

DEVELOPING CREATIVE ECOTOURISM EXPERIENCES IN NANBENG VILLAGE: A SUSTAINABLE APPROACH TO DESTINATION MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to (1) assess the current state of ecotourism practices in Nanbeng Village and understand its impact on the local environment and community; (2) identify and develop innovative and sustainable ecotourism experiences that are immersive and educational while ensuring the conservation of the village's natural and cultural heritage; and (3) evaluate how these sustainable ecotourism strategies can bolster the economic development of Nanbeng Village without compromising the integrity of its natural resources. Through a qualitative research methodology, this study will employ field observations, semi-structured interviews with local residents, local government officials, private sectors, and tourists, totaling 20 people, to understand existing tourism practices and identify opportunities for innovative ecotourism experiences. This study will also consider how such experiences could enhance the economic development of the community while preserving its natural resources. This investigation augments the comprehensive comprehension of ecotourism within border territories, positing a universally relevant framework for the advancement of sustainable tourism that can be modified by rural collectives worldwide. Furthermore, it provides actionable insights to guide tourism policy and planning in Nanbeng Village, offering a practical blueprint for managing natural resources effectively while leveraging them sustainably for tourism.

Keywords: ecotourism, creativity, sustainable tourism, destination management, Nanbeng Village

INTRODUCTION

The remarkable progressions accomplished by the tourism sector in China have solidified its status as a pivotal benefactor to the nation's economy, as stated by Gao et al. (2009). For its potential to promote environmental protection and socioeconomic development, ecotourism has drawn great interest from both academics and industry professionals (TIES., 2015). China's potential to utilize ecotourism as a means for environmental preservation and economic advancement has garnered increased attention, as per Ahmad et al. (2018) findings. Sustainability and the protection of natural areas are at the heart of ecotourism (Khan et al., 2020; Machnik, 2021). Equal progress is sought in the areas of the environment, society, and the economy (Almeida & Dieguez, 2021). Bhatt (2020) argues that ecotourism's positive effects

on local economies and biodiversity make it a "win-win" for everyone involved. Locals may earn money from tourists while also being incentivized to help preserve their environment. Responsible tourism is becoming increasingly popular, and for good reason: it aims to reduce negative effects on natural and cultural resources while bolstering preservation efforts (Buckley, 2009; Stronza et al., 2019). Ecotourism possesses the capacity to mitigate poverty in the vicinity of conservation areas by introducing novel avenues for livelihood to the local populace (Liu et al., 2012). However, the realization of ecotourism encounters an array of obstacles that require overcoming. In spite of these impediments, ecotourism may yield advantageous outcomes for the environment and the native communities. With the global rise in travel, there's an increasing interest in destinations that offer both natural beauty and a rich cultural backdrop, like the border regions which present a unique blend of both these elements. Nanbeng Village, located in the picturesque Yunnan Province of China, epitomizes such a destination. Positioned as a border settlement, Nanbeng boasts of its distinctive geographical context, abundant natural resources, and a profound traditional heritage. While this combination has the potential to turn the village into a sought-after ecotourism spot, the challenges of sustainable management in such regions are complex, particularly when it comes to balancing economic development with environmental and cultural conservation (Li, 2004). Overcrowding, habitat degradation, and increased pollution are some of the potential consequences if tourism exceeds the environment's capacity to cope with visitor volume (Che, 2002). Sustainable ecotourism that does not negatively impact local populations or the natural environment requires careful planning, regulation, and monitoring (Kimengsi et al., 2019). Existing research has shed light on the global tactics and effects of ecotourism. Border areas with distinctive social, economic, and political positions and the presence of historical and natural attractions are becoming increasingly attractive for tourism (Safdari Molan et al., 2021). However, as identified in the research gap, there remains an evident dearth of qualitative research focusing specifically on the unique dimensions presented by border regions like Nanbeng Village. The nuances of these areas, from their cultural amalgamation to the potential environmental challenges, necessitate tailored approaches to ecotourism. The notion of ecotourism champions the cause of safeguarding the environment, imparting environmental knowledge and fostering reverence for the customs of the indigenous community (Wibowo et al., 2023). Such tailored strategies are imperative not only to ensure the conservation of the region's invaluable resources but also to optimize its economic potential in a sustainable manner.

In light of this context, this study embarks on a journey to explore the current state of ecotourism in Nanbeng Village, delving deep into its impact and the potential for innovative, sustainable practices. This study is to establish a comprehensive knowledge of ecotourism in Nanbeng by gathering the viewpoints of a wide range of stakeholders, from local inhabitants to government officials, and to give practical insights that help influence the industry's future in a sustainable path.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The Concept and Significance of Ecotourism

The notion of ecotourism centers around ethical travel to natural regions that conserves the environment and enhances the wellbeing of local populations (Lee & Jan, 2017). It offers visitors a learning experience and delivers eco-related knowledge and environmental protection measures. Planning and understanding stakeholder interests are crucial to ecotourism success (Siregar et al., 2022; Submitter et al., 2020). Ecotourism seeks to reconcile economic growth with environmental and cultural preservation. This is done through promoting sustainable activities and reducing environmental damage. The sub-sector of the tourism industry which exhibits the highest rate of growth is presently perceived to be the fastest-growing (Dinç et al., 2023; Gonfa, 2020). Ecotourism helps conserve natural resources, biodiversity, and vulnerable ecosystems. It generates cash and jobs for locals, especially in rural areas where other livelihoods are scarce (Saragih et al., 2022). Nature, culture, and the human influence on the environment are all things that ecotourists learn more about. Ecotourists' activities are impacted by their environmental views, social norms, sense of agency, and trip value (Lee & Jan, 2017). Managers of ecotourism locations can boost visitors' learning experiences and environmental attitudes through the introduction of wearable augmented reality applications and highlighting the themes of ecological catastrophe or climate change (Lee & Jan, 2017). Ecotourism is a sort of responsible travel that gives economic advantages to local people and protects the environment (Dinç et al., 2023). It delivers a sustainable and ecologically friendly tourism experience that contains components of learning and education (Siregar et al., 2022). Ecotourism strategies improve local economy and safeguard natural resources (Saragih et al., 2022). Ecotourism offers opportunities for improving livelihood security and incentivizing conservation efforts by involving local communities (Khan et al., 2020). Ecotourism promotes ethical, environmentally friendly travel that benefits local communities. Its relevance rests in its capacity to promote environmental protection, generate economic advantages, cultivate cultural appreciation, and boost the well-being of both the environment and local populations.

