



Tourism and Sustainable Development: A Cross-Reading through Tourist Guides

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Abstract:

This research contributes to the ongoing initiative to advance sustainable tourism by harmonising economic growth, environmental conservation, and cultural enrichment. The situation of tourist guides offers a pertinent perspective on how field practitioners interpret and convey the ideas of sustainability to visitors.

The primary concern pertains to the capacity of guides to serve as authentic mediators among the territory, local residents, and tourists, while including the ecological and social aspects of sustainable development. The aims are to examine the instructional and awareness-raising functions of guides, to delineate their specific practices, and to assess their constraints within a framework characterised by institutional and environmental obstacles. The research is a qualitative approach that entails the analysis of verbatim transcripts and speeches delivered by tourist guides. The findings indicate that, despite a sincere intent to participate, structural and organisational limitations impede the efficacy of initiatives. The discourse underscores the necessity for improved training, institutional backing, and stronger cooperation among stakeholders. Ultimately, viewpoints and suggestions are presented to enhance the role of guides in fostering genuinely sustainable tourism.

Keywords: Tourism; Sustainable Development; Sustainable Tourism; Tourist guides, Local development

Jel Classification Codes: L83, Z32, Q01

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is recognised as a fundamental catalyst for economic, social, and cultural advancement globally (Nunkoo et al, 2020; Antonakakis et al, 2019). The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) states that it constitutes around 10% of global gross domestic product (GDP) and creates one in ten jobs, highlighting its vital contribution to economic development and employment generation. This contribution extends well beyond mere economic considerations: the sector serves as a strategic tool for economic diversification, especially in emerging nations aiming to diminish their reliance on natural resources or conventional industries (Antonakakis et al, 2019).



In addition to its economic advantages, tourism fosters intercultural contact, enhances history, and increases regional appeal, therefore aiding local development and mitigating regional disparities. It serves as a catalyst for intercultural communication and fosters enhanced comprehension among populations (Castilho & Fuinhas, 2025). Moreover, it fosters innovation in services, especially via digital technology and sustainable practices, thereby enhancing the competitiveness of destinations. Ultimately, tourism fosters a sense of belonging and pride within local communities, empowering them to participate actively in their own development (Leal Londoño & Medina, 2024).

However, the persistent expansion of tourism is eliciting growing apprehensions regarding its environmental, cultural, and social ramifications. The rigorous exploitation of natural resources, congestion at specific heritage sites, pollution, and excessive energy usage underscore the shortcomings of the conventional tourism strategy. Gössling (2002) delineates numerous crucial features of these repercussions, encompassing landscape alteration, heightened energy consumption, and shifts in environmental perception prompted by travel. Hardy et al, (2002) cautions against a 'weak sustainability' paradigm, wherein environmental preservation occurs solely when it directly benefits tourism products, failing to adequately balance economic, social, and ecological dimensions.

In this context, Sustainable tourism emerges as an essential alternative for harmonising economic development, conservation of natural resources, and respect for cultural identities. El Archi & Benbba (2022) asserts that sustainable tourism seeks to ensure the equitable management of tourism resources by incorporating environmental, social, and economic aspects to secure their preservation for future generations. Fauzi (2023) underscore the necessity of transitioning to more sustainable tourism models that can diminish the sector's ecological footprint while fostering beneficial effects for local populations. Loureiro et al, (2024) assert that the notion of sustainable tourism represents a paradigm change from conventional tourism, incorporating stakeholder accountability, social equality, and environmental sustainability.

Sustainable tourism has emerged as a significant concern in modern tourist policy, serving as a crucial reference framework that seeks to harmonise regional appeal, resource preservation, and social equity (Briuet al, 2011). It extends beyond a theoretical framework; it necessitates the extensive dissemination of its principles among stakeholders and the relevant public to promote the adoption of responsible behaviour (Marcotte et al, 2017). This aspect of communication and awareness-raising is a fundamental component in the successful execution of this methodology.

