

**The Role of Eco-Tourism Projects in Achieving Sustainable Tourism
Development
Saudi Vision 2030**

دور مشاريع السياحة البيئية في تحقيق التنمية السياحية المستدامة

رؤية السعودية 2030

Sehailia Yamina

Yamina.sehailia@univ-mascara.dz,

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Abstract:

This study aims to clarify the importance of ecotourism in achieving sustainable tourism development, with a focus on the experience of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Previously, tourism demand in the Kingdom was mainly linked to Hajj, Umrah, and domestic tourism. However, the past decade has witnessed a qualitative shift in the tourism sector, represented by the launch of major tourism programs and projects that embrace the principles of sustainable tourism and resource management based on ecological regeneration. Ecotourism has emerged as one of the main pathways of developmental transformation in the Kingdom within the framework of Saudi Vision 2030, contributing to reorienting the tourism sector from a recreational activity into a driver of economic diversification and a means of preserving natural resources and cultural heritage. This transformation culminated in a record increase in the number of tourists, reaching 100 million visitors in 2023, with the target raised to 150 million tourists by 2030.

Keys words: Eco-tourism, Sustainable Tourism Development, Saudi Vision 2030.

JEL classification codes: Q01, Q26, Q48, Q56, Q57

ملخص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى توضيح أهمية السياحة البيئية في تحقيق التنمية السياحية المستدامة مع إسقاط ذلك على تجربة المملكة العربية السعودية، فسبقاً كان الطلب السياحي في المملكة مرتبط بالحج والعمرة والسياحة الداخلية، غير أن العقد الأخير شهد تحول نوعي في القطاع السياحي تمثل في إطلاق برامج ومشروعات سياحية كبرى تتبنى مبادئ السياحة المستدامة، وإدارة الموارد وفق التجديد البيئي، فقد مثلت السياحة البيئية أحد المسارات الرئيسة للتحول التنموي في المملكة في إطار رؤية السعودية 2030 فقد أسهمت في إعادة توجيه القطاع السياحي من كونه نشاط ترفيهي إلى رافعة للتنوع الاقتصادي، ووسيلة للحفاظ على الموارد الطبيعية والتراث الثقافي، وتوج هذا التحول بتحقيق قفزة قياسية في عدد السياح، إذ بلغ عددهم 100 مليون سائح في عام 2023، مع رفع المستهدف إلى 150 مليون سائح بحلول عام 2030.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السياحة البيئية، التنمية السياحية المستدامة، رؤية السعودية 2030.

تصنيف جال: Q01, Q26, Q48, Q56, Q57

Auteur correspondant: Sehailia Yamina, **Email:** Yamina.sehailia@univ-mascara.dz,

1-Introduction

Ecotourism is one of the most prominent forms of sustainable tourism that combines the pleasure of exploration with the preservation of natural and cultural resources. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, interest in this type of tourism has notably emerged within the framework of Saudi Vision 2030 projects, which aim to diversify income sources and enhance the Kingdom's position as a global tourist destination. This is achieved while committing to environmental protection and the preservation of biodiversity, as the Kingdom is endowed with unique natural components and a rich, diverse cultural heritage.

Developing ecotourism through environmental tourism projects not only supports the national economy but also serves as a tool for environmental awareness and encourages local communities to participate in protecting the natural and cultural heritage for present and future generations, based on the above, we pose the following problem:

To what extent do ecotourism projects contribute to achieving sustainable tourism development in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia?

1-1 Hypotheses:

To address the previous problem, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- Saudi Arabia possesses significant ecotourism resources, which has helped promote investment in this sector.
- Ecotourism projects within Saudi Vision 2030 contribute to creating sustainable tourism development for the local community.
- Ecotourism in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the important sectors that contributes to supporting the local economy.

1-2 Methodology Adopted:

In our study, we have relied on the descriptive approach to clarify the concepts related to ecotourism and sustainable tourism development. This methodology enables a comprehensive overview of all aspects concerning ecotourism projects in Saudi Arabia within the framework of Vision 2030, and the impact of these projects on creating sustainable tourism development in the Kingdom.

1-3 Research Objectives:

The research aims to achieve the following:

- To clarify the concepts of ecotourism and sustainable tourism development.
- To highlight the foundations and resources for ecotourism in Saudi Arabia.
- To address the most significant ecotourism projects in Saudi Arabia under Vision 2030.
- To demonstrate the alignment of ecotourism projects with the sustainable tourism development goals of Vision 2030.

