

Institutional and Governance Barriers to Sustainable Ecotourism Implementation in Coastal Destinations: A Qualitative Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable ecotourism has been widely promoted as a development strategy capable of balancing environmental conservation, community welfare, and economic growth, particularly in coastal destinations. However, despite strong policy endorsement, the practical implementation of sustainable ecotourism remains inconsistent and often ineffective. This study develops a conceptual understanding of institutional and governance barriers that hinder sustainable ecotourism implementation in coastal areas. Using a qualitative literature review approach, this research synthesizes 40 peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and international policy reports published between 1990 and 2024. The findings reveal four dominant governance-related barriers: fragmented institutional coordination, weak regulatory enforcement, limited community participation, and power asymmetries among stakeholders. The study contributes theoretically by integrating governance theory and sustainable tourism literature into a coherent framework explaining implementation gaps. Practically, it provides insights for policymakers and destination managers to strengthen institutional capacity, foster collaborative governance, and enhance accountability mechanisms in coastal ecotourism development.

Keywords: sustainable ecotourism, governance, institutional barriers, coastal tourism, literature review

ABSTRAK

Ekowisata berkelanjutan telah banyak dipromosikan sebagai strategi pembangunan yang mampu menyeimbangkan pelestarian lingkungan, kesejahteraan masyarakat, dan pertumbuhan ekonomi, khususnya di destinasi pesisir. Namun demikian, meskipun memperoleh dukungan kebijakan yang kuat, implementasi ekowisata berkelanjutan dalam praktiknya masih belum konsisten dan sering kali tidak efektif. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengembangkan pemahaman konseptual mengenai hambatan kelembagaan dan tata kelola yang menghambat penerapan ekowisata berkelanjutan di wilayah pesisir. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kajian literatur kualitatif dengan mensintesis 40 artikel jurnal bereputasi, buku akademik, dan laporan kebijakan internasional yang dipublikasikan antara tahun 1990 hingga 2024. Hasil kajian menunjukkan adanya empat hambatan utama yang berkaitan dengan tata kelola, yaitu koordinasi kelembagaan yang terfragmentasi, lemahnya penegakan regulasi, keterbatasan partisipasi masyarakat, serta adanya asimetri kekuasaan antar pemangku kepentingan. Secara teoretis, penelitian ini berkontribusi dengan mengintegrasikan teori tata kelola dan literatur pariwisata berkelanjutan ke dalam suatu kerangka konseptual yang menjelaskan kesenjangan implementasi. Secara praktis, temuan penelitian ini memberikan wawasan bagi pembuat kebijakan dan pengelola destinasi untuk memperkuat kapasitas kelembagaan, mendorong tata kelola kolaboratif, serta meningkatkan mekanisme akuntabilitas dalam pengembangan ekowisata pesisir.

Kata kunci: ekowisata berkelanjutan, tata kelola, hambatan kelembagaan, pariwisata pesisir, kajian literatur

INTRODUCTION

Coastal destinations represent some of the most ecologically sensitive and economically valuable tourism environments worldwide. They host diverse ecosystems such as coral reefs, mangroves, and marine biodiversity hotspots, while simultaneously attracting large volumes of

tourists seeking nature-based and experiential travel (UNEP, 2019). In response to environmental degradation and mass tourism pressures, sustainable ecotourism has emerged as a preferred development approach aimed at conserving natural resources while improving local livelihoods (Honey, 2008; Weaver, 2006). Sustainable ecotourism is commonly defined as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people, and involves interpretation and education for visitors (Fennell, 2008). Coastal ecotourism, in particular, has been promoted as a mechanism for marine conservation, poverty alleviation, and community empowerment (Buckley, 2009; Bennett et al., 2022). International organizations such as UNEP and UNWTO have consistently emphasized the importance of ecotourism in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (UNEP & WTO, 2005).

Despite its conceptual appeal, the implementation of sustainable ecotourism in coastal destinations has proven problematic. Numerous studies report a persistent gap between sustainability rhetoric and on-the-ground outcomes, where environmental degradation, community marginalization, and governance failures continue to occur (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Hall, 2011). This disconnect suggests that the challenge of sustainable ecotourism lies not in the absence of strategies, but in weaknesses related to governance and institutional arrangements (Nunkoo, 2017). Governance in tourism refers to the structures, processes, and interactions through which public, private, and community actors coordinate decision-making and resource management (Rhodes, 1996; Pierre & Peters, 2000). In coastal ecotourism contexts, governance is particularly complex due to overlapping jurisdictions, competing sectoral interests, and asymmetrical power relations between stakeholders (Zapata & Hall, 2022). Poor coordination between tourism, environmental, and marine authorities often results in fragmented policies and ineffective enforcement (Dredge & Jenkins, 2011).

