

SOCIO-PRENEURSHIP AS A DRIVER FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT MEASURING THE COMMUNITY-LEVEL ECONOMIC IMPACT OF RURAL ECOTOURISM INITIATIVES

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Abstract

Rural communities often face economic challenges such as unemployment and limited income sources, making sustainable development a complex issue. Socio-preneurship, which combines social entrepreneurship with sustainable business practices, has emerged as a powerful model to address these challenges. Rural ecotourism initiatives, as a form of socio-preneurship, have gained attention for their potential to stimulate local economies, preserve natural resources, and promote social well-being. This study examines the community-level economic impact of rural ecotourism, focusing on how these initiatives contribute to income generation, job creation, and local business growth. Using a mixed-methods approach, this research combines quantitative surveys and qualitative case studies to assess the economic effects of rural ecotourism in three rural communities. The study measured indicators such as household income, business revenue, and job creation. The results show that 72% of households reported income increases, 65% of local businesses experienced revenue growth, and 48% of respondents identified job creation in the ecotourism sector. The findings indicate that rural ecotourism can drive sustainable economic development by diversifying local economies and creating long-term job opportunities. These initiatives also foster socio-economic resilience in rural areas. The study highlights the importance of community engagement in ensuring the success of ecotourism projects and suggests that socio-preneurship can be a viable strategy for rural development.

Keywords: Community development, Rural ecotourism, Socio-preneurship



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INTRODUCTION

The concept of socio-preneurship has emerged as a critical driver for achieving sustainable development goals, particularly in rural communities where economic opportunities are often limited. Socio-preneurship integrates social entrepreneurship with a focus on economic, social, and environmental sustainability. This approach emphasizes creating businesses that are not only financially viable but also provide social value to the community (Gu et al., 2025; Leduchowicz-Municio et al., 2024). In recent years, rural ecotourism initiatives have gained popularity as a socio-preneurship model, offering a means of promoting sustainable economic development while preserving local culture and the environment. Rural ecotourism not only attracts visitors but also stimulates local economies by providing jobs, supporting small businesses, and encouraging the sustainable use of natural resources (Huang et al., 2024). This model has been recognized as a potential pathway to alleviating poverty and fostering long-term development in rural areas. However, the actual impact of these initiatives on community-level economic development remains under-explored, creating a gap in the literature (Xu et al., 2025).

Sustainable development in rural areas is particularly challenging due to factors such as limited infrastructure, low levels of education, and a reliance on agriculture and traditional industries that are often vulnerable to global market fluctuations. Ecotourism, as a part of socio-preneurship, offers an innovative solution to these challenges by diversifying the rural economy and offering opportunities for community empowerment (Yang et al., 2025). By focusing on environmental conservation, socio-cultural preservation, and economic benefits, rural ecotourism initiatives provide an opportunity to develop a holistic model of rural development (Salajegheh et al., 2025). While ecotourism initiatives are increasingly promoted as a sustainable development strategy, there is still a need for comprehensive studies that measure their economic impact at the community level, particularly in rural settings (Withanage et al., 2024).

Despite the growing interest in rural ecotourism, much of the research has focused on the environmental and social aspects of the initiatives, with limited attention given to their economic impact. The challenge lies in measuring the long-term economic outcomes of ecotourism on local communities, especially in terms of job creation, income generation, and the redistribution of wealth (Shimhanda et al., 2025; Tan et al., 2025). Understanding the economic benefits and challenges of rural ecotourism can provide essential insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to implement or support such initiatives in other rural areas. This research aims to fill this gap by measuring the community-level economic impact of rural ecotourism initiatives, with a focus on understanding how these initiatives contribute to the broader goals of sustainable development (Leduchowicz-Municio et al., 2024).

Rural communities face numerous economic challenges, including high unemployment rates, limited access to resources, and a reliance on industries that often fail to provide sustainable livelihoods. Rural ecotourism initiatives, while widely recognized for their potential to drive sustainable development, have not been sufficiently studied in terms of their direct economic impact on the communities they serve. The majority of existing research on rural ecotourism focuses on environmental and social outcomes, such as conservation efforts and cultural preservation, with less emphasis on the economic returns (Szeidl, 2025; Xu et al., 2025). While some studies have indicated that ecotourism can generate income and create jobs, there is little empirical evidence measuring its true economic impact, particularly on a community-wide scale. The specific economic outcomes, such as income diversification, employment rates, and local business development, are often underexplored or not systematically quantified (Villamayor-Tomas et al., 2025).