In this dynamic, tourist guides, frequently relegated to the status of simple practical informants, actually hold a pivotal role at the core of the visitor experience (Omma, 2024). They serve as authentic cultural and ideological intermediaries, adept at translating, interpreting, and prioritising the narratives of destinations, thus influencing visitor behavior whether by advocating for sustainable travel, bolstering the local economy, or fostering respect for the environment and cultures ((Dung, 2024). This guiding talent extends well beyond logistics: guides are genuine agents of sustainability.



Recent scholarly research offers definitive illustrations of its function. A report in Tibet indicates that local guides utilise their religious history, especially Buddhist charity, to foster harmonious connections with Western guests and collaboratively develop sustainable tourism practices (Omma, 2024). An ethnographic study in Arctic Norway indicates that guides are influenced by Sámi indigenous knowledge and embrace a relational ethic that enhances visitors' connection to environment and their dedication to cultural preservation (Omma, 2024). Moreover, research conducted in Turkey emphasises the practical competencies of guides environmental consciousness, historical conservation, and community support as well as their function in fostering sustainable practices (Dung, 2024).

These research emphasise that tourist guides can effectively serve as agents of sustainability, translating abstract ideas into concrete acts in practice. Nonetheless, their function extends beyond mere information dissemination; they serve as cultural and social intermediaries whose actions can significantly impact tourist conduct. This is a crucial inquiry: to what degree do tourist guides genuinely facilitate the promotion of sustainable tourism ideals and practices among visitors? This issue raises concerns over their capacity to represent and promote the ideals of sustainable development, as well as the extent to which their actions contribute to a comprehensive plan for advancing responsible and equitable tourism.

This project aims to investigate the role of tourist guides in advancing sustainable tourism practices. It aims to examine how guides incorporate sustainability ideas into their language and actions, and how these practices affect guests' behaviours and views. The study aims to emphasise their role as important contributors to creating awareness and promoting the principles of responsible tourism.

A qualitative methodology was employed to achieve the research aims, utilising semi-structured interviews with tour guides. This approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives, activities, and roles in advancing sustainable tourism. The obtained data underwent thematic analysis to discern the primary contributions and limitations of their efforts.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Paradigm

This study employs an interpretive framework, positing that reality is socially produced through the experiences, perceptions, and interactions of local people. This approach does not try to establish objective truths; instead, it seeks to illuminate the subjective interpretations that tourist guides and institutional players ascribe to sustainable tourism in the Djanet region. It is especially good at looking at the ways that local tourism development is talked about, represented, and done, while also taking into account the specific social, cultural, and environmental context. Evrard et al (2009, pp. 29-30) assert that interpretive techniques in marketing seek not to generalise but to attain a comprehensive, nuanced, and contextualised understanding of the phenomena examined.

2.2 Research Design

This research is part of a qualitative approach. This approach is favoured for analysing



representations, discourse and practices related to sustainable tourism in the Djanet region. It allows for an in-depth exploration of the content produced in tourist guides and compares it with the vision of a local institutional actor, in order to produce a cross-referenced and contextualised reading (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

2.3 Data Collection Method

The data for this study was gathered via semi-structured expert interviews with prominent figures in the tourism business in Djanet. This method was selected as it facilitates a more profound comprehension of the perceptions, experiences, and practices of the questioned experts.

A roadmap for expert interviews was created based on five primary issues of sustainable tourism.

- Conceptualisation and comprehension of sustainable tourism,
- Contemporary methodologies pertaining to sustainable tourism,
- The role of stakeholders in advancing sustainable tourism
- Challenges and impediments faced
- Opportunities and suggestions for sustainable tourism in Djanet.

This guidance provided a structure to maintain uniformity in conversations while permitting participants to articulate their views and offer specific examples.

2.4 Sample Collection

The qualitative data collection utilised a semi-structured interview guide centred on five key themes concerning sustainable tourism in Djanet: the vision for sustainable tourism, existing practices, challenges and limitations, the role of stakeholders in promotion, and future prospects and recommendations. The interviews were performed with three groups of essential stakeholders:

tourism agencies tourist guides the tourism director in Djanet.

