

Interplay of environmental policy and sustainable tourism development in Balkan countries

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Abstract: Tourism is key to the Balkan economies, yet it is growing rapidly, which raises environmental concerns. This work examines how environmental policy and tourism interact in six Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. By looking at the Environmental Performance Index (EPI), the Travel and Tourism Development Index (TTDI), and the number of tourists, this study shows the tough play between Environmental Policy, sustainability, and green tourism growth. Findings show a strong link between green scores and tourism pull, but gaps are due to roads, ads, and local ways. Croatia shows the good of mixing green care and tourism rules, while Albania's rise, with okay EPI scores, shows other key parts at play. The study says that green goals need more than green counts; a full plan tying together nature care, road work, and work with local folk is key. The study ends by saying that made-for-green rules, strong rules, and working across borders are a must to align Balkan tourism with big green goals.

Keywords: *Environmental policy, Green tourism, Sustainable goals, Tourism growth.*

1. Introduction

Tourism is now a key part of global trade, generating revenue and employment opportunities. It also contributes to social and regional development. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), more people have visited distant lands in recent years, despite economic downturns and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as travel increases, concerns about its environmental impact and social sustainability grow. Balancing the economic benefits of tourism with its ecological and cultural costs is a complex challenge requiring thorough assessment. Many tourists visit natural and historical sites, exerting significant pressure on these areas. This can lead to damage caused by climate change, overuse, and population growth. Sensitive environments such as beaches, highlands, wetlands, and historic towns are particularly vulnerable. Consequences include loss of biodiversity, pollution of air and water, land disputes, and depletion of natural resources. These issues often stem from inadequate crowd management. While tourism provides substantial economic benefits for both local and national economies, these gains can diminish if the destinations are degraded or lost. Addressing the conflict between tourism development and environmental and cultural preservation is essential for sustainable growth, requiring effective policies and responsible practices.

Talk on green travel discusses the need to balance economic growth with environmental preservation and traditional practices. Green travel is not just a way to reduce harm to the earth; it incorporates long-term care for nature, traditional ways, and benefits for local communities. It requires plans that ensure a fair distribution of resources both now and in the future. This approach guarantees that we do not deplete resources needed by future generations. In this context, green rules are essential for integrating travel growth with broader environmental goals.

In past years, states, large groups, and firms have established many green rules and plans to reduce the negative impacts of travel. These measures include creating safe spots and parks, implementing

green tags, enforcing waste management rules, setting emission reduction goals, and local initiatives to conserve nature. However, the effectiveness of these rules is often questionable. Frequently, green rules are weakly enforced, funding for them is limited, and their goals are overshadowed by short-term financial needs. Moreover, global travel complicates rule enforcement, as environmental issues in one location can have far-reaching effects across the planet.

The big issue at hand means we must check how well green rules work to fix the bad sides of travel. We look at what works and what fails in these rules. This helps us build better plans for later. Yet, some spots still face too many tourists, trash issues, and loss of their old ways. We must look at many spots to spot the best ways, note the misses, and fit rules to each case.

Now it is key-to investigate how green rules in travel work, due to big world changes. The fast change of our world's weather, the push to reach key world goals, and more tourists wanting green trips all mark a key point. We must think anew about how travel fits with caring for the world. Travelers care more about their mark on the earth, but still, more want to travel. Heads of sports and business folks must find a way to meet this want and yet keep our earth safe.

This work examines how we manage land, ensure its safety, and oversee tours. It considers how groups, rules, and shared responsibilities assist in addressing land care challenges. Tours serve as a suitable context for this study because they involve various groups, including governments, companies, local residents, and visitors with diverse interests. Effective management of tours requires strategies that foster teamwork, trust, and collective responsibility. This work evaluates whether land care rules in tours are effective, aiming to demonstrate how rules can support both land preservation and sustainable growth.

The study examines accurate data, case by case, and reviews regulations in various countries. The focus is on locations with many tourists, where land issues are significant, and effective rules are essential.