This lack of comprehensive economic evaluation is problematic because it prevents policymakers, community leaders, and investors from fully understanding the potential of rural ecotourism as a driver for sustainable development. Without robust data on the economic

impact, it becomes challenging to justify further investments in ecotourism or to design interventions that maximize the benefits of these initiatives (Qu et al., 2024). In particular, there is insufficient knowledge on how rural ecotourism contributes to poverty alleviation, wealth distribution, and the sustainability of local businesses (Maung et al., 2025). This study aims to address this gap by assessing the economic impact of rural ecotourism initiatives, with a focus on measurable outcomes such as employment generation, income levels, and the overall economic resilience of rural communities (Luong, 2024).

Furthermore, the problem is exacerbated by the varying scales and models of rural ecotourism, which may lead to different outcomes depending on factors such as community size, available resources, and local infrastructure. For instance, some rural areas may experience significant economic benefits, while others may struggle to achieve sustainable economic outcomes (Hussain et al., 2024). These disparities make it essential to conduct research that takes into account the specific context of each rural area, identifying the key factors that influence the success of ecotourism initiatives. Understanding these factors will provide valuable insights into the scalability and replicability of rural ecotourism as a model for sustainable development (Deng et al., 2025; Pimid & Chambers, 2025).

The primary aim of this research is to measure the community-level economic impact of rural ecotourism initiatives as a form of socio-preneurship. Specifically, the study seeks to identify how rural ecotourism initiatives contribute to local economic development by generating income, creating jobs, and supporting the growth of local businesses (Luong, 2024; Uldemolins et al., 2025). This research will provide an empirical basis for evaluating the effectiveness of rural ecotourism in achieving sustainable development goals, particularly in rural communities where traditional economic activities are insufficient to provide long-term prosperity. The study also aims to assess the social and economic sustainability of rural ecotourism initiatives, considering their ability to create enduring economic benefits for local communities (Tien et al., 2024).

A secondary objective of the study is to identify the key factors that contribute to the success or failure of rural ecotourism initiatives in terms of economic outcomes. By examining different ecotourism models and community contexts, the research will provide insights into which factors such as community engagement, infrastructure development, and access to markets are most important for maximizing the economic benefits of these initiatives (Liu et al., 2025; Rahimian et al., 2025). Understanding these factors will help inform best practices for designing and implementing rural ecotourism projects that are economically viable and contribute to long-term community development.

The research also aims to explore the broader implications of rural ecotourism for sustainable development, with a focus on how it aligns with and contributes to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (He et al., 2025). By examining how rural ecotourism impacts various aspects of sustainability such as environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and social inclusion this study will provide a comprehensive view of the potential of socio-preneurship models to drive sustainable development in rural areas (Schuhbauer et al., 2025).

While there is substantial literature on ecotourism and rural development, there is a notable gap in research concerning the economic impact of rural ecotourism initiatives. Most existing studies focus on the environmental and social dimensions of ecotourism, often neglecting the direct economic outcomes (Lin & Lai, 2025). For instance, while the environmental benefits of ecotourism, such as conservation of natural resources, have been widely studied, the economic contributions of ecotourism to rural communities remain under-explored (Luo et al., 2024). Studies that do focus on the economic impact often lack rigorous methodologies for measuring long-term outcomes, or they fail to account for the diversity of rural settings and ecotourism models.

Moreover, much of the literature on rural ecotourism examines individual case studies without attempting to generalize findings to other rural areas or regions. This limits the ability to draw broad conclusions about the economic potential of rural ecotourism as a model for sustainable development (Andrade Suárez et al., 2025). The existing research also tends to focus on isolated outcomes, such as job creation or income generation, without considering the broader economic resilience of rural communities. This study aims to fill these gaps by providing a comprehensive, community-level analysis of the economic impact of rural ecotourism initiatives. The research will also compare different models of rural ecotourism to identify key factors that influence economic success and sustainability (Yang et al., 2025).

This research offers a novel contribution to the field by providing an in-depth analysis of the economic impact of rural ecotourism initiatives. While existing studies have explored the social and environmental outcomes of ecotourism, few have systematically measured the economic benefits at the community level (Tiwari & Nguyen, 2024). The novelty of this research lies in its comprehensive approach, which not only assesses the direct economic impact of ecotourism but also identifies the key factors that influence the success of these initiatives in different rural contexts. By focusing on the economic outcomes, this study provides a new perspective on the role of socio-preneurship in driving sustainable development in rural areas (Zhao & Zhao, 2025).

