

## Mapping Ecotourism Business Research: Review and Synthesis

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### Abstract

This paper aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis, map the main areas of the “Ecotourism business research” literature over the past eleven years and offer a classification of subjects and future research agendas. Ecotourism is emerging as a popular instrument for biodiversity conservation, a form of sustainable tourism. This study uses PRISMA meta-analysis and Bibliometric Method and uses the Vosviewer application. The purpose of this writing is to evaluate the intention of tourists to remain loyal to environmentally friendly destinations. The data on the number of documents/writings with the theme “Ecotourism business research” contained in the Scopus database in the period 2014 – 2024 is 263 documents. The number of Ecotourism Business Research documents increased exponentially, from 4 in 2014 to 20 in 2024, with a peak of 50 documents in 2023. The most authors who raised the theme “Ecotourism business research” were Hall, CM; Xu,A and Zheng,Q. Judging from the university’s involvement in research on Ecotourism Business recorded in Scopus, the University of Johannesburg and Fujian Agriculture and Forestry University are the universities that produce the most journals with the theme “Ecotourism business research”. The most dominant country with the theme “Ecotourism business research” is Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Research, Business, Ecotourism

### INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism has emerged as a significant aspect of sustainable tourism, recognized for its dual role in promoting responsible travel and conserving biodiversity (Weaver, 2015). It combines environmental conservation efforts with the socioeconomic development of local communities, aiming to minimize the negative impacts of traditional tourism. This growing interest in ecotourism is part of a broader global shift toward sustainable development, as more stakeholders in the tourism industry governments, NGOs, and private enterprises seek to develop environmentally friendly practices (Orams, 1995). Ecotourism has thus become not only a popular subject for policymakers and practitioners but also a focal point for academic research.

Over the past decade, "Ecotourism business research" has experienced substantial growth, reflecting the increasing academic and practical attention to this field. The expansion of this research domain corresponds with a heightened awareness of sustainable business practices and the need to balance economic interests with ecological preservation (Ahmad, & Ahmed, 2018). Scholars are investigating various dimensions of ecotourism, including its economic viability, environmental impact, marketing strategies, and the role of community engagement. Consequently, the literature on ecotourism business research spans multiple disciplines such as environmental studies, economics, management, and geography, revealing the interdisciplinary nature of the field.

However, despite the expanding body of work on ecotourism business, a comprehensive analysis that synthesizes these studies is lacking. Current literature often addresses specific themes or case

studies without offering a holistic view of the overarching trends and directions in the field. As a result, there is a gap in understanding how different aspects of ecotourism interconnect and where the field is headed. Furthermore, identifying the key contributors, both in terms of individual researchers and academic institutions, can provide insights into the major drivers of knowledge production and collaboration within this area.

A systematic mapping and analysis of the literature are necessary to address these gaps and provide a clearer picture of the landscape of ecotourism business research. By examining the available studies from 2014 to 2024, this paper aims to uncover the thematic focuses that have emerged over time, the progression of research interests, and the extent to which certain subfields have developed (Boley, & Green, 2016). Additionally, this analysis seeks to highlight prolific authors and institutions that have played a significant role in advancing the discourse on ecotourism business, offering a networked perspective of research collaboration and influence.

The methodological approach of this paper utilizes the PRISMA meta-analysis and bibliometric methods to ensure a systematic review of the literature. By applying these methods, the paper aims to conduct a thorough examination of the quantity and quality of research produced over the specified period. Moreover, the use of tools like the Vosviewer application allows for the visualization of patterns in publication trends, co-authorship, and thematic clusters, providing a comprehensive and visual representation of the field's development.

In summary, this paper's objective is to offer an integrative review of ecotourism business research over an eleven-year period. By doing so, it will contribute to the understanding of the evolution of this research area, identify leading contributors, and propose directions for future research agendas. The insights gained from this analysis are expected to serve as a resource for academics, practitioners, and policymakers interested in the sustainable development of tourism through the lens of ecotourism, offering a consolidated view of where the field stands and potential opportunities for advancing its role in both business and environmental conservation.