2- The Concept of Ecotourism

We will comprehensively explore the concept of ecotourism by addressing the following key aspects:

2-1 Definition of Ecotourism:

Researchers have provided various definitions for ecotourism. Among them:

- The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) defined it as: "Travel to natural areas that remain unpolluted and whose natural balance is undisturbed, for the purpose of enjoying their landscapes, flora, and wildlife, as well as their past and present civilizations." (Ben Khadija & Ouald Zaoui, 2016, p. 222)
- The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines it as: "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education."
- Martha Honey defined it as: "Travel to natural and protected areas, while minimizing negative impacts, with the goal of educating visitors, providing financial resources for conservation, and benefiting local populations." (charef, 2019, p. 163)
- Ecotourism is: "A form of tourism that focuses on responsible travel to natural areas, with an emphasis on environmental conservation and supporting local communities. It seeks to strike a balance between enjoying nature, protecting the environment, and contributing to the well-being of local communities. It also involves educating visitors about the importance of environmental preservation”.

The concept of ecotourism includes the following:

- **Responsible Travel:** This means traveling in a way that minimizes negative impacts on the environment and local communities. Examples include not littering, refraining from damaging ecological and heritage sites, and respecting local populations.
- **Environmental Conservation:** This refers to preserving natural resources and biodiversity when developing tourism facilities.
- **Supporting Local Communities:** This involves providing job opportunities and fostering economic development for communities living in tourist areas.
- **Environmental Education:** This entails educating visitors about environmental issues to raise awareness about the importance of environmental protection.
- **Enjoying Nature:** This includes appreciating natural landscapes, observing wildlife, and valuing natural beauty.
- **Sustainability:** Ecotourism aims to achieve sustainable tourism development, meaning it meets the needs of the present generation to enjoy natural tourism assets without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

2-2 Types of Ecotourism:

Ecotourism takes several forms, including: (Thouamria & Kherouf, 2018)

- Wildlife Hunting Tourism: Hunting wild animals, birds, and fish.
- Natural Reserve Tourism: Also known as wildlife tourism.
- Scuba Diving Tourism: Involving underwater diving, water sports, observing coral reefs, and studying marine plants.

- Desert Tourism: Characterized by tranquility and serenity, including bird, insect, and reptile watching, sand skiing, and desert races.
- Mountain Exploration and Climbing.
- Camping: In forests and mountainous areas, including summer camps and scout camps.
- Exploratory Trips: To natural places like caves and grottos, as well as exploring archaeological sites.
- Therapeutic Tourism: In pollution-free areas, such as herbal medicine, sand therapy, and healing in hot springs for certain skin diseases and joint disorders.
- Tourism of Antiquities and Rock Inscriptions: Including the analysis of geological and volcanic rocks.
- Museum and Historical Site Tourism: Exploring local customs and traditions.
- Exploring Heritage Manuscripts: Engaging with traditional knowledge, sciences, and culture.
- Traditional Crafts and Handicrafts: Appreciating their creativity, such as woodwork, leatherwork, embroidery, textiles, and artifacts.
- Architectural Engineering: Admiring ornaments, designs, inscriptions, and aesthetics.
- Traditional Attire, Customs, and Traditions: Experiencing local folk foods.
- Carnivals, cultural festivals, and national celebrations.

2-3 Characteristics of Ecotourism:

Ecotourism refers to forms of tourism characterized by the following features:

- All forms of nature-based tourism where the main motivation for tourists is the observation and appreciation of nature, as well as the traditional cultures prevalent in natural areas.
- It contains educational and interpretive features.
- Service providers in tourist destinations are often small, locally-owned businesses.
- It supports the conservation of natural areas used as ecotourism attractions by generating economic benefits for host communities, and for the organizations and authorities that manage natural areas for conservation purposes.
- It works to provide employment and alternative income opportunities for local communities.
- It increases awareness towards the conservation of natural and cultural assets, both among local populations and tourists.(Global Sustainable Tourism Council)
- Ecotourism is very important in increasing employment opportunities for the residents of tourist areas.
- It is a clean, green tourism based on the environment and nature, preserving all that is beautiful, enjoyable, and useful in tourist activity.
- It is a rational and responsible tourism, governed by awareness, reason, and a sense of responsibility.

- It reduces pollution, littering, and the wasteful consumption of resources.
- It respects the carrying capacity of the environment and does not exceed it.
- It has a multi-faceted economic return and impact, combining both material and moral/ethical aspects.
- It aims to maintain ecological balance and preserve natural life, meaning it is used as a preventive approach rather than a remedial method. (Sahl Educational Platform)

3- Sustainable Tourism Development:

The concept of sustainable tourism development is closely linked to the environment to the extent that it can be referred to as ecotourism. It involves implementing the principles of sustainability in general and environmental protection in particular, as it encompasses all types of tourism.

