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Current Trends in Mountain Tourism Development of Georgia

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Abstract.

Mountain ecosystems are vital yet fragile, facing significant degradation. While tourism boosts income for rural highland communities, it often triggers landscape transformation, increased waste, and reduced quality of life. Sustainable planning is therefore essential to prevent irreversible environmental damage.

This study utilizes content analysis of Georgia's legislative and strategic documents to evaluate mountain tourism policy. While these documents outline goals for infrastructure and economic growth—tracking visits, accommodation, and employment—they reveal significant gaps. Most highland settlements lack modern spatial or urban development plans, leading to developmental disparities.

Ultimately, we have no answer to the question: has tourism damaged Georgia's natural and cultural heritage in the mountainous regions? Only a comprehensive analysis of environmental and economic indicators can ensure the integrity of these regions. Without a sustainable approach, the mountain tourism sector risks total collapse due to the loss of its primary asset: the natural environment.

This article aligns with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and 15 (Life of Land). It emphasizes the importance of sustainable development in mountain communities and the protection of their vital environment.

Keywords: High Mountain settlements; Policy; Strategy Sustainable development; Tourism.

Introduction

The shocks caused by COVID-19 and the subsequent post-pandemic trends significantly changed the tourism industry worldwide, including in Georgia, presenting it with new and modern challenges. The pandemic underscored the importance of developing sustainable mountain tourism, positioning mountain villages and territories as safe havens. It also created and/or revealed new, healthy environments with a high quality of life. Increased demand leads to increased income and creates new opportunities for rural mountain communities. At the same time, higher revenues and employment levels inevitably lead to altered landscapes, large volumes of waste, and noise, which reduce the quality of life in mountain regions. Therefore, sustainable tourism planning is essential to avoid irreversible environmental damage.

Main Part

Mountain environments represent critically important ecosystems. At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, held in Rio de Janeiro (2012),

the necessity of sustainable development in mountainous regions was reaffirmed, resulting in the adoption of the concluding declaration N66/288, *"The Future We Want,"* which the Government of Georgia has joined. Accordingly, Georgia has taken on international obligations regarding the sustainable development of mountain regions [1 10 p.]. Sustainable development does not separate environmental and social systems.

Sustainable development affects the entire economy, including tourism. Mountains are significant tourist destinations that attract visitors with their authentic culture, biodiversity, health resorts, scenic beauty, and opportunities for sports activities. Moreover, tourists increasingly value open-air destinations and seek refuge from the fast pace of urban life [2 pp.2-25].

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Sustainable development is a continuous process of change in which resource exploitation, investments, technological progress, and other innovations are implemented in line with the needs of both the present and the future. Preserving the integrity of the natural environment is a prerequisite for tourism development, neglecting this will sooner or later lead to the complete disappearance of tourism as a sector of the regional economy [2-4].

Georgia is a mountainous country with a rich culture and diverse landscape, offering countless opportunities for nature enthusiasts. The towering peaks of the Caucasus Mountains and the country's diverse forests create a unique natural beauty that attracts many visitors.

The Georgian state supports mountain development, which is reflected in various policy documents. For instance, the *Law of Georgia on the Development of High Mountainous Regions* defines terms, regulates matters related to the status of high mountain settlements, and sets procedures for granting, suspending, terminating, or restoring this status for individuals permanently residing in such areas. It also provides important social benefits and tax incentives. However, the tourism industry, as a service sector, is not included in these tax benefits (except for services specifically defined by the Government of Georgia) [5].

The *Strategy for the Development of High Mountain Settlements of Georgia 2024–2030* [6] is one of the most transparent and operational support mechanisms. According to this document, currently, 1,801 settlements in Georgia have the status of a high mountain settlement. The highest number (434) are located in the Mtskheta-Mtianeti region. Of these, 98.3% are rural-type settlements, 1.17% are small towns (21 settlements), and 0.5% are urban-type settlements (9 towns). Thus, there is high potential for the development of agro-tourism and eco-tourism in high mountain settlements.