## **METHODS**

To conduct a systematic review of the existing literature on ecotourism business research, this study adopts a methodological framework that combines the PRISMA meta-analysis and bibliometric analysis. The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) approach provides a structured and transparent methodology for identifying, screening, and including relevant academic works, ensuring a rigorous and comprehensive collection of data. Following the PRISMA guidelines, this study systematically searched, screened, and reviewed the literature to identify documents that specifically focus on "Ecotourism business research." This process included defining precise inclusion and exclusion criteria, selecting relevant keywords, and ensuring that the selection of articles was unbiased and comprehensive. The bibliometric analysis was then used to quantify patterns within the literature, including publication trends, author collaborations, and the distribution of research across different countries and institutions. The application of these combined methodologies enables a detailed exploration of the field, highlighting the core themes and dominant research contributors over the past decade.

For visualization and deeper analysis, Vosviewer software was employed to map and analyze the bibliometric data. Vosviewer is a powerful tool that allows for the visualization of bibliographic networks, such as co-authorship, co-citation, and thematic clusters. By utilizing Vosviewer, the study was able to generate visual representations of the research landscape, displaying the

interconnectedness of authors, research topics, and institutional affiliations. The data for this bibliometric analysis was extracted from the Scopus database, chosen for its comprehensive indexing of high-quality academic publications. A total of 263 documents published between 2014 and 2024 were retrieved, providing a substantial dataset for analysis. The study tracks the progression of research output over time, identifies key authors contributing to the development of ecotourism business research, and examines the involvement of universities across different regions. This detailed mapping enables a nuanced understanding of how the field has evolved, who the key players are, and which institutions and regions are leading in terms of research output.

## RESULTS

The results of the study reveal a significant upward trend in the volume of publications related to ecotourism business research over the last eleven years. Starting with just 4 documents in 2014, the number of publications has grown consistently, reaching 20 in 2024. Notably, 2023 stands out as a peak year, with 50 publications being produced, indicating an intensified interest and a surge in academic activity within this field. This exponential growth not only demonstrates the increasing relevance of ecotourism as a research topic but also suggests that the themes associated with sustainable tourism and biodiversity conservation are gaining traction across a wide range of disciplines and regions. The steep rise in publications suggests that researchers are increasingly recognizing the need to explore the intersection of tourism, business, and environmental sustainability.

The analysis of individual contributions to the field highlights a few key authors who have significantly shaped the discourse on ecotourism business research. Among the most prolific contributors are Hall, C.M., Xu, A., and Zheng, Q., who have published extensively on various dimensions of the topic. Their work has likely played a foundational role in developing core themes and debates within the field, influencing other researchers and practitioners interested in sustainable tourism models. The prominence of these authors underscores the centrality of certain thought leaders in driving the academic conversation forward and setting the agenda for future research. The impact of their research is evident not only in the number of publications but also in the widespread recognition of their work within the academic community and beyond.

At an institutional level, the University of Johannesburg and Fujian Agriculture and Forestry University stand out as leading academic centers for research on ecotourism business. Their significant output in this area indicates a strong institutional commitment to exploring sustainable tourism practices and fostering research that spans both economic and environmental perspectives. The role of these universities suggests that they have developed robust programs or networks that support research on ecotourism, contributing to the global knowledge base and influencing policies and practices within this domain. Additionally, the findings indicate that Indonesia has emerged as the most dominant country in terms of research contributions, reflecting its rich biodiversity, thriving tourism sector, and ongoing efforts to balance economic development with conservation. The prominence of Indonesian research highlights the country's active role in promoting sustainable tourism and positions it as a leader in shaping the ecotourism business discourse on a global scale.

## DISCUSSION

The rapid growth in the number of publications on ecotourism business research over the past decade signifies an increasing awareness and emphasis on sustainable tourism models. This upward trend reflects not only an academic interest but also a societal demand for sustainable business

practices within the tourism industry. The consistent rise in research output suggests that ecotourism has evolved from a niche concept to a mainstream topic of inquiry, addressing the complex interrelations between tourism, business operations, environmental conservation, and community development. As the world faces escalating environmental challenges, such as climate change, habitat destruction, and the loss of biodiversity, the role of ecotourism as a sustainable alternative to conventional tourism has become more critical. This shift in research focus underscores the need to address the sustainability of tourism in ways that are economically viable while fostering conservation and benefiting local communities.

