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REFRAMING FLOODPLAINS AS OPPORTUNITY SPACES: SOCIO-ECONOMIC POTENTIAL AND COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN BAYELSA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This research aimed to assess the socio-economic potential and perceptions of communities towards emerging floodplains for sustainable tourism development in Bayelsa State. Adopting a descriptive survey design, data were gathered from 233 respondents across selected communities using a structured questionnaire. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were used to analyze data. Additionally, a Composite Socio-Economic Potential Index (SEPI) was developed to measure socio-economic potential, while perceptions were summarized. Results indicated that floodplain tourism has a moderate socio-economic potential characterized by opportunities for employment generation, youth engagement, women empowerment, and community development. However, communities had mixed perceptions concerning environmental sustainability, cultural preservation, and government management in tourism development. The study concludes that emerging floodplains hold promise for sustainable tourism development in Bayelsa State, albeit with certain risks. Recommendations for infrastructure investment and community participation are suggested to optimize benefits.

Keywords: Socio-Economic Potential, Community Perceptions, Transforming Emerging Floodplains, Sustainable Tourism Destinations, Nigeria

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Introduction

Persistent inundation has emerged as one of the most frequent and costly natural disasters worldwide, with pronounced effects in low-lying coastal and deltaic areas. Research by the Jude et al. (2025) has shown that climate change has already exacerbated extreme rainfall events and coastal flooding in recent decades, making floodplain environments increasingly susceptible to hazards. Floodplains in developing countries, where planning is weakest and adaptive infrastructure scarce, are often conceived of as places of danger, loss, and displacement rather than productive change. For example, in Nigeria repeated flood events especially the nationwide flood disasters of 2012 and 2022 have heightened understandings of floodplains as hostile territories in need of emergency measures and structural fixes (Nkwunonwo et al., 2016). Though this reactive narrative is based on fact, it has also limited imaginations of the productive potential that lies within floodplain ecosystems.

Bayelsa State, situated in south-central Nigeria within the heart of the Niger Delta, is one of the most flood-affected areas in the country. The state's topography, crisscrossed by rivers and influenced by tidal surge, renders it prone to flooding during rainy seasons. Empirical research on flood impacts in Bayelsa State has focused on infrastructure damage, agricultural loss, household displacement, reduction in land values (Ajayi et al., 2019). Policy discussions have consequently centered around flood mitigation, embankment construction, and disaster response. While these solutions are undoubtedly important, they reinforce a narrative in which floodplains are considered liabilities that need fixing. Little exploration has been done on how floodplains could operate as assets in a diversified economy with proper planning mechanisms in place.

Across the world, floodplains and wetlands have been utilized for tourism purposes. River tourism, wetlands ecotourism, and delta recreation have all created livelihoods and jobs in certain contexts. Managed floodplains that become seasonally submerged have successfully hosted boating activities, birding tours, cultural celebrations, eco-lodges in Asia and Europe, revealing that dynamics floodplains can maintain tourism value if ecological resources are conserved and governance is aligned. The tourism system literature (Obenade & Seigha, 2020) treats tourism as an interactive web of resources (natural and cultural), actors (local community), tourism infrastructure, and institutional leadership. Viewing floodplains through the lens of tourism systems softens the binaries between hazard and opportunity; water-induced hazards can create unique landscapes that attract visitors if properly leveraged.

In Nigeria tourism has been heralded as an important economic diversification strategy from oil dependence (Obioma, 2013). However, tourist arrivals and activities have been concentrated in specific areas with vast underserved regions, especially within riverine and wetland ecosystems. Research on tourism potentials in the Niger Delta often

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highlights cultural festivals, historical landmarks, and beach resorts overlooking floodplain ecosystems. Meanwhile, literature on flooding in Bayelsa State has largely focused on vulnerable communities, property loss, and emergency management (Awokola & Adetunji, 2018). This disciplinary disconnect has created a research void where floodplains are analyzed extensively as hazards but not as potential tourism opportunities.

