

SUSTAINABLE FOUNDATIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF REGIONAL TOURISM IN AZERBAIJAN

Dargahov V.S.^{1*}, Asgarli G.F.², Imrani Sh.V.^{2,3}, Karimli G.F.³

¹*Baku State University, Azerbaijan*

23, Zahid Khalilov Street, Baku, AZ1148

²*Institute of Geography, Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan*

117, H. Javid Ave., Baku, AZ1073

³*Mingachevir State University, Azerbaijan*

21, D. Aliyeva Street, Mingachevir, AZ4500

**Corresponding author: vuqardargahov@bsu.edu.az*

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Summary. This study examines the contribution of tourism to sustainable regional development in Azerbaijan by integrating survey-monitoring results with official statistical indicators. Tourism demand, recreational preferences, overnight stays, accommodation activity, and regional tourism dynamics were analyzed using comparative statistical methods, SPSS, Chi-Square testing, correlation, and regression analysis. The analysis covers the principal tourism-oriented economic regions of Azerbaijan and evaluates differences in demand for nature-based recreation, wellness, ecotourism, outdoor activities, and cultural heritage tourism. The results indicate particularly strong demand for nature-based recreation and demonstrate substantial regional differences in tourism activity. Guba-Khachmaz recorded the highest growth in overnight stays, while Shaki-Zagatala and Ganja-Dashkasan also showed significant positive dynamics. Regression models produced high goodness-of-fit values across the analyzed regions ($R^2 = 0.964\text{--}0.990$; $p < 0.05$), supporting a positive relationship between tourism activity and regional economic development. The findings also show that nature-based recreation, ecotourism, wellness, and outdoor tourism have considerable potential to generate additional regional value. Sustainable tourism policies should therefore combine destination development, local-resource use, infrastructure improvement, community participation, and diversified tourism products to strengthen regional economic resilience.

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1. Introduction

Tourism is an important driver of regional economic and social development through employment creation, local income generation, entrepreneurship, and the formation of added value. Its effects are particularly significant in rural and peripheral regions, where tourism can diversify economic activity and support the use of local natural and cultural resources. Regional tourism development can also stimulate investment in accommodation, transport, services, and other related sectors (Economic Forum, 2021; Walas et al., 2025).

In Azerbaijan, tourism has increasingly been considered within sustainable and regional development strategies. The development of tourism destinations can strengthen local economies, improve community welfare, create new professional opportunities, and increase the economic value of regional resources. Investment and effective resource use are therefore important for maintaining the sector's long-term contribution to regional development (Imrani et al., 2025).

However, evaluating this contribution requires more than general tourism statistics. Combining official indicators with survey-monitoring data makes it possible to compare actual tourism flows with visitor preferences and identify regional differences in demand. Accordingly, this study aims to assess the role of tourism in the sustainable development of Azerbaijan's regions by integrating official statistical data with survey results and SPSS-based statistical analysis.

2. Research materials and methods

This study combines official tourism statistics with survey-monitoring data to assess regional differences in tourism demand and their relationship with sustainable regional development in Azerbaijan. The analysis covers the Shaki-Zagatala, Mountainous Shirvan, Guba-Khachmaz, Lankaran-Astara, Ganja-Dashkasan, Karabakh, and Eastern Zangezur economic regions. Official indicators include tourist flows, overnight stays, accommodation activity, and regional tourism dynamics, while survey data are used to examine preferences for different forms of recreation and tourism.

2.1. Literature review

Previous studies demonstrate that regional tourism can contribute to economic growth, employment, infrastructure development, destination competitiveness, and community income, although its effects vary spatially and depend on governance, human capital, accessibility, and resource use (Motsa et al., 2021; Astanaku-lov & Goyipnazarov, 2023; Li et al., 2024). Research on Azerbaijan similarly emphasizes the importance of tourism-recreation zoning, natural tourism resources, ecotourism, and destination development for regional economies (Imrani & Veliyeva, 2021; Dargahov et al., 2023, 2024; Imrani et al., 2024).