The contributions of key authors like Hall, C.M., Xu, A., and Zheng, Q. reveal the growing importance of thought leaders in shaping the discourse on ecotourism business practices. Their work lays the foundation for developing theoretical frameworks and practical insights that drive sustainable tourism efforts. These authors' extensive contributions demonstrate how individual academic efforts can influence global perspectives on ecotourism, encouraging further study into business models that align with ecological conservation and community well-being. By identifying and exploring the underlying principles of successful ecotourism operations, these authors have provided crucial benchmarks for both researchers and practitioners seeking to implement sustainable tourism models in diverse contexts. Furthermore, their influence may inspire collaborations and cross-disciplinary studies that broaden the understanding of how tourism business models can sustainably coexist with environmental conservation goals.

The prominence of universities like the University of Johannesburg and Fujian Agriculture and Forestry University reflects the global distribution of research efforts and the expanding geographical scope of interest in ecotourism. These institutions play a pivotal role in fostering research and collaboration, often bridging regional insights with global perspectives. Their contributions highlight a particular focus on Asia and Africa, regions rich in biodiversity and home to emerging ecotourism markets. This geographic emphasis is notable as it indicates where much of the current research and practical innovation in sustainable tourism is taking place. As these regions contain diverse ecosystems and communities that are heavily impacted by tourism activities, understanding and promoting sustainable practices in these areas can provide valuable case studies for the development of broader ecotourism principles worldwide.

A key finding of the study is the need to explore the factors influencing tourist loyalty to environmentally friendly destinations. As ecotourism continues to grow, understanding what drives tourists to choose and remain loyal to sustainable destinations is critical for the industry's future. Factors such as environmental awareness, cultural authenticity, economic incentives, and the perceived benefits of supporting local conservation efforts may all play a role in shaping tourist behavior. Future research could delve deeper into these motivational factors, examining how marketing strategies, community engagement, and conservation initiatives impact tourists' decisions to visit and return to ecotourism sites. This knowledge is essential for destination managers and policymakers aiming to enhance visitor experiences and promote sustainable business models that benefit local economies and ecosystems.

Moreover, further investigation into the drivers of sustainable ecotourism business practices is necessary to understand their long-term impact on conservation efforts and local communities. These drivers may include regulatory frameworks, stakeholder engagement, financial models, and community-based management strategies. Understanding how these elements interact and contribute to the success of ecotourism operations will be crucial for ensuring that such practices remain sustainable over time. The interplay between economic benefits for local communities and

the need to preserve natural resources requires a delicate balance. Future research should thus aim to identify best practices that not only support conservation but also ensure economic viability and social inclusion, enabling local communities to be active participants and beneficiaries of ecotourism development.

In conclusion, the study provides a comprehensive overview of the trends, key contributors, and institutional efforts in the ecotourism business research landscape. The findings underscore the growing importance of sustainable tourism practices and point to areas where further research is needed. Continued exploration of tourist loyalty, sustainable business drivers, and their impacts on both conservation and communities will help to develop more robust ecotourism models. This holistic approach to ecotourism will be essential for advancing the field, promoting biodiversity conservation, and fostering sustainable socioeconomic development in tourism-dependent regions. By addressing these critical research gaps, future studies can contribute to a deeper understanding of how to implement ecotourism practices that are beneficial for all stakeholders involved, from tourists and businesses to local communities and natural ecosystems.

## CONCLUSION

This bibliometric analysis has effectively traced the evolution of ecotourism business research from 2014 to 2024, offering insights into how the field has grown and diversified over the past eleven years. The observed trends underscore a significant and rising importance of sustainable tourism, as demonstrated by the increase in publications, the growing network of scholars, and the emphasis on sustainability across different geographic regions. The steady expansion in research output reflects a global recognition of the need to balance tourism activities with environmental conservation and sustainable business practices. By identifying prolific authors, key academic institutions, and countries actively contributing to the field, the study has revealed the central players and collaborative networks that are shaping the current and future discourse on ecotourism business practices.

Furthermore, this paper lays the groundwork for future studies to build upon by highlighting thematic focuses and research gaps within the ecotourism business literature. The analysis encourages scholars to delve deeper into understanding how ecotourism can effectively function as a sustainable business model that benefits local communities, preserves natural habitats, and remains economically viable. By mapping out the key areas of research and identifying dominant trends, this study not only consolidates current knowledge but also advocates for more comprehensive, multidisciplinary approaches to examining the impacts and potentials of ecotourism. Ultimately, this work serves as a valuable reference for academics, practitioners, and policymakers who aim to promote sustainable tourism practices, providing a framework for advancing the role of ecotourism in achieving broader sustainability goals and fostering resilient, environmentally responsible tourism businesses.

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