



Assessment of Ecotourism Activities in Giresun Based on Local Community Opinions*

Yerel Halk Görüşleri Doğrultusunda Giresun'da Ekoturizm Etkinliklerinin Değerlendirilmesi

ABSTRACT

Ecotourism, which adopts an environmentally sensitive and sustainable approach in contrast to the negative impacts of mass tourism, is among the preferred forms of tourism for cities distinguished by natural attractions such as Giresun. The primary aim of the research is to determine the suitability levels of ecotourism activities among the local population living in Giresun. As a result of the findings, this study is significant for providing insight into planning efforts in the field of ecotourism and contributing to the literature. A total of 508 valid surveys were analyzed using a questionnaire as the data collection technique. The participants of the research are predominantly women, single, young, students, and individuals with a bachelor's degree. According to the research results, it has been concluded that the local population in Giresun can engage in activities such as nature photography, agricultural practices, planting and cultivating plants, and fruit picking. Additionally, nature hiking and camping activities are other events that have a high acceptance rate among the public. It is anticipated that, in the future, planning by public and private tourism stakeholders for ecotourism activities deemed appropriate by local residents will contribute to the regional economy and urban tourism.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Local Community Perception, Giresun, Ecotourism Activities

ÖZET

Ekoturizm, kitle turizminin olumsuz etkilerine karşın doğaya duyarlı ve sürdürülebilir bir anlayış benimseyen, Giresun gibi doğal güzellikleriyle öne çıkan şehirler için tercih edilebilen turizm türlerinin başında gelmektedir. Araştırmanın temel amacı, Giresun'da yaşayan yerel halkın ekoturizm etkinliklerinin uygunluk seviyelerini tespit etmektir. Elde edilen bulgular sonucunda bu çalışma, ekoturizm alanında yapılacak planlama çalışmalarına ışık tutması ve literatüre katkı sağlaması açısından önemlidir. Araştırmada veri toplama tekniği olarak anket formu kullanılarak 508 geçerli anket analiz edilmiştir. Araştırmanın katılımcılarını çoğunlukla kadın, bekar, genç, öğrenci ve lisans düzeyindeki bireyler oluşturmaktadır. Araştırma sonuçlarına göre, Giresun ilinde yerel halkın doğa fotoğrafçılığı, tarımsal faaliyetler, bitki dikimi ve yetiştirme ile meyve toplama gibi etkinliklerin uygulanabileceği sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Ayrıca doğa yürüyüşü ve kampçılık faaliyetlerinin de halk tarafından yüksek kabul oranına sahip diğer etkinlikler olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Gelecekte kamu ve özel turizm paydaşlarının yerel halk tarafından uygun bulunan ekoturizm etkinliklerine yönelik planlama yapmalarının bölge ekonomisine ve şehir turizmine katkı sağlayacağı tahmin edilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ekoturizm, Yerel Halk Algısı, Giresun, Ekoturizm Etkinlikleri

INTRODUCTION

There are numerous factors that give rise to the phenomenon of tourism, which involves millions of people each year traveling and temporarily staying outside their places of residence. People participate in tourism activities for many different reasons. These reasons have remained largely unchanged for centuries. Although the fundamental factors underlying tourism movements—arising from human psychology, social life, and individuals' overall psycho-social and economic perspectives, behaviors, and attitudes—have remained constant, the other elements influencing these factors have evolved in parallel with economic, cultural, and social developments (Bayer, 1992). Natural and historical environmental values, together with economic, sociological, and cultural factors, constitute the initial and boundary conditions of tourism movements. Tourism development that ignores these factors may lead to the destruction of the very elements that sustain it, thereby resulting in the disappearance of the tourism process itself (Uslu, 1990). Therefore, measures should be taken to prevent the negative impacts of tourism in destinations where tourism activities are widely carried out.