Sustainable tourism research increasingly links regional development with circular resource use, community participation, infrastructure, digitalization, and environmental responsibility (Baggio & Cooper, 2011; Einarsson & Sorin, 2020; UNWTO, 2021). These approaches indicate that tourism should be assessed not only through visitor numbers but also through its relationship with regional demand, local resources, economic activity, and sustainability.

2.2. Methodology

The methodological framework combines survey monitoring, comparative analysis, Chi-Square testing, correlation analysis, and regression modelling to assess the relationship between tourism demand and regional development. Survey data were processed in SPSS to compare observed and expected frequencies of tourism preferences, while official statistical indicators were used to evaluate regional differences and temporal changes in tourism activity.

Regression analysis was applied to examine changes in overnight stays across the selected economic regions. The B coefficient, constant (A), coefficient of determination (R^2), and p-value were used to assess the direction, explanatory power, and statistical significance of the models. Survey results were then compared with official regional statistics to identify relationships between tourism preferences, tourism activity, and regional development. The use of integrated survey and statistical approaches is consistent with established methods in sustainable tourism research (Einarsson & Sorin, 2020; UNWTO, 2021; Kaurav et al., 2021).

3. Research results

Tourism is one of the most dynamic sectors of the global economy. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the tourism industry had fully recovered by the end of 2024, accounting for 10.4% of global GDP. Azerbaijan also experienced rapid post-pandemic recovery, reaching 83% of its pre-pandemic tourism level by 2024 (Travel Market Report, 2024). Before the pandemic, tourism accounted for approximately 3.5–4.5% of Azerbaijan's GDP, while its current contribution is about 3.0%, with particularly visible effects on regional economic activity and household income (ARSTA ASSC, 2025).

The value generated by tourism services in Azerbaijan increased from USD 845 million in 2022 to USD 1.2 billion in 2024, although this remained below the level recorded in neighboring Georgia (USD 4.6 billion). Despite increased investment and national tourism-development initiatives, the sector's full economic potential has not yet been reflected in GDP, while WTTC projections indicate further growth over the next five years. Sustainable tourism development therefore requires integrated strategies, investment, transparency, community participation, and the transformation of local resources into tourism products capable of generating regional added value (UNWTO, 2017). At the same time, technological and socio-economic innovations in tourism products, services, organizational structures, business models, and circular-economy solutions can strengthen competitiveness and regional economic benefits (Innovation in Tourism, 2017).

To evaluate tourism's contribution to regional development in Azerbaijan, official statistical indicators were integrated with survey-monitoring results and analyzed using SPSS. The analysis covers Shaki-Zagatala, Mountainous Shirvan, Guba-Khachmaz, Lankaran-Astara, Ganja-Dashkasan, Karabakh, and Eastern Zangezur and considers tourist flows, accommodation capacity, overnight stays, recreational preferences, and regional tourism dynamics. These indicators were used to compare tourism demand and assess differences in tourism activity and its potential contribution to regional added value. A total of 1,058 respondents participated in the survey-monitoring, and SPSS analysis was used to determine tourism demand based on variable and fixed frequencies. Among the participants, 650 were male and 450 were female. The

questionnaire focused primarily on demand for different recreational activities and their potential contribution to additional value creation in the regions.

In the SPSS analysis of leisure categories, the respondents were grouped by preferences for passive and active recreation. The Chi-Square analysis in SPSS was used to assess frequency distributions according to the variables. The calculated expected frequencies were 264.5 for passive recreation and 163.5 for active recreation. Thus, if the expected frequency were equal for each category: $\frac{1058}{4} = 264.5$.

This formula illustrates the expected frequency distribution for the passive recreation category. The comparison between observed and expected frequencies across the main recreational categories is presented in Fig. 1.