The value of this work lies in its assistance to both thought and action. In educational discussions, it explores how rules help maintain safety while allowing for growth. In practical application, it provides those who create rules, manage tours, and conserve land with ideas on how to improve. By identifying what is not working and offering effective fixed plans, it supports both governments and organizations in land management and tourism development.

Finally, safe tours should be the top aim of tour rules. This means not just saving land for all to enjoy later but also ensuring locals benefit fairly from tour growth. Good land rules are key here. Without them, tour growth can fail and spoil the land it relies on.

1.1. Goals of the Study

1. To examine how top travel spots implement and enforce environmental regulations. Focus on how they create, operate, and monitor these rules. Note how each location differs.

2. To find and identify major issues caused by large numbers of tourists in certain areas. Pay close attention to tourist behavior, large constructions, and their impact on natural sites and historical locations.

3. To check what we are currently doing to preserve the green spaces, living webs, and old structures. See how many of the goals we set are being achieved in real life.

4. To make tips based on proof to create green rules in tourism better. The aim is to find a good balance between money growth and conserving nature.

2. Literature Review

The connection between tourism and the environment is complex, considering that nature is now marketed as a travel destination. A large portion of the tourism sector is directly reliant on environmental and natural area activities. Particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an increase in demand for eco-friendly, natural travel (WTTC). In addition, infrastructure development in natural areas, habitat fragmentation, rising global carbon emissions, and direct harm to ecosystems by

tourists all contribute to environmental degradation. Furthermore, the growing number of visitors beyond the ecological and social carrying capacity damages the resource potential and natural assets that attract tourists, reducing the relevance of tourist routes [1]. With over 10% of the world's GDP coming from tourism, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) considers this sector one of the most economically promising [2]. The number of foreign visitors may increase from 1.442 billion in 2018 to an estimated 1.8 billion by 2030 [3]. Over the last 25 years, the number of foreign visitors worldwide has more than doubled, from 1.08 billion in 1995 to 2.4 billion in 2019 [4]. In 2019, 330 million jobs and 10.3% of the world's GDP were directly or indirectly related to domestic and international tourism [5]. According to recent research, the tourism industry's operations and international travel increase energy expenses, carbon dioxide emissions, air pollution, and visitor numbers, all of which have a slow but noticeable impact on climate change [6]. When weighed against the socioeconomic benefits that tourism generates for communities or the state, it is said to be detrimental to the ecological state [7, 8]. In addition to other sources of pollution in tourist destinations, include sewage, solid waste, noise, oil and chemicals, transportation, architectural pollution, and more. Furthermore, inadequately managed and poorly planned tourism infrastructure degrades the environment. Low-quality services, increased waste and pollution, and excessive use of natural resources are the outcomes of this [3]. The development of a strategy to maintain the quality of the environment is aided by an understanding of the intricate problems that the researchers briefly described. A well-defined set of principles dedicated to protecting the environment, experiences, and financial gains is included in ecotourism policy [9]. Ecotourism demonstrates that travelers and tourism industry professionals possess a positive and conscientious attitude toward the preservation and conservation of all elements of the current ecosystem [10]. To lessen environmental harm, another strategy considers the installation of green technologies in infrastructure facilities. One of the contemporary strategies for addressing climate change, according to the Infrastructure for Climate Action Report, is for the state to adopt sustainable infrastructure. The battle against climate change and its mitigation are primarily related to infrastructure, which accounts for 79% of all greenhouse gas emissions. The design, construction, and operation of sustainable infrastructure are predicated on the idea that social, economic, and environmental factors will not be diminished [11, 12].

Planning that is founded on sustainable ecotourism principles is currently the norm in destination management, with the aim of effectively balancing commercial interests with environmental sustainability. Given that the established model offers the local community long-term socioeconomic and ecological benefits, as well as ecological integrity, it is appropriate to regulate the growth and development of tourism using ecotourism principles. To put it another way, ecotourism guarantees ecosystem stability and becomes a powerful weapon against environmental degradation [10]. Numerous studies show how crucial it is to build green technology-based transportation infrastructure, as this will improve the sustainability of the travel and aviation sectors [13, 14]. It should be mentioned that introducing cleaner energy is still a major strategy to improve the stability of the local economy, which depends heavily on tourism [15, 16].