The selection of a sample including 10 participants was predicated on the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study. Gueste et al (2006) assert that a finite number of interviews may be adequate once data saturation is achieved. Moreover, Yin (2018) affirms that in qualitative research, significance is determined more by the profundity of the information collected than by the sample size. The stakeholders were chosen due to their pivotal involvement in the design, development, and regulation of sustainable tourism at the local level. The interviews were performed in person in an open environment to enable respondents to articulate their experiences, perceptions, and recommendations without constraint. The interviews lasted, on average, between 30 and 45 minutes. The data was collected with participant consent and subsequently transcribed in entirety to provide thorough thematic analysis.

2.5 Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was employed for data analysis, tailored for qualitative research. NVivo software was employed to guarantee meticulous and orderly arrangement of the data. This software enables the categorisation, categorisation, and comparison of meaningful units extracted from interviews, so aiding in the detection of repeating themes and divergent



3.1 Vision and Understanding of Sustainable Tourism

Analysis of the interviews conducted in Djanet reveals that the stakeholders interviewed do not have a uniform understanding of the concept of sustainable tourism. While the academic definition emphasises the reconciliation of environmental preservation, social equity and economic viability, the local perception reflects a more contextualised appropriation. The discourse shows a focus on certain aspects (natural, social or cultural) depending on the role and experience of each stakeholder.

“...Sustainability, to me, primarily entails the preservation of the desert, its dunes, and archaeological sites. Should we inflict damage against them, tourism will become unfeasible...” Tourist guide 1.

“...Sustainable tourism must primarily benefit the local residents. The local populace must see economic and social benefits within...” Director of Tourism in Djanet.

“...The priority is to embrace visitors while safeguarding our Tuareg culture and traditions...” Local Agency Administrator 1.

These quotations underscore the variety of perspectives related to sustainable tourism. The guides primarily underscore the ecological aspect, deeming the preservation of natural and archaeological heritage as a fundamental necessity for any tourism activity. In contrast, local institutions prioritise the socio-economic aspect, underscoring the significance of advantages for local communities. Ultimately, organisations and locals underscore the cultural aspect associated with the preservation of Tuareg customs and the conveyance of an authentic lifestyle to visitors.

This heterogeneity illustrates the intricacy of sustainable tourism, which, as defined by the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2015), hinges on a balance among environmental preservation, socio-cultural integrity, and economic feasibility. Nonetheless, local roots impart a further specificity: the conservation of cultural identities within a distinctive Saharan setting. The findings align with the research of Sharpley (2020) and Saarinen (2014), who assert that the comprehension of sustainable tourism is frequently contextual and disjointed, with each stakeholder emphasising the part deemed most significant based on personal experience

3.2 Role of Tourism Operators in Promoting Sustainable Tourism

Tourist guides and local agencies seem to be pivotal in the execution and advocacy of sustainable tourism in Djanet. Their job extends beyond mere mediation between visitors and local resources; they also serve as cultural intermediaries, custodians of authenticity, and occasionally as environmental stewards. The analysis of the obtained data indicates that their participation is seen as a crucial element in the sustainability of tourist operations.

“...We not only showcase the landscapes to visitors, but also elucidate how to honour the sites and prevent leaving marks in the desert...” Tourist guide 2

“...Agencies must choose excursions that protect vulnerable locations. Tourism must be conducted responsibly...” Local Agency Administrator 2

“...If guides fail to educate tourists, they may act as though they are merely in a basic coastal resort...” Director of Tourism in Djanet



The collected testimonials emphasise various facets of the contributions made by guides and tourist companies in advancing sustainable tourism.

The educational component seems to be paramount. Guides underscore their obligation to enhance tourists' awareness of the regulations pertaining to the preservation of the desert environment and ancient sites. Their work extends beyond merely accompanying tourists; it encompasses an educational initiative designed to foster responsible and sustainable behaviour.

Secondly, the organisational dimension is very crucial for agencies. As tour planners, they exert a significant influence on site selection, duration of visits, and, consequently, the potential effects on local resources. An astutely managed and accountable organisation not only aids in the preservation of delicate regions but also alleviates undue strain on the environment and local communities.