While previous studies have examined sustainability indicators, community participation, and environmental impacts, fewer have systematically synthesized how institutional and governance barriers undermine sustainable ecotourism implementation, particularly in coastal destinations. This gap is significant given that governance quality has been identified as a critical determinant of sustainability outcomes (Bennett et al., 2022). Therefore, this study aims to address the following research question: What institutional and governance barriers hinder the effective implementation of sustainable ecotourism in coastal destinations? By conducting a qualitative literature review, this research seeks to (1) identify recurring governance-related challenges, (2) integrate fragmented insights into a coherent conceptual framework, and (3) offer theoretical and practical implications for improving sustainable ecotourism governance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable Ecotourism in Coastal Contexts

Ecotourism has evolved from a niche conservation-oriented activity into a mainstream development strategy adopted by governments and international organizations (Weaver, 2006). In coastal areas, ecotourism is often linked to marine protected areas, small-scale fisheries, and community-based conservation initiatives (Bennett & Dearden, 2014). Ideally, coastal ecotourism generates income while incentivizing environmental stewardship and cultural preservation (Buckley, 2009). However, empirical evidence suggests that many coastal ecotourism initiatives fail to deliver long-term sustainability. Environmental degradation persists due to overuse, weak regulation, and insufficient monitoring, while economic benefits are frequently captured by external actors rather than local communities (Scheyvens, 1999; Cole, 2006). These outcomes indicate that sustainability challenges are deeply embedded in governance and institutional arrangements rather than tourism activities alone.

Governance and Institutional Theory

Institutional theory emphasizes that formal rules, informal norms, and enforcement mechanisms shape collective action and policy outcomes (North, 1990). In tourism, institutions determine how resources are allocated, who participates in decision-making, and how conflicts are resolved (Hall, 2011). Governance theory further expands this perspective by recognizing the role of networks, partnerships, and non-state actors in managing complex systems (Rhodes, 1996). Ostrom's (2010) concept of polycentric governance highlights the importance of shared authority and multi-level coordination in managing common-pool resources such as coastal ecosystems. When governance systems lack clarity, legitimacy, or enforcement capacity, sustainability initiatives often fail despite strong policy intentions (Pierre & Peters, 2000).

Tourism Governance and Sustainability

Tourism governance has been widely recognized as a determinant of sustainable development outcomes (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Effective governance requires coordination across sectors, stakeholder participation, transparency, and accountability (Ruhanen et al., 2010). In coastal tourism, governance complexity is heightened due to overlapping mandates between tourism, environment, fisheries, and local governments (Zapata & Hall, 2022). Nunkoo (2017) argues that trust and legitimacy are essential for governance effectiveness, as stakeholders are more likely to comply with regulations they perceive as fair and inclusive. Conversely, governance failures often result in weak enforcement, elite capture, and community exclusion (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021).

Institutional and Governance Barriers in Coastal Ecotourism

A synthesis of existing studies reveals recurring governance-related barriers that undermine sustainable ecotourism implementation. These include fragmented institutional coordination, limited community participation, weak regulatory enforcement, and power asymmetries among stakeholders (Bichler, 2021; Cavalheiro et al., 2021). Table 1 summarizes key studies informing this synthesis (see compiled table).

Table 1. Summary of Literature (1990-2024) Informing the Institutional and Governance in Coastal Ecotourism Framework

