

# Sustainable Economic Development through Alternative Tourism in the Vjosa Valley, Albania

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**Abstract:** - The Vjosa Valley, located in southern Albania, is renowned for its pristine landscapes and rich cultural heritage, presenting significant opportunities for sustainable tourism development. This research investigates the potential for alternative tourism in the Vjosa Valley, focusing on ecotourism, cultural tourism, and community-based tourism. A mixed-methods approach was used, combining field visits, 25 interviews with local business owners, and 17 interviews with representatives from municipal, cultural, and environmental organizations, to assess tourism's impacts and potential. A questionnaire distributed to 83 respondents across Përmet, Tepelenë, and Gjirokastër gathered insights on local perspectives and interest in tourism activities. Findings indicate strong community support for sustainable tourism, a preference for nature and cultural tourism, and a high interest in tourism-related training. Challenges such as environmental degradation and cultural erosion were also identified. Conclusively, the study recommends sustainable tourism practices, improved infrastructure, and active community involvement to foster economic growth, cultural preservation, and conservation of the Vjosa Valley's resources, providing a pathway for balanced and lasting development in the region.

**Key-Words:** - Vjosa Valley, Alternative Tourism, Sustainable Tourism, Ecotourism, Cultural Tourism, Community-Based Tourism, Economic Development, Environmental Conservation.

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## 1 Introduction

The Vjosa River is a 272 km-long river, 192 km of which crosses the territory of Albania. Vjosa is one of the last remaining wild rivers in Europe. Covering 6,706 km<sup>2</sup> territory between Albania and Greece, it is one of the most ecologically diverse ecosystems in Europe. Albania recently declared the Vjosa River a National Park, protecting 12,727 hectares of its valley in March 2023 as part of a national commitment to preserving this unique natural landscape, [1]. The Vjosa Valley is home to extraordinary beauty and ecological diversity, but also thousands of years of cultural identity, in southern Albania. More than half (50.47%) of the valley is part of Gjirokastër County, a county that we hope now will be able to take advantage of the dividends sustainable tourism can bring towards stimulating economic development whilst ensuring

environmental and cultural preservation, [2]. More importantly, this research is one of the very few studies to emphasize the unexplored possibilities for alternative tourism in terms of ecotourism, cultural tourism, and community-based tourism that prioritize sustainable development, and responsible travel in the Vjosa Valley, [3], [4]. Alternative tourism, on the other hand, provides a sustainable development opportunity that is tailored to the Vjosa area and contributes directly to the objectives of its protection status as opposed to conventional tourism which produces degradation, [5]. The study has the objective of building local economic development while enhancing community welfare and contributing to conservation, by identifying what types of tourism are compatible with the natural and cultural characteristics of the valley, [6], [7]. To develop a replicable model for sustainable tourism that meets pressing socio-economic

objectives while conserving one of Europe's last natural river systems, this research team undertook the research project "Economic Development of the Vjosa Valley through Alternative Tourism (Gjirokastra District)", funded by the National Agency for Scientific Research, and Innovation (AKKSHI) of Albania..

### 1.1 Objectives

1. To find out what possible alternative tourism activities could be developed in the Vjosa Valley.
2. To evaluate the current and potential positive or negative impact these activities have on the local economy, community, and environment.
3. To involve nearby stakeholders, the residents, businesses, and institutions that will use the plan in its action steps.
4. To research best practices in other similar destinations globally and adapt to the context of Vjosa Valley?
5. To develop suggestions for enhancing sustainable tourism in the area.

### 1.2 Significance of the Study

The natural beauty of the Vjosa Valley and its cultural values represent an excellent basis for developing alternative tourism. Sustainable tourism practices have become an area of major interest in research. This research:

- Boost the local economy by creating jobs and increasing business opportunities
- Maintain the rich tapestry of regional heritage through contacts with national associations
- Preserve natural habitats and biodiversity.
- Facilitate infrastructure development and community amenities to enhance the quality of life for local residents.

## 2 Literature Review

As the unique and magnificent natural and cultural potential of a certain area, like the Vjosa Valley, can generate alternative tourism development it must also consider sustainable tourism. This review of literature draws upon a theoretical understanding of alternative tourism, describing key concepts that underpin the principles and practices in ecotourism, cultural tourism, and community-based tourism. A look at what is possible for tourism in the Vjosa Valley, drawing on relevant case studies and best-practices from destinations accessibly similar around the world, [4].

### 2.1 The Development of Sustainable Tourism

Tourism that meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing those same opportunities for the future. It means managing all resources in a way that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, not excluding cultural ones, while flow management essential ecological processes and functions of biological diversity. According to the UNWTO, tourism development should be sustainable in terms of maintaining the essential equilibrium between environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects, [8].