In line with its 2023 tourism strategy, Türkiye has adopted a strategic orientation toward alternative tourism types in order to reduce regional development disparities, spread tourism activities throughout the entire year, and

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alleviate the environmental and social pressures created by mass tourism. Ecotourism is one of these alternative tourism types. With its natural, historical, and cultural assets, Türkiye possesses a higher ecotourism potential compared to its neighboring countries. Moreover, the coexistence of diverse cultures and religions throughout history in shaping these natural riches attracts the interest of tourists (Tutcu, 2021; Demir & Çevirgen, 2006). Within the framework of this general potential, the present study aims to determine the ecotourism potential of Giresun province and to identify the perceived suitability levels of ecotourism activities based on the perceptions of the local population. Accordingly, the study seeks to answer the following research question: What are the levels of perceived suitability of ecotourism activities that can be implemented in Giresun province according to the local population? Determining the suitability levels of ecotourism activities can be considered important in terms of contributing to planning and investment related to this field. This study differs from other works in the literature in that it empirically examines ecotourism activities based on the perceptions of the local population.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ecotourism is a form of tourism that initially aims to learn about nature, seeks to minimize negative environmental impacts, promotes use without excessive consumption, and emphasizes a local-oriented and sustainable approach (Fennell, 2008). Ecotourism is considered together with ecological activities such as reducing pressure on non-renewable natural resources, ensuring local-scale participation in tourism management, serving quality-oriented rather than quantity-oriented visitor groups, ensuring the conservation of biological diversity, and raising awareness among local people and visitors while safeguarding the welfare of the local community (Güçer & Kement, 2015). The primary objective of ecotourism is to protect natural areas and rural regions considered the tourism destinations of the future from the harmful effects of tourism, and to ensure the continuity of tourism activities that are compatible with nature in environments where environmental problems are either absent or minimized (Tuna, 2007). Ecotourism plays an important role in contributing to regional development by reducing the negative environmental impacts of the tourism sector and utilizing regional potential as an alternative form of tourism. At the same time, the conscious use of limited natural resources within the scope of ecotourism activities contributes to the sustainability of these resources (Akbaba & Özel, 2024).

Ecotourism can be distinguished from other types of tourism through its unique characteristics. The main characteristics of ecotourism include the following (Pratiwi, 2000; Manning & Dougherty, 1995):

- ✓ Tourist Profile and Awareness: Ecotourists generally consist of individuals who enjoy traveling to natural areas and cultural environments and who are willing to learn about, appreciate, and better understand local cultures, regions, and the natural environment.
- ✓ Spatial Focus: Activities take place in relatively undisturbed natural areas, protected regions, or authentic cultural settings.
- ✓ Environmental Sensitivity and Conservation: Ecotourism emphasizes respect for the opportunities and limitations offered by the natural environment, aiming not to negatively affect ecosystems while promoting low-impact activities and the non-consumptive use of natural resources.
- ✓ Education and Contribution: It highlights environmental education and contributes to a deeper understanding of different cultures and the natural environment.
- ✓ Infrastructure and Technology: It requires the use of environmentally friendly technologies and local resources.
- ✓ Socio-economic Balance: By integrating economic growth objectives with conservation goals, ecotourism provides long-term and sustainable benefits for local communities, nations, and regions.
- ✓ Social Participation and Sensitivity: It adopts an approach that is sensitive to the needs and expectations of local communities.

The increasing demand for ecotourism may be evaluated positively for the tourism sector due to its utilization of natural resources; however, it may also raise concerns regarding the sustainable preservation of ecological values and natural life. When natural areas, ecosystems, and rural regions especially pristine and rare environments attract growing attention, local communities and tourism operators may neglect environmental protection due to economic concerns and fail to consider the carrying capacity of the region, thereby causing environmental damage (Karaküçük & Akgül, 2016).

The fundamental principle underlying ecotourism, in contrast to mass tourism, is the protection of the environment. However, if these positive characteristics of ecotourism cannot be effectively implemented, not only will the protection of natural areas fail to be achieved, but environmental degradation may also become an inevitable risk.

Among the main reasons for such negative outcomes are tourists' failure to behave in accordance with the spirit of ecotourism, the perception of ecotourism merely as a market expansion strategy, the commodification of nature, and attempts to generate excessive profit from these activities (Sünnetçioğlu & Yeşildağ, 2021). In order to prevent such negative consequences, it is crucial to adhere to ecotourism principles in tourism destinations. The main principles of ecotourism include the following (Wallace & Pierce, 1996; Wood, 2002):

- ✓ Minimizing the negative impacts of tourism activities on natural and cultural environments as well as on local communities.
- ✓ Enhancing visitors' awareness and understanding of the natural and cultural values of the destination and promoting conservation awareness.
- ✓ Contributing to the conservation and sustainable management of protected and natural areas.
- ✓ Ensuring the active participation of local communities and local authorities in decision-making processes regarding the type and scale of tourism development.
- ✓ Directing the economic and social benefits generated by tourism to local communities.
- ✓ Implementing visitor management and sustainable planning approaches for ecotourism destinations.
- ✓ Monitoring the environmental and social impacts of tourism and promoting infrastructure that is compatible with the natural environment.

