

HCS D

**Human capital and social
development.**

2026 – volume 22, issue 4

Inson kapitali va ijtimoiy rivojlanish jurnali.

2026 – 22-jild, 4-son



**O‘ZBEKISTON RESPUBLIKASI OLIIY TA’LIM FAN VA
INNOVATSIYALAR VAZIRLIGI
SHAROF RASHIDOV NOMIDAGI SAMARQAND DAVLAT
UNIVERSITETI**



**Inson kapitali va ijtimoiy rivojlanish jurnali
Journal Human capital and social development
Журнал Человеческий капитал и социальноеразвитие
Jurnali**

22-jild, 4-son (iyul) 2026.

Jurnal 2021-yilda tashkil topgan.

Davriyligi: har ikki oyda

Davriy nashirning rasmiy nomi: “Inson kapitali va ijtimoiy rivojlanish”-“Human capital and social development”-“Человеческий капитал и социальное развития” O‘zbekiston Respublikasi Prezidenti Administratsiyasi huzuridagi Axborot va ommaviy kommunikatsiyalar agentligi tomonidan 19.05.2021 sanada berilgan №1179 guvohnomasi bilan ro‘yhatdan o‘tgan.

Jurnal: O‘zbekiston Respublikasi Oliy ta’lim, fan va innovatsiyalar vazirligi huzuridagi Oliy attestatsiya komissiyasi Rayosatining 2023-yil 29-avgustdagi 342/5-son qarori bilan tasdiqlangan Iqtisodiyot fanlari bo‘yicha falsafa doktori (PhD) va fan doktori (DSc) Ilmiy darajasiga talabgorlarning dissertatsiya ishlari yuzasidan dissertatsiyalari asosiy ilmiy natijalarini chop etish tavsiya etilgan ilmiy nashrlar ro‘yhatiga kiritilgan.

Jurnal asoschilari: Sharof Rashidov nomidagi Samarqand davlat universiteti Inson resurslari va mahalla tarqqiyotini boshqarish instituti.

Nashr etuvchi: SamDU tahririy-nashriyot bo‘limi.

Xalqaro indeksi: ISSN 3030-3672

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**«INSON KAPITALI VA IJTIMOYIY RIVOJLANISH»
«HUMAN CAPITAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT»
«ЧЕЛОВЕЧЕСКИЙ КАПИТАЛ И СОЦИАЛЬНОЕ РАЗВИТИЕ»
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A STUDY ON THE INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT MODEL OF DESERT TOURISM IN ARID REGIONS: A CASE STUDY BASED ON THE MUTETAR DESERT SCENIC AREA

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Received: 08 June 2026

Revised: 22 June 2026

Accepted: 14 July 2026

Published: 31 July 2026

Funding source for publication:
Samarkand State University.

Publisher's Note: HCSD stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



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Abstract: Sustainable development of desert tourism in arid regions is a process of synergistic advancement of three goals: ecosystem protection, tourism industry development, and community well-being improvement. This paper takes the Mutetar Desert Scenic Area as an example, using thematic analysis to systematically examine the coupling mechanism, internal tensions, and adjustment paths of the ecological, industrial, and community integration development of desert tourism. The study finds that the scenic area has initially formed a coupling framework of ecological management, industrial cultivation, and community embedding, achieving phased synergy of the three goals through infrastructure development, asset-light operation, and local employment absorption. However, structural tensions exist among these three aspects, manifested in the erosion of the original desert landscape by excessive development on the periphery, the constraint of industrial competitiveness by homogenization of business formats, and the challenges to sustainable community participation posed by a single employment structure and excessively high labor intensity.

Keywords: Arid region tourism; Desert tourism; Integrated development; Ecological protection; Community participation

QURG'OQCHIL HUDUDLARDA CHO'L TURIZMINING INTEGRATSIYALASHGAN RIVOJLANISH MODELI BO'YICHA TADQIQOT: MUTETAR CHO'LINING MANZARALI HUDUDIGA ASOSLANGAN AMALIY TADQIQOT

