

The Role of Tourism in Promoting Human Rights: A Review of Literature

Vyddiyaratnam Pathmanandakumar
Department of Geography, Faculty of Arts & Culture, Eastern University, Sri Lanka
Email: pathmanandakumarv@esn.ac.lk

Abstract

This review explores the intricate relationship between tourism and human rights, assessing the potential benefits and risks of tourism's influence on a broad spectrum of human rights, including political, civil, social, cultural, economic, and environmental rights. The review systematically analyzes literature from prominent databases such as Scopus and Web of Science, covering publications from 2000 to 2023. It portrays tourism as having dual effects: it can foster freedom of movement, expression, and cultural diversity, but it may also lead to human rights violations such as exploitation and environmental damage. The review emphasizes tourism's educational value in promoting human rights awareness among tourists and local communities, fostering cultural understanding and tolerance. It also highlights tourism's role in poverty alleviation and socio-economic enhancement, particularly for marginalized groups. The findings advocate for a human rights-based approach to tourism development and management to ensure that benefits are distributed fairly and sustainably. The review calls for responsible tourism practices and policies prioritizing human rights, suggesting that such an approach can maximize tourism's positive impacts while minimizing its negative consequences. The review concludes by stressing the need for continued research and increased collaboration among tourism industry stakeholders to ensure that tourism effectively contributes to human rights advancement, thereby fostering a more equitable and respectful global tourism industry.

Keywords: Environmental sustainability, Human rights, Indigenous rights, Responsible tourism, Tourism

1. Introduction

Tourism has long been recognized as a powerful force that shapes economies, societies, and cultures worldwide (Arabadzhyan et al., 2021; Hijioka et al., 2014). Beyond its economic significance, the impact of tourism extends to various aspects of human life, including human rights (Abbas et al., 2021). In recent years, the role of tourism in promoting human rights has garnered increasing attention among scholars and practitioners alike (Abbas et al., 2021). This review explores how tourism contributes to advancing human rights principles such as political, civil, social, cultural, economic, and environmental rights. Human rights, traditionally centered on political and civil liberties, have evolved to include a broader spectrum, encompassing cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions (Abbas et al., 2021). The expansion of the human rights framework has provided a platform to explore the intersection between tourism and human rights, recognizing that tourism activities can positively and negatively impact various human rights dimensions (Hemingway, 2004). The central research question guiding this review is: How does tourism influence human rights across various dimensions, and what

are the implications for promoting a rights-based approach to tourism development? Tourism can also positively and negatively impact human rights (Ferraz & Serpa, 2021; Hemingway, 2004). On the positive side, tourism can promote freedom of movement, expression, and association. Tourism can also promote cultural diversity and respect for human dignity (Bianchi & Stephenson, 2013). On the negative side, tourism can contribute to human rights violations such as the exploitation of children, forced labor, and the violation of the rights of indigenous people (Hemingway, 2004). Tourism can also contribute to the degradation of natural resources, which can negatively impact future generations' rights (Kongbuamai et al., 2020).

This review explores a wide range of literature, drawing on academic studies, reports, and policy documents to examine the multifaceted relationship between tourism and human rights. It explores how tourism can catalyze promoting human rights, fostering cultural understanding, empowering local communities, and facilitating economic development. Additionally, it critically assesses the potential challenges and negative consequences that tourism can pose to human rights, such as exploitation, displacement, and cultural commodification. This review seeks to offer an overview of the existing knowledge on how tourism promotes human rights by examining the relevant literature. It will contribute to the ongoing discourse on responsible and sustainable tourism practices, highlighting the need for a human rights-based approach to tourism development and management. This literature review seeks to illuminate the complexities and opportunities associated with the relationship between tourism and human rights. It underscores the importance of considering human rights principles in tourism planning, policy-making, and practice, ultimately advocating for a more inclusive, equitable, and respectful tourism industry that respects and upholds the fundamental rights of individuals and communities.

2. Methodology

Academic databases, specifically Scopus and Web of Science, were selected for their comprehensive coverage and credibility. These databases provided access to various scholarly articles relevant to the research topic. The search was restricted to English-language publications from the year 2000 to 2023. The following keywords were used to identify relevant literature: "tourism," "human rights," "social justice," "gender equality," "labor rights," and "child protection." These terms were chosen to capture a broad spectrum of research on

the intersections between tourism and various human rights dimensions. Articles were selected based on their relevance to the core research question and their contribution to understanding tourism's impact on human rights. Inclusion criteria encompassed studies that specifically addressed how tourism affects human rights or explored tourism's role in promoting or violating these rights. Exclusion criteria included publications not directly related to human rights, those primarily focused on non-human rights aspects of tourism, and studies that were not peer-reviewed. Data Extraction and Analysis: Relevant data from selected articles were extracted and categorized based on thematic areas. The review process involved synthesizing findings to identify patterns, contrasts, and gaps in the existing literature. The findings were organized thematically to address the research objectives.