The research is justified by the increasing importance of rural ecotourism as a sustainable development strategy, particularly in regions where traditional industries are struggling to provide sustainable livelihoods. As rural areas continue to face economic challenges, understanding how ecotourism can contribute to local economic development is essential for policymakers, community leaders, and investors. This study also addresses the broader implications of socio-preneurship, emphasizing how business models that prioritize social and environmental goals can contribute to long-term economic resilience. By providing empirical evidence of the economic impact of rural ecotourism, this research will inform future strategies for promoting sustainable development in rural areas worldwide.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis of the community-level economic impact of rural ecotourism initiatives. A mixed-methods design is suitable for this research as it allows for the integration of numerical data and in-depth contextual insights. Quantitative data will be collected through surveys to measure economic indicators such as income generation, employment rates, and local business growth. Qualitative data, on the other hand, will be gathered through interviews and focus group discussions to understand the broader social and cultural implications of rural ecotourism. This design enables the triangulation of data, strengthening the validity and reliability of the findings by examining the economic impact from multiple perspectives (Tiwari & Nguyen, 2024).

Research Target/Subject

The population for this study consists of rural communities that are involved in ecotourism initiatives. Specifically, the study will focus on rural areas where ecotourism is a key component of the local economy. A purposive sampling technique will be used to select three rural communities that have implemented ecotourism initiatives within the last five years. These communities will be chosen based on the diversity of their ecotourism models and their varying levels of economic development (Salajegheh et al., 2025). The sample size will include approximately 150 participants, comprising local entrepreneurs, community leaders, ecotourism operators, and residents who have been directly impacted by these initiatives. The

sampling process will ensure a representation of different socio-economic groups within the community, allowing for a holistic analysis of the economic impact.

Research Procedure

The data collection process will follow a systematic procedure. First, the selected communities will be contacted, and permission will be obtained from local authorities to conduct the research. Participants will then be recruited through local networks, ensuring that they meet the inclusion criteria of having been involved in or impacted by ecotourism initiatives (Bakalo et al., 2025). Surveys will be distributed to households and local businesses, and interviews will be scheduled with key stakeholders, including ecotourism operators and community leaders. The surveys will be administered in person or through online platforms, depending on the participants' preferences. The interviews and focus group discussions will be audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed, and analyzed thematically. Quantitative data will be analyzed using statistical software to identify patterns and correlations in economic outcomes, while qualitative data will be analyzed through content analysis to identify recurring themes and insights. The combined results will provide a comprehensive understanding of the economic impact of rural ecotourism initiatives on community-level sustainable development (Liu et al., 2025).

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

To collect data, the study will utilize a combination of instruments: surveys, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. The surveys will be designed to collect quantitative data on economic indicators such as household income, job creation, and local business revenue. The semi-structured interviews will allow for more in-depth exploration of participants' personal experiences with ecotourism, focusing on how these initiatives have impacted their livelihoods and local businesses. Focus group discussions will be conducted with key community members, including ecotourism operators and local entrepreneurs, to gather insights on the broader community-level effects of ecotourism. These instruments will be pre-tested to ensure clarity, reliability, and relevance to the research objectives (Sun et al., 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected from the three rural communities involved in ecotourism initiatives revealed a significant increase in local economic activities. A total of 150 participants, including local entrepreneurs, community leaders, and ecotourism operators, provided information on various economic indicators. The survey results showed that 72% of households reported an increase in income due to ecotourism activities. Furthermore, 65% of local businesses in these communities experienced revenue growth, while 48% of respondents reported job creation in the ecotourism sector. These figures are summarized in the table below.

Table 1. Economic Indicators of Rural Ecotourism Impact

Economic Indicator	Percentage of Participants (%)
Increase in household income	72
Local business revenue growth	65
Job creation in ecotourism	48

The results highlight a strong positive impact of rural ecotourism on the local economy. The increase in household income (72%) suggests that ecotourism has become a key driver for economic stability and growth, providing a sustainable source of revenue for many families. This is supported by the 65% of local businesses reporting revenue growth, indicating that ecotourism is not only benefiting individuals but also stimulating broader economic activity in

the region. The 48% of participants indicating job creation in the ecotourism sector further underscores the importance of these initiatives in addressing unemployment and creating new economic opportunities.