These areas are rich in cultural and historical monuments, biodiversity, winter and summer resorts, and more. Over 20 high mountain settlements have been granted the status of climate or balneological resorts. The strategy emphasizes:

- a) the significance of high mountain settlements for sustainable national development;
- b) the potential for producing organic, ecologically clean, and branded products locally (expanding such production would support the development of gastro-

nomic tourism and provide additional income sources for the population);

- c) the tourism opportunities of high mountain settlements.

The strategic goal of this policy document "Job creation in high mountain settlements through the diversification of the local economy" includes support for the processing sector, the production of niche mountain products, and tourism development.

According to the strategy, the growth of tourism has had a positive impact on all municipalities with high mountain settlements, though not evenly. Declared statistics show that between 2012 and 2022, the number of hotels and similar establishments in 21 such municipalities increased by 162%, and the number of employees increased by 146% (from 1,480 to 3,642 people). In 2022, Borjomi Municipality led in the number of hotels (22%), followed by Kazbegi (17.3%) and Mestia (12.7%).

It is worth noting that most high mountain settlements lack spatial planning or urban development plans, or such documents are outdated and need revision. Due to the complex terrain, climate change, geohazards, and the presence of unique natural and cultural heritage, proper planning of development/building and the establishment of strategies to protect so-called "aesthetic characteristics" is of utmost importance [6, p.28].

The 2024–2026 years action plan of the *Strategy for the Development of High Mountain Settlements of Georgia* [7] includes over 10 tourism-related activities. These include:

- a) supporting the development/expansion of the hotel industry in high mountain settlements through co-financing;
- b) preparing feasibility studies for the development of resorts and resort areas;
- c) building and rehabilitating tourist infrastructure and eco-tourism infrastructure (visitor centers, tourist

shelters, eco-trails, picnic areas, camping zones, etc.). The strategy significantly emphasizes environmental protection and sustainable development. However, it does not address the actual environmental damage caused by tourism development.

The *Rural Development Strategy of Georgia 2021–2027*, including its 2024–2027 action plan [8], contains several activities directly related to rural tourism:

- Activities of objective 1.2, such as “Co-finance the interest on credit and the object of the lease for the development/expansion of the hotel industry”
- Activities of objective 1.7 (Development of rural tourism and relevant tourist products): a) Development of rural touristic products, b) Development of small-scale touristic infrastructure c) Development of the skills of the private sector in touristic services (The retraining program)

This policy document emphasizes:

- Support the increase of bio/organic production
- Construction/rehabilitation of sports, culture and recreational infrastructure - they directly affect the rural environment but are also indirectly related to tourism.

Since the vast majority of mountain settlements are rural, this document is also highly relevant.

If these state programs are refined, they will promote mountain tourism development. This will be reflected in outcome indicators, such as:

- the number of tourists overnight stays in high mountain settlements (currently somewhat difficult or inadequately measured);
- the number of restored cultural monuments and tourist sites.
- the number of visitors to protected areas.

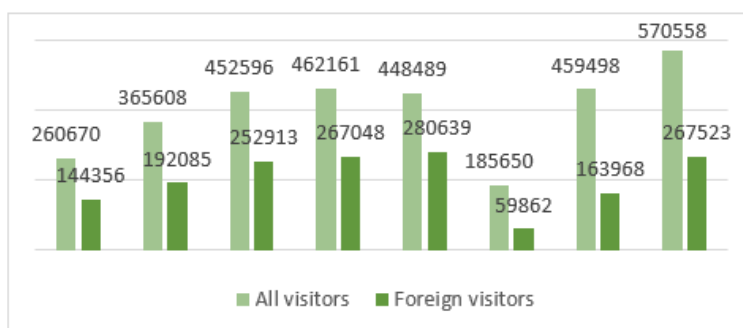
The official statistics below (see Diagram 1 and Diagram 2) present the number of visitors to high mountain settlements.