3. Results

3.1. Tourism as a Catalyst for Human Rights Promotion

Many researchers highlight how tourism can increase awareness of human rights issues among both tourists and local communities (Rastegar et al., 2021; Rastegar & Ruhanen, 2023; Safonov et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2020; Zarezadeh & Rastegar, 2023; Zhai & Luo, 2023). The influx of tourists exposes visitors and locals to various cultures and socio-political conditions. This exposure is not just passive; as Yu et al. (2020) and Zarezadeh and Rastegar (2023) suggest, it can actively highlight discrepancies and instances where human rights are not fully respected or upheld. Zhai & Luo (2023) further argue that such interactions, albeit sometimes uncomfortable, are vital for shedding light on global human rights issues. Moreover, as tourists encounter different cultures and traditions, they often witness the real-world implications of rights violations, ranging from subtle forms of discrimination to overt injustices. Seyfi et al. (2023) and Viken et al. (2021) note that these firsthand experiences can be particularly impactful, prompting tourists to rethink their perceptions and potentially take action or advocate for change.

The educational potential of tourism extends beyond mere exposure; it includes structured interactions and dialogues facilitated by local communities and tourism operators. Sharma et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of these engagements, which can transform tourist experiences into educational opportunities, promoting a deeper understanding and respect for human rights. Through cultural exchange programs and guided tours that address local issues,

tourists can gain a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by different communities. Tourism not only broadens individuals' horizons but also serves as an active platform for the promotion of human rights. It encourages empathy, tolerance, and respect through experiential learning and constructive dialogues, making it a potent tool for global social change.

3.2. Economic Empowerment and Poverty Alleviation

Tourism can significantly influence economic empowerment and poverty alleviation, both of which are integral to the broader achievement of human rights. According to various researchers like Shah (2022), Xiao et al. (2023), and Yang et al. (2021), the tourism sector fosters job creation, promotes entrepreneurship, and facilitates income generation, thereby potentially enhancing the socio-economic conditions of local communities. This sector's influence extends particularly to marginalized groups, including women, indigenous communities, and other vulnerable populations, who may find new opportunities for economic advancement within the tourism industry.

However, while the benefits are notable, addressing the challenges associated with tourism development is equally important. Studies by Hemingway (2004) and Shah (2022) emphasize the necessity for tourism to be inclusive and equitable. Specific concerns regarding respecting and protecting workers' rights within this sector exist. Ensuring fair wages, safe working environments and robust protection against exploitation are essential measures to prevent the potential negative outcomes of tourism development. These safeguards help ensure that the growth of the tourism sector contributes positively to the community without undermining the rights and welfare of the individuals it employs.

3.3. Empowerment of Indigenous Communities

Indigenous communities around the world often grapple with complex issues, including struggles over land rights, the erosion of cultural identity, and the ongoing quest for self-determination. The intersection of tourism with these concerns presents both an opportunity and a challenge. On the one hand, tourism can serve as a powerful vehicle for Indigenous communities to assert their rights, celebrate and promote their rich cultural heritage, and secure a seat at the table in critical decision-making processes that affect their future (Carr et al., 2016; Quang, 2023). These positive outcomes hinge on the ability of tourism to facilitate economic

benefits, enhance visibility, and foster greater understanding and respect among broader populations.

On the other hand, the literature extensively documents the potential pitfalls associated with tourism in indigenous regions. Key among these is the risk of commodification—where unique cultural elements are repackaged and sold in ways that strip them of their intrinsic meaning and value. This, coupled with cultural appropriation, where sacred and traditional symbols and practices are taken out of context or used without proper permission, can profoundly undermine the rights of indigenous peoples and exacerbate existing inequalities (Carr et al., 2016; Hemingway, 2004). Such practices not only distort and trivialize indigenous cultures but also fail to provide economic or social benefits to the community members themselves.

To navigate these complexities, responsible tourism practices are crucial. They must prioritize meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities, ensuring that consent is obtained and that the communities are active participants rather than passive subjects. Moreover, tourism should facilitate equitable benefit-sharing, where the economic gains are substantial and directly contribute to the community's welfare. Such practices help to uphold human rights and foster a tourism industry that supports rather than exploits indigenous cultures (Carr et al., 2016; Quang, 2023). This nuanced approach to tourism underscores the importance of collaboration, respect, and a deep commitment to justice and equity in interactions with Indigenous communities.

