Sustainable Ethical Tourism (SET) And Engagement Of Rural Communities In Hunan Province China

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Abstract
The travel and tourism industry are often regarded as a promising business opportunity due to its rapid growth worldwide. Employment expansion, a broader economic foundation, population increase, social progress, and a renaissance in traditional arts are just some of the possible benefits of rural tourism in China. With unemployment in Hunan Province at an unprecedented level, their rural tourism industry is one area should be significantly considered. The Chinese government plan for promoting tourism may benefit from a greater responsibility for this industry. In order for tourism to play a significant role in China economic growth, the government needs to have effective and efficient governance of the environment. It is also important to raise awareness of the mindfulness issue so that sustainable tourism may place a stronger focus on mindfulness-based tourism products. This study highlights rural tourism, different types of rural tourism, and the positive effects rural tourism may have on local economies and national economic growth in the context of China 14th Five-Year Plan for 2021-2025 where China focuses on the effort to "open up the countryside," investing in rural regions with distinctive geographical or cultural characteristics in order to attract more tourists. The data and analysis presented in this paper are the result of an extensive literature research methodology that involved the use of an extensive number of published articles on the issue of rural tourism. The investigation focused on the interpretivist epistemology. In this study, the researcher discusses the issue in Hunan Province and offers a summary and assessment of its significance. The paper provides guidelines for achieving sustainable tourist growth in an ethical manner.

Keywords: Rural tourism, Sustainable Ethical Tourism (SET), sustainability, environmental management, Hunan Province.
Introduction

The term "sustainable ethical tourism" (SET) refers to an umbrella concept that includes various tourist strategies that have an emphasis on these three key principles. The goal of SET is to increase tourism's beneficial economic and social effects while decreasing its negative environmental and cultural ones. The purpose of addressing SET and engaging rural communities, whether in Hunan or elsewhere, is to include locals, especially those living in rural areas, in the planning and implementation of tourist attractions and amenities. To ensure that tourist operations are culturally sensitive and environmentally sustainable, this might include including local populations in decision-making processes and providing them with economic rewards. The province of Hunan in China, renowned for its abundant cultural legacy and breath-taking natural scenery, stands to gain significant advantages from the implementation of Science, Engineering, and Technology (SET). The objective of this initiative is to include rural communities in Hunan province in the development and promotion of sustainable and ethical tourism practises.

Long-standing obstacles indicate these communities' attempts at revitalization. Throughout history, individuals residing in rural areas have expressed a strong desire for a more lucrative urban lifestyle, leading many to abandon their rural origins in pursuit of enhanced prospects. During the period spanning the 1980s and 1990s, a significant demographic shift occurred in China, with around 260 million individuals relocating from their rural hometowns to prominent metropolitan centres. Undoubtedly, urban centres surpass rural villages in terms of the various incentives they provide, such as advanced technology, promising employment possibilities, access to quality education, a wide range of services, and efficient transportation systems.

However, in the current context of living in a highly competitive and demanding metropolitan setting, individuals residing in China's cities have started to experience a strong desire for the simple pleasure of life, leading to a significant number of them to return to their rural origins. Rural tourism has gained significant popularity across various platforms such as social media and travel advisory boards. The annual growth rate of tourists visiting rural regions has experienced a substantial increase of 55.5 percent. Furthermore, in the year 2021, the generated income witnessed a notable surge of 48 percent, reaching a total of $551 billion (Ding & Gilligan, 2023). The 14th Five-Year Plan for 2021-2025, designed by the national government, places emphasis on rural tourism by prioritising the expansion of rural areas and allocating resources towards the development of regions characterised by distinctive geographical and ethnic attributes. Consistent with the earlier endeavours of the administration to foster "charming villages" in rural areas, the proposal
places additional significance on the necessity of expanding cultural and recreational pursuits.

The tragedy of anti-commons, resulting from the underuse of public resources and an inadequate supply of public welfare in rural tourist development, is becoming increasingly apparent in a number of Chinese villages that have been split as a result of the excessive dissemination of property rights (Wei & Hu, 2022). The concept of the "tragedy of anti-commons," which refers to the unfortunate challenges arising from the expensive nature of environmental development, waste generation, and depletion of rural resources. These challenges stem from the inherent conflict between the institutional framework and the various stakeholders involved in the construction of recreational and tourism facilities in certain Chinese villages.