By applying sustainable practices and encouraging education and awareness, ecotourism attempts to combine economic development with environmental and cultural protection. Chinese tourists exhibit a good understanding of ecotourism and are motivated by environmental concerns, which suggests a strong potential for achieving mass park-visitor symbiosis in the ecotourism market (Li et al., 2024). The high-quality development of tourism (HQDT) in China is guided by principles of innovation, coordination, green development, openness, and sharing, with significant contributions from government guidance, innovation, and regional cooperation (Wang et al., 2022). In Transylvania, Romania, the preservation of wood-pastures through traditional agricultural practices has maintained significant biodiversity, which, despite limited tourist flows, has the potential to boost local ecotourism if adequately promoted and supported by authorities (Vijulie et al., 2024). In Poland's Gryfino County, the slow development of tourism despite abundant natural and cultural attractions underscores the importance of local community involvement in recognizing and capitalizing on tourism potential (Głabiński & Duda, 2017). Similarly, the perceptions of rural Serbian inhabitants regarding the economic, social, and environmental advantages of sustainable tourism play a crucial role in shaping their endorsement of tourism projects. This underscores the importance of community engagement and perceived standard of living in cultivating favorable stances towards the advancement of tourism (Demirović Bajrami et al., 2020). In both geographical areas, nevertheless, the primary objective persists unchanged: to harmonize economic expansion with ecological durability, utilizing technological progress and interregional collaboration to improve ecological efficiency and foster the advancement of sustainable tourism.

Challenges and Opportunities in Border Regions

Border regions like Nanbeng Village present both unique challenges and opportunities for ecotourism. The development of cross-border tourism can face challenges due to the decline in tourism dynamics and the negative environmental effects of increased tourist flows (Maratovna et al., 2021; Więckowski, 2023). The challenges include: (1) The tourist sector is profitable, and a shifting climate might make ecotourism growth difficult. It is important to continuously adapt to market trends and maintain a competitive advantage (Che, 2002). (2) Environmental impacts: Tourism may generate congestion, ecological degradation, and pollution. Managing visitor volume and implementing sustainable practices are crucial to minimize these impacts (Che, 2002). (3) Unrealistic expectations: Local communities in border regions may have unrealistic expectations about the potential of tourism for regional growth. Managing these

expectations and ensuring realistic development plans are important for sustainable ecotourism development (Prokkola, 2010). (4) Identity and cultural preservation: The commercialization and standardization of local culture and tourist services can pose challenges to the preservation of local identity and values. Balancing tourism development with cultural preservation is essential for maintaining the authenticity of the destination (Dunets et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, within the tourism sector, there exists an abundance of occasions for both growth and collaboration, particularly in rural locales, through the utilization of the innate, cultural, historical, and economic circumstances inherent to border regions (Menbere & Admassu, 2020; Tambovceva et al., 2020). The opportunities include: 1. Cross-border cooperation: Opportunities for international tourist collaboration abound in border locations. Collaborative efforts between neighboring countries can lead to the creation of unique cross-border tourism products and experiences (Prokkola, 2010). 2. Utilization of natural and cultural potentials: Border regions often have rich natural and cultural resources that can be utilized for tourism development. By leveraging these potentials, border regions can create competitive tourism products and attract visitors (Nestoroska, 2022). 3. Increased competitiveness and employment opportunities: Developing border regions as recognizable tourist destinations can increase their competitiveness and create employment opportunities for the local population. This can contribute to the overall socio-economic development of the region (Nestoroska, 2022). 4. Funding opportunities: Funding programs, such as INTERREG, can provide valuable financial support for tourism projects in border regions. Accessing these funds can help overcome financial constraints and support sustainable cross-border cooperation in tourism (Shepherd & Ioannides, 2020).

In conclusion, border regions' ecotourism development faces challenges related to competitiveness, environmental impacts, unrealistic expectations, and cultural preservation. However, there are opportunities for cross-border cooperation, utilization of natural and cultural potentials, increased competitiveness, and access to funding programs. Border regions may achieve sustainable and responsible ecotourism development by tackling these issues and making the most of possibilities.

Balancing Economic Development with Conservation

Achieving equilibrium between the advancement of economy and preservation of nature in ecotourism necessitates meticulous strategizing and administration. Here are some strategies and considerations:

- (1) Sustainable tourism practices: Sustainable methods are crucial to reducing tourism's environmental impact. This includes reducing waste, conserving energy and water, promoting biodiversity conservation, and supporting local communities (Cater & Cater, 2007).
- (2) Stakeholder engagement: To attain optimal planning and discernment, it is imperative that the community denizens, governing agencies, non-state actors, and other pertinent stakeholders are integrated into the process. This ensures that their perspectives and interests are considered, and fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility for conservation efforts (Cater & Cater, 2007).
- (3) Environmental education and interpretation: Provide educational opportunities for tourists to learn about the local environment, biodiversity, and conservation efforts. Interpretive programs, guided tours, and signage can help raise awareness and promote responsible behavior (Tisdell & Wilson, 2005).
- (4) Monitoring and regulation: Establishment of sophisticated monitoring systems is imperative to accurately evaluate and comprehend the multifaceted environmental impacts of ecotourism activities. Implement regulations and guidelines to ensure compliance with sustainable practices and protect sensitive ecosystems (Tisdell & Wilson, 2005).
- (5) Economic benefits for conservation: Demonstrate the economic value of conservation to local communities and stakeholders. Show how ecotourism can provide financial support for nature conservation efforts, creating incentives for conservation and counteracting pressures for extractive economic activities (Tisdell & Wilson, 2001).
- (6) Carrying capacity management: To prevent overcrowding and mitigate adverse effects, it is imperative to ascertain the carrying capacity of the ecotourism site. This involves setting limits on visitor numbers, managing visitor flows, and maintaining the ecological and cultural integrity of the destination (Butarbutar & Soemarno, 2013).
- (7) Partnerships and collaboration: Promote partnership between government, NGOs, local communities, and tourist businesses. Collaborative efforts can lead to shared resources, knowledge exchange, and coordinated conservation initiatives (Rahman et al., 2022).
- (8) Research and monitoring: Undertake an investigative inquiry aimed at evaluating the effects of the practice of ecotourism on both the natural surroundings and the neighboring societies. Regular monitoring and evaluation help identify potential issues and inform adaptive management strategies (Tisdell & Wilson, 2005).

By implementing the aforementioned strategies and taking into account the cited references, ecotourism can adeptly achieve equilibrium between economic progress and conservation, thereby guaranteeing the enduring sustainability of both the natural milieu and indigenous communities.

Innovative Strategies for Sustainable Ecotourism

The implementation of progressive tactics aimed at ensuring the viability of ecotourism can be categorized into six distinct perspectives. These strategies include:

- (1) Market segmentation and innovative marketing: Market segmentation research should consider all relevant criteria, including sustainability, to ensure supply match's demand. Innovative marketing practices can create demand for sustainable ecotourism products and influence market behavior towards sustainability (Beaumont, 2011).
- (2) Idealistic models for community-based ecotourism: Designing conceptual frameworks for sustainable ecotourism that are congruent with the distinctive attributes and requirements of indigenous populations may avert marginalization and ensure their active participation in the growth of tourism (Nugeraha et al., 2022).
- (3) Emphasizing the sustainability criterion: The sustainability criterion in ecotourism incorporates environmental, social, and economic elements. The incorporation of sustainability into ecotourism products and practices can serve as a distinguishing factor from other tourism products and guarantee adherence to sustainable principles, as posited by Beaumont (2011).
- (4) Community attitudes and support: Comprehending and tackling the communal outlooks and endorsement of ecotourism holds paramount importance in the realm of enduring progress. Factors such as perceived benefits, conservation awareness, and local benefits influence community support for ecotourism initiatives (Moswete et al., 2020).
- (5) Mapping potential zones for ecotourism: According to Roque Guerrero et al. (2020), the utilization of geographic information systems (GIS) can function as a guide for sustainable development and landscape resilience by identifying regions that demonstrate a greater potential for promoting ecotourism. This approach helps in spatial planning and identifying suitable areas for ecotourism activities.
- (6) Compliance with sustainability criteria: Compliance with the sustainability criterion of ecotourism leads to the implementation of environmentally responsible practices and

management systems. Obtaining eco-accreditation and implementing sustainable practices can position ecotourism operators at the upper end of the price scale (Beaumont, 2011).