Annotatsiya: Qurg'oqchil hududlarda cho'l turizmining barqaror rivojlanishi uchta maqsadning sinergik rivojlanishi jarayonidir: ekotizimlarni himoya qilish, turizm sanoatini rivojlantirish va jamoatchilik farovonligini oshirish. Ushbu maqolada Mutetar cho'lining manzarali hududi misol sifatida keltirilgan bo'lib, cho'l turizmining ekologik, sanoat va jamoatchilik integratsiyasi rivojlanishining bog'lanish mexanizmi, ichki keskinliklar va moslashish yo'llarini tizimli ravishda o'rganish uchun tematik tahlildan foydalanilgan. Tadqiqot shuni ko'rsatadiki, manzarali hudud dastlab ekologik boshqaruv, sanoat yetishtirish va jamoatchilikni joylashtirishning bog'lanish doirasini shakllantirgan, infratuzilmani rivojlantirish, aktivlarni kamaytirish va mahalliy bandlikni jalb qilish orqali uchta maqsadning bosqichma-bosqich sinergiyasiga erishgan. Biroq, bu uch jihat orasida tarkibiy keskinliklar mavjud bo'lib, ular periferiyada haddan tashqari rivojlanish natijasida asl cho'l landshaftining yo'q qilinishida, biznes formatlarini bir xillashtirish orqali sanoat raqobatbardoshligining cheklanishida va yagona bandlik tuzilishi va haddan tashqari yuqori mehnat zichligi tufayli barqaror jamoatchilik ishtirokiga oid muammolarda namoyon bo'ladi.

Kalit so'zlar: Qurg'oqchil mintaqaga turizmi; Cho'l turizmi; Integratsiyalashgan rivojlanish; Ekologik himoya; Jamiyat ishtiroki

ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ КОМПЛЕКСНОЙ МОДЕЛИ РАЗВИТИЯ ПУСТЫННОГО ТУРИЗМА В ЗАСУШЛИВЫХ РАЙОНАХ: ТЕМАТИЧЕСКОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ НА ПРИМЕРЕ ПУСТЫННОЙ ЗОНЫ МУТЕТАРА

Аннотация: Устойчивое развитие пустынного туризма в засушливых районах представляет собой процесс синергетического развития трех целей: защиты экосистем, развития туристической индустрии и повышения благосостояния населения. В данной работе на примере пустынной зоны Мутетар с помощью тематического анализа систематически исследуются механизмы взаимосвязи, внутренние противоречия и пути адаптации экологической, промышленной и общественной интеграции в развитии пустынного туризма. Исследование показывает, что в живописной зоне первоначально сформировалась взаимосвязь экологического управления, промышленного земледелия и населенных пунктов, а затем постепенно была достигнута синергия трех целей за счет развития инфраструктуры, сокращения активов и привлечения местных рабочих мест. Однако между этими тремя аспектами существуют структурные противоречия, которые проявляются в разрушении первоначального пустынного ландшафта из-за чрезмерного развития на периферии, ограничении конкурентоспособности промышленности из-за гомогенизации бизнес-форматов и проблемах устойчивого участия местных сообществ из-за единообразной структуры занятости и чрезмерно высокой трудоемкости.

Ключевые слова: Туризм в засушливых районах; Пустынный туризм; Комплексное развитие; Охрана окружающей среды; Участие местных сообществ.

1 Introduction

Desert tourism in arid regions has become increasingly popular in recent years. Achieving coordination and balance among protecting fragile desert ecosystems, cultivating a competitive tourism industry, and improving the well-being of local communities is an important issue for the sustainable development of desert tourism.

The Mutetar Desert is located in Toto Town, Jinghe County, Xinjiang, covering an area of approximately 147 square kilometers. It is bordered by the Ganjiahu Haloxylon ammodendron Forest Nature Reserve to the northeast and the Aibi Lake Wetland Nature Reserve to the southwest. The area boasts a rich variety of wildlife and abundant secondary forest vegetation. It was designated a "National Desert Park" in 2014, rated a 4A-level scenic area in December 2022, and was named a National Adventure Tourism Scenic Area and a Study Base for Primary and Secondary School Students in the Autonomous Prefecture in 2023. The Mutetar Desert features pure sand and a vast area, making it suitable for developing tourism projects such as desert exploration, hiking, sightseeing, self-driving tours, sandboarding, and scientific research.

The scenic area's ticket revenue reached over 823,000 yuan in 2024 and total revenue exceeded 5.6 million yuan in 2025, representing a year-on-year increase of over 580%. The total number of employees grew from 13 to nearly 40, with over 65% being local residents. The expansion of the tourism industry in this scenic area has impacted both desert ecological protection and the transformation of community livelihoods; the integrated development of "ecology-

industry-community" is an inherent requirement. However, over-development on the scenic area's periphery has led to landscape damage, and the rapid expansion of the industry has put pressure on the ecosystem. Furthermore, issues such as insufficient distinctive business formats, lagging supporting facilities, and excessively long working hours for employees have weakened the industry's long-term competitiveness. The depth and quality of community participation also need to be improved. What kind of coupling mechanism has formed among ecology, industry, and community in the development of desert tourism in arid regions? What structural tensions exist? How can these tensions be adjusted through governance practices? These are pressing questions that require further research.