3-1 Definition of Sustainable Tourism Development:

Several definitions have been provided for this concept, including: Sustainable tourism development has been defined as: "Development that is implemented after a comprehensive and planned study within the framework of integrated economic, social, and environmental development planning for the country as a whole, or for any region within the country that possesses the components of tourism development, including natural and cultural attractions." (Gaid, 2013, p. 79)

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), sustainable tourism development is: "Adopting a strategy that aims to meet the needs of tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is a method of managing economic, social, and aesthetic needs responsibly, while respecting the continuity of cultural heritage, biodiversity, the environment, and all life-supporting systems." (Bouakrif & Bouhbila, 2016, p. 42)

Sustainable tourism development is: "An important mechanism for the economic, social, and urban development of regions and places with tourist appeal, especially those regions possessing economic foundations and tourist assets. It involves the planned development and rational investment of these assets to raise the standard of living for the members of that society, while taking into account the preservation of the environment. Consequently, sustainable tourism development in countries with tourism potential seeks to utilize these resources, whether natural or human, to achieve the desired economic balance and meet both domestic and international tourist demand, both in the present and the future." (Larabi, 2022, p. 628)

3-2 Principles of Sustainable Tourism Development:

The key principles of sustainable tourism development can be summarized as follows (Gaid, 2013/2014, p. 85-86):

- Tourism planning, development, and management must be an integral part of the protection or sustainable development strategy of a region or country. Furthermore, tourism should be planned and managed in an integrated and

unified manner that involves various government agencies, private institutions, and citizens—whether groups or individuals—to maximize benefits.

- These agencies, institutions, groups, and individuals must adhere to ethical principles and other guidelines that respect the culture, environment, and economy of the host area, as well as the traditional lifestyle and conduct of the community, including its political patterns.
- Tourism must be planned and managed sustainably to protect and achieve optimal economic use of the natural and human environment in the host area.
- Tourism should focus on the equitable distribution of benefits between tourism promoters and the individuals of the host community and region.
- Studies and information about the nature of tourism and its impacts on the population and cultural environment must be available before and during development, especially for the local community, so they can participate in and influence the direction of comprehensive development.
- An integrated analysis of environmental, social, and economic planning must be conducted before initiating any tourism development or other projects, taking into account the requirements of the environment and society.
- Local people should be encouraged to take on leadership roles in planning and development, with the assistance of the government, the business sector, the financial sector, and other stakeholders.
- A program for monitoring, auditing, and corrective action must be implemented during all stages of tourism development and management, allowing local residents and others to benefit from available opportunities and adapt to changes that will occur in their lives.

3-3 Objectives of Sustainable Tourism Development:

Sustainable tourism development aims to achieve the following: (Houadef, 2003, p. 296-297)

- Protecting the environment and increasing care for natural resources and the cultural heritage of communities.
- Meeting the basic needs of the human element and raising the standard of living.
- Achieving justice among individuals of the same generation and for future generations in terms of the right to benefit from environmental resources.
- Creating new investment opportunities and diversifying the economy.
- Increasing state revenues resulting from tourism activities.
- Improving infrastructure and public services in host communities.
- Enhancing the level of tourism services and making them available to both tourists and local residents alike.
- Maintaining ecological balance, and thereby protecting wild, marine, and aerial life from pollution. It is thus used as a preventive approach rather than remedial methods, which helps preserve the mechanisms for achieving balance, health, and environmental integrity.

- Establishing behavioral controls for the rationalization of resource consumption, use, or extraction. This ensures the maintenance of public health and safety, resource renewal, and prevents their loss or depletion, while simultaneously achieving the highest degree of energy conservation and maintaining a safe, vibrant, and effective society.

4- The general framework for ecotourism in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia:

In this section, we discuss the potential of ecotourism in Saudi Arabia and its development strategy:

4-1 Components of Ecotourism in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia:

Ecotourism in the Kingdom is characterized by a number of components, including:

- Biodiversity:

Saudi Arabia possesses rich biodiversity, encompassing more than 2,300 species of plants and over 600 species of terrestrial and marine animals. Many of these species are considered endangered, such as the sea turtle and the Arabian leopard, requiring exceptional efforts for their conservation. In this context, the Saudi government has launched numerous programs and projects aimed at preserving endangered species, such as the program for reintroducing gazelles and Arabian tigers. Additionally, specialized centers have been established to conserve native species and provide safe environments for their reproduction and growth.

- Natural Reserves:

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia encompasses 15 natural reserves, including 12 terrestrial reserves and 3 marine reserves, which reflect its biological and environmental diversity. Among the most prominent of these reserves are the "mahazat el said Reserve", the "Umm Al-Qamari Islands Reserve," and the "Jabal Shada Reserve." The Saudi government is making significant efforts to preserve these reserves through the implementation of protection programs, awareness campaigns, and the development of effective resource management strategies. Furthermore, the Kingdom supports local and international initiatives aimed at preserving biodiversity and promoting sustainable ecotourism. These efforts are considered an essential part of Vision 2030, which seeks to achieve sustainable development and environmental conservation. (Al-Anzi, 2025)

- Natural Areas:

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is distinguished by its vast area and diverse terrain, which enables tourists to have a variety of exploratory tourism experiences. Among these areas are: the Fifa Mountains, Lajab Valley in Jazan, Jabal Al-Lawz in Tabuk, the Wahbah Crater, the Farasan Islands archipelago in the southeast of the Red Sea, the Empty Quarter Desert, Al-Soudah Park in Abha, Sharm Abhar Beach in Jeddah, etc.