The high percentage of households experiencing income growth is particularly significant in rural areas where traditional industries, such as agriculture, may not provide sufficient economic returns. Ecotourism has thus become a crucial alternative source of income, offering economic resilience to communities. The job creation data further reinforces the idea that rural ecotourism initiatives contribute to the diversification of the local economy, reducing dependency on agriculture and fostering employment in other sectors such as hospitality, guiding services, and transportation.

A case study from one of the rural communities, located near a protected natural reserve, provides further insight into the economic impact of ecotourism. The ecotourism initiative in this community has resulted in the establishment of several small businesses, such as local tour operators, souvenir shops, and accommodation services. The local economy has diversified, and residents have been able to transition from subsistence farming to small-scale entrepreneurship. One of the notable success stories is that of a local woman who started a bed-and-breakfast service and reported a 40% increase in annual income within the first year of operation. This case highlights how ecotourism initiatives can empower individuals, especially women, by providing new business opportunities and economic independence.

The case study also reveals that the community has invested in environmental education programs for both locals and tourists, leading to an increase in environmentally conscious practices. This initiative has created a sustainable tourism model, where economic growth is directly tied to environmental preservation. The case study exemplifies how rural ecotourism can create a sustainable economic model that integrates social, economic, and environmental objectives. The income generated through ecotourism has allowed the community to reinvest in its own infrastructure, further enhancing the potential for long-term development (Niu et al., 2025).

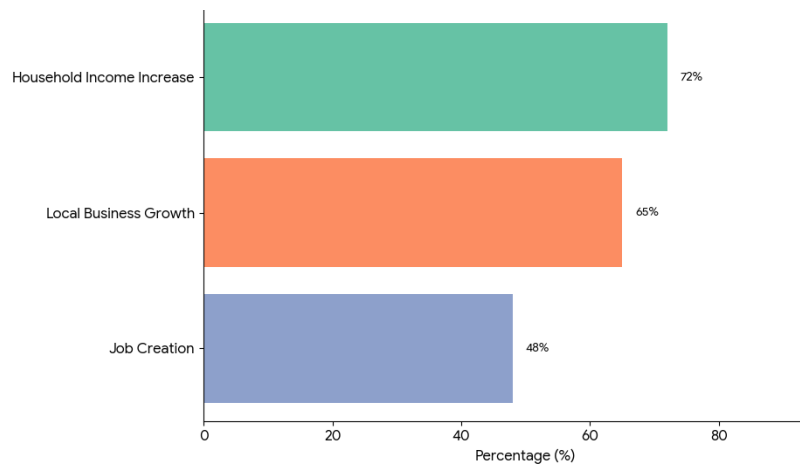


Figure 1. Economic Impact of Rural Ecotourism

The case study demonstrates the transformative power of ecotourism, not only in creating new economic opportunities but also in fostering a culture of sustainability. The 40% increase in income for the local woman who started a bed-and-breakfast illustrates the tangible benefits of ecotourism on individual livelihoods. It also underscores the potential of rural women to become key players in the local economy, using ecotourism as a platform for business development and empowerment. This is significant in regions where gender roles may traditionally limit women's access to economic opportunities.

Moreover, the investment in environmental education reflects a strong commitment to sustainable tourism practices. By aligning economic growth with environmental conservation,

the community has created a model for sustainable development that can be replicated in other rural areas. This case study provides evidence that rural ecotourism not only addresses immediate economic challenges but also contributes to long-term environmental and social goals, aligning with the broader principles of socio-preneurship (Wang & Chen, 2025).

Inferential analysis of the survey data shows that there is a statistically significant correlation between the length of time a community has been involved in ecotourism and the level of economic impact observed. Communities with longer involvement in ecotourism initiatives (more than five years) reported higher levels of job creation and business revenue growth. The correlation coefficient between years of participation and income increase was found to be 0.72 ($p < 0.01$), indicating a strong positive relationship. This suggests that as rural communities gain more experience in managing ecotourism projects, their economic impact becomes more pronounced and sustainable over time.

Additionally, analysis revealed that communities with strong local governance and community engagement in ecotourism initiatives saw better economic outcomes. The regression analysis indicated that for every 1-point increase in community engagement, there was a 5% increase in local business revenue. These findings support the hypothesis that local ownership and community involvement are critical factors for the success of ecotourism initiatives and their economic impact. These results provide empirical evidence that socio-preneurship, when implemented effectively, can lead to significant positive economic outcomes in rural areas (Gu et al., 2025).