### 2.2 Ecotourism

Ecotourism, as a type of sustainable tourism, focuses on the conservation and improvement of nature and the quality of local communities through responsible travel to natural areas. Ecotourism is a type of tourism that involves travel to natural destinations, minimizes impact, builds environmental awareness, provides direct financial benefits for conservation, and respects local culture, [1]. There is also a big space for ecotourism development simply because the Vjosa Valley accommodates diverse and intact ecosystems. Field research of ecotourism in places like the Costa Rican rainforests and the Galápagos Islands has shown that they benefit conservation with ecotourism contributing to local economies, [9].

### 2.3 Cultural Tourism

Cultural tourism relates to the appreciation of the people of the present and past as reflected in tangible stories. This encompasses both tangible and intangible culture- some of which are heritage sites, musical and dance traditions, celebrations, and local crafts. Much of the Vjosa Valley has the potential for cultural tourism, with archaeological sites, traditional villages, and living cultures. Cultural tourism and the role it plays in cultural safeguard and economic specimen has always been a field of interest for researchers, [5]. Models from Provence in France and Tuscany in Italy highlight how cultural tourism can enhance local economies while conserving cultural heritage, [10].

### 2.4 Community-Based Tourism

Community-based tourism (CBT) is a form of tourism where local communities have significant control over and involvement in its development and management. The goal of CBT is to empower

the local community, promote cultural exchange, and ensure equitable distribution of tourism benefits. The type of approach given to the Vjosa Valley is consistent with CBT. This model can help improve community welfare and encourage sustainable development while providing authentic experiences to tourists, [6], [7]. Examples of successful CBT programs in countries such as Nepal and Thailand can serve as models for developing new programs in the Vjosa Valley, [2], [3].

## 2.5 Case Studies & Best Practices

- Costa Rica: As a place well known for its ecotourism programs, these have played an important role in both the conservation and economic development of Costa Rica, [9]. Oman has established an integrated basis for sustainable tourism by managing environmental attention, social participation, and education, [11]. So here you have it, the most popular places in terms of traveling are phrenetic perked up by culture — Provence in France, which has learned how to market its heritage. Efforts like hosting local festivals, crafts, and heritage walks have made the region more interesting for all without compromising its cultural integrity, [10]. Community-based tourism initiatives in Nepal, especially in Annapurna Conservation Area have furnished the local communities to pursue sustainable development as well as provide a different experience for tourists, [3]. All these initiatives focus on local involvement, protection of cultural heritage, and conservation of nature.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Overview

These data are obtained through a mix of methods in order to provide sufficient evidence of the opportunities for alternative tourism in the Vjosa Valley. Our approach involves site visits, stakeholder interviews, survey dissemination, and a review of best practices, [2]. This makes sure there is a good understanding of the local culture and how tourism development might affect these factors, [12].

#### 3.1.1 Field Visits

In-field visits were made throughout the Vjosa Valley to provide direct insights into its natural and cultural attributes. During these visits, the research team was able to explore the environment, learn about the various tourism opportunities available, and interact with community members. Field visits

like those conducted in regions such as Tortuguero emphasize the importance of on-site exploration in understanding the interplay between nature and tourism, [13].

#### 3.1.2 Stakeholder Interviews

The research team utilized semi-structured interviews to provide flexibility in exploring different views and perspectives from two primary stakeholder groups:

Interviews were conducted with 25 residents, mostly business owners in the area to understand perspectives on tourism development as well as ongoing challenges and opportunities. These interviews offer perspectives on the local business climate as well as the community's willingness to believe in alternative tourism efforts, similar to findings in the Mt. Everest region, where tourism plays a significant role in local livelihoods, [14].

We conducted interviews with local representatives (municipal offices, culture, environment) over 17 times. These interviews were targeted around topics regarding institutional support towards tourism development, regulatory frameworks, and potential partnerships, similar to strategies outlined by the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) in its global reports, [15].

This provides a tool that will allow for the collection of quantitative data on tourism potential from a larger population-based approach through the development of an in-depth questionnaire. The survey was used to seek information on types of tourism activity that could be developed in the region, what locals believed were the benefits and constraints/complaints regarding tourism, and participation interest regarding tourism training. Questionnaires were sent directly to a variety of interest groups such as residents, businesses, and institutions through personal contacts as well as the official websites of each of the municipalities involved. Responses: We collected a total of 83 responses, all from Përmet, Tepelenë and Gjirokastër respondents. It facilitated widespread and knowledgeable engagement which resulted in a strong dataset for preliminary analysis, [16].

### 3.2 Procedure

The possible tourism activities and the natural relatedness of the region were captured systematically during field investigations, [17]. On the qualitative side, interviews were transcribed and then analyzed by performing a thematic analysis based on the interview data concerning tourism development.

