facilities; | – availability of sewage treatment systems – application of sustainable technologies – introduction of recycling and reuse processes |
| C5 – performance indicators of tourism activities; | – flow of visitors (tourist flows) – flow of investments – changes in the volume of billable services |
| C6 – promotion and information support. | – information support of ecotourism |

combining both commercial and environmental approaches (Dzhandzhugazova 2013a).

In Russia, the share of natural landmarks is about 40%, which is quite significant, but does not fully indicate the country's natural tourist potential. In 2018, the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation inspected the most popular ecotourism sites and compiled the results into a list of best ecotourism practices in order to promote the tourism further, especially in the Far East, where ecotourism programs should take a new course of development (Maksanova 2018).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The main goal of the study was to identify and evaluate the best regional practices of developing ecotourism in the Russian Federation. The object of the research was the cumulative potential of ecotourism in Russia, which includes 13 tourism zones with various forms of tourism development and the degree of importance of their resources. At the initial stage of the study, an algorithm based on the regulatory framework and existing scientific and methodological approaches was developed to assess the best practices of ecotourism in the regions. The methodological base of the research was the scientific and practical grouping and systematization of ecotourism sites, as well as the development of an algorithm to evaluate regional practices, including the following steps:

- analyzing regional practices of boosting ecotourism;

- building a system of evaluation criteria for ecotourism practices;
- ranking the evaluation criteria;
- assigning scores to ecotourism practices;
- identifying the best regional practices of ecotourism.

The software used to form the initial tables and identify the best practices of ecotourism was “Region-specific aspects of implementing investment project (Certificate of state registration of computer program No. 2018610966 2017).

The assessment base of the research included the main group of criteria divided into six general criteria:

- C1 – planning and management of sites;
- C2 – site compliance with safety requirements;
- C3 – availability of ecotourism infrastructure;
- C4 – sustainability of infrastructure facilities;
- C5 – performance indicators of tourism activities;
- C6 – promotion and information support.

Additionally, a second group of criteria included 22 internal criteria, which provided a more detailed assessment of ecotourism sites within the framework of key criteria (**Table 1**).

The criteria base of the study set out in **Table 1** includes basic criteria of different priority, which

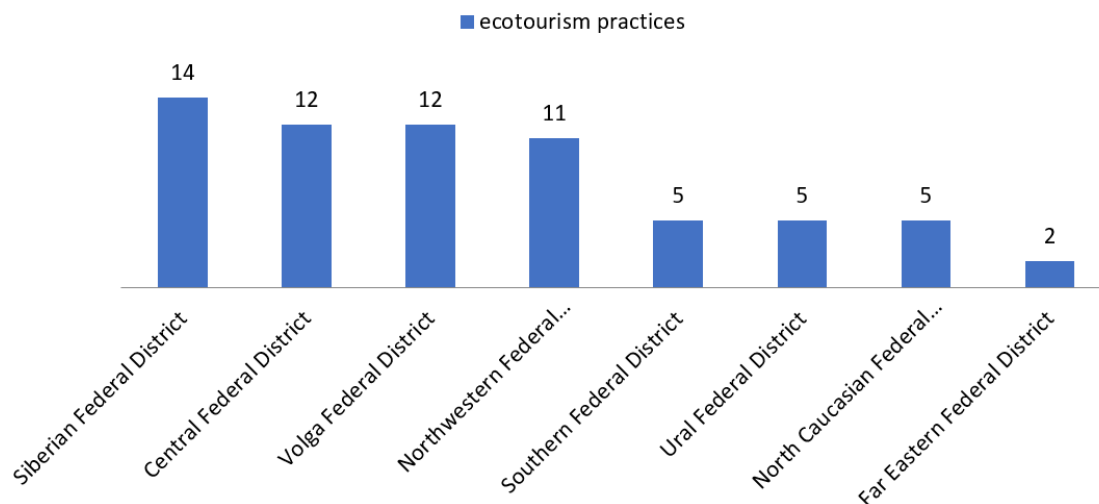


Fig. 2. Distribution of best regional ecotourism practices by federal districts of Russian Federation (2018)

predetermined their ranking and the building of an assessment scale. The assessment scale makes it possible to assess the significance of the criteria from 1 (equal priority) to 9 (absolute superiority). The use of mathematical methods to process the results and sufficient accuracy and relevance of the calculations were achieved through that approach (Eremko et al. 2016).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The processes of promoting national environmental programs mainly depend on the study and popularization of their successful practices. A study of the best regional practices of ecotourism development made by the Russian Ministry of Culture of in 2018 helped identify and summarize best practices as well as build a system of flaws in the existing environmental programs. Within the study, 123 ecotourism facilities in Russia were evaluated, of which only 66 practices applied in 48 regions of the Russian Federation complied with GOST R 56642-2015. Tourist services. Ecotourism.

57 practices, however, were rejected and excluded from the assessment procedure, which undoubtedly reduces the possibilities for developing ecotourism programs in Russia, since only 50 % of Russian regions can provide a high-quality comprehensive tourism product. The distribution of the best regional ecotourism practices by federal districts of the Russian Federation is shown in **Fig. 2**.

The data shown in **Fig. 2** shows that the quality of ecotourism programs does not solely depend on the resource component. For example, only two destinations in the Far Eastern Federal District, the district with the most abundant tourist resources, were

included into the collected book of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, – the Kronotsky Nature Biosphere Reserve and Shantar Archipelago Tour. Whereas its neighbour, the Siberian Federal District, has 14 objects listed in the collection of the best practices. Hence, the quality of management and safe ecotourism organization matters play a significant role and should be the emphasis of the work of tourist administrations in the regions.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of studying the best ecotourism practices have served as the grounds for the identification of best practices using the selected objects of the collection, which contributes to the promotion of useful experience and offers universal methods and approaches used to assess ecotourism destinations. Furthermore, the emphasis on regional practices, which result from competent environmental policies of the regions, provides an opportunity to strengthen their public image, as well as effectively promote local ecotourism brands (Dzhandzhugazova 2013b).

For instance, following the assessment of ecotourism sites, five best practices were identified: the Baikal State Reserve (the Republic of Buryatia), the “Baikal Area Reserve” (the Irkutsk Region), the Stolby Nature Sanctuary and the Ergaki Nature Park (the Krasnoyarsk Krai), the Kenozersky National Park (the Arkhangelsk region).

All these sites may serve as reference sites, because they do not only have valuable natural resources, but also provide high-quality tourist infrastructure which meets the needs and limitations of ecotourism: guest houses, camping grounds and camp sites, other forms of accommodations. There are also various options for

recreation and excursions offered on the territories, e.g. ecological paths, picnic points, ethnical towns, horseback riding tours, rafting, fishing, snowboarding and downhill skiing, etc. At the same time, a constant monitoring of the facilities and a systematic approach to the development of ecotourism will help find solutions for a number of important issues, including the creation of comprehensive tourist destinations combining environmental tourism and sports for different categories of consumers. Only one third of the surveyed

regional ecotourism practices today can meet those requirements, and only a quarter of them are suitable for disabled people.

In conclusion, it needs to be borne in mind that the applied selective approach may not only be used to diagnose the state of ecotourism development in the regions of the Russian Federation, but also to develop new methods of promoting the most successful ecotourism destinations.

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