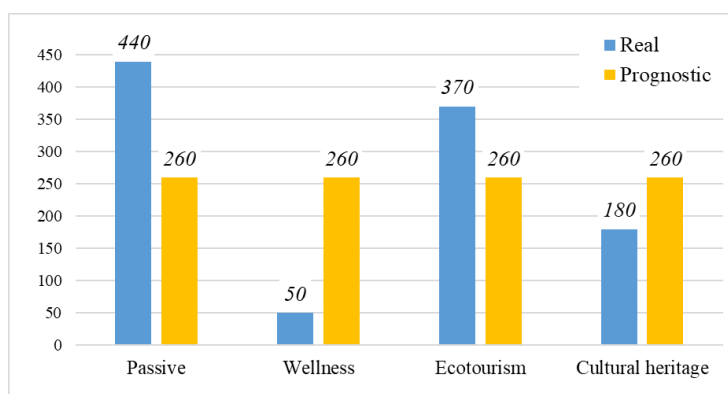


Fig. 1. Comparison of the real and prognostic amounts

The SPSS analysis of tourist demand for different types of tourism activities across regions allows for a comparative assessment between actual and expected figures. The results indicate that the predominance of passive recreation in natural areas has made traditional tourism destinations the primary choice among travelers. In particular, the notable difference between actual and expected figures in health tourism reflects the official statistical data on the number of users of health tourism services in the country.

Specifically, the number of both domestic and international tourists utilizing health tourism services in Azerbaijan stands at approximately 200,000 people, with a significant portion – around 73,500 individuals – receiving services at Naftalan's therapeutic and wellness facilities (ARSTA. ASSC, 2025). Additionally, visitors frequent other wellness resorts under the TABIA Group, such as Galaalty, Lankaran Springs, Yengija Thermal Spa, and Duzdagh Sanatorium. Health tourism services are also offered through traditional social referral systems in sanatoriums operated under the Trade Union Confederation, primarily in Baku and the Absheron Peninsula. The SPSS analysis reveals that the presence of real health tourism offers in the country has the potential to increase both domestic and international tourist numbers and generate added economic value for the regions.

The SPSS analysis of ecological and outdoor tourism activities shows a relatively small difference between actual and expected figures. In the post-pandemic period, the growing demand for outdoor leisure and nature-based recreation has led to the expansion of ecological and outdoor tourism activities and the establishment of new tourism routes across the regions.

The increasing number of visitors to national parks, along with the provision of services along hiking trails, has positioned ecological tourism as an emerging trend. Currently, the number of users of national parks exceeds 350,000 people and continues to grow steadily. In parallel, the offering of tourism routes covering natural areas, route marking, the growing number of companies offering mountain sports, hiking, and other outdoor tourism activities, and the services provided at major resorts such as Shahdag and Tufandagh reflect the dynamic development of this sector. The growth of ecological and outdoor tourism in Azerbaijan, alongside the diversification of agro-tourism and open-air tourism products, has notably contributed to the creation of additional value within the regions (Dargahov, 2023).

In determining the demand for cultural and historical heritage tourism, the difference between actual and expected visitor numbers remains minimal. While cultural heritage is not the primary motivation for most regional tourists, in recent years, the formation of eco-cultural and ethno-cultural destinations and the increasing number of visitors to the nine cultural heritage reserves under the State Tourism Agency (STA) have contributed to steady growth in this sector.

Notable examples include the villages of Basgal, Lahij, and Khinalig as eco-cultural destinations, and the historic center of Shaki as a cultural heritage destination. According to official data, the number of participants in cultural tourism activities has reached approximately 800,000 people, with 667,000 of them visiting the nine cultural heritage reserves managed by the STA (ARSTA. ASSC, 2025). The analysis of survey-monitoring results confirms that the share of cultural heritage within tourism demand continues to rise, directly linked to the emergence of newly established eco-cultural and ethno-cultural destinations and centers. Moreover, in the inbound tourism market, cultural and historical heritage remains a key attraction, with visitors showing a preference for Baku's historical architecture, Shaki's historic center, Gobustan National Historical and Cultural Reserve, and the ethnocultural villages of Basgal, Lahij, and Khinalig.