### Survey Responses

Statistical applications were quantitatively received by the answers, in order to recognize travel tendencies and preferences as well as perceived impacts of tourism — being positive or doing harm to local communities, [18].

#### **3.2.1 Best Practices Analysis**

The research team reviewed the literature and analyzed case studies of best practices elsewhere in destinations similar to this project globally. How can tourism models fit with the natural, social, and community values of Vjosa Valley? This analysis was conducted on models that do have this harmony. Given the lack of robust evidence around what actually works to combat plastic pollution, we aimed then at identifying best practices that can be adapted to local conditions. For example, insights from Tortuguero and Costa Rica informed the adaptation of ecotourism models that balance conservation and economic benefits, [13], [19].

#### **3.2.2 Community Engagement**

The participation of local stakeholders in the research process ensures relevant and locally grounded findings and recommendations addressing the needs or aspirations of local communities. Ongoing engagement with residents, business owners, and local institutions created a collaborative approach to the development of tourism. This mirrors the strategies proposed by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and UNWTO for sustainable tourism development, [20].

### **3.3 Research Results**

#### **3.3.1 Field Visits**

The field visits conducted across the Vjosa Valley framed an understanding of the natural and cultural resources of the area. Those trips played an important role in identifying tourism activities that may be developed compatibly with the natural environment. They toured a variety of sites from parks and memorials to community centers, talking with residents along the way for their input.

#### **Key Observations:**

##### *1. Natural Landscapes:*

- The natural beauty of the Vjosa River and the neighboring environment are incredible, from crystal-clear water, plant life, and fauna abundance to picturesque landscapes. This has created areas that are perfectly suited to ecotourism opportunities, including kayaking and bird watching as well as nature walks with a local guide.

- Provides Education and Scientific Tourism Potential due to Unique Geological Outcrops/Formation Landforms & Biodiversity Hotspots.

##### *2. Cultural Heritage:*

- Historical, with ancient ruins and Enclaves. These sites could appeal to cultural tourists, who are interested in history, architecture, and local traditions.
- Unique attributes, such as local festivals, traditional music, and crafts, were recognized as key cultural resources that could be integrated into the tourism offer.

##### *3. Community Engagement:*

- The local community was very eager to be involved in tourism development. The locals were delighted to share their culture and natural attractions with visitors.
- Although, they expressed concerns regarding the preservation of their culture and environmental impact as increasing visitors arrive due to increased tourism.

#### **3.4 Stakeholder Interviews**

Interviews with 25 residents (mostly business owners) yielded several insights into the local business and community readiness for alternative tourism initiatives. Business owners were one of the main stakeholders affected by tourism development, therefore this group was selected as their contribution is direct and related to the local economy. The number 25 was a calculated choice, designed to give us enough of a wide-ranging sample, while also being viable – allowing for the collation of insight from different business typologies in each of the primary areas through which the Vjosa Valley flows. The number is consistent with comparable research where 15-30 interviews provide enough data to find trends and get meaningful recommendations, alongside the opportunity to explore in more detail.

#### **Views on Tourism Development:**

- Respondents from businesses were generally favorable to the development of alternative tourism upon acknowledging that it is vital for both their local economy and jobs.
- The record high tourist arrivals in 2018 motivated many business operators to expand their services towards tourists, such as local food service, tour guides, and accommodation.

### Current Challenges:

- Limited infrastructure such as roads, signage, and accommodation facilities one of the priorities identified in the effort to grow tourism.
- Also marketing and promotion of this region need to be improved in order to attract local people and foreign tourists.

### Potential Opportunities:

- There were few tourism packages combining nature, culture, and adventure activities that business owners quickly saw the merit in.
- They stressed the need for training and capacity-building programs to hone their skills in hospitality and tourism management.

### 3.5 Representatives of Local Institutions

The interviews carried out with 17 local institutional stakeholders highlighted existing layers of support for tourism development, regulation patterns, and partnership opportunities that need to be in place to ensure sustainable growth. These were chosen from municipal offices, cultural organizations, and environmental agencies to represent the key institutions of tourism governance, cultural preservation, and environmental management in the Vjosa Valley. Seventeen were sampled to cast a broad, yet sufficiently narrow representation across the types of institutions or agencies so that all were included without redundancy.

### Institutional Support:

- Response by local institutions in support of tourism development due to its evident propensity as a driver of economic growth and growth of the community.
- They pointed to initiatives including road repairs and strengthening infrastructure for tourism activities like visitor centers.

### Regulatory Frameworks:

- Delegates highlighted the need for sound regulatory regulations that mitigate the impacts of tourism development. It applies regulations for the protection of natural and cultural heritage sites, as well as recommendations for eco-friendly tourism practices.
- An appeal to local organizations, businesses, and communities to work together so that tourism development is consistent with conservation objectives for the region.