2 Literature Review

Currently, research on the relationship between ecology, industry, and community in nature tourism destinations can be mainly divided into three categories. First, tourism development drives local industries and benefits communities through infrastructure, employment, and foreign exchange earnings, but it also presents negative ecological externalities. In inland delta wetlands, tourism-driven infrastructure expansion has led to environmental problems such as overtaking, noise, and littering (Mbaiwa, 2003); in marine and terrestrial ecosystems, the overtaking behavior of some individual tourists has resulted in vegetation trampling, significantly reducing vegetation height and coverage, and weakening community resilience and resistance (Mason et al., 2015); unregulated growth in snorkeling tourism may exacerbate coral reef degradation

(Gil et al., 2015); increased density of whale-watching boats may increase humpback whale turning frequency, and wildlife tourism may also affect the diurnal activity rhythms of mammals (Amrein et al., 2020; Patterson et al., 2025).

Second, tourism benefits and costs are unevenly distributed within communities and among stakeholders. Case studies from rural and island areas reveal that while tourism can create business opportunities and protect marine culture, it can also lead to problems such as the loss of unique characteristics, increased waste, higher land prices, and reduced willingness among young people to return to their hometowns. There are systemic differences in the perceptions of development status among residents, tourists, and operators (Wu, 2021; Lin et al., 2022).

Thirdly, governance and industrial organization methods affect the quality of coupling. Process management and information systems can improve the efficiency of marine tourism services and reduce disturbance to the marine ecosystem (Chen et al., 2012). The "conservation hub" model, which links tourism with scientific research, education, and community benefits, has proven helpful in achieving a multi-objective win-win situation for conservation, industry, and community (De la Cruz-Modino & Cosentino, 2022). Historical ecological studies have revealed a long-term link between marine trade, deep-sea fishing, and coral reef resilience, but modern tourism growth is disrupting this balance by changing consumer preferences and intensifying near-shore fishing (Yadav et al., 2020). Existing research largely focuses on humid or aquatic ecosystems such as

wetlands, oceans, and forests. Empirical studies on the "ecology-industry-community" coupling mechanism of desert tourism in arid regions are insufficient. Furthermore, while there are many studies examining ecological impacts, industrial effects, or community perceptions separately, integrative explanations of the structural tensions among these three elements and their governance and adjustment processes are lacking. In addition, mechanistic analyses of how tourist behavior regulation, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and institutional implementation reshape the ecology-industry-community relationship remain weak (Legaspi et al., 2020).

Therefore, this study takes the Mutetar Desert scenic area as an example to explore the coupling mechanism, structural tensions, and governance and adjustment paths among ecology, industry, and community in the development of desert tourism in arid regions.

3 Research Methods

The Mutetar Desert Scenic Area is a representative desert tourism destination in the arid region of Xinjiang. Its development, from its initial stages to its rapid expansion, encompasses key phases in the evolution of ecological, industrial, and community relationships. Located on the western edge of the Gurbantünggüt Desert, its ecosystem is extremely fragile, and the surrounding communities are primarily agricultural and pastoral. Therefore, the ecological and community impacts of tourism development are particularly significant. This paper takes the Mutetar Desert Scenic Area as an example, employing field research and interviews to obtain basic data on the scenic area's development from 2023 to 2025. This data covers multiple

dimensions, including the scenic area's operational layout, infrastructure investment, visitor numbers, operating revenue, employment impact, and reflections on problems. The paper then longitudinally tracks and analyzes the scenic area's integrated development process. Furthermore, reports on the scenic area's festival activities and regional development were obtained from authoritative media outlets such as the Jinghe County People's Government website, the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Culture and Tourism Department website, China Daily, and CNR.cn, for cross-validation and to supplement background information.

This paper employs thematic analysis to organize survey and interview data, extract text fragments related to ecology, industry, and community, and then uses open coding to summarize initial concepts such as ecological management, industrial development, community embedding, conflict tension, and rectification and adjustment. Then, through axial coding, the initial concepts are grouped into three core themes: coupling mechanism, structural tension, and adjustment path. Finally, a theoretical explanation is provided around the research question.

4 Results and Analysis

4.1 Coupling Mechanism of Ecology, Industry, and Community

After three years of development, the Mutetar Desert Scenic Area has initially formed a coupled framework of ecological management, industrial development, and community integration, and has achieved phased synergy through specific mechanisms.