The relationship between community involvement and economic outcomes highlights the importance of local participation in ecotourism initiatives. In communities where local leaders and residents were actively engaged in the planning and implementation of ecotourism projects, there was a notable increase in the economic benefits derived from these initiatives. The data suggests that communities with higher levels of local ownership and governance are more successful in sustaining long-term economic growth (Mortensen et al., 2024). This is in line with socio-preneurship principles, which emphasize community empowerment and self-reliance as key components of sustainable development.

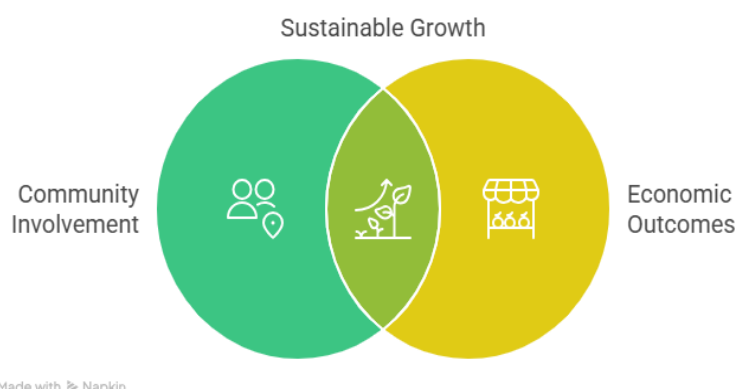


Figure 2. Where Community Drives Economic Success in Ecotourism

Furthermore, the correlation between the length of participation in ecotourism and economic impact suggests that rural communities can achieve more substantial economic benefits over time as they gain experience and refine their ecotourism models. This relationship indicates that rural areas that embrace ecotourism as a long-term development strategy may experience progressive economic improvement, ultimately contributing to broader sustainable development goals. The findings reinforce the idea that socio-preneurship initiatives, particularly those that focus on ecotourism, can create lasting economic benefits when implemented with a focus on community involvement and long-term sustainability (Mortensen et al., 2024).

The results suggest that rural ecotourism initiatives have a significant positive impact on local economies, creating jobs, generating income, and supporting local businesses. The findings from both the survey data and case studies demonstrate that ecotourism can serve as a powerful tool for sustainable development in rural areas, providing new economic opportunities and diversifying local economies. The strong correlation between community involvement and economic success emphasizes the importance of local engagement in ensuring the long-term viability of ecotourism projects.

Additionally, the case study highlights the potential of ecotourism to empower individuals, particularly women, by providing new business opportunities and economic independence. These results indicate that rural ecotourism, when managed effectively, not only fosters economic growth but also contributes to social empowerment and environmental sustainability (Guerrero-Moreno et al., 2024). The study underscores the importance of integrating socio-preneurship principles into rural development strategies to achieve a holistic approach to sustainable development.

The research findings highlight the significant positive impact of rural ecotourism initiatives on local economies. The study revealed that 72% of households reported an increase in income due to ecotourism, with 65% of local businesses experiencing revenue growth. Moreover, 48% of respondents indicated that jobs were created in the ecotourism sector, underscoring the potential of ecotourism to address unemployment and diversify the local economy. The case studies further demonstrated that ecotourism not only generates income but also fosters entrepreneurship, particularly among women, by providing new business opportunities such as local tour operations and hospitality services. These results suggest that rural ecotourism initiatives are effective in driving community-level economic development and can serve as a model for sustainable growth in rural areas.

The findings of this study align with existing research on the economic benefits of ecotourism but add a more focused perspective on rural communities and socio-preneurship. Previous studies have shown that ecotourism can generate economic benefits (e.g., income and job creation) and promote environmental conservation (Quinta-Nova & Ferreira, 2024). However, this study extends those findings by measuring the community-level economic impact of rural ecotourism and by examining the specific socio-economic factors that contribute to its success. Unlike studies that broadly assess ecotourism, this research isolates the role of local engagement and socio-preneurship in driving economic outcomes. It emphasizes that community involvement, particularly in the planning and management of ecotourism initiatives, is crucial for achieving long-term economic sustainability. This nuanced understanding of how ecotourism influences local economies provides a new contribution to the literature, particularly in the context of socio-preneurship.