The increase in regional tourism demand has directly influenced the growth in the number of overnight stays. Statistical analysis shows that the number of overnight stays has increased most significantly in the Guba-Khachmaz and Shaki-Zagatala economic regions. The annual dynamics of overnight stays across the selected economic regions during 2021–2024 are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

The Results of SPSS regression analysis for economic regions (ARSTA. ASSC, 2025)

Regions	2021	2022	2023	2024
Mountainous Shirvan	34,9	56,6	63,7	82,4
Shaki-Zagatala	188,2	220,5	223,4	284,7
Ganja-Dashkesan	64,1	115,2	194,6	203,5
Karabakh	13,7	33,5	46,1	57,2
Guba-Khachmaz	398,7	491,1	609,8	752,3
Lankaran-Astara	112,0	130,0	162,5	182,1

The correlation analysis between the dynamics of overnight stays and the results of survey-monitoring data confirms that regression coefficients indicate growth patterns in both fixed and variable parameters, complementing the monitoring results of tourism demand in these regions. The regression coefficients, constants, coefficients of determination (R^2), and statistical significance levels for the selected economic regions are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

SPSS Regression Analysis Results for Economic Regions

Regions	B (coefficient)	A (constant)	R^2	P
Mountainous Shirvan	15,96	-32027,5	0,987	0,006
Shaki-Zagatala	21,83	-43833,5	0,964	0,017
Ganja-Dashkesan	46,55	-93555,5	0,979	0,010
Karabakh	14,53	-29099,8	0,989	0,005
Guba-Khachmaz	118,0	-236676,5	0,990	0,005
Lankaran-Astara	23,4	-46689,8	0,989	0,005

The regression analysis results indicate that the B coefficient shows a positive relationship between the annual increase in overnight stays and the generation of added value within the regions. For example, in the Guba-Khachmaz economic region, an increase of 118,000 overnight stays corresponds to a positive correlation coefficient when compared with expected figures based on survey-monitoring results. Additionally, the model fit indicators (R^2) for the economic regions were found to be very high, ranging from 0.98 to 0.99. Statistical analyses confirmed, with p-values < 0.05, that the variables contribute to additional economic value and support prospects for sustainable development.

Based on the linear trend graph of overnight stays, the Guba-Khachmaz economic region displays a clear advantage over other regions. Although the Karabakh and Mountainous Shirvan economic regions currently have lower starting figures, they demonstrate consistent upward trends, indicating potential for added value in the future. Furthermore, the sharp increase observed in the Ganja-Dashkasan economic region is directly linked to the growing tourism demand in this area.

In assessing tourist preferences, variable factors correspond to the type of recreation selected, while constant factors reflect the dynamics of respondent opinions. The analysis reveals that natural areas constitute most overall tourist flows, evidenced by statistical data showing increased numbers of visitors to nearby and medium-distance tourism destinations. Accordingly, the dynamic rise in overnight stays in Guba, Gusar, Gabala, Shamakhi, and Ismayilli districts is associated with the predominance of nature-based recreation, eco-tourism, and outdoor tourism activities. The linear trends in tourism activity across the selected economic regions for the period 2018–2025 are illustrated in Fig. 2. The distribution of respondents' tourism preferences, including nature-based recreation, coastal areas, cultural heritage, wellness tourism, and other activities, is presented in Table 3.