ECOTOURISM POTENTIAL OF GİRESUN PROVINCE

Ecotourism utilizes the conservation and development potential of tourism while minimizing its negative impacts on ecological, cultural, and aesthetic values, thereby becoming attractive to different stakeholder groups. The phenomenon of ecotourism has attracted the attention of various parties, including environmentalists, tour operators, small-scale community planners, public institutions, aid organizations, and tourists. This diversity has led the literature to address the issues prioritized by these different stakeholders (Rahemtulla & Wellstead, 2001). It is known that local communities, which are among the most important stakeholders in tourism, play a significant role in the success of tourism activities, and they are also expected to play a similar role in the effectiveness of ecotourism activities.

Activities based on ecotourism may vary depending on the natural, cultural, and economic conditions of a destination. Ecotourism activities are classified into three primary groups (Tetik, 2012): learning-based activities (botanical tourism, bird watching/ornithology, nature photography, wildlife observation, agritourism/farm tourism, and monitoring geomorphological formations), entertainment-based activities (mountaineering, horse/jeep safaris, balloon tourism, paragliding, canoeing, rafting, bicycle tourism, underwater diving, equestrian nature trekking, recreational angling, trekking, and hiking), and relaxation-based activities (camping/caravan tourism and plateau tourism). Türkiye possesses significant diversity and richness in terms of ecotourism resources. Particularly, the Eastern Black Sea Region, where natural resources are densely concentrated, holds an advantageous position compared to other regions and hosts numerous ecotourism-based activities (Kaya & Yıldırım, 2020). One of these host provinces is Giresun.

Ecotourism provides strategic contributions to the conservation of natural resources, the economic development of local communities, and the preservation of cultural heritage. These findings demonstrate that ecotourism holds high potential in regions with rich natural resources like Giresun (Saydam & Öztürk, 2024). As a reflection of this potential, nature trekking can be conducted in many areas of Giresun, especially in its plateaus and nature parks. Furthermore, there is significant potential for activities such as bird watching, off-roading, rafting, paragliding, caving, wildlife observation, photo safaris, cycling, horse safaris, angling, botanical tours, camping and caravan tourism, and village tours (Yiğit, 2020; Sezer & Bekdemir, 2017). For destinations to compete effectively with others, the support of the local community is essential. Accordingly, ensuring the active participation of local residents in tourism activities is of paramount importance (Turpcu & Çelikkanat Paşlı, 2019).

According to Social Exchange Theory, local residents who perceive tourism as beneficial to their well-being are willing to support tourism development and exhibit positive attitudes toward tourists. Conversely, residents who perceive the exchange as problematic oppose tourism development (Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003). Therefore, identifying the perceptions of the local population regarding ecotourism activities emerges as a critical factor. It can be stated that any type of tourism opposed by the local people cannot be long-lasting; similarly, ecotourism would not be sustainable in the long term under such conditions.

In a study conducted by Çavuş and Zere (2021), it was concluded that the positive perceptions of Giresun's local residents regarding the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions of ecotourism would contribute to the development of ecotourism activities in the region.

METHODS

The population of the study consists of the local residents living in Giresun province. Ethical approval was obtained in accordance with the Ethics Committee decision dated December 1, 2021, and numbered 17/6. A questionnaire form was used as the data collection method of the study. The population of Giresun province, which constitutes the main population of the research, is 450,154 (TUİK, 2022). The sample group of the study was determined using the convenience sampling method. The data of the study were obtained through digital platforms on social media, via e-mail, and by applying a face-to-face survey method. After the approval of the ethics committee, a total of 600 individuals were reached between February 5, 2022, and June 5, 2022. After excluding missing data and erroneous questionnaires, the number of valid questionnaires was determined as 508. The sample size of this study was evaluated based on the sample size table proposed by Yazıcıoğlu and Erdoğan (2011) for different population sizes, which suggests a minimum sample size of 384. According to this reference range, the sample size was considered sufficient for statistical analysis. Within the scope of this research, the questionnaire items used by Akin (2020) were utilized. In the first part of the questionnaire used in the study, demographic factors were measured. The suitability levels of ecotourism activities in Giresun province were measured using a Likert-type scale included in the second part of the questionnaire. Since this research was conducted only in Giresun province, the generalizability of the findings is limited.