Stakeholder Engagement in Ecotourism Planning

Stakeholders' input throughout ecotourism planning is vital for the project's success. It allows for the understanding of stakeholder interests and levels of influence, which helps in managing their engagement effectively (Lalicic & Weber-Sabil, 2022). The involvement of stakeholders is necessary to achieve sustainability in a tourism destination (Submitter et al., 2020). Nonetheless, inadequate stakeholder collaboration may impede the triumph of ecotourism (Salman, Jaafar, & Mohamad, 2021). Poor interactions and collaborations among stakeholders can lead to the degradation of natural resources and neglect of communities, undermining the long-term survival of ecosystems and communities themselves (Wondirad et al., 2020). To address this, a multi-stakeholder management model is needed to unite stakeholders towards achieving sustainable ecotourism (Wang et al., 2021).

(1) Awareness and participation: Stakeholder engagement helps create awareness and promote participation in ecotourism initiatives. It allows stakeholders to understand the benefits and potential impacts of ecotourism, leading to increased support and involvement (Ogunjinmi & Braimoh, 2018).

(2) Collaboration and consensus-building: Engagement of various stakeholders facilitates the establishment of mutual collaboration and consensus-building amongst diverse groups. This collaborative approach helps reach agreements, address concerns, and develop shared solutions, increasing the likelihood of successful implementation (Kenawy et al., 2017).

(3) Tokenistic engagement: Tokenistic engagement, where stakeholders are involved superficially or as a formality, can hinder the success of ecotourism projects. Genuine and meaningful engagement is necessary to ensure stakeholders' perspectives are considered and their interests are addressed (Kenawy et al., 2017).

(4) Community involvement and empowerment: Participation in decision-making processes is a strong instrument that may provide local communities a feeling of ownership when done through stakeholder engagement. This involvement enhances the success and sustainability of ecotourism projects by aligning them with local needs and aspirations (Kia, 2021).

(5) Stakeholder interests and influence: Understanding stakeholders' interests and their level of influence is crucial for effective engagement. Recognizing and effectively managing the

interests of significant stakeholders is a crucial factor in surmounting obstacles and securing their backing for the project, as posited by Salman, Jaafar, Mohamad, et al. (2021).

(6) Stakeholder management: Effective management of stakeholders is a crucial component of implementing ecotourism successfully. Successful project outcomes depend on stakeholder parity, incorporating their input into project planning and decision-making, and considering their concerns and complaints (Salman et al., 2022).

(7) Challenges and barriers: Various challenges and barriers can hinder stakeholder engagement in ecotourism planning. These include deficiencies in operationalizing engagement, institutional limitations, stakeholder attitudes, and perceptions (Kenawy et al., 2017). Identifying and remedying these challenges holds significant importance for the efficacious engagement of stakeholders.

Research Gap

The broad literature review highlights substantial insights into ecotourism definitions, significance, strategies, and challenges; however, several critical research gaps persist. Firstly, while stakeholder engagement is recognized as essential for effective ecotourism (Lalicic & Weber-Sabil, 2022; Salman, Jaafar, & Mohamad, 2021), there remains limited empirical exploration of stakeholder perceptions in border regions. This gap could significantly hinder the development of tailored engagement strategies (Xu et al., 2023). Secondly, although technological innovations have begun shaping sustainable ecotourism practices (Lee & Jan, 2017; Pavlidis et al., 2022), there is a scarcity of comprehensive evaluations concerning how advanced technologies can enhance ecotourism management and visitor experience, particularly in border regions. Thirdly, existing studies have identified both opportunities and challenges inherent to border regions (Maratovna et al., 2021; Więckowski, 2023), yet in-depth case analyses addressing specific political, policy-related, and cultural dynamics are still relatively limited, necessitating further investigation (Navrátil et al., 2015; Navrátil et al., 2013). Furthermore, the enduring sustainability ramifications of ecotourism methodologies continue to be insufficiently examined, thereby emphasizing the imperative for longitudinal investigations that assess persistent socio-economic impacts and ecological robustness (Sobhani et al., 2023). Community dynamics, including internal power structures and decision-making processes within local communities, are also inadequately explored, despite their importance for successful ecotourism implementation (Mingjing, 2024). Furthermore, the literature identifies a notable lack of specific economic models or frameworks suited to balancing economic benefits with conservation efforts, especially in sensitive border areas

(Cater & Cater, 2007; Tisdell & Wilson, 2005). Training methodologies tailored for local community capacity building and stakeholder education also require deeper exploration, particularly in region-specific contexts. Lastly, resilience strategies designed to mitigate external shocks such as pandemics and economic downturns in vulnerable ecotourism areas have not been comprehensively explored, emphasizing a critical need for strategic adaptability research. Addressing these gaps could significantly enhance ecotourism management strategies and promote sustainable development in diverse regions worldwide.

Building upon the identified research gaps, especially those relating to stakeholder perceptions, sustainable development strategies, and balancing economic growth with ecological preservation, this study seeks to address these critical areas through a comprehensive examination of ecotourism in Nanbeng Village, a unique border region. To direct this study, the subsequent research inquiries have been crafted:

RQ 1: What are the existing ecotourism practices in Nanbeng Village, and how have they impacted the local environment and community?

RQ 2: What are the potential innovative ecotourism experiences that can be developed in Nanbeng Village, emphasizing sustainability, immersion, and education?

RQ 3: How can the proposed sustainable ecotourism strategies contribute to the economic upliftment of Nanbeng Village while ensuring the conservation of its natural and cultural resources?