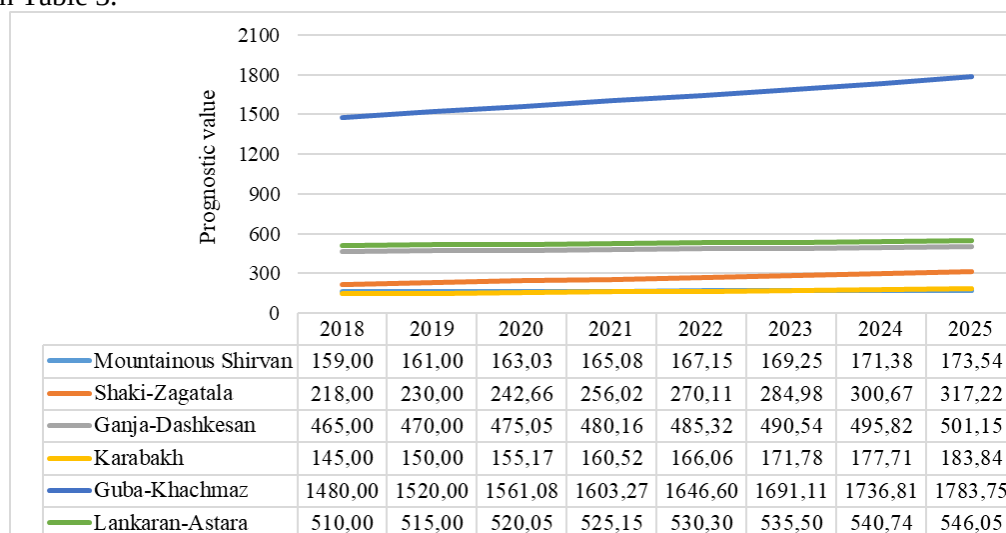


Fig. 2. Linear trend graph for regions (2018–2025)

Table 3

SPSS Coefficients Based on Tourist Interests

Tourist intersts	Amount	Percentage (%)	Coefficient
Nature areas	470	42,6	0,426
Coastal areas and lakes	135	12,2	0,122
Historical and cultural heritage	136	12,3	0,123
Wellness	242	21,9	0,219
Others	121	11,0	0,110
Total	1104	100	1,0

4. Conclusion

The evaluation of the tourism sector's impact on regional development in Azerbaijan, based on the correlation between official statistical data and survey-monitoring assessments, reveals that the demand for nature-based recreation, health tourism, ecological, and outdoor tourism activities has notably increased. This growth has, in turn, contributed to the rise in visitor numbers to traditional tourism destinations and facilitated the creation of additional economic value within the regions.

According to the results of SPSS analyses and regression modeling, the analysis of both fixed and variable factors by location or region showed statistical significance at the $p < 0.05$ level, indicating that these factors contribute to additional economic value. Moreover, the R^2 values obtained from the SPSS regression models demonstrated a high level of model fit across economic regions and existing tourism destinations, ranging between 0.98 and 0.99.

Furthermore, the direct proportionality between the survey-monitoring results and the dynamics of tourism activity confirms that expanding nature-based recreation, ecological, and outdoor tourism activities in destination management strategies will stimulate the development of complementary programs and projects. This finding highlights the importance of integrating these tourism types into regional tourism policies and investment priorities to ensure sustainable economic growth and increased added value in Azerbaijan's regions.

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УСТОЙЧИВЫЕ ОСНОВЫ РАЗВИТИЯ РЕГИОНАЛЬНОГО ТУРИЗМА В АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНЕ

Даргахов В.С.^{1*}, Аскарли Г.Ф.², Имрани Ш.В.², Керимли Г.Ф.³

¹Бакинский государственный университет, Азербайджан
AZ1148, Баку, ул. Захида Халилова, 23

²Институт географии Министерства науки и образования Азербайджанской Республики, Азербайджан
AZ1073, Баку, пр. Г. Джавида, 117

³Мингячевирский государственный университет, Азербайджан
AZ4500, Мингячевир, ул. Д. Алиевой, 21

*Автор, отвечающий за переписку: vuqardargahov@bsu.edu.az

Резюме. В исследовании рассматривается вклад туризма в устойчивое региональное развитие Азербайджана посредством объединения результатов опросов и мониторинга с официальными статистическими показателями. Туристский спрос, рекреационные предпочтения, количество ночёвок, деятельность средств размещения и региональная динамика туризма анализировались с использованием сравнительных статистических методов, программы SPSS, критерия хи-квадрат, корреляционного и регрессионного анализа. Анализ охватывает основные экономические районы Азербайджана, ориентированные на развитие туризма, и оценивает различия в спросе на отдых на природе, оздоровительный туризм, экотуризм, активный отдых на открытом воздухе и культурно-познавательный туризм. Результаты свидетельствуют об особенно высоком спросе на отдых на природе и демонстрируют существенные региональные различия в туристской деятельности. Наибольший рост количества ночёвок зафиксирован в Губа-Хачмазском экономическом районе, тогда как в Шеки-Загатайском и Гянджа-Дашкесанском экономических районах также наблюдалась значительная положительная динамика. Регрессионные модели продемонстрировали высокие показатели качества аппроксимации по анализируемым регионам ($R^2 = 0,964-0,990$; $p < 0,05$), подтверждающие положительную взаимосвязь между туристской деятельностью и региональным экономическим развитием. Полученные результаты также показывают, что отдых на природе, экотуризм, оздоровительный туризм и туризм, связанный с активным отдыхом на открытом воздухе, обладают значительным потенциалом создания дополнительной региональной стоимости. Следовательно, политика устойчивого развития туризма должна объединять развитие туристских дестинаций, использование местных ресурсов, совершенствование инфраструктуры, участие местных сообществ и диверсификацию туристских продуктов для укрепления региональной экономической устойчивости.