The economic and social aspects are crucial levers for sustainable tourism. Local stakeholders underscore the significance of employment development and the incorporation of communities into tourism operations as essential components. This strategy fosters economic growth while guaranteeing the fair distribution of earnings, so adhering to the tenets of inclusion and social justice.

The cultural factor is especially significant in the Saharan milieu. Guides and agencies are crucial in advocating for both tangible and intangible heritage, emphasising local traditions, customs, music, crafts, and food. Thus, they contribute to fortifying the region's cultural character while enhancing tourists' knowledge of its preservation significance. This cultural mediation fosters international discussion and enables travellers to partake in a more genuine and respectful experience.

The significance of these actors is in their capacity to serve as genuine mediators between the ideas of sustainable tourism and their practical application. Their closeness to guests directly impacts their behaviour and decisions. Consequently, they seem to be important participants in the development of sustainable, equitable Saharan tourism that is profoundly embedded in local culture.

3.3 Current Sustainability Practices

Current practices in Djanet indicate a progressive effort to incorporate sustainable tourism ideas into local tourism activities. Stakeholders concur on the necessity of mitigating environmental damage, fostering community engagement, and augmenting cultural resources. These efforts, despite their diversity, demonstrate a commitment to harmonising tourism attraction with the conservation of natural and cultural resources.

"...We are starting to equip our camps with solar panels to reduce the use of generators..."

Tourist guide 5

"...I prefer to accompany small groups on foot or by camel rather than using too many vehicles..." Tourist guide 3

"...Artisans now make jewellery and objects using natural or recycled materials to show that even in the desert, it is possible to innovate..." Tourist guide 6

These testimonials underscore a vigorous revitalisation of sustainable methods. The incremental implementation of solar energy signifies an intention to incorporate energy



transition ideas into Saharan tourism facilities, concurrently diminishing the carbon footprint. The selection of eco-friendly excursions that prioritise walking or traditional camel transport demonstrates an increased consciousness of the effects of motorised travel on the delicate desert ecosystem. Ultimately, innovation in sustainable crafts exemplifies the development of a local circular economy, wherein artisanal creation serves as a catalyst for sustainability and tourism attraction.

These activities indicate a progressive evolution in attitudes and initiatives, signifying a transition from a minimalist preservation approach to a proactive strategy for sustainable innovation. They demonstrate that tourism in Djanet is dynamic, capable of adjusting to the evolving demands of travellers while reinforcing its cultural and natural foundations.

3.4 Challenges and Constraints

Despite the advancements in fostering sustainable tourism in Djanet, numerous obstacles continue to impede the successful execution of its principles. These limits pertain to structural, institutional, environmental, and social elements. Recognising these impediments enhances comprehension of existing constraints and facilitates the identification of feasible pathways for enhancement. These challenges signify not merely local concerns but also global trends impacting vulnerable tourism sites. They thus advocate for strategic deliberation that encompasses both local stakeholders and foreign collaborators.

‘...We aspire to collaborate with nature, yet we lack the financial means to establish sustainable infrastructure...’ Director of Tourism in Djanet

“... Occasionally, tourists disregard regulations, particularly at archaeological sites, making comprehensive oversight challenging...” Tourist guide 4

“...The regulations are in place; nevertheless, their enforcement is inadequate due to a lack of coordination and follow-up among local authorities...” Tourist guide 3

The analysis of the collected comments indicates that the obstacles faced in fostering sustainable tourism in Djanet extend beyond mere infrastructural deficiencies. They embody a synthesis of structural elements, including inadequate logistical and financial resources, and institutional characteristics characterised by occasionally disjointed governance. Additionally, there are natural limits associated with the conservation of a notably delicate Saharan ecosystem, along with social challenges, particularly the necessity to engage local communities more in the decision-making process. These challenges, while considerable, should not be regarded merely as impediments, but also as catalysts for re-evaluating tourist management practices. Considering them facilitates a more cohesive and robust strategy, presumably positioning Djanet on a sustainable and inclusive path.