In line with the state strategy for reducing carbon emissions, the researchers offer suggestions for the installation of green systems and infrastructure at airport facilities, which will improve energy sustainability [17, 18]. Since the tourism industry needs to adjust to the new climate realities, the state should implement a variety of strategies to lessen the detrimental effects of tourism on climate change. The impact of tourism on global emissions is four times greater than anticipated, according to studies that examined traveler behavior in 160 countries between 2009 and 2013. The expansion of the tourist footprint has not been slowed by more responsible travel practices or advancements in technology [19].

The current situation demonstrates that if sufficient steps are not taken to improve the existing trends in the tourism industry, the goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 50% by 2050 may be at risk [20]. Prioritizing sustainable tourism in environmental and climate policy is crucial because it will help achieve decarbonization objectives [21]. Many communities can benefit from sustainable livelihood options offered by climate-friendly and sustainable tourism, particularly in developing nations

where tourism is a major source of income [22, 23]. The overall situation of the issue under study suggests that comprehensive steps must be taken to implement the state's environmental policy, which entails using green technologies and infrastructure, as well as the proper growth of the tourism sector.

3. Methodology

There are various steps in the research process, including: (1) determining how ecological state indicators depend on visitor numbers; (2) understanding how travel and tourism development levels relate to environmental performance indicators; and (3) analyzing correlations between policy indicators of sustainable development goals, tourist attractiveness indicators, and the level of tourism industry development. The indicator of the number of arrivals (the tourist attractiveness rating) throughout the year was considered when selecting the countries for the study.

The relationship between tourist appeal, the growth of the tourism sector, environmental protection, and sustainable development policies, which established environmental preservation as a top priority, was established based on the research methodology. To determine the efficacy of environmental policies in well-known tourist locations, the research methodology employed graphic comparison techniques. Indicators that show how well environmental protection policies are working include the Environmental Performance Index (EPI), which evaluates the health of the ecosystem and the state of the environment; one of its components, the Index of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), shows the degree of biodiversity and environmental protection.

An additional consideration is the Travel and Tourism Development Index (TTDI), which measures and identifies policies and factors that guarantee the long-term growth of the travel and tourism industry, thereby aiding in the nation's development. These factors and policies include the business environment, safety and security, health and hygiene, human resources and the labor market, and ICT readiness [24]. The global status of sustainable development is summarized by the 2022 Environmental Performance Index (EPI). The EPI uses performance indicators to rank countries according to ecosystem viability, environmental health, and climate change performance. On a national level, these metrics are used to assess how closely nations adhere to the set environmental policy objectives.

Using the graphic method of comparison, the extent to which the state's environmental policy, sustainable development policy (which is a consequence of the state's environmental policy), and the state of travel and tourism development have affected the nation's appeal to tourists was determined.

4. Results

This analysis explores the relationship between tourism inflows and environmental sustainability in selected Balkan countries. The data set includes the number of tourists, the Environmental Performance Index (EPI), and the Travel and Tours Development Index (TTDI) for each country in 2024. The firm examining the number of tourists and EPI in some Balkan countries (Fig.1, Fig.2) shows significant disparities in their performance. Croatia leads with approximately 21.6 million tourists and the highest EPI score of 62.3. This indicates that effective green regulations and strong environmental policies enhance tourism success. Albania reports nearly 2.65 million visitors and an EPI of 52.2. It stands out as a rising destination, primarily due to affordability, media exposure, and natural attractions rather than green policies. Montenegro attracts only 351,000 tourists with an EPI of 47.7, while Serbia receives around 854,000 visitors with a similar EPI, suggesting that factors such as accessibility, infrastructure, and destination reputation significantly influence tourism beyond environmental performance. The worst performers are Bosnia, with just 197,000 tourists and an EPI of 46.0, and North Macedonia, with 118,000 tourists and an EPI of 50.3. Both fall short in transforming their culture and nature into significant attractions. The comparison suggests that, while there is a correlation between high EPI scores and more visitors as demonstrated by Croatia the relationship is not straightforward. Albania's high score, despite a moderate EPI, indicates that environmental care alone does not determine travel success. The effectiveness of eco initiatives depends on financial investment, political stability, and

strategic marketing. The findings suggest that for Balkan countries to enhance their tourism sectors, policies must combine environmental care with targeted investments and regulatory measures to ensure sustainable and long-term growth.