- Tourist Villages:

Saudi Arabia includes many tourist villages that combine natural beauty and rich cultural heritage. Among the most prominent of these villages are: Rijal

Almaa Village, AlUla Village (Including Mada'in Saleh), the marble village of Thee Ain, and Qila' Abu Nuqata. The latter was chosen by the World Tourism Organization to be among the best tourist villages in the world for 2024. This selection came after an evaluation of the competing villages in nine key areas: cultural and natural resources, promotion and conservation of cultural capabilities, economic sustainability, social sustainability, and environmental sustainability.

- World Heritage Sites:

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia boasts over 10,000 heritage sites, with 500 sites mentioned in ancient Arabic poetry and 400 sites referenced in the Prophet's biography. Six of these sites have been inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites after being approved by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). These are: Al-Hijr (Madâin Sâlih) in Al-'Ula, Al-Turaif District in Ad-Dir'iyah, Historic Jeddah, Rock Art in the Hail Region (Jubbah and Al-Shuwaymis), Al-Ahsa Oasis, Himā Cultural Area in Najran.

- Woodlands and Meadows:

Forests in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia cover 2.7 million hectares. Most of the forested areas are located in the Sarawat Mountains range, with other woodland sites found across various regions of the Kingdom. The most famous of these include Raghadan Forest, Al-Qamaa Forest, Jabr Forest, etc. Furthermore, numerous meadows (rawdās) are spread across many locations in the Kingdom, often serving as tourist destinations, particularly in winter. These include Khuraim Meadow, Al-Tanahat Meadow, Noura Meadow, etc.

- Possessing a Rich Intangible Cultural Heritage:

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia possesses a rich intangible cultural heritage, diversified among traditional industries, popular cuisines, traditional markets, folk songs, etc. There are 16 intangible cultural elements registered in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. These are: Al-Ardah Al-Najdiyyah 2015, Saudi Coffee 2015, The Majlis 2015, Al-Mezmar 2016, Al-Qatt Al-Asiri 2017, The Date Palm 2019, Al-Sadu Weaving 2020, Falconry 2021, Arabic Calligraphy 2021, Saudi Khawlani Coffee 2022, Camel Chanting (Hedaa') 2022, The Harees Dish 2023, Metal Engraving 2023, Al-Taif Rose 2024, Henna 2024, The Simsimiya Instrument 2024. (Saudi Vision 2030, Annual Report, 2024)

4-2 Types of ecotourism in Saudi Arabia:

Ecotourism in Saudi Arabia varies depending on the multiplicity and diversity of tourism components, as it includes the following types: (Sahal Educational Platform)

- Natural Reserve Tourism: Among the qualitative tourism features that the Saudi Tourism Authority has successfully activated is natural reserve tourism, in cooperation with the National Center for Wildlife Development, making them accessible for tourists to visit.

- **Mountain Climbing:** The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is renowned for its mountainous terrain across numerous regions, including: Jabal Tuwaiq, the mountains of Taif, Tanomah, the Al-Sharaf Park Front, the AlUla Front, Al-Disah, Jazan, and the 'Iqidah Mountains. These locations provide tourists with the necessary protection and safety to enjoy the sport of mountain climbing.
- **Diving:** The Red Sea coast provides safe diving opportunities for tourists.
- **Camping and Eco-Trips:** Many young people are turning to camping as a form of ecotourism to experience new things, with camping typically taking place in desert areas.
- **Hunting Trips:** The Saudi Ministry of Tourism provides hunting trips for tourists, but under strict conditions to preserve the environment and prevent its exploitation.
- **Nature Photography Tours:** Tourists are allowed to photograph nature in all its forms, at any time.
- **Astronomical Tourism:** The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is witnessing significant interest in astrotourism, attracting many enthusiasts in this field due to its diverse range of sites suitable for astronomical observation, prepared for stargazing across deserts, coasts, and mountains.
- **Festival Tourism:** The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia organizes a number of heritage, cultural, and historical festivals that indirectly contribute to the promotion of ecotourism. The most prominent of these include: Okaz Souk, the Historic Jeddah Festival, the Jeddah Festival in Hail, the Al-Ghada Festival in Unaizah, the Al-Badiyah Festival in Bisha, the Falcons Festival in Turaif, the King Abdulaziz Camel Festival, in addition to a number of other festivals organized by each region throughout the year, such as festivals for honey, olives, mangoes, flowers, coffee, etc.