In terms of ecological management, the scenic area has implemented a series of control measures. In 2023, the visitor

center and ticket hall were completed and put into operation, concentrating visitor activities in specific functional areas and reducing direct disturbance to the core desert area. In 2024, 3,602 square meters of sunshades and paved roads were completed, along with 1,150 square meters of wooden boardwalks in the sand-sliding area, a 112-square-meter pavilion, and two new tourist toilets. These facilities guide visitor behavior and reduce trampling damage to the original sand surface. In 2025, safety risk information signs were installed, and safety risks and emergency response procedures were uniformly marked in key locations such as parking lots, visitor centers, amusement park areas, and service stations, ensuring visitor safety while also regulating activity areas. This ecological management approach, which uses facilities to control behavior and management to reduce disturbance, has been effectively implemented.

In terms of industry, the scenic area has cultivated diversified business formats through a light-asset cooperation model. It has signed cooperation agreements with desert tourism project suppliers, introducing more than ten business formats such as desert off-road vehicles, all-terrain vehicles, camel riding, desert trains, traditional road trips, themed travel photography, sand therapy and wellness, and desert homestays. This has enabled the scenic area to quickly form a comprehensive "tourism, wellness, and entertainment" industry complex. In 2025, it achieved a total revenue of over 5.6 million yuan, including over 3.12 million yuan in ticket revenue, over 2.07 million yuan in shuttle bus revenue, and over 390,000 yuan in other revenue such as business management fees, thus

initially forming a diversified revenue structure.

At the community level, the scenic area has integrated itself into the community through local employment and cooperative participation. The total number of employees increased from 13 in 2024 to nearly 40 in 2025, with 26 of them being local residents, accounting for over 65%. The camel riding project is operated by the Tuotuo Town Camel Breeding Cooperative, increasing the number of camels from 7 to 25, enabling local herders to participate in tourism operations using traditional breeding skills. The development of the scenic area has also spurred the growth of surrounding catering, hotels, and other service industries. This integration of employment and cooperative operation allows tourism revenue to be directly converted into community income.

A mutually supportive coupling relationship has been formed among the three dimensions: ecological management provides a sustainable resource base for industrial development, industrial cultivation creates economic opportunities for community employment, and community integration provides local support for ecological protection. This coupling relationship has maintained relative stability during the rapid expansion period of the scenic area, constituting a phased achievement of integrated development.

4.2 Structural tensions in integrated development

With the explosive growth in tourist numbers, structural tensions among ecology, industry, and community are gradually emerging. First, there is a contradiction between industrial expansion and ecological protection. The destruction of the desert landscape caused

by tourism development affects tourists' experience of the natural desert scenery. Facilities built to enhance the tourist experience may erode the authenticity and vastness of the desert. Excessive infrastructure construction hinders tourists' pursuit of a pure desert experience, weakening the core attraction. This contradiction has alerted management, and the scenic area plans to gradually relocate its businesses to the desert, strictly controlling development boundaries. However, finding a balance between convenience and landscape authenticity remains difficult. Second, the scenic area faces the dilemma of homogeneous industries and a lack of distinctive features. Although more than ten businesses have been introduced, desert off-roading, all-terrain vehicles, and sandboarding are common in other desert scenic areas in Northwest China. There is a lack of differentiated products based on the unique topography and culture of Mutartar, which not only weakens market competitiveness but also limits tourist stay time, restricting the deep release of the industry's driving effect on the community. The general-purpose businesses introduced to rapidly expand the scale of the industry are directionally different from the specialized and in-depth products needed for desert tourism in arid regions. Third, the depth and quality of community participation are insufficient. Although more than 65% of the employees are local residents, community participation still faces structural limitations, such as a single employment structure, excessive labor intensity, and limited cooperative participation. Community members are mainly engaged in low-skilled, low-income jobs and lack channels to move to management or business positions. The

growth in the number of jobs comes at the expense of the quality of employment. Currently, only camel riding is operated by the cooperative, while other business formats are dominated by external enterprises. The community has a weak voice in the industrial chain.

Community participation is not only about the number of jobs created, but also about the quality of employment, skills development, and rights protection. Industrial expansion exacerbates ecological pressure, ecological constraints limit industrial space, industrial homogenization weakens community benefits, and insufficient community capacity makes it difficult to support the specialization and upgrading of industries. The integration of ecology, industry, and community is a dynamic process that requires continuous adjustment.