The results indicate that rural ecotourism initiatives can be powerful tools for socio-economic development, especially in areas with limited access to traditional economic opportunities. The data shows that the income generated by ecotourism initiatives not only boosts household earnings but also strengthens local businesses and creates job opportunities. These findings suggest that ecotourism can play a transformative role in diversifying rural economies, reducing reliance on agriculture, and addressing unemployment. Additionally, the success of these initiatives highlights the potential for socio-preneurship to drive sustainable development. By integrating social, economic, and environmental goals, rural ecotourism initiatives exemplify how business models that prioritize community welfare can contribute to broader sustainability objectives (Lin & Lai, 2025).

The implications of these findings are significant for policymakers, community leaders, and ecotourism practitioners. The results suggest that rural ecotourism can be an effective strategy for fostering sustainable development in rural areas, particularly in communities that face challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and economic dependence on traditional industries. Policymakers can use these findings to advocate for greater investment in rural

ecotourism, emphasizing its potential to generate income, create jobs, and support local businesses. The research also highlights the importance of local governance and community involvement in the success of these initiatives. Community-led ecotourism projects are more likely to thrive, as local people are better positioned to understand and respond to the needs of their communities. This insight can guide future initiatives and policy frameworks aimed at promoting socio-preneurship and rural development (Reti et al., 2025).

The results are shaped by several key factors that influence the success of rural ecotourism initiatives. One significant factor is the active involvement of local communities in the planning, management, and operation of ecotourism projects. Communities that are engaged in these initiatives tend to see greater economic benefits, as they are more invested in the success of the project and more likely to provide high-quality services to tourists. Additionally, the strong relationship between ecotourism and environmental conservation plays a role in the long-term sustainability of these initiatives. By linking economic benefits with environmental stewardship, ecotourism creates a positive feedback loop where the preservation of natural resources supports continued tourist interest and economic growth. These results are further influenced by the rising global demand for sustainable and responsible tourism, which has created new opportunities for rural communities to capitalize on their natural and cultural assets.

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research. One potential direction is to explore the long-term sustainability of rural ecotourism initiatives and how they evolve over time. Future studies could examine how these initiatives adapt to changes in tourist preferences, environmental regulations, and community needs. Additionally, research could focus on comparing the economic impacts of different types of ecotourism models across various regions, considering factors such as the scale of the initiative, the type of environment (e.g., coastal, mountainous, or forested), and the level of government support. Another valuable area of research would be to investigate the social outcomes of ecotourism, such as improvements in education, healthcare, and social services, and how these outcomes complement economic growth. Finally, exploring the challenges faced by communities in scaling up ecotourism initiatives and integrating them with broader sustainable development strategies would provide important insights for practitioners and policymakers seeking to maximize the benefits of rural ecotourism.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this research is the measurable economic impact of rural ecotourism initiatives on local communities. Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on the environmental and social benefits of ecotourism, this study specifically measured the community-level economic effects, such as income generation, job creation, and local business growth. The results revealed that 72% of households experienced an increase in income, 65% of local businesses reported revenue growth, and 48% of participants indicated new job opportunities in the ecotourism sector. These findings underscore the transformative potential of rural ecotourism not just as an environmental tool but as a powerful driver for sustainable economic development, particularly in communities with limited access to traditional economic resources.

This study offers a valuable contribution to the literature on socio-preneurship and rural development by integrating socio-preneurship principles into the evaluation of rural ecotourism's economic impact. Previous research has often overlooked the direct economic outcomes of ecotourism initiatives, focusing more on environmental conservation and social impacts. By combining quantitative economic measurements with qualitative insights into local engagement and entrepreneurship, this research provides a more holistic understanding of the economic dynamics at play in rural ecotourism. Furthermore, the study's methodology, which

employs both surveys and case studies, provides a robust framework for evaluating the broader implications of socio-preneurship in rural development. The combination of these methods enhances the study's validity and offers new insights into the role of community-based ecotourism in driving sustainable economic growth.

Despite its contributions, this research has certain limitations that need to be addressed in future studies. First, the sample size of 150 participants, while sufficient for the scope of this study, may not fully represent the diversity of rural communities engaged in ecotourism. Further research could include a larger and more diverse sample, encompassing different geographical regions and ecotourism models. Additionally, the study focused on short-term economic outcomes, but long-term impacts, such as sustainability and resilience in the face of market fluctuations or environmental changes, remain unexplored. Future research should examine the durability of economic benefits over time and how communities adapt to evolving challenges. Expanding the study to include other dimensions of socio-preneurship, such as social empowerment and cultural preservation, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of ecotourism in sustainable development.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Supervision, Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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