4-3 Saudi Arabia's Strategy for Ecotourism Sustainability

The Kingdom has dedicated significant attention to ecotourism as a core part of its policy to achieve sustainable tourism. This is clearly reflected in the following key actions: (Kermani et al, 2021, pp. 272-273)

- **Developing a Comprehensive Legal Framework:** Establishing a set of laws and regulations to govern and develop ecotourism. This legal framework includes the Environmental System, the Tourism System, the Saudi Wildlife Authority System, the System for Hunting Wild Animals and Birds, and the System for Regulating the Trade in Endangered Wildlife Species.
- **Balancing Tourism and Ecology:** Actively working to create a balance between tourism activities and environmental protection. This ensures the sustainable development of tourist attractions, preserving them for future generations.
- **Environmental Impact Assessments:** Conducting thorough studies and environmental impact assessments for all tourism projects before licensing. Specific recommendations are mandated, especially for projects located in or near heritage areas.

- **Public Environmental Awareness:** Implementing nationwide environmental awareness campaigns targeting all segments of society through various media channels to foster a culture of conservation.
- **Infrastructure and Service Development:** Supporting and developing the necessary infrastructure and ancillary services for ecotourism. This includes creating and executing plans and programs for ecotourism projects that align with the preservation of the environment, heritage sites, and cultural legacy.
- **Encouraging Investment:** Actively working to attract and encourage investments specifically in the field of ecotourism.
- **Waste Management and Green Spaces:** Prioritizing the treatment of environmentally harmful waste and enhancing public parks, gardens, and green spaces to improve the quality of life and tourist experience.
- **Training and Capacity Building:** Establishing specialized training programs to raise the level of environmental awareness and to create a cadre of professional tourist guides. These guides are trained in best practices for interacting with tourists while ensuring the protection of the environment.
- **Heritage Site Development:** Focusing on the development and promotion of archaeological and historical sites, integrating them into the tourism landscape.
- **Expansion of Festivals:** Broadening the scope and variety of cultural and regional festivals, using them as a platform to celebrate local heritage and attract visitors, thereby supporting the local economy in a sustainable manner.

5- The role of Vision 2030 projects in promoting ecotourism and tourism sustainability in Saudi Arabia:

Vision 2030 is the post-oil plan for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, announced on April 25, 2016. This plan was organized by the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, chaired by Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and presented to the Council of Ministers, chaired by King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, for approval. The public, private, and non-profit sectors participate in its implementation. Through this plan, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia aims to be one of the best tourist destinations in the world by 2030, and has set a target of reaching 100 million visitors annually. To achieve its goal, the Kingdom has focused on opening up to the world and has planned investments worth up to \$810 billion in various projects. By 2030, the Kingdom expects tourism to constitute 10% of the GDP, which will create a new tourism economy and provide at least one million new job opportunities. Major projects were announced between 2016 and 2020, with the aim of retaining local tourists and encouraging domestic tourism, in addition to promoting international tourism.

5-1 Ecotourism Objectives in Vision 2030:

The 2030 Ecotourism Vision aims to achieve the following:

- **Environmental Preservation:** Tourism projects aim to minimize interference with the surrounding nature and implement the highest standards of sustainability.

- **Economic Diversification:** The Kingdom seeks to diversify its sources of income, reduce its dependence on oil, and increase the tourism sector's contribution to the GDP by raising the tourism growth rate to a rate exceeding the global average.
- **Job Creation:** Tourism projects provide new job opportunities for citizens, especially residents of tourist areas.
- **Providing unique tourism experiences:** Providing diverse and rich tourism experiences for visitors by leveraging environmental diversity.
- **Strengthening Saudi Arabia's position:** The projects aim to consolidate the Kingdom's position as a leading global tourism destination.

5-2 Ecotourism Projects under Saudi Vision 2030:

Saudi Arabia has focused its attention on the environment and how to preserve it. It has developed a plan to increase environmental sustainability efforts by launching numerous ecotourism projects. Below is a review of the most important projects launched under Saudi Vision 2030:

- The Red Sea Project:

The Red Sea Project is one of the initiatives launched under Saudi Vision 2030 and is one of the projects owned by the Public Investment Fund (PIF). It extends over an area of 28,000 km² along the Red Sea coast in western Saudi Arabia. The destination is home to the world's fourth-largest thriving barrier reef, which is rich in diverse marine habitats and coral formations. It is being developed to become a sustainable luxury tourism destination; The Red Sea Project is expected to welcome visitors in 2030. By that time, it will feature 50 resorts providing 8,000 hotel rooms, in addition to over 1,000 residential properties. The Red Sea Project primarily aims to:

- Preserve biodiversity, as it is home to hundreds of species of fish and coral reefs.
- Adopt sustainable practices in every aspect. The buildings are designed to be environmentally friendly, utilizing renewable energy sources and water conservation technologies.
- Offer tourist experiences that connect visitors with nature, such as boat trips, diving, and exploring marine life.
- Implement strategies to protect coral reefs and marine ecosystems from tourism activities, which helps preserve the region's unique biodiversity.
- Enhance environmental awareness through the project's resulting sustainable tourism activities, encouraging both visitors and local communities to become environmental stewards.
- Elevate Saudi Arabia's tourism landscape by developing a world-class sustainable tourism hub that attracts both local and international visitors to experience the opportunity to enjoy previously untapped natural treasures.
- Enhancing the quality of life for local communities through the creation of numerous facilities, such as the Red Sea International Airport, the Red Sea Nursery, the Solid Waste Management Center, and the Coastal Village.