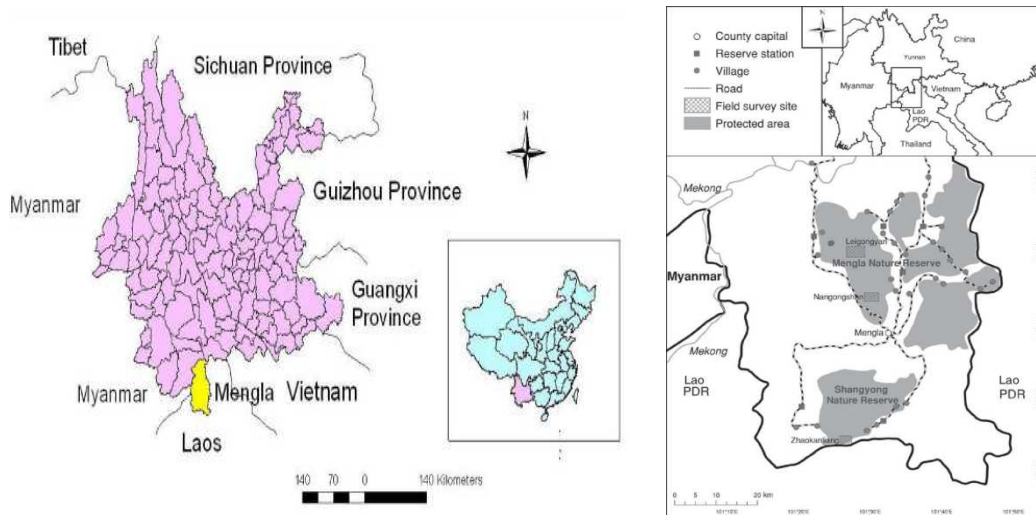
DATA AND METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth understanding of the intricacies and dynamics of ecotourism in Nanbeng Village, particularly given its unique status as a border region. By utilizing qualitative methodologies, researchers are able to gain profound insights concerning the creation, implementation, and interpretation of assessments and evaluations, in addition to investigating the behavior, perceptions, emotions, and comprehension of examinees (Rahman, 2020). This approach permits researchers to exhibit flexibility in their methodology, modifying their techniques and methods to suit the specific research setting and objectives. It is particularly advantageous when exploring topics that are arduous to quantify or necessitate a more extensive comprehension of the societal and cultural milieu (De Oliveira, 2023). The approach is tailored to capture nuanced insights from local stakeholders and to unravel the cultural, environmental, and economic subtleties of the region that might not emerge from a purely quantitative approach.

Research Site and Context

The research is focused on Nanbeng Village (Figure 1), a border settlement in Mengla County, Yunnan Province, China. The village has been selected due to its rich natural and cultural heritage, coupled with its unique position as a border region, making it both challenging and essential for ecotourism development.

Figure 1 Location of Nanbeng Village, Mengla County, Yunnan Province, China



Nanbeng Village serves as an extension of Mandan Village and is under the jurisdiction of the Mandan Village Committee located in Mengla Township. This village is situated in a semi mountainous region, positioned 6 kilometers away from the Mandan Village Committee and 15 kilometers away from Mengla Township. With an annual precipitation range of 1200-1600 millimeters, Nanbeng Village offers favorable conditions for cultivating various crops such as grain, rubber, sugarcane, and tea. Moreover, the village encompasses 4690 acres of forest land. Under the jurisdiction of Nanbeng Village, there exists one natural village, which consists of 86 households and a rural population of 458 individuals. Within this population, there are 458 individuals engaged in agricultural activities, forming a labor force of 250 individuals. Specifically, 240 individuals are involved in primary industry occupations. The primary sources of income for farmers in this village include rubber, grain, fishing, and tourism. Furthermore, on December 31, 2019, Nanbeng Village was selected to be included in the second batch of national forest and rural lists.

Data Collection

The researcher will conduct several field visits to Nanbeng Village to observe the existing tourism practices firsthand, the state of natural resources, and the interactions between tourists and locals. This will involve photographing sites, taking notes on visitor behaviors, and understanding the logistics of the current tourism operations. Relevant documents such as local tourism policies, historical records of Nanbeng Village, and previous research or reports on tourism in the area will be analyzed to understand the historical and policy context.

In qualitative research, the non-probability sampling approach of "purposive sampling" is frequently used. This method requires picking examples that are both informative and pertinent to the research question at issue (Palinkas et al., 2013). It involves deliberately selecting participants or cases based on specific characteristics or criteria that align with the research objectives (Tongco, 2007). This sampling method is particularly effective when studying a specific cultural domain or when seeking knowledgeable experts in a particular field (Tongco, 2007). It allows researchers to target specific cases or individuals who can contribute unique perspectives and rich data to the study (Palinkas et al., 2013). A total of 20 individuals will be interviewed, including 7 local residents, 4 government officials, 3 private sector representatives, and 6 tourists (Table 1). A semi-structured format will allow for consistency across interviews while providing flexibility to explore emerging themes or unexpected insights.

Table 1 Stakeholders with their information

Code No. of Participants	Gender	Occupation
S1	Female	Committee Member of Township
S2	Male	Committee Member of Village
S3	Male	Committee Member of Village
S4	Male	Committee Member of Village
S5	Female	Tour Operator
S6	Male	NGOs
S7	Male	NGOs
S8	Female	Local Resident
S9	Male	Local Resident
S10	Female	Local Resident
S11	Female	Local Resident
S12	Male	Local Resident
S13	Male	Local Resident
S14	Female	Local Resident
S15	Male	Tourist
S16	Male	Tourist
S17	Female	Tourist
S18	Male	Tourist
S19	Male	Tourist
S20	Female	Tourist

A non-probability selection approach known as "purposive sampling" was used to choose the 20 participants. The main objective of this sample procedure was to get a comprehensive assortment of viewpoints that are pertinent to the examination of ecotourism. This was particularly important due to the distinct attributes and individuals involved in this field. Here are the specific criteria for the selection:

(1) Local Residents (7 individuals):

- Residency: Must have resided in the region for at least ten years to ensure a deep understanding of the locale and the changes over time.
- Diversity: In order to comprehensively encompass a wide array of experiences and viewpoints, it is imperative to integrate individuals across a spectrum of age cohorts, genders, and occupational histories.
- Involvement: Priority will be accorded to persons who have had firsthand or indirect involvement with ecotourism efforts, whether as recipients, partners, or even as evaluators.

(2) Government Officials (4 individuals):

- Position: Must hold or have held a role in local or regional governance associated with tourism, environment, or community development.
- Experience: Minimum of five years in their respective positions to ensure they have a comprehensive understanding of policies, challenges, and strategies.

(3) Private Sector Representatives (3 individuals):

- Affiliation: Must be associated with businesses or NGOs directly related to ecotourism – this could include tour operators, hoteliers, or conservation organizations.
- Influence: Ideally in decision-making positions or roles where they shape the direction or practices of their respective entities in relation to ecotourism.
- Track Record: Should have a demonstrated commitment to sustainable practices and community engagement.

(4) Tourists (6 individuals):

- Experience: Tourists who have visited multiple ecotourism destinations, not just the local under study, to provide comparative insights.
- Engagement: Preference for tourists who have engaged with local communities or have a deep interest in sustainable tourism practices.

Interviews were structured according to a comprehensive protocol:

Interview Duration: Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes, allowing adequate time for participants to share detailed responses and for researchers to clarify and explore key points.

Mode of Interview: Interviews were primarily conducted face-to-face, in quiet, private locations within Nanbeng Village to ensure comfort and minimize distractions.

Interview Questions: Questions were crafted to be open-ended, facilitating rich qualitative data. Sample questions included inquiries about community changes due to ecotourism, policy challenges, sustainability practices, and comparative tourism experiences.

Ethical Considerations: All participants engaged in the study were duly apprised of the research aims, methodologies, possible risks, and advantages prior to their involvement. Informed consent was obtained in writing from all interviewees. Participants were explicitly apprised of their entitlement to disengage from the research at any point without facing any adverse consequences.

Sensitive Topics Management: The researcher proactively identified and mitigated sensitive topics by clearly communicating confidentiality measures, reassuring anonymity, and providing participants with opportunities to skip questions they found uncomfortable. Additionally, the interviewer was trained to manage sensitive responses respectfully and empathetically.