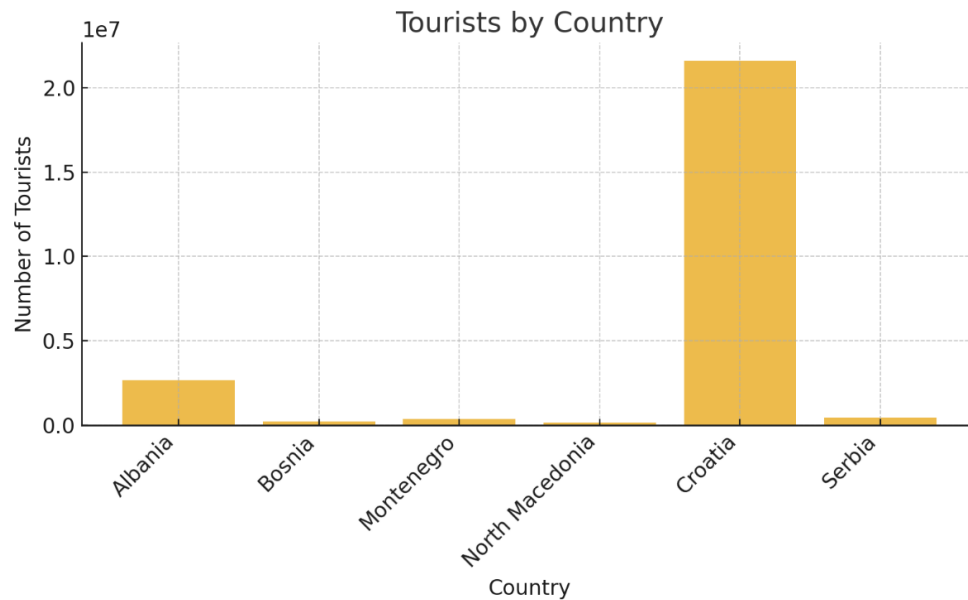


Figure 1.
Total number of Tourists by Country.

The scatter plot (Fig.2) demonstrates the relationship between environmental performance (EPI) and tourism. Countries with higher EPI scores, such as Croatia, tend to attract significantly more tourists, suggesting a positive link between sustainability and tourism inflows. However, some countries deviate from this trend, indicating that other factors such as infrastructure, marketing, and cultural heritage also play a role.