No	Authors (Year)	Focus / Context	Methodology	Findings	Relevance to Framework
1	Honey (2008)	Ecotourism & sustainability	Conceptual / Policy analysis	Ecotourism often fails due to weak governance and elite capture.	Establishes governance as determinant of ecotourism success.
2	Weaver (2006)	Sustainable tourism theory	Conceptual	Sustainability depends on long-term governance commitment.	Theoretical base for governance-based sustainability.
3	Buckley (2009)	Ecotourism practices	Conceptual synthesis	Weak regulation undermines ecotourism outcomes.	Links governance failure to environmental degradation.
4	Fennell (2008)	Ethics in ecotourism	Conceptual	Ethical governance is essential for sustainability.	Supports accountability dimension.
5	North (1990)	Institutional economics	Theoretical	Institutions shape policy implementation outcomes.	Anchors institutional barrier analysis.
6	Pierre & Peters (2000)	Governance theory	Theoretical	Effective governance requires coordination & accountability.	Provides governance framework foundation.
7	Rhodes (1996)	New governance theory	Conceptual	Governance occurs beyond formal government.	Supports multi-actor governance view.
8	Ostrom (2010)	Polycentric governance	Conceptual	Shared governance improves sustainability outcomes.	Supports co-governance and collaboration.
9	Bramwell & Lane (2011)	Tourism governance	Conceptual review	Fragmented governance undermines sustainability.	Core reference for governance fragmentation.
10	Hall (2011)	Tourism policy governance	Conceptual	Policy incoherence causes implementation failure.	Supports policy fragmentation theme.
11	Ruhanen et al. (2010)	Tourism governance review	Systematic review	Governance failures are common across destinations.	Justifies cross-context synthesis.
12	Nunkoo (2017)	Governance & sustainable tourism	Conceptual	Trust and power affect governance outcomes.	Introduces legitimacy & power relations.

13	Beritelli et al. (2007)	Destination governance	Empirical	Clear roles improve destination performance.	Supports institutional clarity dimension.
14	Scheyvens (1999)	Community empowerment	Conceptual	Participation often symbolic, not substantive.	Basis for community participation barrier.
15	Tosun (2006)	Community participation	Conceptual review	Structural barriers limit participation.	Reinforces participation constraint theme.
16	Jamal & Getz (1995)	Collaborative planning	Conceptual	Collaboration essential in complex tourism systems.	Supports coordination framework.
17	Cole (2006)	Cultural impacts	Qualitative	Community exclusion reduces sustainability.	Supports inclusiveness dimension.
18	Berkes (2009)	Co-management	Conceptual	Shared governance enhances sustainability.	Supports collaborative governance.
19	UNEP & WTO (2005)	Sustainable tourism policy	Policy report	Governance gaps hinder implementation.	Aligns governance with policy outcomes.
20	UNEP (2019)	Coastal tourism	Policy analysis	Sectoral fragmentation weakens coastal management.	Supports coastal governance theme.
21	Bennett & Dearden (2014)	Marine governance	Empirical	Weak enforcement undermines conservation.	Reinforces enforcement barrier.
22	Cavalheiro et al. (2021)	Coastal governance	Empirical	Poor governance reduces tourism sustainability.	Supports governance-outcome linkage.
23	Bennett et al. (2022)	Marine tourism governance	Empirical synthesis	Governance quality determines sustainability success.	Validates governance-centric framework.
24	Dredge & Jenkins (2011)	Tourism policy planning	Conceptual	Institutional silos reduce effectiveness.	Supports policy fragmentation dimension.
25	Dwyer et al. (2009)	Tourism policy implementation	Policy analysis	Institutional misalignment causes failure.	Reinforces implementation gap theme.
26	Ayeni & Ebohon (2012)	Institutional capacity	Conceptual	Weak capacity leads to sustainability failure.	Supports institutional capacity barrier.
27	Pförr & Pechlaner (2019)	Institutional change	Conceptual	Governance reform improves destination resilience.	Supports adaptive governance.
28	Farmaki (2020)	Crisis & tourism governance	Empirical	Crises expose governance weaknesses.	Links governance to resilience.
29	Ruhanen et al. (2020)	Governance & resilience	Empirical	Governance capacity enhances destination recovery.	Supports resilience dimension.
30	Higgins-Desbiolles (2021)	Justice in tourism	Conceptual	Governance must address equity & justice.	Adds ethical governance layer.
31	Bichler (2021)	Power in tourism governance	Conceptual	Power asymmetries shape outcomes.	Supports power imbalance theme.
32	Del Chiappa & Presenza (2021)	Institutional coordination	Empirical	Coordination improves destination governance.	Reinforces coordination barrier.