### Potential Partnerships:

- Enhancing tourism development through potential partnerships between national and global institutions. This may involve securing sponsorships

that offer capital resources, technical capacity, and even marketing support.

- Involvement of local residents in decision-making and sharing benefits role within the tourism development as community-based programs highlighted by institutions.

## 4 Research Findings

### 4.1 Responses by Municipality

More than half of the respondents are from the district Përmet, then Gjirokastrë and Tepelenë. Hence all different known places in the Vjosa Valley region were represented there, providing a complete overview, and ensuring that the findings are inclusive (Figure 1).

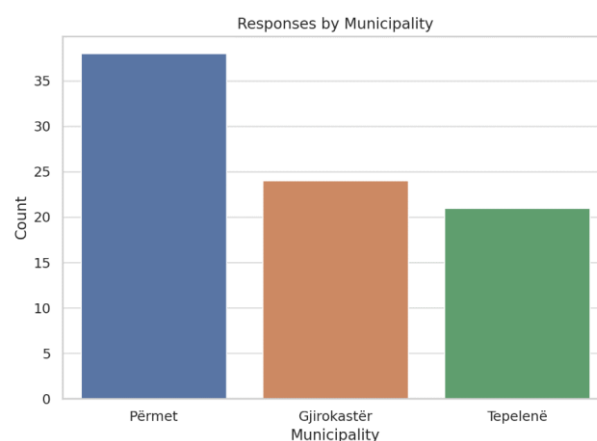


Fig. 1: Responses by Municipality

### 4.2 Residing Time in the Area

As the data indicates (Figure 2), most respondents have lived in this area for less than a year, 1–5 years or longer. It is so under-populated that most respondents live there shortly. This implies that an overwhelming number have recently moved into the area. These findings suggest that:

- These new residents (less than one year) can bring their ideas and perspectives applicable to developing alternative tourism. These people may come from differing backgrounds and have experiences that can lead to creative ways to advance tourism.
- The high proportion of occupants who had lived for fewer than 12 months could reflect recent moves into the area. Analyzing the factors contributing to this surge of tourism will help in planning for infrastructure.
- Recent arrivals may need a greater degree of community blending and appreciation for local customs and heritage. The development aspect can be answered through community engagement

programs and education about local culture and sustainable tourism.

- While a large number of the respondents are new residents, considerable numbers also have lived there for 1-5 years, 6-10 years, and more than 10 years. This helps ensure a range of experiences and perspectives are represented in the survey, including both traditional insights from those witnessing long-term development and new perspectives.
- When creating tourism plans, the variety of lengths of stay should be taken into consideration by policymakers and planners. Promoting programming that serves existing residents while welcoming newer arrivals will also provide inclusive development opportunities with benefits for all, particularly in the community.

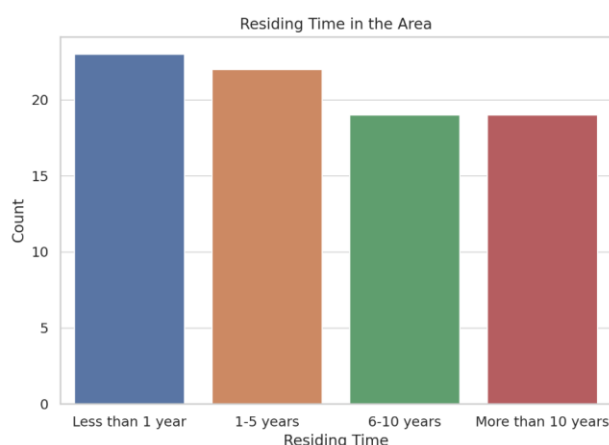


Fig. 2: Residing Time in the Area

### 4.3 Types of Tourism

The graph below (Figure 3) depicts the types of tourism that respondents think can be offered in the Vjosa Valley area. The results point the great opportunities for various forms of tourism development within Vjosa Valley with a high focus on Special Interest tourism, Sports/Athletics Tourism, and Wellness Tourism. These findings indicate that stakeholders should certainly promote these types of tourism while developing other feasible alternatives as part of a sustainable tourism strategy for the region.