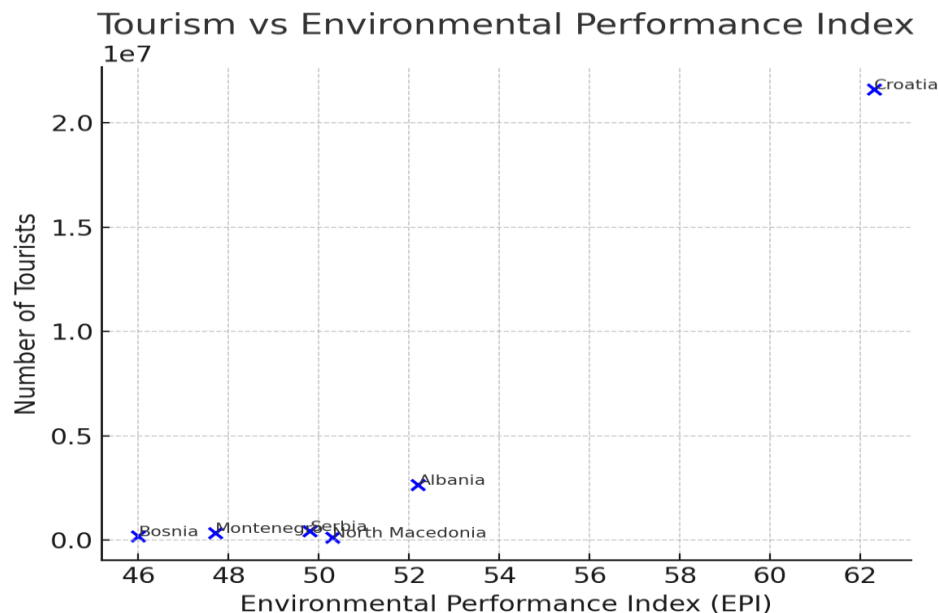


Figure 2.
Tourism vs Environmental Performance Index.

The analysis suggests that while environmental sustainability (measured by EPI) contributes to attracting tourists, it is not the sole determinant. Policymakers should consider an integrated approach combining sustainability, cultural promotion, and infrastructure development to strengthen the tourism sector.

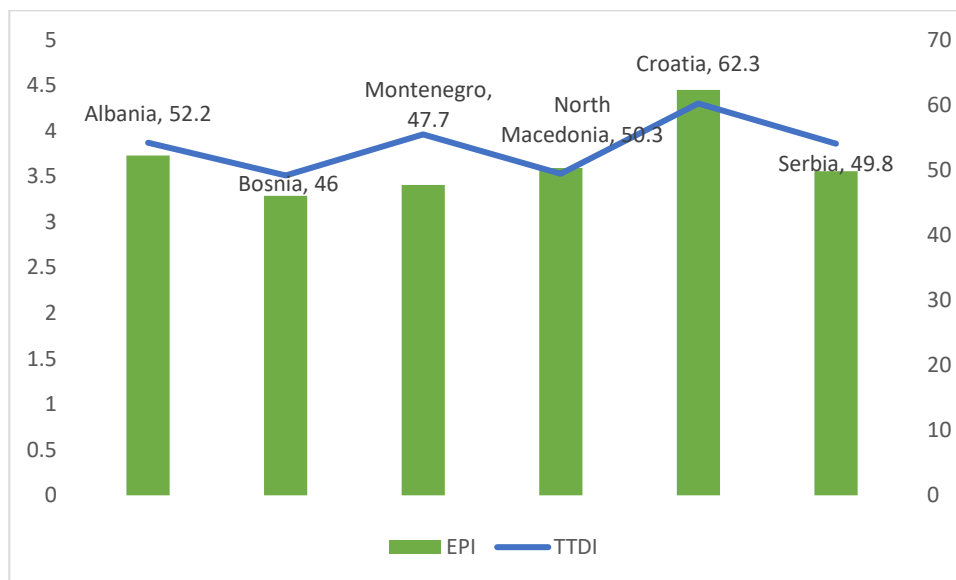


Figure 3.
The relationship between the Travel and Tourism Development Index and the Environmental Performance Index (EPI).

Data from the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia) shows a significant and real link (Fig. 3). It is between how well they care for the environment and how effectively they attract tourists. A correlation coefficient ($r = 0.79$) indicates a strong positive relationship. An R-squared value ($R^2 = 0.62$) suggests that approximately 62% of the variations in the Travel and Tourism Development Index (TTDI) are explained by changes in the Environmental Performance Index (EPI). Croatia ranks highest with high scores on both indices (EPI = 62.3; TTDI = 4.3). This aligns with the idea that environmental care and sustainable practices enhance a location's appeal, as supported by literature. Conversely, Bosnia and Herzegovina is at the lower end with the lowest EPI (46) and TTDI (3.51) scores, indicating that poor environmental management can negatively impact tourism growth. Albania (EPI = 52.2; TTDI = 3.87) and Serbia (EPI = 49.8; TTDI = 3.86) fall within the mid-range. They fit the broad trend and support the view that small, positive changes in environmental care can boost tourism. However, some anomalies indicate that the connection is not definitive. Montenegro (EPI = 47.7; TTDI = 3.96) stands out as an unusual case despite its low environmental care scores. Its appeal might be due to its seacoast, popular tourist destinations, or effective advertising. It compensates for weak environmental practices. Conversely, North Macedonia (EPI = 50.3; TTDI = 3.53) is an unusual case with poor tourism growth despite fair environmental scores. This may be due to inadequate infrastructure, connectivity, or regulations. These anomalies suggest that while good environmental care generally attracts tourists, this relationship depends on other factors such as policies, location, and economic conditions. In all, the data support the idea that prioritizing the Earth is beneficial not only for environmental reasons but also for the growth of tourism. As a side note, revenue from infrastructure such as roads, regulations, and branding must align with environmental initiatives to ensure that gains in Earth care lead to consistent improvements in tourism in the Western Balkans.