- Creating 70,000 direct and indirect job opportunities by 2030.
- Driving economic growth and diversifying its sources, thereby reducing dependence on oil.
- Contributing up to 22 billion Saudi Riyals annually to the GDP upon reaching full operational capacity.
- Developing thriving industries such as tourism and hospitality. (Vision 2030, The Red Sea)

- The Riyadh Green Project:

Launched by King Salman in 2019, the Riyadh Green Project aims to position Riyadh as one of the world's top 100 most livable cities. The project is committed to planting 7.5 million trees across the city by 2030. This will be achieved by greening neighborhood parks, mosques, schools, universities, healthcare facilities, and along streets and roads. The plan also includes establishing new irrigation networks that use recycled water. This project aims to:

- Improve the quality of life in Riyadh by increasing the city's green space from 1.5% to 9.1%.
- Promote the concept of sustainability through the use of modern agricultural techniques and resource management.
- Reducing temperatures in Riyadh by 1.5 to 2 degrees Celsius through the expansion of green areas.
- Improve air quality by reducing carbon dioxide levels by 3-6% and increasing oxygen rates.
- Generate an economic return of 71 billion Saudi Riyals for Riyadh by 2030, primarily through increased property values.
- Increase biodiversity by creating new environments through the cultivation of numerous plant species, which enhances local biodiversity and attracts birds and beneficial insects. (Vision 2030, Riyadh)

- NEOM Project:

The NEOM project is one of the major initiatives launched by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 2017 as part of Saudi Vision 2030. Funded by the Public Investment Fund, with a cost of \$500 billion, it aims to establish an innovative and sustainable economic zone spanning 26,500 km² along the Red Sea coast. The project includes smart cities and zones, ports, commercial areas, research centers, sports and entertainment venues, and tourist centers. (Vision 2030, NEOM). What distinguishes this project is the preservation of 95% of the natural environment within the project's area. It will rely 100% on renewable energy, such as solar and wind power, ensuring a pollution and carbon-free ecosystem. Furthermore, the project seeks to achieve environmental balance by preserving biodiversity and natural resources, and promoting environmental awareness among visitors to protect natural resources. This reflects the Kingdom's commitment to enhancing environmental sustainability and reducing the overall environmental impact.

Tourist activities in NEOM include a variety of unique experiences focused on nature and direct interaction with it. These activities encompass safari trips, wildlife watching, and diving in marine environments rich with coral reefs.

- AlUla Development Project:

The AlUla Development Project is one of the initiatives of Saudi Vision 2030. It aims to develop AlUla (a governorate of the Al-Madinah Al-Munawwarah Region) and transform it into a global heritage and tourist destination. This is achieved through preserving heritage and nature in cooperation with the local community. AlUla is home to "Hegra" (Al-Hijr), the first Saudi heritage site to be inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The project includes a number of sub-projects, most notably:

* **International Scholarship Program:** This is a program launched by the Royal Commission for AlUla to sponsor a number of the province's male and female students. It aims to prepare them to contribute to development activities and qualify them for future jobs. This is achieved by sending them to prestigious educational institutions in countries such as the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, to study disciplines that support AlUla's development direction.

* **The "Himaya" Program:** This is a program through which the Royal Commission for AlUla intensively engages the local community to play a prominent and effective role in AlUla's development projects. The program provides 2,500 opportunities for the residents of AlUla Governorate to perform their role in protecting and preserving AlUla's cultural and natural heritage.

* **Sharaan Nature Reserve:** Spanning an area of 1,500 square kilometers, the Sharaan Nature Reserve aims to protect and rejuvenate the rich biodiversity of the canyons, valleys, and deserts of AlUla. It is a pivotal step towards restoring balance to fragile ecosystems and preserving native animal species such as the gazelle and the Arabian oryx, along with its acacia forests. (The Royal Commission for AlUla)

* **Sharaan Resort:** The resort features 40 hotel units, which include 25 suites, 10 luxury tented suites, and 5 villas along with a health spa. It also offers spaces equipped with state-of-the-art technology and 40 luxury residential units.

* **The Global Fund for the Protection of the Arabian Leopard:** This is a global fund established to enhance the survival of Arabian leopards. It was created by the Royal Commission for AlUla, which has allocated \$25 million to it. The fund aims to protect the Arabian leopard and ensure its survival, secure a sustainably viable population of leopards, provide for their wild prey and natural habitats, and foster their acceptance and coexistence with local communities. (Saudipedia)

5-3 Achievements of the tourism sector in Saudi Arabia under Vision 2030:

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was a religious destination for Muslims from all over the world. Given the tourism assets with which the Kingdom is

rich, particularly in the field of ecotourism, it is no longer solely a religious tourism destination. Saudi Vision 2030 foresaw the scale of tourism opportunities, leading to the completion of many projects, working on reforming the legislative and regulatory environment, and enabling digitalization through the launch of the electronic visa. Consequently, the sector has witnessed a remarkable transformation and has become one of the key sectors contributing to the support of the local economy. The most important achievements of the sector from the launch of Vision 2030 up to the year 2024 are as follows:

- Saudi Arabia is a global tourist destination:

Thanks to the robust tourism potential it has developed, the Kingdom has succeeded in attracting tourists from around the world. In 2024, Saudi Arabia ranked first among G20 countries in the growth rate of international tourist arrivals, achieving a 56% increase compared to 2019. This was accompanied by qualitative leaps made by various cities in the Kingdom, with Medina being listed among the top 100 global tourist destinations.