The most counts were given to *special interest tourism* signifying an unmistakable faith in its prospect. This kind includes activities such as birdwatching, photography, and religious pilgrimage which can generate tourists with specific interests in mind and enable to cater to niche markets. Coming in a close second is *sports tourism*, hinting at a strong demand for off-trail skiing as well as camping and biking along the routes. Such a varied landscape makes the Vjosa Valley suitable for

different sports activities of interest to adventure tourists. There was also a very strong interest in *wellness tourism*. Wellness, yoga and other health-oriented activities could benefit from the peaceful natural setting of the Vjosa Valley. Another best possible option is *ecotourism* which reflects the diversity and natural beauty found in the region. This form of tourism encourages nature-oriented activities as well as sustainability, attracting eco-minded tourists. The essential feature of *rural tourism* is to demonstrate the essence of agricultural activities and local traditions. This type allows visitors access to an authentic rural lifestyle in Vjosa Valley. Of the 19 tourists who had visited the region at least once, a number had cited *Wine and Culinary Tourism* - suggesting areas that are critical in determining an interest in the region's local cuisine and wine production. If food tourism can attract food-loving people and introduce direct economic benefits through gastronomic activities, so too can wine tourism. *Cultural tourism* got a ton of attention, highlighting cultural heritage, traditions, and historical sites as draw cards for the area to entice tourists wanting an in-depth experience. *Educational tourism* shows potential for using the area for educational purposes, using the region for language learning, history exploration, skill development workshops, etc. This can help draw in students and school groups.

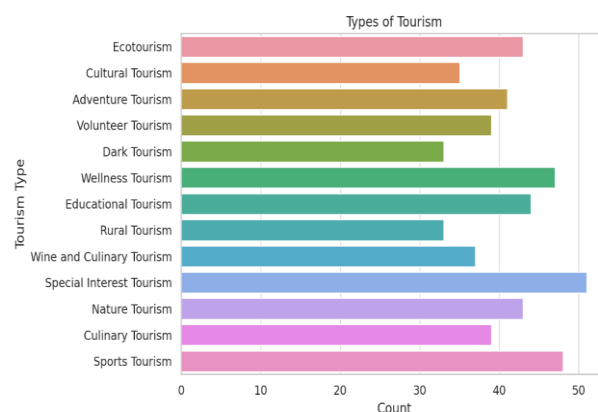


Fig. 3: Types of Tourism

### 4.4 Perceived Impact of Tourism

The following graph (Figure 4) shows how respondents reported the impact of tourism on Vjosa Valley: Results reveal a mixed perception of tourism representation in the Vjosa Valley. About 20 of the respondents believe tourism has a very negative impact. Indicating serious doubts over the potential negative effects of tourism on local communities and environment. Some of the main problems can be environmental degradation, cultural erosion, and higher cost of living. Such issues

emphasize the need for corrective measures around tourism that include conservation, cultural programming, and a cost of living policy. On the other hand, those respondents who perceive tourism positively highlight its possible advantages that can be gained through strategic and sustainable travel development. To bridge the gap between what local residents perceive and what tourists see, the locals need to be included in the decision-making process, educated them about sustainable tourism practices, and monitor its impact continuously to make adjustments. By addressing these challenges and tapping into its advantages, a sustainable tourism model can thrive in the Vjosa Valley providing local economic growth and improving quality of life for residents whilst safeguarding the natural and cultural heritage.

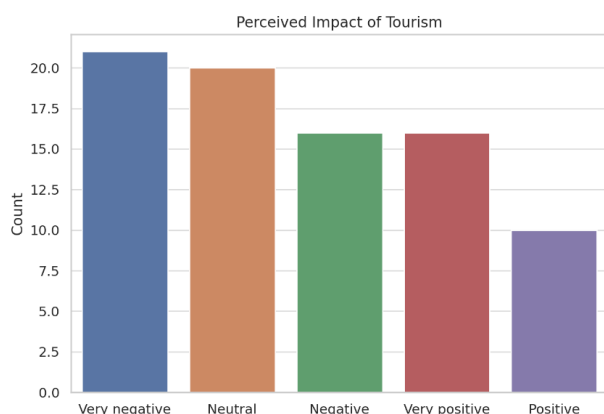


Fig. 4: Perceived Impact of Tourism

#### 4.5 Benefits of Tourism

Figure 5 illustrates the perception of the positive impacts of tourism in Vjosa Valley. The most common perceived benefits are: Educational Opportunities, Employment Generation, Development of Infrastructure, and Economic Growth. Educational Opportunities, as a benefit, are mentioned most often and this suggests the strong conviction about positive tourism education benefits and opportunities for learning/development. Job Creation is considered the largest positive benefit — it suggests that better employment and high numbers of jobs are being generated in response to tourism, bringing down unemployment and improving lives. Infrastructure development embodies the belief that tourism will bring important investments into local infrastructure such as roads, utilities, and public facilities while Economic Growth, similarly, is seen as a major benefit and identified in previous studies, [21].