Two principal phases of data gathering transpired between the commencement of October and the middle of November in the year 2022. The initial visit involved informal interviews and observational assessments guided by local village representatives, providing foundational understanding. The second visit, from November 15th to 18th, included structured, recorded interviews that yielded detailed and significant qualitative data in the form of 20 complete interview transcripts.

Throughout the research process, meticulous field notes, photographs, and observational data were systematically documented to enhance data triangulation and deepen contextual understanding.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis technique that involves recognizing, evaluation, and documenting of repeating motifs or trends within the dataset (Nowell et al., 2017). It is a flexible and widely used approach that allows researchers to explore and understand the

underlying meanings and patterns in the data (Nowell et al., 2017; Proudfoot, 2022). The thematic analysis procedure followed a structured, systematic approach as outlined below:

(1) Data Transcription:

- All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to maintain accuracy and ensure all nuances and meanings were captured.

(2) Familiarization:

- The transcripts and observation notes were thoroughly reviewed multiple times to achieve comprehensive familiarity with the data.

(3) Initial Coding:

- Using NVivo qualitative analysis software (version 12), data were initially coded employing both predefined and emergent codes. The predefined codes were informed by existing literature and research objectives to ensure alignment with the theoretical framework of the study.

(4) Predefined Coding Scheme:

Predefined Codes	Description
Natural Resource Protection	Efforts to protect, conserve, and sustainably use local natural resources (forests, water sources, biodiversity).
Cultural Heritage Preservation	Initiatives and strategies aimed at conserving and promoting local culture, traditions, and identity.
Economic Impacts	Effects of ecotourism on local economic development, job creation, income diversification, and livelihood improvements.
Community Participation	Levels and forms of involvement of local residents in ecotourism activities and decision-making processes.
Educational Experiences	Components within ecotourism offerings that aim to educate tourists about environmental sustainability, culture, or community practices.
Sustainability Practices	Activities, practices, or policies adopted to ensure the sustainability of tourism operations.

(5) Identifying and Reviewing Themes:

- Codes were systematically categorized and grouped to identify broader themes. Emergent codes were added iteratively to address new insights and patterns not initially anticipated.
- Themes and sub-themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and external distinctiveness.

(6) Defining and Naming Themes:

- Clear definitions and names were developed for each identified theme to represent accurately and succinctly the essence of each thematic pattern.

(7) Integration with Literature:

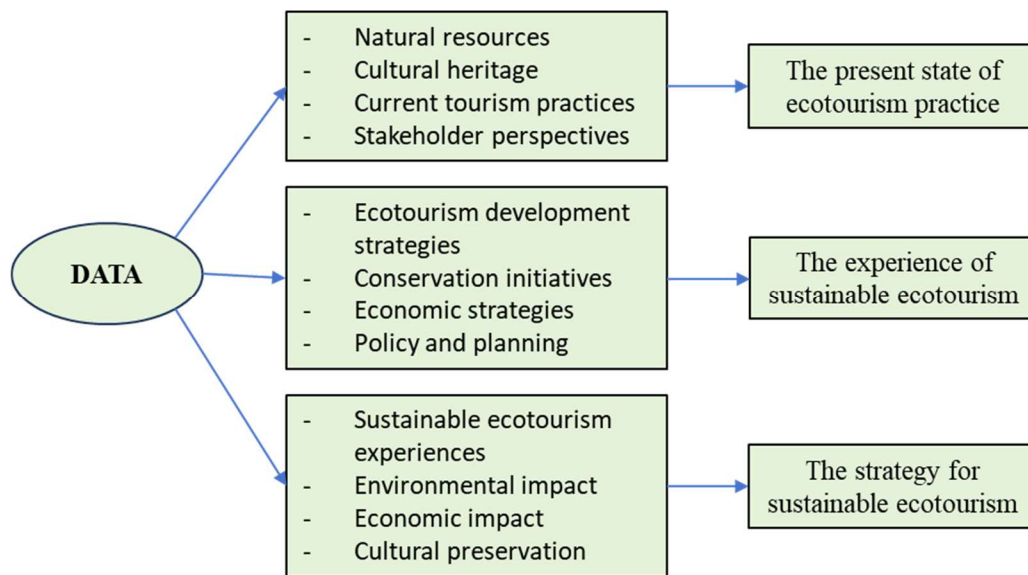
- Final themes were compared and contrasted against existing literature to identify congruencies, gaps, and unique contributions of this study.

(8) Enhancing Analytical Rigor:

- Triangulation: Observational data, interview transcripts, and document analyses were cross-referenced to confirm and validate identified themes.
- Member Checking: Summaries of preliminary findings were shared with participants to verify accuracy and resonance with their expressed views.
- Reflective Journaling: Throughout the data analysis process, reflective notes were kept to document analytical decisions, personal biases, and methodological reflections, thus enhancing transparency and reflexivity.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis was applied to assess the comprehension of the participants, wherein all transcripts were subjected to analysis, resulting in the identification of three fundamental concepts. The research questions encompass three distinct areas, namely "the present state of ecological tourism practice," "the experience of sustainable ecological tourism," and "the strategy for sustainable ecological tourism." It is inevitable that the understanding of participants may exhibit overlaps, either with pre-existing categories or with one another. The findings of the research indicate that the comprehension of certain settings is effectively elucidated, and the concepts are inherently comparative. The results gathered from interviews and on-site observations, as depicted in Figure 2, reveal three prominent themes pertaining to Nanbeng Village. These themes underscore the significance of implementing a sustainable destination management approach in order to foster the growth of a unique and innovative ecotourism experience inside the village. The topics encompassed in this discussion are "the present state of ecological tourism practice", "the experience of sustainable ecological tourism", and "the strategy for sustainable ecological tourism".

Figure 2 Thematic framework

The present state of ecotourism practice

The present state of tourist practices in Nanbeng Village can be concisely outlined based on interviews conducted, focusing on the following aspects:

- Natural resources

Everyone that the researcher interviewed agreed wholeheartedly: Nanbeng Village is truly blessed with nature's bounty. For example, *"The vast stretches of forests are something the village is particularly proud of."* (S1, S2, S5,) Some of interviewees also mentioned about water resources, for instance, *"And it's not just the woods; the gentle streams weaving through the edges of these forests give the village an added touch of natural beauty. It's easy to see why many view it as a perfect spot for ecotourism."* (S8, S9, S16)

- Cultural heritage

When you talk to folks about Nanbeng Village, one thing becomes crystal clear: people are immensely proud of their vibrant ethnic minority culture. Through the interview, it can be found that nestled right on the border and known as a meeting ground for various ethnic groups, the village has become a melting pot of diverse traditions and stories. The majority of participants (90%) emphasized pride in the vibrant ethnic minority culture. For example, *"it's not just a trip - it's a journey into an authentic ethnic minority cultural."* (S15, S17) However, a minority (10%; 2 out of 20) expressed concern about the potential commercialization and dilution of local traditions due to increased tourism. For instance, one local resident mentioned, *"We are*

happy tourists appreciate our culture, but sometimes it feels like our traditions become simplified just to attract more visitors” (S11).