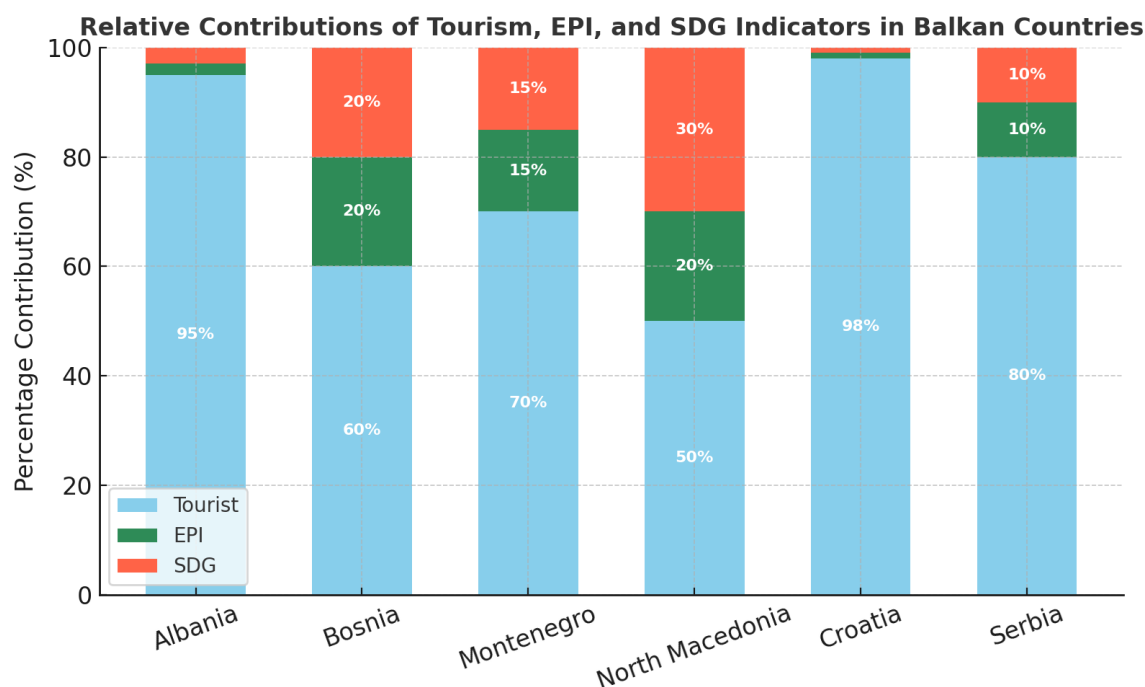


Figure 4.
Relative Contributions of Tourism, EPI, and SDG Indicators in Balkan Countries.