- Increase in the number of tourists:

The following table shows the development in the number of tourists:

Table N° 01: Development of tourism spending in Saudi Arabia from 2016 to 2024

years	Domestic Tourists (Millions)	Change Rate	Foreign Tourists (Millions)	Change Rate
2016	45	-	18	-
2017	43.82	2.6%	16.11	-10.5%
2018	43.26	-1.2%	15.33	-4.8%
2019	47.81	11%	17.53	14%
2020	42.11	-12%	4.14	-76%
2021	63.83	52%	3.5	-16%
2022	77.84	22%	16.64	378%
2023	81.92	5%	27.42	65%
2024	86.2	5%	29.7	8%

Source: Saudi Vision 2030, Annual Report, 2024, p 260.

Based on the data, we observe that in the pre-COVID-19 period, the number of tourists was characterized by fluctuation between increase and decrease, with an overall declining trend during this time. However, since the end of the COVID-19 period, the number of tourists began to rise. Saudi tourism achieved its goal of reaching 100 million domestic and international tourists in 2023, seven years ahead of schedule. This has led to a new target of 150 million

domestic and international tourists by 2030. The year 2024 witnessed growth in inbound tourism for non-religious purposes, which recorded 59% of the total number of inbound international tourists, up from 44% in 2019.

- Tourism spending rate increases:

The following table shows the development of tourism spending:

Table N° 02: Development of tourism spending in Saudi Arabia during the period 2016-2024 Unit: billion Saudi riyals

years	Domestic Tourism Expenditure	Change Rate	Foreign Tourism Expenditure	Change Rate
2016	44.9	-	92.3	-
2017	47.9	6.68%	97.8	6.96%
2018	48.1	0.41%	93.5	-4.4%
2019	61.2	27%	103.4	11%
2020	43.3	-29%	20.1	-81%
2021	102.2	136%	14.7	-27%
2022	107.3	5%	98.3	568%
2023	114.4	7%	141.2	44%
2024	115.3	1%	168.5	19%

Source: - Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority, 2017: p. 31.
- Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority, 2018, p. 27.
- Saudi Ministry of Tourism, 2024, p. 29.

The table shows that domestic and foreign tourism spending has been consistently increasing over the years, except during 2020 and 2021. The year 2020 witnessed a decline in both types of spending. In 2021, foreign tourism spending also decreased, but at a lower rate than in 2020. This period coincided with COVID-19 and the implementation of curfews and lockdown measures.

Starting in 2022, after the lifting of restrictions, tourism spending began to rise. Foreign tourism spending surpassed domestic spending, driven by an increase in the number of international tourists, particularly for non-religious purposes. In 2024, entertainment and holidays emerged as the leading non-religious purpose for tourism in terms of spending by inbound foreign tourists, reaching 36.4 billion Saudi Riyals. This growth is attributed to the creation of rich and diverse tourism experiences.

- Increase in the number of employees in the tourism sector:

The following table shows the development of the number of employees in the tourism sector in Saudi Arabia:

Table N° 03: Development of the number of employees in the tourism sector in Saudi Arabia during the period 2016-2024

years	Number of employees
2016	517,279
2017	535,941
2018	552,556
2019	571,152
2020	679,539
2021	767,819
2022	879,815
2023	929,404
2024	966,531

Source: General Authority for Statistics reports, from 2016 to 2024.

The table shows that the number of workers in the tourism sector is increasing year after year. This is due to the growth in tourism facilities, especially hospitality establishments, developed under Vision 2030. The number of workers in the tourism sector was 517,279 in 2016 and rose to 966,531 in 2024, representing a 64% increase from 2016. It is noteworthy that in 2016, Saudi nationals constituted 22% of the total workforce in the tourism sector, and women's participation in tourism activities was very limited at just 3.5% (General Authority for Statistics, 2016, p. 15). However, by 2024, the percentage of Saudi workers in the tourism sector reached 25% of the total workforce. Furthermore, women's participation increased to 13.3% of the total workers in tourism activities in 2024 (General Authority for Statistics, 2024).

To increase the number of Saudi employees in the tourism sector, the Kingdom has worked on developing local tourism competencies through:

- 600,000 training opportunities in the tourism sector since 2019, averaging 100,000 training opportunities annually, to empower youth for employment.
- Five support programs for entrepreneurs and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) offered by the Tourism Development Fund's "TDF Grow" center.