**Literature Review**

**Rural tourism**

The main characteristics of rural tourism include wide-open spaces, very little tourist development, and familiarity with a wide variety of attractions and activities that take place in rural regions. According to Roberts & Hall (2001), agricultural and eco-touristic natural areas provide tourists with the chance to directly engage in immersive experiences. According to Lane (1994), rural tourism may be defined as a type of tourism that takes place in rural regions, characterised by the diverse and intricate dynamics of the rural environment, economics, history, and geographical position. The comprehensive understanding of rural tourism should encompass the preservation and presentation of the historical aspects of rural areas, including rural customs, folklore, local and family traditions, as well as the values and beliefs that constitute a shared legacy (Wang et al., 2013). Two additional focal points emerged in the realm of rural tourism research. Firstly, it was determined that rural tourism need to prioritise sustainable activities. Secondly, rural tourism should be regarded as a catalyst for rural development (Sharpley & Roberts, 2004).

The China government established the original definition of poverty or the poverty line by examining the household spending patterns of rural populations. The benchmark was established in 1985 with an annual per capita income of 206 RMB, which corresponded to an annual per capita income of 625 RMB in 2000. According to the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development (2006), there was a significant reduction in the officially recognised poverty population in China, down from 250 million individuals in 1978 to 30 million individuals in 2000 (Gao et al., 2009). In the case of Suixiang Ming Village in Guizhou province, China, the construction team initiated a competition of interests with the local farmers. This resulted in a significant increase in both the time and cost of building, beyond the intended value. In a same vein, the Tangshan Village located in Guizhou province had initially intended to undertake tourist development. However, the developers ultimately
decided to withdraw their financial investment due to the increased land transfer price resulting from competitive bidding among farmers. Hence, it is imperative to conduct an analysis of the factors that contribute to the occurrence of the anti-commons tragedy in the context of rural tourist growth, and to investigate viable strategies for mitigating its effects (Wei & Hu, 2022).

The Standards policy system holds significant importance in the context of rural tourist development in China. The evaluation encompasses several aspects, namely: tourist arrivals and economic returns, social benefits, ecological and environmental benefits, tourism items, infrastructure, management, operation, safety, accessibility, and development potential. Rural tourist attractions or facilities have the opportunity to conduct a self-assessment based on certain criteria in order to enhance their products or services as needed. After attaining the minimum scores, individuals have the opportunity to submit an application to the provincial tourist authority.

Challenges of implementation Sustainable Ethical Tourism (SET) in China

The challenges is ensuring that the framework is consistent with the framework of China 14th Five-Year Plan for 2021-2025, which has been adopted and approved. It is well-known that STI drives the technologies that will play a central role in the future growth of a country's economy. Although China has made strides in launching the projects through the introduction of a comprehensive and practical strategy, the country still has some obstacles that need to be addressed. With the China 14th Five-Year Plan for 2021-2025 framework, scientific progress is guaranteed to parallel the country's economic growth.

The leaders have shown that China has made the shift from capacity building to becoming an innovation-driven nation. However, there are also lagging sectors in the country, and they tend to be in the areas of basic necessities like clothes, housing, and food. Moreover, limitation the number of guests has been challenging. The county and prefecture governments appear to be the cause of the problem, given tourism is the primary economic driver in the area. Getting more people to visit your site implies more money in your pocket and it is hard to turn away approaching tourists (Gu et al., 2013). Current congestion will persist unless a system is put in place to regulate visitor numbers in advance.

Tourism development in Hunan

Western Hunan is an underdeveloped area with a diverse population and uneven economic, social, and environmental growth. The area is growing increasingly popular among foreign visitors due to its abundance of tourist attractions and facilities. The ecology is suffering from tourism's fast growth. Meanwhile, the country's underdeveloped economy provides little support for the growth of the tourist industry. All of these
challenges are the direct result of flaws in the sustainable growth of regional tourism and must be addressed for western Hunan’s economy, environment, and tourism to progress in tandem (Yuan et al., 2014). In the context of this study, Western Hunan pertains to the western area of Hunan Province, encompassing Zhangjiajie City, Huaihua City, and Xiangxi Independent Area. The geographical area under question corresponds to the western regions of Guizhou Province and Chongqing City. Hubei Province serves as the northern border of the region. In the southern direction, there exists a connection with the Guangxi Autonomous Region. In the eastern direction, it shares boundaries with Changde City, Yiyang City, Loudi City, and Shaoyang City, all of which are located in Hunan Province.