- Current tourism practices

The interview showed that tourism isn't the main breadwinner for the village, but it's definitely growing its share. Most locals see it as a nice addition to their regular earnings. But some village officials are buzzing about the promising rise in ecotourism. For example, *“they're keen to share that it's putting more money in local resident's pockets, but they're also the first to admit they're still getting the hang of it. There's excitement, but also a shared feeling that there's a lot more they could do to boost ecotourism.”* (S1, S4)

- Stakeholder perspectives

The word on the street, especially from travel agency folks, is pretty hopeful. For example, *“they're genuinely impressed with how Nanbeng Village is shaping up as a tourist spot. The allure? It's the winning combo of nature's charm and rich culture.”* (S5, S6, S7) Many believe that with the right push and polish, Nanbeng could be the next big thing in rural tourism.

The experience of sustainable ecotourism

The succinct overview of the sustainable ecotourism experience in Nanbeng Village may be derived from interviews performed, with a specific focus on the following aspects:

- Ecotourism development strategies

A great deal of importance was placed on the ecotourism strategy called "original" in the surrounding area of Nanbeng, apparently by a significant proportion of attendees. For example, *“the key to attracting tourists to our village lies in its 100% preservation of the most original ecological mode. Visitors can experience authentic ethnic minority customs here, and at the same time, the consumption level here is not high, suitable for almost all age groups of tourists.”* (S2, S9, S12) In addition, the regular holding of village meetings helps to align the village's vision with sustainable principles. For example, *“when we have questions about the development of ecotourism, we often communicate with relevant leaders during village meetings.”* (S3, S10, S14) Nevertheless, 10% (2 respondents) voiced concerns regarding the effectiveness of these meetings, noting that they sometimes failed to produce tangible results: *“We meet often, but sometimes these discussions don't lead to clear actions or decisions”* (S13).

- **Conservation initiatives**

One recurring theme in the interview was the village's respect for the natural environment. For example, *“some respondents talked about community led forest clearing operations, tree planting activities, and wildlife conservation plans.”* (S2, S3, S11, S12) At the same time, Nanbeng Village actively establishes a “water source protection zone” to minimize human interference and ensure that the habitat remains pristine and undisturbed. However, a minority of participants (15%; 3 out of 20) highlighted challenges like insufficient funding and limited long-term planning: *“Our intentions are good, but without consistent financial support and proper long-term strategies, our conservation efforts might fall short”* (S7).

- **Economic strategies**

Diversification is the most frequently mentioned method by respondents when discussing the ecological tourism economy in Nanbeng. The village has successfully combined traditional agriculture with ecotourism related enterprises, ensuring multiple sources of income for local people. For example, *“some respondents emphasized that the village values training programs to provide locals with skills to enter the ecotourism market, from tour guides to making handicraft souvenirs.”* (S1, S2, S5, S6)

- **Policy and planning**

Nanbeng Village attaches great importance to policies and planning for the development of ecotourism. On the one hand, the local government has worked together with external experts to create policies that give importance to sustainability. On the other hand, individuals are also starting to recognize the possible downsides of excessive tourism. Therefore, for instance, *“some respondents mentioned the policy of limiting the number of tourists during peak seasons to ensure that the ecology and culture of the village are not overwhelmed.”* (S1, S2, S3, S4) Nonetheless, a critical minority (20%; 4 respondents) argued that policy enforcement lacked rigor and consistency: *“We have excellent policies on paper, but implementation and enforcement are often inconsistent”* (S4, S10).

The strategy for sustainable ecotourism

A concise summary of Nanbeng Village's strategy for sustainable ecotourism may be gleaned from interviews, with a focus on the following elements in particular:

- **Sustainable ecotourism experiences**

Entering Nanbeng, it is obvious that this village is not just a destination, but an experience. For example, *“the locals shared touching stories of travelers immersing themselves in the daily*

rhythm of the village, whether it's participating in traditional dances, tasting homely cuisine, or attending ancient agricultural ceremonies.” (S18, S19, S20) These are not just carefully planned experiences, but real moments of life heading Nanbeng, welcoming visitors to make their journey both authentic and sustainable.

- **Environmental impact**

The lush mountains and rivers and primitive streams running Nanbeng are not only the background, but also the lifeblood of the community. For example, *“respondents often express their deep-seated admiration for nature. This sentiment is translated into feasible measures, from community led afforestation to strict waste management agreements, to ensure minimal ecological footprint.” (S10, S13)* The village consciously strives to reduce its carbon footprint, showcasing its proactive environmental management methods, whether through promoting local agricultural products or encouraging sustainable modes of transportation such as cycling. However, 10% (2 local residents) critiqued the insufficient public awareness and participation in waste reduction programs: *“We have waste management strategies, but community involvement needs significant improvement” (S9).*

- **Economic impact**

At the intersection of tradition and modernity, the ecological tourism industry in Nanbeng has sparked economic revival. The locals talked about untapped potential that is now being utilized, for example, *“artisans searching for new markets for their crafts, farmers hosting experiences from farms to dining tables, and young entrepreneurs establishing environmentally friendly homestays.” (S8, S9)* Although the influx of tourists undoubtedly brought prosperity, the focus of the community remains on fair wealth distribution and ensuring that economic benefits permeate every household. There are 4 respondents (20%) warned about unequal economic benefits, noting disparities between villagers directly involved in tourism and those who were not: *“While some benefit significantly, others see little change, potentially increasing inequality in the village” (S12, S14).*

- **Cultural preservation**

In every conversation, one can feel the rhythm of the heart of Nanpeng culture. As this village opens its doors to the world, people consciously strive to ensure that their cultural tapestry is not diluted. Cultural protection is the most important aspect, for example, *“from establishing a local museum to showcase its heritage, to organizing seminars to educate tourists about the village's folklore, traditions, and crafts.” (S1, S12, S17, S18)* Elderly people in the community

particularly emphasize their role as cultural guardians, passing on stories, songs, and skills to the younger generation to ensure the perpetuation of their rich heritage.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to investigate the utilization of a sustainable strategy to destination management in order to foster the development of innovative ecotourism experiences in Nanbeng Village, located in China. This discourse is centered on the findings of the present study in order to address the three research inquiries.

RQ 1 What are the existing ecotourism practices in Nanbeng Village, and how have they impacted the local environment and community?

Ecotourism in Nanbeng Village and its consequences on the local ecology and people were the study's main focus. When considered on the basis of the relevant literature, the results highlight several debate topics.

Ecotourism in Nanbeng Village leverages abundant forest resources and interconnecting streams to attract ecotourists, aligning with the perspective that natural areas must be protected and sustainably managed (Lee & Jan, 2017). The village's rich cultural diversity also significantly enhances its ecotourism appeal, providing authentic ethnic minority experiences. Although tourism currently contributes modestly to the village's income, stakeholders recognize its growing economic importance and the need for structured development (Siregar et al., 2022). Stakeholders remain optimistic about ecotourism's potential to sustainably uplift the local economy and environment (Khan et al., 2020). However, the findings underscore the necessity for addressing potential challenges such as infrastructure development and effective stakeholder training to realize this potential fully.