While tourism has the potential to contribute positively to human rights by generating employment and economic development, its impact on local communities and the environment can also be detrimental if not managed carefully. Rapid tourism growth often comes with inadequate planning and unsustainable practices that can lead to negative outcomes. These include environmental degradation, such as pollution and habitat destruction; social issues, like displacement of local populations; and cultural problems, such as the loss of authenticity and commercialization of traditional practices (Hemingway, 2004; Quang, 2023). Scholars like Carr et al. (2016) and Hemingway (2004) have strongly advocated for responsible and sustainable tourism development that respects all stakeholders' rights, actively promotes community participation, and seeks to mitigate these negative impacts.

The literature review highlights several specific challenges in leveraging tourism as a force for human rights promotion. Power imbalances between local communities and multinational corporations, unequal distribution of tourism benefits, which often marginalizes smaller communities, a lack of awareness and education about human rights among stakeholders, and limited enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance with ethical standards are persistent issues (Carr et al., 2016; Hemingway, 2004; Quang, 2023). Conversely, there are significant opportunities to improve the situation through strategic initiatives. These include integrating human rights principles into tourism policies and operational guidelines, enhancing capacity building for local stakeholders to ensure they can advocate for and benefit from tourism, empowering communities to have a voice in tourism development, and fostering collaboration between governments, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector to create holistic and inclusive tourism models (Carr et al., 2016; Hemingway, 2004). The discourse suggests a need for a balanced approach to tourism development that harnesses its economic benefits while rigorously safeguarding against potential harms to ensure the promotion and protection of human rights within impacted communities.

4. Discussion

The literature review indicates that tourism can significantly contribute to promoting human rights (Carr et al., 2016; Hemingway, 2004; Seyfi et al., 2023). One of the main ways tourism can contribute to the protection and promotion of human rights is by creating employment opportunities (Carr et al., 2016; Quang, 2023; Seyfi et al., 2023; Shah, 2022). Tourism ranks among the world's most extensive and rapidly expanding sectors, employing an estimated 300 million globally (Xiao et al., 2023). In many developing countries, tourism is one of the few sectors that offer employment opportunities to people who would otherwise be unemployed or underemployed (Shah, 2022; Xiao et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the development of tourism infrastructure and services can lead to the improvement of living conditions for local communities (Quang, 2023). Tourism can create income that can be reinvested in essential social services like healthcare, education, and housing. This investment can positively influence local communities' access to economic, social, and cultural rights (Carr et al., 2016; Seyfi et al., 2023). Moreover, tourism can promote cultural exchange and understanding, which can help to overcome prejudices and stereotypes

(Viken et al., 2021; Zarezadeh & Rastegar, 2023). Tourism allows travelers to experience diverse cultures and lifestyles, fostering increased tolerance and appreciation for diversity. This exposure can support safeguarding and advancing civil and political rights, including freedom of expression and freedom from discrimination (Seyfi et al., 2023).

Further literature analysis revealed that tourism can also contribute to protecting and promoting women's rights (Hemingway, 2004). Women comprise a substantial part of the tourism workforce, and the industry can provide opportunities for women's economic empowerment and leadership (Shah, 2022). Additionally, tourism can advance women's rights by enhancing their visibility and participation in the decision-making processes that shape tourism development (Seyfi et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2021). In terms of promoting the right to education, tourism can contribute to developing educational programs and opportunities for local communities. For example, tourism can support the development of educational programs related to local history, culture, and natural resources, which can help to preserve and promote local knowledge and traditions (Carr et al., 2016; Sharma et al., 2018).

Furthermore, Tourism can foster sustainable development and enable local communities to enjoy economic, social, and cultural rights by implementing sustainable tourism practices (Quang, 2023; Sharma et al., 2018). Sustainable tourism practices help reduce environmental harm, protect cultural heritage, and offer economic advantages to local communities (Sharma et al., 2018). However, it is important to note that the potential benefits of tourism for human rights are not automatic. Tourism development should be carried out with respect for human rights and awareness of its potential negative effects on them. Moreover, the benefits of tourism should be shared fairly among all segments of society, especially vulnerable groups.