FINDINGS

Within the scope of the study, the reliability analysis revealed that the scale measuring participants' perceptions of potential ecotourism activities in Giresun was highly reliable ($\alpha:0,889$). This obtained value exceeds the threshold of 0,80 specified by Karagöz (2016), which indicates high reliability. The findings regarding the demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Findings According to Demographic Characteristics

		F	%			F	%
Gender	Female	325	64	Marital Status	Single	364	71,7
	Male	183	36		Married	144	28,3
Age	18-25	287	56,5	Education Level	Elementary	42	8,3
	26-35	116	22,8		High School	168	33,1
	36-45	55	10,8		Associate Degree	46	9,1
	46-60+	50	9,8		Bachelor's Degree	199	39,2
Occupation	Worker	57	11,2		Graduate	53	10,4
	Student	118	23,2				
	Self-employed	76	15				
	Civil Servant	97	19,1				
	Unemployed	111	21,9				
	Other	49	9,6				

When Table 1 is evaluated, it is observed that 64% of the 508 participants are female and 36% are male. According to the table, the majority of the participants consist of females, with 325 individuals representing a 64% share. Regarding the marital status of the respondents, 71.7% are single, while 28.3% are married. The findings indicate that the majority of the sample is composed of single participants, totaling 364 individuals (71.7%). An analysis of the age distribution reveals that 56.5% of the participants fall within the 18–25 age range, followed by 22.8% in the 26–35 range, 10.8% in the 36–45 range, and 9.8% in the 46–60+ age group. Based on these data, the 18–25 age group constitutes the largest segment of the participants, with 287 individuals (56.5%). In terms of occupational distribution, 11.2% of the participants are workers, 23.2% are students, 15% are self-employed, 19.1% are civil servants, 21.9% are unemployed, and 9.6% belong to other occupational groups.

Table 2: Participants' Perceptions of Potential Ecotourism Activities in Giresun

	1-Definitely Inappropriate		2-Inappropriate		3-Indecisive		4-Appropriate		5-Definitely Appropriate	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1.Nature Hiking	14	2,8	22	4,3	51	10	220	43,3	201	39,6
2.Mountain Climbing	23	4,5	45	8,9	102	20,1	179	35,2	159	31,3
3.Bird Watching	19	3,7	39	7,7	109	21,5	220	43,3	121	23,8
4.Nature Photography	12	2,4	7	1,4	33	6,5	201	39,6	255	50,2
5.Wildlife Safari	42	8,3	104	20,5	151	29,7	119	23,4	92	18,1

6.Camping	17	3,3	31	6,1	52	10,2	228	44,9	180	35,4
7.Rafting	41	8,1	103	20,3	143	28,1	137	27	84	16,5
8.Plant Observation and Study	11	2,2	27	5,3	88	17,3	211	41,5	171	33,7
9.Wildlife Conservation and Restoration	19	3,7	53	10,4	122	24	187	36,8	127	25
10.Angling	15	3	27	5,3	67	13,2	185	36,4	214	42,1
11.Planting and Cultivating Activities	6	1,2	12	2,4	56	11	201	39,6	232	45,7
12.Preservation and Development of Historical and Archaeological Values	18	3,5	48	9,4	143	28,1	192	37,8	107	21,1
13.Orienteering	24	4,7	48	9,4	144	28,3	186	36,6	106	20,9
14.Cycling	33	6,5	50	9,8	73	14,4	213	41,9	139	27,4
15.Horseback Riding	39	7,7	75	14,8	136	26,8	159	31,3	99	19,5
16.Aerial Sports	45	8,9	98	19,3	160	31,5	135	26,6	70	13,8
17.Fruit Picking	10	2	32	6,3	58	11,4	184	36,2	224	44,1
18.Visiting and Examining Local Architectural Structures	25	4,9	44	8,7	81	15,9	225	44,3	133	26,2
19.Viewing and Analyzing Religious Structures and Artifacts	27	5,3	43	8,5	130	25,6	198	39	110	21,7
20.Visiting Symbols and Values Related to Urban Identity	22	4,3	37	7,3	93	18,3	215	42,3	141	27,8
21.Agricultural Activities	10	2	16	3,1	48	9,4	196	38,6	238	46,9

When examining Table 2, which presents the perceptions of local residents regarding suitable ecotourism activities that can be implemented in Giresun Province, it is evident that the most favored ecotourism activity is nature photography, with a preference level of 50.2%. This is followed by agricultural activities at 46.9%, plant planting and cultivation activities at 45.7%, and fruit picking activities at 44.1%. These data indicate that the people of Giresun perceive these options as the most suitable for ecotourism, aligning closely with the region's rural and natural identity.