Due to its abundant natural resources and rich cultural variety, Nanbeng Village is in the forefront of ecotourism for complete development. Ecotourism benefits the ecology and local populations, according to literature. This matches Nanbeng's practices and stakeholders' perceptions, and it shows the village's ecotourism-driven growth. To preserve and enjoy its natural and cultural resources, the town must be adaptable and open to new ideas.

RQ 2 What are the potential innovative ecotourism experiences that can be developed in Nanbeng Village, emphasizing sustainability, immersion, and education?

In addressing the research question, the findings from Nanbeng Village and the broader literature can be synthesized as follows:

Nanbeng Village emphasizes authenticity, actively preserving traditional cultural practices. Stakeholders prioritize maintaining the village's "original" ecological state, countering

potential issues of commercialization identified by Dunets et al. (2019). Conservation initiatives, including forest management and water source protection, could become immersive learning experiences, aligning with Tisdell and Wilson (2005) advocacy for environmental education. Economically, integrating traditional agriculture with ecotourism diversifies income sources and ensures authentic tourist experiences, echoing sustainable tourism practices outlined by Cater and Cater (2007).

The village's proactive management of tourism flows through effective policy planning, including peak season tourist limits, addresses common tourism challenges identified by Che (2002) and Butarbutar and Soemarno (2013). Given Nanbeng Village's position in a border region, there exists potential for innovative cross-border ecotourism experiences. Drawing insights from the literature, such collaborations could lead to the development of unique cross-border tourism products, combining the natural and cultural potential of multiple regions (Nestoroska, 2022; Prokkola, 2010). Yet, enhancing the consistency and effectiveness of policy implementation and stakeholder cooperation remains essential for sustainable success.

RQ 3 How can the proposed sustainable ecotourism strategies contribute to the economic upliftment of Nanbeng Village while ensuring the conservation of its natural and cultural resources?

The linchpin of sustainable ecotourism lies in striking a delicate balance between economic development and the conservation of natural and cultural resources. The unfolding story of Nanbeng Village exemplifies the power of locally driven, sustainable ecotourism strategies in achieving this equilibrium.

Nanbeng Village exemplifies the balance between economic development and conservation through sustainable ecotourism. The authentic tourism experiences provided, such as participation in local traditions and cuisines, align with Beaumont (2011) innovative marketing principles, enhancing tourist appreciation for sustainability. Proactive environmental strategies, including afforestation and waste management, significantly reduce ecological impacts, meeting sustainability criteria (Beaumont, 2011). Economic rejuvenation is evident through diversified local incomes and equitable wealth distribution, reflecting community-based ecotourism models advocated by Nugeraha et al. (2022). The village's cultural preservation efforts—museums, educational seminars, and elder-led cultural transmission—reflect community engagement priorities (Moswete et al., 2020). Stakeholder involvement has been integral, highlighting the need for authentic participation and empowerment in successful ecotourism development (Lalicic & Weber-Sabil, 2022; Salman, Jaafar, & Mohamad, 2021; Wang et al., 2021). Nonetheless, addressing operational challenges, such as stakeholder

engagement consistency and institutional limitations, remains critical for enduring success (Kenawy et al., 2017)

In summation, Nanbeng Village's sustainable ecotourism strategies, deeply rooted in community engagement and environmental conservation, offer a promising blueprint for other regions. By intertwining tradition with modernity, economic development with conservation, and ensuring genuine stakeholder engagement, the village not only addresses its unique challenges but also contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable ecotourism. Collaborate with results and discussion, a potential model for sustainable tourism development that can be adopted by similar communities worldwide was proposed.

Potential Model for Sustainable Tourism Development

This model emphasizes authenticity, conservation, community engagement, and stakeholder collaboration, reflecting both theoretical foundations and practical considerations identified in this research (Figure 3).

1. Foundation of the Model: Authenticity, Conservation, and Community Engagement

(1) Authenticity:

- **Cultural Heritage:** Integrate genuine local customs, narratives, and traditions into tourism activities, protecting cultural authenticity from commercialization.
- **Local Experiences:** Encourage visitor participation in daily community life, such as traditional dances, cooking, and farming, fostering deeper cultural connections.

(2) Conservation:

- **Environmental Stewardship:** Promote community-driven conservation projects like forest management, tree planting, and water source protection, offering tourists interactive experiences.
- **Sustainable Practices:** Implement eco-friendly initiatives including sustainable transportation, waste management, and local agricultural use to reduce environmental impacts.

(3) Community Engagement:

- **Economic Inclusivity:** Blend traditional agriculture and ecotourism, providing training in tourism-related skills like guiding and handicraft production to diversify local incomes.

- Stakeholder Collaboration: Foster cooperation between local communities, government entities, and experts through regular community meetings, ensuring aligned and sustainable ecotourism development.

2. Key Elements of the Model

(1) Cultural Preservation:

- Establish local museums and cultural centers to exhibit heritage.
- Conduct educational seminars about folklore and traditions, involving elders in cultural education.

(2) Environmental Conservation:

- Develop conservation projects and protected ecological zones, encouraging tourist participation through activities like guided nature walks and wildlife tours.

(3) Economic Development:

- Support eco-friendly homestays and artisan markets, ensuring equitable distribution of tourism-generated revenues.

(4) Policy and Planning:

- Collaborate with policymakers and specialists to create sustainable tourism guidelines.
- Manage visitor numbers during peak seasons to minimize environmental impact.

3. Operationalizing the Model

(1) Capacity Building:

- Provide training for residents in hospitality, guiding, and sustainable tourism practices.
- Develop curricula focused on environmental stewardship and cultural appreciation for youth.

(2) Marketing and Communication:

- Utilize targeted marketing highlighting authenticity and ecological responsibility, leveraging digital platforms to engage broader audiences.

(3) Monitoring and Evaluation:

- Establish metrics to assess tourism impacts, regularly adjusting strategies based on feedback and research.

4. Global Adoption Potential

(1) Adaptability:

- Easily tailored to diverse global communities with rich cultural and natural resources.