The geographical area under consideration has a high concentration of interconnected rivers, forming an extensive network, and possesses abundant water resources derived from these rivers. Nevertheless, there are substantial seasonal fluctuations in the volume of river water, characterised by increased precipitation during the spring and summer months, which are commonly referred to as the rainy season, and decreased precipitation during the autumn and winter months, known as the dry season (Yuan et al., 2014). Based on the general classification system of vegetation, the forest ecosystem in the Xiangxi area primarily comprises various types of vegetation, including warm evergreen coniferous forest, deciduous broadleaf forest, evergreen and broad-leaved forest, warm shrubs, evergreen leather leaf brush, and herbaceous swamp.

Methodology

This study employed a questionnaire, in-depth interviews, and field observations, this case study reproduces the methodology of a framework for revitalising rural regions based on characteristics of rural economic performance. Purposive sampling is used, with household heads participating in the survey; quantitative and qualitative research methodologies are employed to gather perspectives on variations in rural economic performance and social distinction. Questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, and informal observations were all employed in this study. Data and information about rural households and their perspectives on the five capitals in China involved in this study, which examined the external and internal variables affecting rural areas' economic performance and the socioeconomic differentiation of rural households, were gathered primarily through the use of a questionnaire form given during a field survey. Furthermore, information on the physical development of the areas around the chosen village, as it involves to the five areas in Hunan Province that impacted the economic performance of the villages and their people, is obtained through field observations. Moreover, this study also employed in-depth interviews to obtain information about the backgrounds of successful and unsuccessful rural households.
Table 1.1 Evaluation process on the economic performance of rural areas.

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<th>Analysis</th>
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| Factors of local variations in rural development | Area 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 | Rural area (Mixed-methods)  
- Data collecting from all village heads in a subset of rural areas in Hunan where the population density is between 0 and 150 persons per square kilometre.  
- Information is gathered by a field questionnaire of the physical features of the village and observation of residents' homes. |
| Factors in rural families' (household) socioeconomic status | Area 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 | Household level  
- To collect information about the income levels of village residents, a questionnaire given to both high- and low-income families.  
- Information is gathered through in-depth interviews with a random sample of households in order to provide information on the transformation and change (dynamic) process. |

Findings

The Social Credit System (SET) in province such as as Hunan may make a significant contribution to:

Enhanced socio-economic conditions for local populations

Improving local peoples' standard of living is essential to ensuring their survival and the long-term viability of their unique cultures, customs, and ecosystems. It entails helping indigenous communities have a better quality of life, giving everyone a fair shot, and developing their social and economic infrastructure. By the late 1990s, researchers started focusing on the unique challenges encountered by rural communities in their efforts to revive their economic performance. Multiple challenges, including those connected to the five forms of capital such as economic, human, social, cultural, and environmental have been the focus of recent studies on the factors that determine rural economic performance across the world as emphasised by Rashid et al. (2019). Terluin (2003) emphasised on the pattern-matching on variables of rural economic
performance to explain that population dynamics, territory dynamics, and the globalisation process are the primary causes of the disparities in economic performance across rural regions. There has been a paradigm change in the continuation of Terluin's work towards the incorporation of the five forms of capital such as monetary, human, social, cultural, and ecological (Courtney & Moseley, 2008).

The preservation and augmentation of cultural and natural heritage

There has been a notable rise in consciousness regarding sustainability and ethical aspects within the tourist industry. One of the significant advantages of the SET approach is in its commitment to upholding and honouring local cultures and traditions. By generating awareness and providing financial support for cultural heritage initiatives, SET plays a significant role in the preservation and revitalization of these traditional elements. The promotion of cross-cultural understanding facilitates the interaction between visitors and local communities, therefore fostering mutual comprehension, tolerance, and respect among diverse cultural groups. In 2012, UNESCO initiated the natural and cultural treasures of a country are the exceptional elements of its landscape and the results of its people’s ingenuity and innovation. Both serve as testaments to cultural traditions, advance contemporary civilization, and generate revenue from tourists (Qu et al., 2014). There has long been a tendency towards "valuing the ancient over the modern" in terms of how society assess the worth of historical and cultural assets under the purview of the Cultural Relics Protection Law's policy structure (Sun et al., 2023). China's strategy for protecting and expanding its cultural and natural legacy is comprehensive, encompassing legislation, conservation projects, community participation, local education, and international partnerships. China's national identity and pride may flourish, and the country can make strides towards sustainable development, through appreciating and investing in its rich and diverse cultural heritage as well as its historical and ecological legacy.