The chart (Fig.4) provides a clear overview of how tourism, the Environmental Performance Index (EPI), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) influence six Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Croatia, and Serbia. It divides 100% of each country's growth efforts into these three components. The chart illustrates the extent to which each country relies on tourism or prioritizes environmental and sustainable development. The data reveal significant variations among the countries. Croatia (98%) and Albania (95%) depend most heavily on tourism, allocating very small portions to EPI and SDGs. This shows they rely heavily on travel to grow strong and attract people. This makes them depend on just one sector. It could pay off now, but it might harm them later. They may face significant risks such as weather changes or major global issues. These lands might find it difficult to adhere to the EU's rules on sustainable growth. However, North Macedonia demonstrates a more balanced approach (50% Tourism, 20% EPI, 30% SDG). This mix suggests a broad growth strategy where travel remains important but is only part of a larger focus on environmental protection and sustainable development. This aligns with recent discussions on growth that consider environmental, social, and economic factors together. Bosnia (60% Tourism, 20% EPI, 20% SDG) and Montenegro (70% Tourism, 15% EPI, 15% SDG) also show a more diversified approach, though less so than North Macedonia. They still prioritize travel but incorporate environmental and long-term goals into their growth plans. Serbia (80% Tourism, 10% EPI, 10% SDG) is somewhat in the middle. It remains primarily tourism-driven but recognizes the need to diversify to maintain stability. Yet, it is not as mixed as North Macedonia. All told, these findings stress how varied growth models are in the Balkans. Lands like Croatia and Albania show how much they lean on travel. This might boost growth now but may hurt them later. On the flip side, North Macedonia, Bosnia, and Montenegro show a mixed model that links travel with earth care and long-term aims, fitting well with global plans on sustainable growth. Serbia is in a middle position, still learning to combine these elements, but travel still comes first. The chart indicates that we need to learn less about tourism and focus more on earth care and long-term goals to maintain strength, meet EU regulations, and promote growth that benefits more people across the region.

5. Discussion

The study results are consistent with previous research, which indicates that the relationship between attraction and tourism use and the environment is not always straightforward and is often complex [25]. The data collected is consistent with the research [26]. When analyzing the factors that make a destination attractive, it was identified that half of the respondents considered environmental preservation as their most important factor, while the other half prioritized other aspects such as beaches, cultural heritage, museums, food, distance, architecture, climate, and healthcare.

Analysis of the environmental performance of the nation showed that countries with better environments and those that obey environmental laws have higher tourist arrivals. The same results can be seen with regard to the sustainability strategy, which is defined in this study. The results of the study show that with better environmental laws and regulations, tourism can grow. Nevertheless, environmental pollution is a major outcome of the growth of tourism. Even though environmental sustainability has a positive impact on the development of tourism, other factors such as the quality of accommodation, the quantity of tourist resources, the accessibility of the destination, and supply also determine how attractive the destination is to tourists [7].

Overtourism, which results from an increase in tourism-related activities, has adverse effects on the quality of life of locals and tourist areas [27, 28]. The results show that state intervention is relevant in ecotourism sustainability and environmental conservation. This includes setting legal frameworks for conducting tourism business and establishing quality standards; offering financial support for the restoration and conservation of ecosystems; promoting and implementing environmental policies; limiting tourism overproduction; and establishing standards for the quality of infrastructure [10, 29]. On the other hand, it is quite difficult to justify the effectiveness of environmental policy depending on the criteria that may include the 'redundancy' in the tourism sector, the irregular application of

environmental policies, or the need to implement certain policies for a specific length of time. The main concern remains a nature protection policy that is both qualitatively developed and flexible. The remaining problems require further monitoring and the need for improving the strategy, even though many destinations have made significant advances in reducing their negative environmental impacts [30]. The effectiveness of environmental protection policies in famous tourist destinations is not always successful. The metrics used to assess performance are not standardized and differ greatly between locations. The complexity of ecosystems, cultural considerations, and disparities in enforcement capabilities across different regions are all contributing factors to the lack of standardization. Since every location has distinct environmental and sociocultural traits, developing a standard set of performance evaluation criteria is challenging.