Further analysis of the literature also revealed that tourism can promote the right to health by providing access to healthcare services for local communities and supporting the development of health-related infrastructure and programs (Dwyer, 2022; Hemingway, 2004). Tourism can also promote healthy lifestyles and behaviors by offering opportunities for physical activity, healthy eating, and stress reduction (Dwyer, 2022; Hemingway, 2004). Tourism can foster freedom of expression and access to information by facilitating cultural exchanges and educational opportunities. It allows individuals to explore various cultures, traditions, and viewpoints, enhancing understanding, respect, and appreciation for diversity (Baum, 2020;

Higgins-desbiolles et al., 2019). Additionally, tourism can support the development of cultural and educational institutions, such as museums and cultural centers, which can provide access to information and promote freedom of expression (Dwyer, 2022; Viken et al., 2021; Zarezadeh & Rastegar, 2023).

Moreover, Tourism can enhance the right to work and the right to a decent standard of living by creating job opportunities, particularly in areas with few other economic options. Moreover, tourism can boost local economies by generating income for communities and elevating their living standards (Quang, 2023; Shah, 2022). Tourism can promote the right to work and improve living standards by providing employment opportunities, especially in regions with limited economic alternatives. Additionally, by bringing in revenue for local communities, tourism can help raise their overall quality of life. For example, tourism can contribute to environmental degradation, negatively impacting the enjoyment of the right to a healthy environment.

Moreover, tourism can lead to the commodification of culture, which can negatively impact the enjoyment of cultural rights (Carr et al., 2016; Seyfi et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2018; Viken et al., 2021). Therefore, it is essential to implement a human rights-based approach to tourism development, considering tourism's effects on human rights. This method should involve local communities in the decision-making processes concerning tourism development and consider the impacts of tourism on vulnerable populations, including women, children, and indigenous peoples.

Tourism can potentially contribute to the protection and promotion of human rights. However, It is crucial to develop tourism in a way that respects and promotes human rights while also considering any potential negative impacts on human rights. A human rights-based approach to tourism development can ensure that tourism contributes to the enjoyment of human rights by all. The literature reviewed in this study highlights the complex relationship between tourism and human rights. While tourism can catalyze human rights awareness, economic empowerment, and cultural exchange, careful attention must be given to ensure responsible and sustainable tourism practices that respect the rights of local communities and the environment. This review underscores the need for further research, policy development, and

collaboration among stakeholders to maximize the positive impacts of tourism on human rights promotion and protection.

5. Conclusion

The "The Role of Tourism in Promoting Human Rights" literature review underscores tourism's positive impact on human rights worldwide. When managed ethically, tourism can foster economic growth, cultural exchange, and social development, all essential for promoting human rights. It generates income and employment, supports economic rights, and encourages cultural understanding, combating discrimination for cultural rights. Responsible tourism practices can empower local communities and preserve indigenous rights, though challenges such as over-tourism, labor exploitation, and environmental degradation must be addressed. Governments, businesses, and travelers must prioritize responsible and sustainable tourism to safeguard human rights within the industry. The literature reviewed highlights the significant potential of tourism to advance human rights, drive socio-economic development, and enhance cultural understanding. However, tourism must be conducted and overseen responsibly, sustainably, and with a focus on human rights to realize its positive effects fully. We can foster a more inclusive, fair, and respectful tourism sector that benefits individuals and communities globally by embedding human rights principles in tourism policies, strategies, and practices.

6. References

- Abbas, J., Mubeen, R., Iorember, P. T., Raza, S., & Mamirkulova, G. (2021). Exploring the impact of COVID-19 on tourism: transformational potential and implications for a sustainable recovery of the travel and leisure industry. *Current Research in Behavioral Sciences*, vol 2, pp. 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crbeha.2021.100033>
- Arabadzhyan, A., Figini, P., García, C., González, M. M., Lam-González, Y. E., & León, C. J. (2021). Climate change, coastal tourism, and impact chains—a literature review. *Current Issues in Tourism*, vol 24, no.16, pp. 1–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2020.1825351>
- Baum, T. (2020). Hospitality , tourism , human rights and the impact of COVID-19. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, vol 32, no.7, pp. 2397–2407. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-03-2020-0242>
- Bianchi, R. V., & Stephenson, M. L. (2013). Deciphering tourism and citizenship in a globalized world. *Tourism Management*, vol 39, pp. 10–20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2013.03.006>
- Carr, A., Ruhanen, L., Whitford, M., Carr, A., Ruhanen, L., & Whitford, M. (2016). Indigenous peoples and