Enhanced resilience of regional economies and ecological systems

China is widely recognised as being among the most environmentally polluted nations on Earth. It ranks as the second most polluted nation globally, behind the United States. The pollution in China may be attributed to the exploitation of natural resources and the significant contribution of many sectors to the country’s economy. This scenario has severe implications for both human health and the natural environment.

China has emerged as a significant tourist destination, ranking fifth globally in terms of foreign tourism arrivals as of 2005. The tourist industry has been identified as a significant contributor to environmental pollution in several nations. China has recognised the imperative to mitigate its adverse environmental effects and has been making efforts to safeguard the environment since the 1980s. In order to mitigate pollution levels, China must establish a framework for sustainable tourism.
In addition, it is important to note that tourism is a significant economic driver. Consequently, China, like many other nations, endeavours to implement strategies aimed at attracting tourists. The nation is renowned for its establishment of remarkable infrastructure and its concerted efforts to enhance the overall comfort and satisfaction of tourists in every location. Ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of the implementation of SET in Hunan or any other geographical area necessitates the imperative inclusion of continuous engagement and collaboration with local populations, stakeholders, and experts.

Travellers and tourism providers have the potential to facilitate the achievement of immediate and tangible positive outcomes in terms of sustainability within the travel sector. However, achieving enduring enhancements in sustainability would need a collective and coordinated endeavour throughout the whole sector.

Although the price premium that individuals are ready to pay for sustainable travel is far smaller than the actual cost of implementing sustainable practises, it is crucial for the industry to contemplate the financial responsibility of facilitating the transition towards sustainability. The travel sector has the potential to enhance the credibility of its sustainability objectives by jointly establishing minimum targets for sustainability. The establishment of a comprehensive sustainability grading system across industries might enhance the legitimacy of sustainability claims. A potential approach to enhancing the decision-making process for travellers is the implementation of a centralised grading system that places emphasis on the delineation and quantification of environmental effect. This system would enable individuals to make well-informed decisions based on comprehensive and reliable information. The alignment of stakeholders’ goals within the intricate structure of the tourism sector has the potential to enhance the progress towards sustainable travel. One potential approach to address this issue involves the incorporation of sustainability principles within laws and broader industry standards that encompass the concerns and objectives of all relevant stakeholders. The incorporation of additional obligatory sustainability criteria into the star rating system of hotels has the potential to foster congruence between the motives of hotel owners and operators.

Conclusions
The primary economic and social benefits of rural tourism for a rural community are the development of employment and the financial support of needed infrastructure. Development of Sustainable Ethical Tourism (SET) is a democratic and transformational style of tourism that prioritises the well-being of host communities. In doing so, it anticipates developing opportunities for urban tour operators and allied businesses as well as all other stakeholders in the area’s tourist industry. To guarantee SET, it is crucial to understand the many uncertainties held by
local populations. The fundamental objective of SET should be to prioritise the empowerment of community people in order to foster the sustainability of all resources. Additionally, it is widely acknowledged that SET serves as a viable avenue for revenue production in rural communities, contributing to their overall development and improvement. The significance of the Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) sector in Hunan’s economic development plan cannot be understated. In order for this sector to be sustainable, it is imperative that it plays a positive role in improving the lives of rural communities. Significantly, this enables the retention of revenue inside the local community, rather than its control being exerted by external entities and international investors. Furthermore, it serves as a catalyst for promoting local business and encouraging investments in the community, so ensuring the longevity of the economic momentum and its confinement within the specific geographical regions in which it operates.

The SET tool has the potential to play a crucial role in facilitating the achievement of equitable and environmentally sustainable development within a nation. By adopting ethical and sustainable practises within the realm of tourism, nations may effectively safeguard the long-term sustainability of their tourist industries. This approach entails the preservation of their natural and cultural resources, while simultaneously generating significant economic and societal advantages. By integrating sustainability principles into the growth of tourism, nations have the potential to establish a tourist industry that is robust, inclusive, and fair, therefore making a positive contribution towards the achievement of the global Sustainable Development Goals in China.

Sustainable rural tourism requires thorough preparation and integrity from every organisation participating. Regardless of every challenge, it has an opportunity at prospering when appropriate environmental management and conservation procedures are implemented. Sustainable tourism focuses on local community participation, stakeholders who are motivated by ethics, comprehensive regulation, effective marketing, and meticulous planning and design to minimise negative impacts on the environment, society, and the economy. Although there are still challenges facing rural areas, there are also positive aspects to rural tourism. It provides viable means through which rural areas might raise their production and economic standing.

Bibliography