Ключевые слова: региональный туризм, статистический спрос, экотуризм, культурный туризм, активный туризм, анализ с использованием SPSS и критерия хи-квадрат, регрессионный анализ

AZƏRBAYCANDA REGIONAL TURİZMİN İNKİŞAFININ DAYANIQLI ƏSASLARI

Dərgahov V.S.^{1*}, Əsgərli G.F.², İmrani Ş.V.², Kərimli G.F.³

¹Bakı Dövlət Universiteti, Azərbaycan
AZ1148, Bakı, Zəhid Xəlilov küç. 23

²Azərbaycan Respublikası Elm və Təhsil Nazirliyi, Coğrafiya İnstitutu, Azərbaycan
AZ1073, Bakı, H. Cavid pr. 117

³Mingəçevir Dövlət Universiteti, Azərbaycan
AZ4500, Mingəçevir, D. Əliyeva küç. 21

*Məsul müəllif: vuqardargahov@bsu.edu.az

Xülasə. Tədqiqatda sorğu-monitorinq nəticələri rəsmi statistik göstəricilərlə birləşdirilməklə turizmin Azərbaycanda dayanıqlı regional inkişafa töhfəsi araşdırılır. Turizm tələbatı, rekreasiya üstünlükləri, gecələmələrin sayı, yerləşdirmə müəssisələrinin fəaliyyəti və regional turizm dinamikası müqayisəli statistik metodlar, SPSS proqramı, xi-kvadrat testi, korrelyasiya və reqressiya təhlili vasitəsilə araşdırılmışdır. Təhlil Azərbaycanın turizm yönümlü əsas iqtisadi rayonlarını əhatə edir və təbiət əsaslı istirahətə, sağlamlıq turizminə, ekoturizmə, açıq hava fəaliyyətlərinə və mədəni irs turizminə olan tələbatdakı fərqləri qiymətləndirir. Nəticələr təbiət əsaslı istirahətə xüsusilə yüksək tələbatın olduğunu göstərir və turizm fəaliyyətində əhəmiyyətli regional fərqləri ortaya qoyur. Gecələmələrin sayında ən yüksək artım Quba-Xaçmaz iqtisadi rayonunda qeyd alınmış, Şəki-Zaqatala və Gəncə-Daşkəsən iqtisadi rayonlarında da əhəmiyyətli müsbət dinamika müşahidə edilmişdir. Reqressiya modelləri təhlil edilən regionlar üzrə yüksək uyğunluq göstəriciləri nümayiş etdirmişdir ($R^2 = 0,964-0,990$; $p < 0,05$). Bu nəticələr turizm fəaliyyəti ilə regional iqtisadi inkişaf arasında müsbət əlaqənin mövcudluğunu dəstəkləyir. Əldə edilən nəticələr, həmçinin təbiət əsaslı istirahətin, ekoturizmin, sağlamlıq turizminin və açıq hava turizminin əlavə regional dəyər yaratmaq baxımından əhəmiyyətli potensiala malik olduğunu göstərir. Buna görə də dayanıqlı turizm siyasəti regional iqtisadi dayanıqlığın gücləndirilməsi məqsədilə turizm destinasiyalarının inkişafını, yerli resurslardan istifadəni, infrastrukturun təkmilləşdirilməsini, yerli icmaların iştirakını və turizm məhsullarının şaxələndirilməsini birləşdirməlidir.

Açar sözlər: regional turizm, turizm tələbi, ekoturizm, mədəni turizm, açıq havada turizm, SPSS və xi-kvadrat təhlili, reqressiya təhlili