Considering the pandemic period, the number of tourists in 2022 increased significantly compared to 2015, although it slightly lagged behind the pre-pandemic levels.

According to 2023 data, the top three most visited mountainous eco-tourism municipalities are Keda (96,701 visitors), Tsalka (87,426 visitors), and Tianeti (51,040 visitors). Notably, visitor statistics for the Tsalka Canyon began in 2021 (the well-known Diamond Bridge opened in 2022 - It spans 240 m across, suspended 280 m above the canyon. The bridge is the longest and tallest free-hanging structure in the world), and the Pshav-Khevsureti Protected Area is the newest among them. It is worth noting that the development of tourism infrastructure at Tsalka Canyon significantly reduced the number of visitors to Tbilisi and Kazbegi National Parks.

Diagram 1.

Total Number of Visitors, Including Foreign Visitors, in Municipalities with High-Mountain Settlements, 2015–2022.



Source: “Strategy for the Development of High-Mountain Settlements of Georgia, 2024–2030,” p. 33.

Unfortunately, the reality is that “Georgia Tourism Strategy 2025” [9] does not include a specific goal or objective supporting mountain tourism. However, the National Tourism Administration actively promotes mountain tourism products in both domestic and international markets [10]—this includes the production and targeted placement of numerous promotional films on various international platforms, as well as the promotion of mountain-ski resorts.

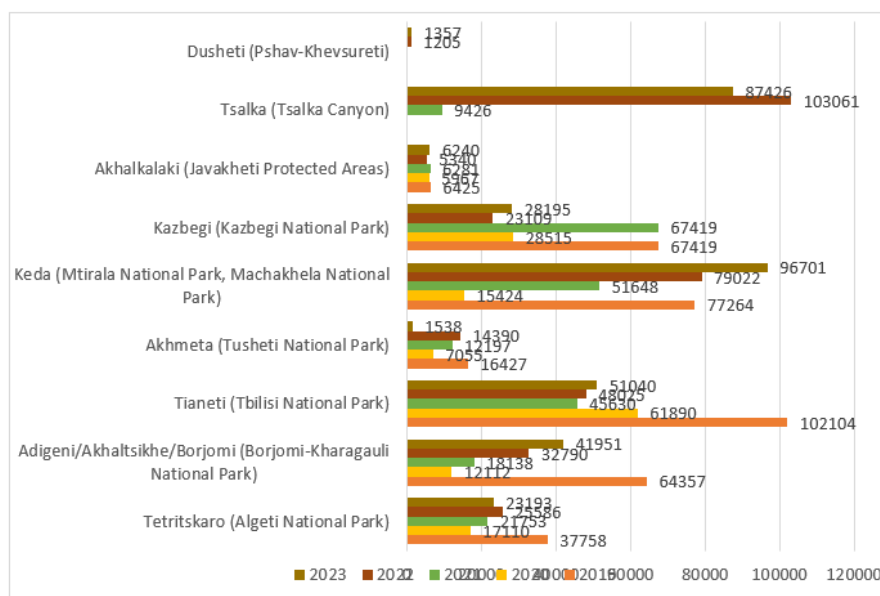
Through close cooperation between the state and the private sector, the appearance of mountain settlements is significantly improving. The Government of Georgia is actively working on the development of four-season resorts to increase tourism potential and attract a larger number of domestic and international tourists. Both the state and the private sector are implementing numerous important activities and investment projects: construction/rehabilitation of air and road transport connections and bicycle trails; installation of modern cableways (Bakuriani, Gudauri, Goderdzi, Mestia), ski slopes (mountain trails), and artificial snowmaking infrastructure; restoration of historical monuments; organization of various cultural and entertainment festivals (Mountain Days, music and

film festivals), and sports events [11, pp.70-78]. Particularly impressive are the initiatives supporting the development of Abastumani as a unique wellness resort, which are extensively described in the authors’ work [12, pp.176-182].