- tourism : the challenges and opportunities for sustainable tourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, vol 9582, pp. 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2016.1206112>
- Dwyer, L. (2022). Tourism contribution to the SDGs : applying a well-being lens. *European Journal of Tourism Research*, vol 32, pp. 1–20.
- Ferraz, J., & Serpa, S. (2021). Tourism and Human Rights: A Complex Relationship. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol 10, no.2, pp. 75–89. <https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2021-0040>
- Hemingway, S. (2004). Tourism's impact on women's human rights in South East Asia. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, vol 8, no.3, pp. 275–304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364298042000255216>
- Higgins-desbiolles, F., Carnicelli, S., Krolkowski, C., & Boluk, K. (2019). Degrowing tourism : rethinking tourism Degrowing tourism : rethinking tourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, pp. 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2019.1601732>
- Hijioka, Y., Lin, E., Pereira, J. J., Corlett, R., Cui, X., Inzarov, G., Lasco, R., Lindgren, E., & Surjan, A. (2014). Asia. In V. R. Barros, C. B. Field, D. J. Dokken, M. D. Mastrandrea, K. J. Mach, T. E. Bilir, M. Chatterjee, K. L. Ebi, Y. O. Estrada, R. C. Genova, B. Girma, E. S. Kissel, A. N. Levy, S. MacCracken, P. R. Mastrandrea, & L. L. White (Eds.), *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability: Part B: Regional Aspects: Working Group II Contribution to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Part B, pp. 1–1820). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107415386>
- Kongbuamai, N., Bui, Q., Yousaf, H. M. A. U., & Liu, Y. (2020). The impact of tourism and natural resources on the ecological footprint: a case study of ASEAN countries. *Environmental Science and Pollution Research*, pp. 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11356-020-08582-x>
- Quang, T. D. (2023). Can tourism enhance inclusivity for indigenous peoples ? Cham perspectives on tourism benefit sharing at living heritage sites in Vietnam. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, vol 1, no.1, pp. 2040–2049. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-08-2022-0243>
- Rastegar, R., & Ruhanen, L. (2023). Climate change and tourism transition: From cosmopolitan to local justice. *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol 100, pp. 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2023>
- Rastegar, R., Seyfi, S., & Rasoolimanesh, S. M. (2021). How COVID-19 case fatality rates have shaped perceptions and travel intention? *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, vol 47, pp. 353–364. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2021.04.006>
- Safonov, A., Hall, C. M., & Prayag, G. (2023). Non-collaborative behaviour of accommodation businesses in the associational tourism economy. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, vol 54, pp. 98–107. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2022.12.007>
- Seyfi, S., Rastegar, R., Kuhzady, S., Hall, C. M., & Saarinen, J. (2023). Whose justice? Social (in)justice in tourism boycotts. *Annals of Tourism Research Empirical Insights*, vol 4, no.2, pp. 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annale.2023.100103>

- Shah, I. A. (2022). Using panel dynamic estimation, exploring governance effectiveness , tourism development and poverty reduction relationship in SAARC countries. *Journal of Tourism Futures*, vol 1, no.1, pp. 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JTF-09-2022-0221>
- Sharma, P., Charak, N. S., & Kumar, R. (2018). Sustainable Tourism Development and Peace: a Local Community Approach. *Journal of Hospitality Application & Research*, vol 13, no.1, pp. 36–55.
- Viken, A., Höckert, E., & Grimwood, B. S. R. (2021). Cultural sensitivity: Engaging difference in tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol 89, pp. 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2021.103223>
- Xiao, K., Ullah, W., Fu, J., & Zhang, X. (2023). Poverty Alleviation Efficiency of Tourism and Its Spatiotemporal Differentiation in Jiangxi Province of China Based on the DEA Model. *SAGE Open*, vol 1, pp. 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231168835>
- Yang, J., Wu, Y., Wang, J., Wan, C., & Wu, Q. (2021). A Study on the Efficiency of Tourism Poverty Alleviation in Ethnic Regions Based on the Staged DEA Model. *Front. Psychol*, vol 12, pp. 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.642966>
- Yu, Q., McManus, R., Yen, D. A., & Li, X. (2020). Tourism boycotts and animosity: A study of seven events. *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol 80, pp. 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2019.102792>
- Zarezadeh, Z. (Zara), & Rastegar, R. (2023). Gender-leisure nexus through a social justice lens: The voice of women from Iran. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, vol 54, pp. 472–480. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2023.02.003>
- Zhai, X., & Luo, Q. (2023). Rational or emotional? A study on Chinese tourism boycotts on social media during international crises. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, vol 45, pp. 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2022.101069>