Upon reviewing Table 2, when the "Appropriate" and "Definitely Appropriate" options are considered together, popular activities supported by the vast majority of the public include nature hiking (trekking) and camping. Nature hiking achieved a total acceptance rate of 82.9%, with 43.3% responding as "appropriate" and 39.6% as "definitely appropriate," thereby establishing it as the primary ecotourism potential of the region. Similarly, the camping activity received a total support rate of 80.3%, with 44.9% indicating "appropriate" and 35.4% indicating "definitely appropriate." These results suggest that these fundamental activities, which are most embraced by the local population, should be prioritized in the development of ecotourism strategies in Giresun.

CONCLUSION

The feasibility of implementing ecotourism activities within a destination primarily necessitates the availability of geographically suitable areas and the proactive adoption and support of these initiatives by the local populace. A review of the relevant literature reveals a consensus among numerous studies that Giresun province is highly conducive to ecotourism, possessing substantial potential in this domain (Sezer, 2015; Sezer & Bekdemir, 2017; Turpcu & Çelikkanat Pashı, 2019; Kaya & Yıldırım, 2020; Çavuş & Zere, 2021; Saydam & Öztürk, 2024; Kurtlu & Yiğit, 2025).

The sample of the study mainly consists of female, single, young individuals, students, and participants with undergraduate-level education. Therefore, these characteristics of the participants are important when interpreting the results of the research. Tourism stakeholders should take the demographic characteristics of the local population into consideration when planning ecotourism activities and preparing related investments.

One of the most significant findings of the study is the identification of which ecotourism activity is perceived by the local population as the most suitable for the destination compared to others. According to the results, the ecotourism activity considered most appropriate to be implemented in Giresun province by the local population is nature photography. The findings of this study are consistent with the results of the research conducted by Kartal and Pashı (2021), which identified nature photography as one of the most preferred activities in Trabzon province, thereby supporting similar findings in the literature. With its favorable natural environment, Giresun province is highly suitable for this activity. In addition, Kılıç (2024) concluded that elements such as forested areas, mountainous landscapes, rock formations, terrain characteristics, historical artifacts and ruins, islands, waterfalls,

vegetation, and natural habitats in Giresun provide advantages for photography and that the province is also a suitable destination for astrophotography.

The local population also indicates that activities such as agricultural practices, planting and cultivating crops, and fruit picking could be implemented. Ecotourism does not merely involve the passive observation of natural environments; rather, it enables active interaction between people and nature. Within the scope of ecotourism activities, engaging in agricultural practices such as planting crops, harvesting, and fruit picking may encourage individuals who feel overwhelmed by urban life and long for nature to reconnect with the natural environment, understand its importance, and contribute to its protection while also generating socio-economic benefits for the destination. In this context, agricultural products such as hazelnuts, tea, cherries, kiwifruit, corn, and black cabbage could be used as key elements in these activities.

According to the data obtained, when evaluating ecotourism activities considered feasible for Giresun, nature walking (trekking) and camping are other prominent activities that receive approval from a large majority of the local population. In the study conducted by Kavak (2015), the identification of nature walking (trekking) as one of the most preferred activities shows parallelism with the findings of the present research. By establishing nature walking routes along designated trails, visitor participation in these activities can be encouraged; additionally, suitable areas in Giresun province can be identified for the establishment of camping sites or camping centers.

In future studies, routes can be developed for the highlighted ecotourism activities within the scope of this research, and the scope and functionality of existing routes can be investigated. By conducting similar studies in different provinces, the unique ecotourism potentials of these provinces can be compared, which may lead to the formation of ecotourism routes or studies on the integration of existing routes. A significant majority of participants are young people, so studies measuring the perspectives of different age groups could be conducted.

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