As noted, mountain regions vary significantly in terms of tourism load. Despite the popularity of winter resorts, the number of domestic visitors in mountainous regions is lower compared to other regions. Interestingly, based on their experience, guides and travel agencies identify Svaneti and Kazbegi as their primary working areas (tourists are especially attracted by the Caucasus mountain peaks located in these regions); Tusheti and Khevsureti follow in importance. There is less interest in Racha, Imereti, Guria, and the mountainous areas of Adjara. A survey of 120 tourists traveling in the mountains revealed that the main concerns are environmental pollution, disorganized transport infrastructure/vehicles, and poor sanitary-hygienic conditions. The disorder in the vehicle fleet leads to air pollution, road accidents, and longer travel times. Additional problems include a sharp rise in prices and, in some areas, the lack of high-quality internet connectivity [13 p.107-113].

Diagram 2.

Number of Visitors to Protected Areas in High-Mountain Settlements (2019–2023)



Source: "Strategy for the Development of High-Mountain Settlements of Georgia, 2024–2030", p. 35

There is limited access to diversified tourism products, and greater variety is needed (e.g., guided tours, agritourism farms, folklore evenings, festivals, adventure activities, culinary masterclasses, marked hiking trails, horse rentals, jeep tours, etc.). Local food is not readily available in supermarkets or small shops in mountainous regions, as they are mostly supplied from Tbilisi. Aside from the restaurants in large hotels (such as in Stepantsminda and Gudauri), there is a lack of themed (including vegetarian/vegan) and local cuisine establishments [14, P. 437-446].

As noted, spatial planning is a major challenge for most high-mountain settlements. A significant problem in already developed tourist areas is chaotic construction, which leads to the replacement of agricultural land with hotels in land-scarce regions, the erosion of authenticity and traditional farming, and a decline in local agricultural product production.

The tourism potential of high-mountain regions is not being fully utilized. The causes include unequal development of tourism infrastructure and awareness of destinations, difficult accessibility, shortage of qualified personnel, low quality of services, lack of tourism products, and underdeveloped production and supply chains for traditional local products.;

The literary source [15, pp.28-35] highlights the dangers of unsustainable development in the Kazbegi municipality. Among the problems, the dissatisfaction of the local population stands out, as they are rarely involved in highly organized tours and, in most cases, are only compensated through transport services or employment in hotels.

In his article author describe the unsustainable development problems of the mountain tourism in Mestia,(Svaneti) and Kazbegi municipality and remarks [16. pp. 4-5]:

“As such, the theoretically sustainable infrastructure is stretched to its limit. Trails are overused and traffic up to the church substantial. This is due in part to a

lack of development of similar sites to disperse tourists across areas of natural beauty of Georgia”.

In the research have been identified three main challenges of tourism development in the mountainous regions of Georgia which are 1) Lack of communication and cooperation between the private and public sectors 2) Lack of strategic and coordinated marketing 3) Infrastructure Problems and Improper Waste Management [17, p.144],

The document highlights several challenges [18, pp.21-28], including weak tourism infrastructure, language barriers, and low awareness of Tsalka’s tourism potential, a lack of tourism services, and other deficiencies. It also notes the low level of environmental awareness among the local population, along with issues such as solid waste management, illegal logging, fishing, and hunting. As in other regions, there is also a risk of chaotic tourism development in Tsalka municipality.

Thus, the threats posed by the development of chaotic, mass tourism stem from issues related to both infrastructure and the education of the local population, as well as shortcomings in the management of the tourism and hospitality industry. Such tourism has serious environmental and social consequences.

These problems can be addressed through a comprehensive approach. On the one hand, the state must support and regulate the tourism business, manage tourist flows (e.g., introduce visitor management), apply modern spatial planning approaches, and develop services. On the other hand, it is essential to increase the responsibility of tourism business representatives to expand and diversify tourism supply, improve staff qualifications, and adopt sustainable practices to strengthen the local community and economy. Support for both higher and vocational education is crucial for the sustainable development of mountain tourism.