The results of conservation policies are greatly influenced by local context, and attempts to develop a uniform assessment method may oversimplify the subtleties of policy effects [31]. It is challenging to incorporate all pertinent factors into a single system because ecosystems, social structures, and enforcement capacities are dynamic and interdependent. The intricacy and contextual peculiarities of ecosystems and human interactions in these areas account for the uneven assessment of environmental protection laws in well-known tourist locations. Due to the dynamic and interdependent nature of environmental and sociocultural factors, this issue is worsened by the absence of standardized evaluation criteria. According to the study's findings, the degree of tourism development is determined by several important factors, including the environment's quality (natural and climatic factors, ecological features, and uniqueness); infrastructure support; social and economic factors (hospitality, amenities, cultural uniqueness, economic efficiency, accessibility); and historical, cultural, and religious sites and attractions. It should be mentioned that since visitors do not always aim to visit environmentally friendly locations, tourist attractions are no longer entirely reliant on state environmental policies. The state's tourism marketing initiatives, as well as the placement of specific tourist destinations and routes, may be additional factors. Simultaneously, it is challenging to track the effects of environmental policies on specific desirable locations rather than the nation. The following should be suggested as distinct strategies that could affect the efficacy of environmental protection laws and the process for assessing the condition of the environment.

While adhering to general environmental principles, the relevant public authorities implementing environmental policy should create a flexible evaluation system that will enable destinations to modify metrics to their unique ecological and sociocultural characteristics. Given the unique characteristics of various nations' approaches, cross-border cooperation must be encouraged to establish shared stances on important evaluation criteria, acknowledging regional variations while fostering coherence.

Additionally, it is important to put in place ongoing monitoring systems that consider the shifting dynamics of local communities and ecosystems, enabling prompt modifications to evaluate techniques and public policy. Given the unique characteristics of various nations' approaches, cross-border cooperation must be encouraged to establish shared stances on important evaluation criteria, acknowledging regional variations while fostering coherence. To enable prompt modifications of public policy and assessment techniques, it is also necessary to establish ongoing monitoring systems that consider the shifting characteristics of ecosystems and local dynamics. Involving local communities, environmental specialists, state representatives, and tourism industry representatives in the development of evaluation criteria is a crucial step in guaranteeing thorough consideration of both economic and environmental factors.

A long-term perspective that acknowledges that the effectiveness of public policy can manifest over long periods of time, necessitating evaluations that span several years, is necessary, considering the inertia of environmental measures' results. Recognizing the unique characteristics of each location and finding a balance between context-specific methods and standardized evaluation are necessary to remove the obstacles caused by inconsistent assessment. A more thorough and comprehensive understanding of the efficacy of environmental protection laws in well-known tourist locations ought to result from the use of this methodology.

6. Conclusions

The study provided a broad understanding of the effectiveness of environmental conservation strategies by performing a comprehensive analysis of the impact of tourism, conservation, and policy frameworks in well-known tourist destinations. The results of the study reveal the importance of finding the right middle ground between promoting the growth of the tourism industry and the conservation of natural and cultural resources that attract tourists. When the contextual characteristics of each destination are combined with the effectiveness of public conservation management, the study presents a distinct pattern. The conservation achievements differ across regions owing to the inherent diversities in ecosystems, cultures, and the capacity to adopt the right policies, which further support this relationship. As highlighted by the underlined information, it is important to embrace an integrated approach that goes beyond traditional conservation methods. This paper cautions that for environmental policy to be effective, it must consider environmental, social, and economic dimensions of the issue and the complex interrelationships that define its consequences. As per the analysis, a good environmental policy is one that addresses ecological, sociocultural, as well as economic factors. For this policy to be successful, technology implementation, proper planning, public involvement, and constant checking and evaluation are crucial. There is no single recipe for all locations, though; every site is unique and needs tailor-made solutions that fit the ecological and cultural circumstances. The study's conclusion is that simplicity cannot be used to address the complexity of evaluating environmental policies. For this purpose, the interpretation of the success factors is a collaborative and dynamic process that must be context-specific and mutual between governments, local communities, researchers, and the tourism industry. Although sustainable development between the growth of tourism and the conservation of nature has been achieved to some extent, this path has not been fully exhausted. Strategies that are in harmony with the dynamics of the tourism industry's development and environmental management are essential for the effectiveness of environmental protection policies in well-known tourist areas. The paper calls for a shift to locally relevant and integrative approaches that are specific to the context of a given destination and for the dual needs of conservation and tourism to create the future.

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Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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