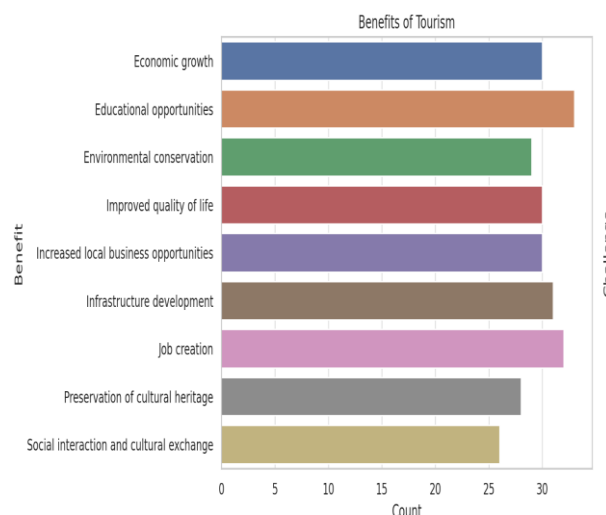


Fig. 5: Benefits of Tourism

#### 4.6 Challenges of Tourism

Figure 6 illustrates the perceived challenges of tourism in the Vjosa Valley.

**The top perceived challenges are:**

1. *Cultural Erosion*— The most commonly cited challenge, suggests strong apprehension towards local culture being lost or diluted due to tourism development.
2. *Higher Cost of Living*: The second most often reported issue, suggesting concerns that tourism furthers price increases beyond where goods, services, and housing become more expensive to local residents.
3. *Environmental Degradation*: Another significant issue, embodying the apprehension that a surge in tourist activity may result in negative impacts on nature, such as pollution, habitat destruction, and biodiversity loss.
4. *Seasonal Work*: the main challenge was pointed out, suggesting that tourism would create seasonal jobs, and therefore unstable and insecure employment for locals.
5. *Overcrowding*: This is another major concern that implies the arrival of a large number of tourists could result in overcrowded public spaces, and facilities; affecting locals' quality of life and visitors' experiences.



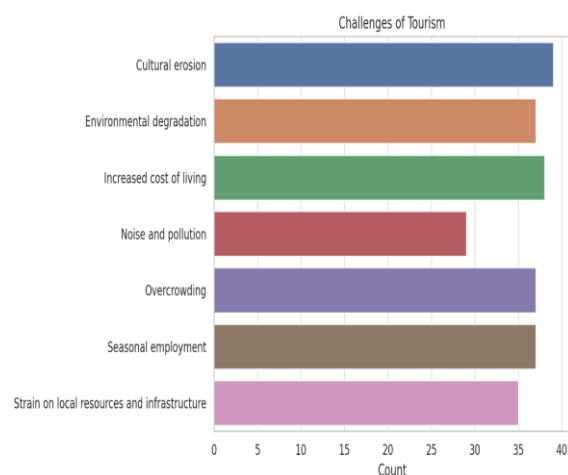


Fig. 6: Challenges of Tourism

#### 4.7 Community Involvement in Tourism Initiatives

Community involvement in tourism projects in the Vjosa Valley is shown in Figure 7. More than 25 respondents indicated that they are "Not involved at all" in tourism initiatives, representing the group with the largest value. Next are those who fell in the category of "Not that involved," "Pretty involved" and, with the lowest number of respondents, "Very involved". However, these findings emphasize a scarcer community engagement concerning tourism, indicating that the involvement of local residents in planning and developing tourism initiatives is essential for their success and sustainability.

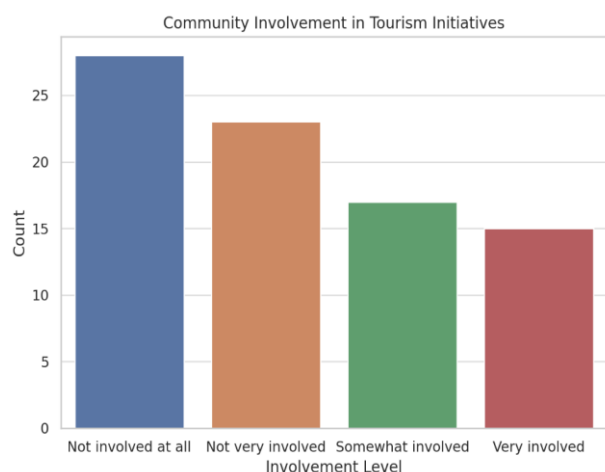


Fig. 7: Community Involvement in Tourism Initiatives

#### 4.8 Interest in Tourism-Related Training

Tourism training comes out as the most in demand for training, with the majority of responses in Figure 8 showing interest in attending new skills workshops. This interest indicates the willingness of the community to improve their skills and

knowledge in supporting the process of tourism development.