4.3 Tension Adjustment Path and Limitations

Currently, the scenic area has proposed a series of rectification measures, presenting an adjustment logic of boundary control, quality improvement, and rights protection.

In terms of ecological adjustment, the scenic area plans to organize a professional team to conduct ecological assessments of the peripheral development areas, formulate scientific rectification plans, gradually relocate business projects into the desert, strictly control development boundaries, and ensure that development activities are coordinated with ecological protection. This shift from passive destruction to proactive management attempts to restore the original landscape of the peripheral areas by relocating facilities into the desert interior. However, the rectification plan remains in the planning stage, and its

implementation effectiveness remains to be seen. Furthermore, whether this measure will cause new disturbances to the core desert area also requires scientific assessment and monitoring.

In terms of industrial adjustment, the scenic area plans to delve deeper into the natural landscape and cultural heritage of the Mutetar Desert, combining it with the desert's unique topography to develop differentiated business projects such as desert stargazing camping and folk culture experiences. It will also collaborate with professional teams to create immersive desert-themed performances, blending light and shadow technology with local traditional arts to showcase the desert's mystery and grandeur. The scenic area is striving towards industrial specialization, attempting to create a unique IP. However, developing distinctive products requires long-term cultural exploration and creative investment, and results are unlikely in the short term. Furthermore, new business models such as stargazing camping, without strict ecological management, may cause new disturbances to the desert's nighttime ecosystem.

Regarding community adaptation, the scenic area plans to expand its team through a combination of open recruitment and internal training, develop a systematic employee training plan, establish and improve a performance appraisal mechanism, implement flexible work arrangements and a rotation system, and set up an employee care fund to improve employment quality and employee welfare, striving to shift from quantitative absorption to quality improvement. However, deeper issues of community empowerment, such as expanding the scope of cooperative

participation, increasing the voice of community members in business decisions, and achieving a fairer distribution of tourism revenue, have not yet been addressed in the rectification plan.

The scenic area proposed spatial control plans to address ecological issues, product innovation directions to address industrial issues, and management optimization measures to address community issues. This problem-oriented and technology-driven approach to adaptation has positive implications. However, there is a lack of systematic integration among these three adjustments. The measures primarily rely on technical and managerial approaches, and the direction of adaptation is mainly driven by scenic area managers, with insufficient decision-making power from community members and ecological experts. Integrated development requires not only technical solutions but also institutional innovation and multi-faceted consultation.

5 Conclusion and Discussion

The scenic area has achieved phased synergy in its ecological, industrial, and community goals through infrastructure development, asset-light operation, and local employment creation, initially forming a coupled framework of ecological management-industrial cultivation-community integration. However, with the explosive growth in tourist numbers, problems such as the contradiction between industrial expansion and ecological protection, the dilemma of industrial homogeneity and lack of distinctiveness, and the challenges of the depth and quality of community participation have gradually emerged. The scenic area's rectification practices follow the adjustment logic of boundary

control-quality improvement-rights protection, but the adjustment measures lack systematic integration and rely mainly on technical and managerial means, with insufficient institutional arrangements.

The integrated development of desert tourism in arid regions is a dynamic process of "coupling-tension-adjustment," rather than a static equilibrium. The synergy among ecology, industry, and community requires continuous adjustment efforts. The tension in integrated development has structural characteristics: the ecological dimension pursues authenticity and integrity, the industrial dimension pursues scale and efficiency, and the community dimension pursues employment and income. These goals may conflict at certain stages of development, and their coordination cannot rely solely on technical solutions; it requires institutionalized consultation mechanisms and interest balancing arrangements. The effectiveness of adjustment depends on the depth of institutional innovation. The current technical rectification measures in the Mutetar Scenic Area are insufficient to fundamentally resolve the structural tension. Institutional arrangements such as ecological compensation mechanisms, community profit-sharing systems, and rights protection clauses in franchise operations are key to achieving long-term integrated development.

The tourism development of the Mutetar Desert offers valuable lessons for the integrated development of desert tourism in arid regions. First, ecological red lines must be established as rigid constraints from the outset, avoiding a path dependency of destruction followed by restoration through scientific carrying capacity assessments and development

boundary control. Second, industrial development should adhere to a distinctive, in-depth, and community-oriented approach, prioritizing compatibility with local culture and community skills when introducing new business models, rather than simply pursuing a large number of projects. Third, community participation needs to be upgraded from employment absorption to rights protection, enhancing the community's voice and sense of gain in tourism development through mechanisms such as expanding cooperatives, skills training, and profit sharing.

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