Unsustainable and chaotic development of tourism in mountainous regions leads to overconsumption of natural resources, air pollution, significant increases in solid waste, visual pollution, and physical degradation,

which may ultimately result in the degradation of biodiversity.

Conclusion

Georgia is a mountainous country characterized by challenging climatic conditions, remoteness from central areas, and various demographic and socio-economic problems. In response to these challenges, Georgia has adopted a Law on Mountains and developed a policy for the advancement of mountainous regions, with particular emphasis on tourism.

The mountains of Georgia represent a significant tourist attraction, and tourism has become one of the key indicators of development in these areas. In recent years, the government has actively pursued the promotion of tourism in mountain regions. However, the

sustainable development of tourism and its proper management are essential for preserving the natural and cultural uniqueness of these regions, while simultaneously improving the socio-economic conditions of the local population.

Despite government efforts, current strategic documents do not adequately address the issues of sustainable development. Researchers have raised concerns about the risks of unplanned and unsustainable growth, which could ultimately lead to the collapse of tourism in these areas. The example of chaotic tourism development in the **Kazbegi Municipality** highlights the urgent need for specialized planning approaches not only in this municipality but across all of Georgia's mountainous regions.

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ანოტაცია. მთის ეკოსისტემები სასიცოცხლოდ მნიშვნელოვანია, თუმცა მყიფეა და მნიშვნელოვანი დეგრადაციის წინაშე დგას. მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ ტურიზმი ზრდის მაღალმთიანი სოფლის თემების შემოსავალს, ის ხშირად იწვევს ლანდშაფტის ტრანსფორმაციას, ნარჩენების ზრდას და ცხოვრების ხარისხის შემცირებას. ამიტომ, მდგრადი დაგეგმვა აუცილებელია გარემოსდაცვითი შეუქცევადი ზიანის თავიდან ასაცილებლად.

ეს კვლევა იყენებს საქართველოს საკანონმდებლო და სტრატეგიული დოკუმენტების შინაარსობრივ ანალიზს მთის ტურიზმის პოლიტიკის შესაფასებლად. მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ ეს დოკუმენტები განსაზღვრავს ინფრასტრუქტურისა და ეკონომიკური ზრდის მიზნებს – ვიზიტების, განთავსებისა და დასაქმების თვალყურის დევნებას – ისინი ავლენენ მნიშვნელოვან ხარვეზებს. მაღალმთიანი დასახლებების უმეტესობას არ გააჩნია თანამედროვე სივრცითი ან ურბანული განვითარების გეგმები, რაც იწვევს განვითარების უთანასწორობას.

საბოლოო ჯამში, არ გვაქვს პასუხი კითხვაზე: მიაყენა თუ არა ტურიზმმა ზიანი საქართველოს ბუნებრივ და კულტურულ მემკვიდრეობას. მხოლოდ გარემოსდაცვითი და ეკონომიკური ინდიკატორების ყოვლისმომცველ ანალიზს შეუძლია უზრუნველყოს ამ რეგიონების მთლიანობა. მდგრადი მიდგომის გარეშე, მთის ტურიზმის სექტორი სრული კოლაფსის რისკის ქვეშაა მისი ძირითადი აქტივის - ბუნებრივი გარემოს დაკარგვის გამო.

ეს სტატია შეესაბამება მდგრადი განვითარების მიზნებს SDG 11- მდგრადი ქალაქები და თემები და SDG 15 – დედამიწის ეკოსისტემები და ხაზს უსვამს მთის თემებში მდგრადი განვითარებისა და მათი სასიცოცხლო გარემოს დაცვის მნიშვნელობას

საკვანძო სიტყვები: მაღალმთიანი დასახლებები; მდგრადი განვითარება; ტურიზმი; პოლიტიკა; სტრატეგია.

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