- Significant Growth in Tourism Real Estate:

Thanks to the massive projects launched within the framework of Saudi Vision 2030, the value of tourism investments has doubled since 2021, rising from 1.18 billion Saudi Riyals to 14.8 billion Saudi Riyals in 2024. Driven by these investments, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has witnessed a major boom in tourism real estate (hotels, resorts, tourist homes, chalets, tourist villages, entertainment facilities, etc.). The number of licensed accommodation establishments reached 4,425 in 2024. Furthermore, the number of licensed rooms in hospitality establishments was 280,844 in 2023, rising to 475,970 rooms in 2024, representing a growth rate of 69.5%. This expansion aims to

enhance the Kingdom's capacity to host a larger number of tourists, especially in the coming years which will be packed with major events. (Rowad Alaamal)

- Contribution to GDP:

Saudi Tourism Minister Ahmed Al-Khateeb stated on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum that the tourism sector contributed 4.7% of GDP in 2024, up from 3% in 2019. This indicates that the Kingdom is on track to reach a 10% contribution to GDP by 2030.

6- Conclusion:

The preceding analysis makes it clear that eco-tourism projects in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia represent a central pillar for achieving sustainable tourism development under Saudi Vision 2030. These projects are not limited to being a promising economic activity that contributes to diversifying income sources and creating job opportunities; they go beyond that to encompass environmental dimensions through the preservation and protection of natural resources, and social dimensions by enhancing the participation of local communities and affirming their cultural identity. Leveraging the rich natural assets abundant in the Kingdom within the framework of well-planned and sustainable eco-tourism projects undoubtedly enhances the global attractiveness of the Saudi destination and strengthens its position as a leading tourist hub. Consequently, supporting and developing these projects in accordance with sustainability standards constitutes a strategic step towards achieving a balance between economic development and environmental preservation, in alignment with the goals of sustainable tourism development.

Testing Hypotheses Validity:

- The first hypothesis is confirmed: (Saudi Arabia possesses significant eco-tourism assets, which have helped boost investment in this sector). This hypothesis is grounded in the Kingdom's distinguished natural and environmental resources that have enhanced investment in the eco-tourism sector. Referring to the research content, it is evident that Saudi Arabia boasts a rich environmental and geographical diversity, in addition to archaeological sites and a rich heritage. Consequently, the eco-tourism projects launched within the framework of Saudi Vision 2030, such as the Red Sea Project, NEOM, AlUla, and AMAALA, represent a tangible investment in these natural assets, transforming them into promising tourism opportunities.

- The second hypothesis is confirmed: (Eco-tourism projects within Saudi Vision 2030 contribute to creating sustainable tourism development for the local community). An analysis of the objectives of eco-tourism projects in the Kingdom under Vision 2030 reveals a significant emphasis on utilizing natural resources to serve sustainable tourism development. Most tourism projects launched under Vision 2030 are founded on principles of sustainability, biodiversity protection, and environmental conservation, while involving local

communities in operational and service processes and striving to enhance their cultural identity.

- The third hypothesis is confirmed: (Eco-tourism in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a vital sector contributing to supporting the local economy). The validity of this hypothesis stems from several indicators, including:

- * Growth in the number of international visitors, with the Kingdom receiving approximately 30 million international visitors in 2024.

- * It is noteworthy that the number of international tourists for non-religious purposes recorded 59% of the total number of inbound tourists.

- * An increase in inbound tourism spending, which reached 168.5 billion Saudi Riyals in 2024, a 19% increase from 2023.

- * The total economic impact of tourism (direct and indirect) reached approximately 498 billion Saudi Riyals in 2024, representing 12.45% of the GDP, compared to 11.5% in 2023.

Recommendations:

Based on the preceding analysis, we propose the following:

- Continued Support for Successful Models: Persist in supporting successful projects like the Red Sea Project and expand the scope of such exemplary, sustainable models.

- Integration with National Initiatives: Link eco-tourism with national initiatives, such as the "Saudi Green Initiative," to create integrated and mutually reinforcing environmental policies.

- Strengthening Partnerships: Enhance cooperation with local communities and international bodies by establishing local and foreign partnerships to ensure the long-term sustainability and global best practices of projects.

- Promotion of Green Hospitality: Encourage the adoption of green hospitality practices by providing incentives for hotels and accommodations that implement environmentally friendly operations.

- Performance Monitoring: Establish clear and measurable Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to consistently track the environmental and economic impact of all eco-tourism projects.

- Enforcement and Penalties: Impose strict fines and penalties on individuals or entities, whether local or foreign tourists, who violate environmental regulations and cause damage to ecosystems.

- Leveraging Religious Tourism: Utilize the occasions of Hajj and Umrah to promote eco-tourism initiatives and raise awareness among pilgrims about the importance of environmental conservation.

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