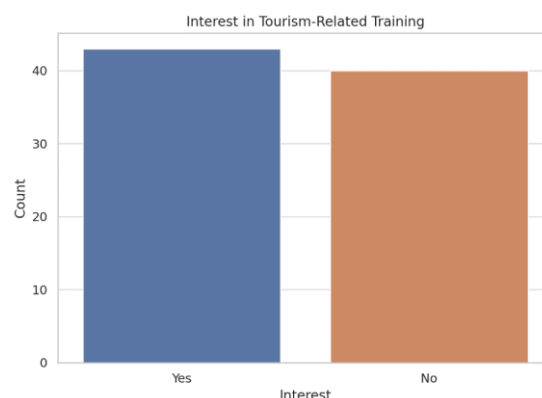


Fig. 8: Interest in Tourism-Related Training

#### 4.9 Types of Training

Responses in Figure 9 show what type of training respondents think will help in developing tourism in the Vjosa Valley as listed in the graph below. Number one training needs are language and communication skills, which indicates that there is a need for good interaction between tourists and providers of the services. It is then followed by ecotourism and nature conservation training, which highlight the commitment of the community to practicing sustainable tourism and environmental stewardship. The region also places high value on the preservation of its cultural heritage when this is reflected in the conservation of rich cultural assets. Improvement in local businesses' capacity to attract and manage tourism ought to be complemented by training in marketing and business development, which is seen as essential. These training priorities reflect the need to strengthen capacities, especially in communication, sustainability, and cultural preservation but also business skills for developing a positive impact tourism sector in the Vjosa Valley.



Fig. 9: Types of Training



## 5 Conclusions

### 5.1 Conclusions

Results from this empirical case study on the economic development of the Vjosa Valley through alternative tourism show that the local community views nature as more valuable compared to potential financial gains. Tourism can be a good financial source if managed and promoted properly. By creating new jobs, tourism will help furnish taxpayers with a place to gain an education while developing local infrastructure, which in turn provides them with their sops using tourism as the medium – all contributing to economic growth. This also points out the focus that needs to be addressed with distractions such as losing some of its cultures, higher cost of living, changing land for loss environmental pressures, temporary workers when it is a season and becoming overcrowded or congested. There is a clear demand for training, particularly in language and communication skills, ecotourism and nature conservation, cultural heritage preservation, and marketing/business development, which suggests the community is willing to be up-skilled for sustainable tourism. Such preparedness is essential to ensure tourism development within the local context and contributes positively to the economy, society, and physical surroundings of this region. The direct economic value gained along the Vjosa Valley, through sustainable tourism development, due to its natural beauty and cultural heritage, will provide tourism jobs and positive impacts. The region can create a strong and inclusive tourism industry by harnessing the identified strengths and interests of the community. By applying the suggested strategies, we can make sure that tourism development in Vjosa Valley is sustainable and profitable to the local population and conserve the unique natural and cultural heritage this region has to offer. Only by working together and by making everyone in the Vjosa Valley feel part of this process can we bring long-lasting prosperity to its community, a better life for its people, and protect their environment and local culture.

### 5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to promote sustainable tourism development in the Vjosa Valley:

#### **Improve Training and Capacity Building:**

- *Language & Communication Skills:* Develop a comprehensive language program that can enhance communication between tourists and Local service providers. This will improve the experience for the visitor and make the exchange of culture much easier.
- *Ecotourism and Nature Conservation:* Focus training on sustainable tourism practices in harmony with the environment to develop tourism that protects, conserves, and enhances the natural environment.
- *Culture and heritage preservation programs.* This will preserve the cultural characteristics of the region and draw tourists culturally.
- *Marketing and Business Development:* Provide training on marketing and business development skills that will enhance the capability of local entrepreneurs and businesses to better attract and manage tourism.

#### **Implement sustainable tourism practices:**

- Guidelines and best practices on sustainable tourism to minimize negative impacts (e.g., environmental degradation, cultural erosion)
- Encourage and develop tourism activities within the framework of sustainable development, promoting harmonious tourism in space and time both ecologically and culturally.

#### **Tackle Economic and Social Issues:**

- Act to mitigate the cost-of-living crisis and ensure that tourism benefits are distributed fairly throughout communities.
- Manage seasonal employment by attracting visitors outside the peak season and diversifying the product offering.

#### **Enhance Infrastructure and Accessibility:**

- Make infrastructure upgrades such as roads, utilities, and public facilities to accommodate tourism activities and improve the visitor experience.
- Have all the main areas of interest and tourism reachable and pleasant to visit

#### **Encourage community participation and ownership:**

- Route local people into the tourism planning and decision-making processes so that their views and needs can inform these.
- Promote tourism activities by the locals including profit sharing.

### Encourage Exchange of Culture and Society:

- Design programs and events that promote interaction among tourists and residents. Feature and market regional culture festivals, traditions, as well as traditional arts and crafts.