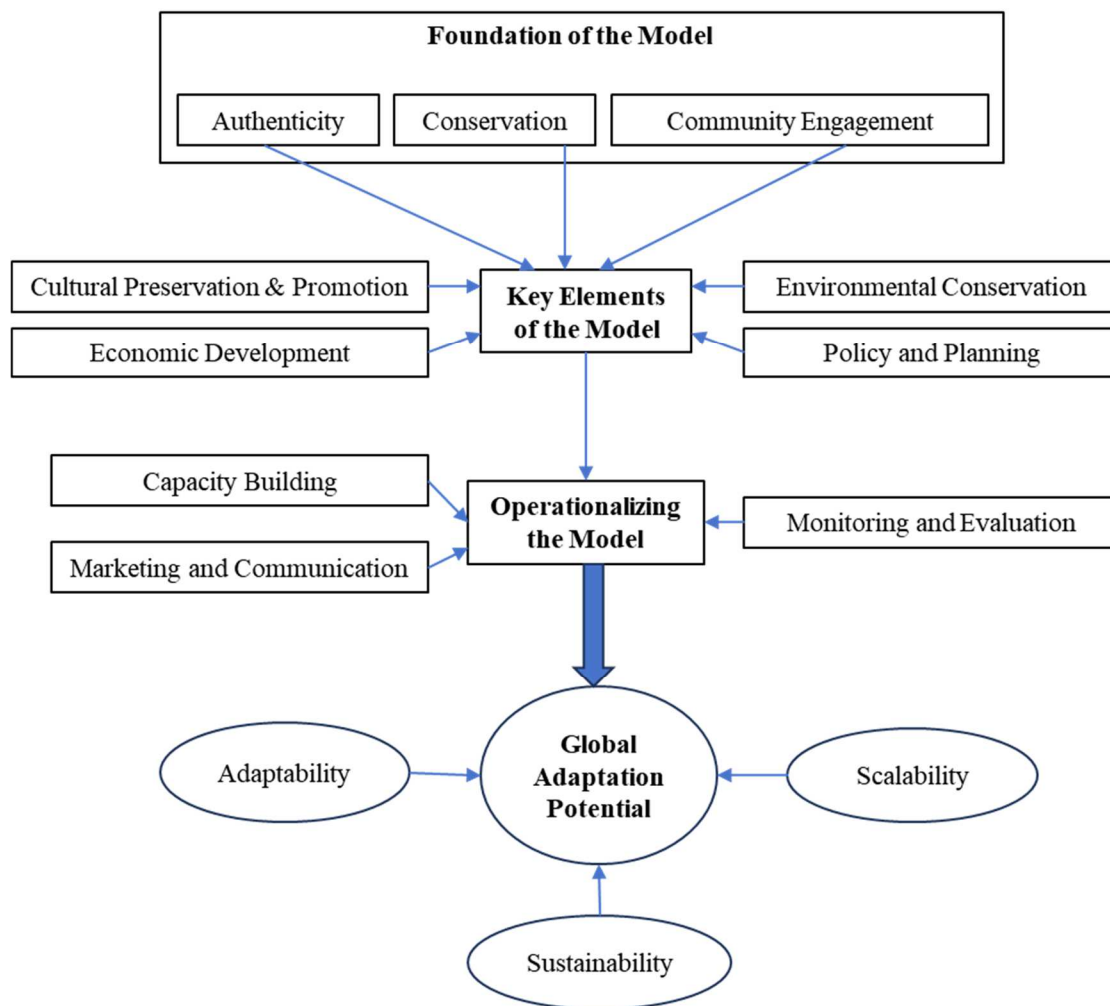
(2) Scalability:

- Begin with small pilots and expand based on effectiveness, encouraging cross-regional collaborations.

(3) Sustainability:

- Ensure longevity by centering conservation and cultural preservation within tourism development, engaging diverse stakeholders for robust and sustainable outcomes.

Figure 3 Potential Model for Sustainable Tourism Development



Global Adoption Potential

The proposed sustainable ecotourism model demonstrates substantial global adaptability, primarily due to its integration of universal sustainability principles and flexible implementation strategies. Empirical evidence from Nanbeng Village illustrates how authentic cultural experiences, rigorous environmental stewardship, diversified economic strategies, and proactive stakeholder engagement collectively promote balanced, sustainable development. This aligns theoretically with Xu et al. (2023) and Pavlidis et al. (2022), who underscore the universality of sustainability principles applicable across diverse geographical and cultural contexts. Additionally, the success of similar strategies in border regions and protected areas globally, as documented by Navrátil et al. (2015), Prokkola (2010), and Sobhani et al. (2023), provides empirical validation for the model's broader applicability. For instance, collaborative conservation projects and culturally immersive tourism products have proven effective across different socio-cultural environments, suggesting that the principles applied successfully in Nanbeng Village can be tailored to comparable communities worldwide. Moreover, as highlighted by Mingjing (2024), addressing local community dynamics through careful stakeholder management enhances the adaptability and success rate of ecotourism initiatives across diverse regions. Therefore, by grounding this model in universally applicable sustainability frameworks and empirical evidence from varied international contexts, this research substantiates its practical relevance and adaptability to global communities seeking sustainable tourism development solutions.

CONCLUSION

Nanbeng Village stands as a testament to the transformative power of sustainable destination management through the lens of creative ecotourism. By weaving together authentic local experiences with a profound commitment to ecological conservation, the village has pioneered a model that encapsulates both economic rejuvenation and preservation of its unique cultural and natural tapestry. Drawing inspiration from modern strategies, such as market segmentation, community-based ecotourism models, and sustainability criteria, Nanbeng showcases how destinations can thrive without compromising their core values. Stakeholder engagement remains at the heart of Nanbeng's success, ensuring an alignment of interests and fostering a genuine sense of communal ownership. Through this harmonized approach, Nanbeng Village offers a compelling blueprint for other destinations aspiring to merge creativity with sustainability in ecotourism, effectively illustrating that economic progress and preservation are

not mutually exclusive but can coexist symbiotically in the realm of modern tourism management.

Limitations of the Study

This investigation, while providing insightful findings, is not without its limitations. One potential limitation is that the study may have overlooked some viewpoints within Nanbeng Village and its stakeholders due to its dependence on qualitative approaches. Certain of these methods were outdoor observations as well as discussions with 20 people that were only informally structured. The scope of participants, although diverse, may not fully represent the broader community's views or the variety of tourists visiting the area. Furthermore, the exclusive emphasis on Nanbeng Village, a distinctive location with notable cultural and environmental characteristics, would restrict the applicability of the results to different settings or areas. The study's timeframe limits the evaluation of the long-term effects of ecotourism methods on economic growth and resource protection.

Implications

For Nanbeng Village: The findings underscore the importance of community engagement and the development of ecotourism experiences that align with local values and conservation goals. Implementing the study's recommendations could enhance Nanbeng's position as a leader in sustainable ecotourism, fostering economic growth while safeguarding its environmental and cultural assets.

For China: This study contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable tourism in China, offering a case study that can inform national policy and planning. This statement highlights the ability of rural communities to utilize their natural and cultural resources to promote economic advancement, aligning with China's goals of rejuvenating rural regions and encouraging sustainable development.

For Global Society: The research provides a model of sustainable ecotourism that can be adapted by similar communities worldwide. It reinforces the notion that sustainable practices are crucial for the long-term viability of tourism destinations, offering insights into balancing economic development with conservation efforts. The study advocates for increased global cooperation in sharing best practices and resources to support sustainable tourism in rural and border regions.

Future Study Directions

Future research should consider expanding the methodological approach to include quantitative data, offering a more comprehensive understanding of ecotourism impacts. Research attempts ought to investigate a more extensive and diversified group of individuals involved in sustainable tourism, such as overseas visitors, in order to obtain more comprehensive understandings of worldwide perspectives on sustainable tourism practices. Comparative studies with other villages or regions employing different ecotourism strategies would provide valuable benchmarks and lessons. In addition, in order to ascertain the financial and lasting sustainability of ecotourism projects, longitudinal studies are crucial. Additionally, research focusing on the integration of digital technologies in promoting and managing ecotourism experiences could offer innovative pathways for sustainable tourism development. To get substantial insights into the variables that either encourage or inhibit the efficacy of these activities, it would be useful to research the impact of policies and government subsidies on the development of sustainable ecotourism practices.

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