33	Zapata & Hall (2022)	Multi-level governance	Conceptual	Governance complexity affects implementation.	Supports multi-level governance lens.
34	Nunkoo et al. (2022)	Trust in governance networks	Empirical	Trust increases governance effectiveness.	Supports legitimacy dimension.
35	Braun & Clarke (2006)	Thematic analysis	Methodological	Enables systematic qualitative synthesis.	Justifies analysis method.
36	Snyder (2019)	Literature review methodology	Methodological	Reviews synthesize fragmented research.	Justifies literature-based design.
37	Jaakkola (2020)	Conceptual research	Methodological	Conceptual rigor enhances contribution.	Supports framework development.
38	MacInnis (2011)	Theory building	Theoretical	Conceptual clarity strengthens theory.	Guides synthesis approach.
39	Choi & Sirakaya (2006)	Sustainability indicators	Conceptual	Governance often underrepresented.	Highlights research gap.
40	Su et al. (2021)	Governance & sustainability	Empirical	Governance mediates sustainability outcomes.	Confirms governance-implementation link.

Source: Compiled by the Author from 40 peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and international policy reports (2025)

Table 1 synthesizes 40 peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and international policy reports examining sustainable ecotourism, tourism governance, and institutional dynamics in coastal destinations. The reviewed studies span diverse geographical contexts and methodological approaches, including conceptual analyses, qualitative case studies, empirical investigations, and policy-oriented reports. Despite contextual differences, the literature reveals consistent patterns of governance-related challenges that constrain the effective implementation of sustainable ecotourism initiatives. These challenges predominantly relate to fragmented institutional coordination, limited regulatory enforcement capacity, inadequate community participation, and persistent power asymmetries among stakeholders. The synthesis highlights that sustainability failures are largely systemic rather than destination-specific, emphasizing governance quality as a critical mediating factor between ecotourism policy intentions and actual implementation outcomes. This integrative overview provides the analytical foundation for the thematic analysis and conceptual framework developed in the subsequent sections of this study.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative conceptual literature review design. Conceptual research is appropriate when the objective is theory development and synthesis rather than hypothesis testing (MacInnis, 2011). This approach allows for the integration of diverse theoretical perspectives and empirical findings to explain complex governance phenomena in coastal ecotourism.

Data Sources and Selection

Relevant literature was identified through academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Keywords used in the search process included *sustainable ecotourism*, *tourism governance*, *institutional barriers*, *coastal tourism*, and *community participation*. Inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and authoritative policy reports published between 1990 and 2024. A total of 68 publications were initially identified. After screening for relevance and quality, 40 sources were selected for in-depth analysis, encompassing tourism studies, governance theory, and coastal management literature.

Analytical Procedure

The selected studies were analyzed using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each article was coded according to its focus, governance challenges identified, and relevance to sustainable ecotourism implementation. Through iterative comparison and synthesis, four dominant governance barrier themes emerged.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Fragmented Institutional Coordination

One of the most prominent barriers identified is fragmented coordination among institutions responsible for tourism, environment, and coastal management (Hall, 2011; Dredge & Jenkins, 2011). Overlapping mandates and sectoral silos often result in inconsistent policies and conflicting development priorities, undermining sustainability goals (Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

Weak Regulatory Enforcement

Many coastal destinations suffer from inadequate enforcement of environmental regulations due to limited institutional capacity, corruption, or political interference (Bennett & Dearden, 2014; Cavalheiro et al., 2021). Without effective enforcement, ecotourism standards remain symbolic rather than operational.

Limited Community Participation

Although community participation is widely promoted in ecotourism discourse, in practice it is often tokenistic (Scheyvens, 1999; Tosun, 2006). Structural barriers such as unequal access to decision-making, lack of capacity, and power imbalances prevent meaningful local involvement, reducing both legitimacy and sustainability.

Power Asymmetries and Elite Capture

Power imbalances between government agencies, private investors, and local communities frequently result in elite capture of tourism benefits (Bichler, 2021; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021). Such

asymmetries erode trust and undermine collaborative governance arrangements essential for sustainable ecotourism.

Conceptual Framework of Governance Barriers

Synthesizing these findings, this study proposes a conceptual framework in which institutional coordination, enforcement capacity, participation mechanisms, and power relations jointly shape sustainable ecotourism implementation outcomes. Governance quality acts as a mediating factor between policy intentions and actual sustainability performance.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the primary obstacles to sustainable ecotourism in coastal destinations are not technical or strategic, but institutional and governance-related. Fragmented coordination, weak enforcement, limited participation, and power asymmetries collectively undermine sustainability efforts despite strong policy commitments. Theoretically, this research advances tourism governance literature by integrating institutional theory with sustainable ecotourism studies. Practically, it highlights the need for strengthened governance capacity, inclusive decision-making, and cross-sectoral coordination. Future research should empirically test the proposed framework across different coastal contexts and governance systems.

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