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## APPENDIX

### Questionnaire: Economic Development of the Vjosa Valley through Alternative Tourism

#### **Introduction**

This questionnaire is addressed to stakeholders interested in the economic development of the Vjosa Valley through the development of tourism. The questionnaire is part of the project "Economic Development of the Vjosa Valley through Alternative Tourism (Gjirokastra District)", financially supported by the National Agency for Scientific Research, Technology, and Innovation (AKKSHI) of Albania. The aim is to identify tourist activities (natural, cultural, etc.) that are currently developed or can be developed in this area and their potential for economic development. All information and responses are confidential and will be used responsibly solely for the aforementioned purpose.

Thank you for your contribution!

#### **Section 1: Demographic Information**

1. In which municipality is your city/village located?
  - Gjirokaštër
  - Përmet
  - Tepelenë
2. How long have you been residing in this area?
  - Less than 1 year
  - 1-5 years
  - 6-10 years
  - More than 10 years

#### **Section 2: Tourism Potential**

3. Which types of tourism do you think can be offered in your area? (Select all that apply)
  - Ecotourism: Focuses on nature-based experiences and promotes conservation. Travelers visit natural areas to appreciate and learn about the environment while minimizing their impact.
  - Cultural Tourism: Involves exploring local cultures, traditions, and heritage. Travelers engage in activities such as homestays, festivals, and workshops to gain a deeper understanding of the destination's culture.
  - Adventure Tourism: Adventure seekers participate in physically demanding activities such as hiking,

rock climbing, white-water rafting, and other adrenaline-pumping experiences.

- Volunteer Tourism (Voluntourism): Travelers engage in community service projects while exploring a new place. This type of tourism aims to positively impact local communities.
  - Dark Tourism: Also known as grief tourism or thanatourism, it involves visiting sites associated with tragedy, death, or historical events, such as battlefields, cemeteries, and disaster areas.
  - Wellness Tourism: Travelers focus on improving their well-being through activities such as yoga retreats, spa vacations, and wellness workshops.
  - Educational Tourism: Travelers seek to learn about new subjects, such as language, history, or specific skills, through immersive experiences in various locations.
  - Rural Tourism: Highlights rural life and offers travelers the opportunity to experience agricultural activities, local traditions, and a slower pace of life.
  - Wine and Culinary Tourism: Travelers explore destinations known for their food and drink culture, including wine tasting, cooking classes, and visits to local food markets.
  - Special Interest Tourism: Caters to specific interests, such as birdwatching, photography, religious pilgrimages, and more.
  - Nature Tourism: Visiting areas with high biodiversity, national parks, and nature reserves for a rich nature experience.
  - Culinary Tourism: Enjoying traditional dishes and exploring local cuisine in small restaurants and food markets.
  - Sports Tourism: Unique sports activities such as off-trail skiing, camping, or cycling through twilight routes.
4. Are there any other types of tourism you believe could be developed in this area? If yes, please specify:

### Section 3: Local Community and Tourism

5. How do you perceive the impact of tourism on the local community?
  - Very positive
  - Positive
  - Neutral
  - Negative
  - Very negative
6. What benefits do you think tourism brings to the local community? (Select all that apply)
  - Economic growth
  - Job creation
  - Preservation of cultural heritage
  - Environmental conservation
  - Infrastructure development
  - Increased local business opportunities
  - Improved quality of life
  - Educational opportunities
  - Social interaction and cultural exchange
7. What challenges do you think tourism brings to the local community? (Select all that apply)
  - Environmental degradation
  - Cultural erosion
  - Increased cost of living
  - Overcrowding
  - Seasonal employment
  - Strain on local resources and infrastructure
  - Noise and pollution

### Section 4: Community Engagement

8. How involved are you or your community in local tourism initiatives?
  - Very involved
  - Somewhat involved
  - Not very involved
  - Not involved at all
9. Would you be interested in participating in tourism-related training or workshops?
  - Yes
  - No
10. What types of training or workshops would be beneficial for you or your community? (Select all that apply)
  - Hospitality and customer service
  - Sustainable tourism practices
  - Cultural heritage preservation
  - Ecotourism and nature conservation
  - Adventure tourism skills

- Marketing and business development
- Language and communication skills

### Section 5: Additional Comments

11. Please provide any additional comments or suggestions regarding the development of tourism in the Vjosa Valley:

Thank you for your participation!

### Contribution of Individual Authors to the Creation of a Scientific Article (Ghostwriting Policy)

- Eduina Guga carried out the formal analysis, investigation, validation, and visualization. She also led the writing of the original draft and contributed to the review and editing process.
- Daniela Qiqi was responsible for project administration, methodology, and conceptualization. She supervised the study and contributed to the writing through review and editing.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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