

## **PROBLEMS OF DEVELOPMENT OF ECOLOGICAL TOURISM IN PROTECTED AREAS OF GEORGIA**

*Tourism, along with agriculture, represents an industry with the highest potential for the development of Georgia's economy. One of the promising directions for the economic growth of Georgia's regions is the development of ecotourism. Several problems have been identified that hinder the further development of ecological tourism in Georgia's protected areas. Scientific and methodological recommendations have been developed to assist in the formation and development of the ecotourism product market, as well as in solving the problems that hinder the development of this type of tourism in Georgia.*

**Keywords:** *Georgia, Ecotourism, Regions, Protected Areas.*

*Туризм, поряд із сільським господарством, є галуззю з найбільшим потенціалом для розвитку економіки Грузії. Одним із перспективних напрямів економічного зростання регіонів Грузії є розвиток екотуризму. Було виявлено кілька проблем, які перешкоджають подальшому розвитку екологічного туризму в заповідних територіях Грузії. Розроблено науково-методичні рекомендації, які сприятимуть формуванню та розвитку ринку екотуристичного продукту, а також вирішенню проблем, які перешкоджають розвитку цього виду туризму в Грузії.*

**Ключові слова:** *Грузія, екотуризм, регіони, природоохоронні території.*

The peculiarity of the development of ecotourism in Georgia is determined by the priority of this direction in the development of domestic and inbound tourism in the country. In this regard, the tourist potential of Georgia has been analyzed, with particular attention given to: analysis of offerings in the tourism market, the possibility of using ecological resources for tourism development in natural protected areas. The aim of the research is to identify existing problems in the development of ecotourism in specially protected natural areas in Georgia and to develop methodological recommendations for their elimination.

During the research, methodological and regulatory materials of the National Tourism Agency of Georgia were used, as well as methods of economic analysis, synthesis, and analysis, along with statistical methods. Official statistical materials were used for quantitative assessments, based on which a comparative analysis was conducted between analytical and statistical estimates.

In recent years, tourism in Georgia has been one of the most important sectors of economy, generating about 11.5% of the country's GDP. In 2019 (the most successful year in the development of international tourism in decades), the total number of visitors reached 9,258.0 thousand people, which is 7.8% more than the corresponding period of the previous year. During the same period, the revenue from

Georgia's tourism industry exceeded \$3.3 billion [1. p. 18].

As for the year 2020, due to the well-known reasons (the year of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic), compared to 2019, the indicators sharply declined both in the number of international arrivals (-6,212.4 thousand people, or 80.5%) and the total revenue from international tourism (-\$2,727.0 million, or 83.5%). The coronavirus has fundamentally changed the global agenda. In 2020, as a result of the worldwide pandemic, the tourism industry in Georgia, like in the rest of the world, experienced an unprecedented contraction. The number of visits by international travelers amounted to 1,513.4 thousand people (-80.5%), and the revenue from international tourism was only \$541.7 million (-83.5%). Consequently, the share of tourism in the country's GDP decreased from 8.4% to 5.9% {1, p. 27}.

However, in nature, everything has its beginning and its end. In the modern world, after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, in places of mass gathering of tourists, signs of social distancing and calculation of the maximum number of tourists are often observed. Over time, this may become a way of life, as tourism already required such restrictions.

People have begun to search for places where they will feel safe, and instead of crowded places, they prefer to visit and relax in locations where they will have the opportunity for social distancing, feeling safe and protected. At the same time, the tourism sector of Georgia is faced with the task of more actively developing eco and agro-tourism, which implies the synergy of Agriculture and tourism, which in turn implies the protection of natural resources. With the development of this type of tourism, the local population will have the opportunity to earn additional income from tourism development.

Today, Georgia is faced with the necessity of clearly defining priority directions for regional development, which can play a role as a locomotive towards sustainable and stable development of the regions. Along with this, the development of other new industries seems possible, which will provide a positive multiplier effect at the regional level. One of the promising directions for the economic growth of Georgia's regions is the development of ecotourism [2, p. 491].

According to the criteria of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), as of 2023, Georgia has 100 protected areas of six different categories, including: 14 state reserves, 14 national parks, 40 natural monuments, 26 reserves, 5 protected landscapes, and one area of multiple use. As of 2023, the total area of protected territories amounts to 912,862 hectares, which is approximately 13% of the entire territory of Georgia.

Currently, in Georgia, we practically have only ecotourism resources, but we almost do not have a real tourism product as a marketable commodity with corresponding characteristics. At the same

time, we should not forget that ecotourism, on the one hand, creates new segments of the tourism market, developing the tourism industry, and on the other hand, ecotourism can become an important factor in the development of Georgia's agriculture. When considering these two aspects of ecotourism, we should remember that they represent a systemic unity. In this case, such a division is conditional - both systemic components are equally important for its development. Its competitiveness is also significant. This contributes to increasing the efficiency of both ecotourism and the economy of Georgia as a whole.

Based on the above, ecotourism can be considered as one of the priority directions in the socio-economic development of the country, as it can provide quite high profits while preserving environmental safety, i.e., it meets the conditions of sustainable development.

Based on the analysis of the development of ecotourism, we can conclude that ecotourism needs support at the state and regional levels. This view is supported by the «Georgia Ecotourism Strategy for 2020-2030,» developed jointly by the Agency of Protected Areas of Georgia, the Austrian Development Agency (ADA), and the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ) [4, p. 23], which notes that the development of ecotourism benefits local communities and makes a significant contribution to the country's economic well-being. At the same time, it ensures the preservation of natural and cultural heritage and increases environmental awareness among tourists and local residents.

At the same time, it should be noted that the development of ecotourism in Georgia is hindered by the impact of certain factors: imperfect legislation; unresolved legal status of ecotourism (laws and regulations are incomplete); clarification of the concept of ecotourism development is needed; there is a lack of interest in implementing mechanisms of economic cooperation and management; municipal authorities do not sufficiently utilize their managerial functions, which determine the policy of municipal entities in the tourism sphere, their role in organizing and regulating tourism development [6, pp. 57-66].

**Conclusions.** Based on the analysis of ecotourism as a sector of the modern tourism industry, we can conclude that ecotourism primarily needs support at the regional level. In organizing the ecotourism sector, regional associations of the tourism business should play the main role.

Regional associations of the tourism business, together with local administrations, regional funds, employment centers, and other interested organizations, should oversee the formation of ecotourism infrastructure on-site. The mechanism for on-site formation should be based on a state program to support the development of ecotourism, which should take into account: improving the regulatory framework; development and methodological support of information networks;

formation of financial infrastructure involving funds, special banks, insurance, and investment institutions; development of a network of production-technological and socio-business centers, business incubators, and technoparks.

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