3.5 Perspectives and Recommendations

Following an analysis of existing practices and the identification of observed obstacles, it is imperative to consider future directions to establish strategies for sustainable tourist growth in Djanet. The anticipated outcomes are to the enhancement of local capabilities, the augmentation of the tourism offering, the conservation of natural and cultural assets, and the incorporation of technology developments. These recommendations are founded on the expectations articulated by local stakeholders and on global best practices for sustainability.



Their objective is to delineate a pragmatic strategy for converting Djanet into a viable and competitive destination within the Sahara, both nationally and internationally.

“... *Increased training would enhance our ability to welcome visitors while preserving our environment...*” Tourist guide 1

“... *We require infrastructure adapted to the desert that preserves our delicate natural ecosystem...*” Director of Tourism in Djanet

“...*Djanet's intangible cultural legacy constitutes our strength. By promoting it, we will attract tourists seeking unique experiences...*” Local Agency Administrator 2

Reflections on the potential for sustainable tourism in Djanet underscore the necessity of a cohesive strategy that amalgamates institutional measures, community endeavours, and public-private collaborations. The sector's future significantly relies on enhancing the competencies of local stakeholders via continuous training for guides, craftspeople, and tourism infrastructure administrators. The objective is to vary the offerings by transcending conventional pathways to encourage innovative cultural and ecological experiences that align more closely with tourists' expectations. In this context, the implementation of digital tools—booking platforms, online promotional campaigns, and cultural mediation applications—can significantly enhance the visibility and appeal of the region. Simultaneously, it is imperative to maintain the delicate equilibrium between development and conservation, particularly through stringent restriction of visitor traffic, sustainable management of natural resources, and enhanced participation of local communities. These principles are crucial instruments for establishing Djanet as a standard for sustainable Saharan tourism, harmonising economic growth, ecological preservation, and the promotion of intangible heritage.

4. CONCLUSION

This research has elucidated the distinct characteristics and obstacles associated with the development of sustainable tourism in Djanet, a Saharan locale with significant potential however hindered by structural and organisational constraints. An examination of present practices, stakeholder attitudes, and encountered obstacles indicates that sustainability in tourism is essential for preserving the delicate desert environment and the unique identity inherent in Tuareg society.

The research indicated that existing initiatives, whether institutional, community-oriented, or individual, establish a robust basis for developing a balanced tourism strategy. Nonetheless, many initiatives are disjointed and would gain from enhanced coordination to foster synergies between public and private entities. Guides, craftsmen, and local associations are vital in cultural and environmental mediation; nonetheless, they necessitate enhanced support in training, finance, and the promotion of their knowledge.

The findings emphasise that sustainable tourism in Djanet necessitates participatory governance, completely incorporating local populations in decision-making and guaranteeing the equitable distribution of economic advantages. Moreover, the utilisation of digital technology, innovation, and international collaborations seems to be a crucial mechanism for enhancing the destination's visibility and fulfilling modern tourist competitiveness standards.



This research presents significant opportunities for decision-makers, researchers, and practitioners. It prompts us to regard sustainable tourism not merely as a means to enhance the local economy, but also as an instrument for historical preservation, social unity, and intercultural advancement. Djanet, leveraging its natural and human resources, has the potential to serve as a dynamic laboratory for sustainable Saharan tourism, harmonising prosperity, authenticity, and ecological respect.

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6. Appendices

Interview guide:

- 1- In the context of Djanet, what does "sustainable tourism" mean to you?
- 2- What do you think are its most important traits or values?
- 3- What specific steps or programs are already in place in Djanet to encourage sustainable tourism?
- 4- Can you share some examples of activities or projects that worked?
- 5- What do you think are the biggest problems that are getting in the way of Djanet's growth as a tourist destination?
- 6- What can be done to get past these problems?
- 7- What do you think tourist agencies, local guides, and organisations like the tourism board should do to promote sustainable tourism?
- 8- What steps could be taken to make this contribution stronger?
- 9- What do you think the future of sustainable tourism in Djanet will be like in the next few years?
- 10- What suggestions would you give to make it more appealing and help it grow?

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