Shifting framings of floodplains from spaces of danger to places of opportunity does not suggest that we move away from structural mitigation. Building resilience, however, could be enhanced by simultaneously allowing communities to derive tangible benefits from their environment. Sustainable tourism is defined by principles of environmental conservation, participation of host communities, and long-term economic benefit (UNWTO, 2018). In flood-prone regions like Bayelsa state, this invites the question of whether seasonal floodplains have the socio-economic dynamics and institutional capacity to facilitate tourism development without causing further environmental degradation or exacerbating social risk.

Importantly, community perceptions also influence whether disaster risk reduction measures or land-use alternatives succeed or fail. According to the Protection Motivation Theory (Rogers, 2003), people tend to assess environmental risks by weighing their level of threat against their vulnerability and ability to cope. Communities living in flood-prone areas may perceive tourism as an opportunity to diversify their livelihoods and increase coping abilities, driving support for such initiatives. On the other hand, mistrust in government or concerns over eviction could create opposition to tourism development. Assessing floodplains for tourism potential should therefore consider not only physical characteristics but also community expectations.

Notably, there is growing literature on climate adaptation interventions and blue economy development in Nigeria. However, studies that explicitly relate floodplain processes to tourism market opportunities in Bayelsa State are limited. Most policy approaches have gravitated towards engineering works rather than promoting dynamic land-use. This study seeks to fill that gap by evaluating the prospect of developing emerging floodplains for sustainable tourism purposes and understanding community perception towards such a goal. Positioning floodplains as opportunities rather than sheer hazard challenges the way we think about resilience, sustainable development, and adaptive land-use in deltaic environments.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to appraise the tourism potentials of emerging floodplains in Bayelsa State and how flood hazard prone spaces can be planned and developed into sustainable tourism destinations. The study specifically achieved the following, to:

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1. identify the socio-economic potentials of transforming emerging floodplains into sustainable tourism destinations in Bayelsa State.
2. identify the communities' perception on floodplain development into tourism destinations in Bayelsa State.

Research Questions

To fully address the purpose of the study, the following questions were considered:

1. What are the socio-economic potentials of transforming emerging floodplains into sustainable tourism destinations in Bayelsa State?
2. What are the communities' perception on the development of floodplain into tourism destinations in Bayelsa State?

Synthesis of Empirical Studies

On a different note, other studies have helped to discover a great extent of contradiction between tourism potentials found in Bayelsa and why it remains untapped or unexploited. For example, a paper done on ecotourism potentials discovered that there are over thirty locations spanning several Local Government Areas in Bayelsa State that had mangrove swamps, rivers, creek and beaches as well as Ijaw cultural festivals and wildlife resources which can be used for tourism exploration, educational tourism and ecotourism investments such as conservations and adventure parks (Nwankwo et.al., 2023). Another related study focused on assessing heritage attraction shows that festivals and heritage sites served as forms of social and economic assets to the people and could be used for improving livelihood if properly branded and marketed (Ballard & Agbai, 2021). However, based on a survey that was conducted, results seem to contrast some of these findings as participants acknowledged the presence of tourism potentials but highlighted issues with accessibility, usage, and maintenance. As one respondent put forward, these areas create no income and have no positive developments surrounding them (Zuowei, 2025). This goes to show that even though there is a consensus that tourism is significant to explore in the state, there are issues in the infrastructure that leads to these areas which could be the cause for why they remain untouched. This further justifies the research question of whether these emerging floodplains can be converted to sustainable tourism through activities like ecotourism, cultural festivals, boating activities, and conservation.

What all these articles have in common though is that poor governance, unplanned development and poor coordination between stakeholders and government officials are among the leading causes of why preventable problems often turn into crises. Problems like poor drainage systems, urbanization, environmental regulation violations and unpreparedness have been noted to amplify the negative effects of flooding. (Jude et.al.,

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2025; Johnnie & Nwala, 2025). On the other hand, solutions like river basin management, planned ecotourism development, public-private partnerships, stronger environmental regulations and coordination between government institutions have been recognized as key solutions to moving towards prevention (Nwankwo et.al., 2023; Obenade & Seigha, 2020). With this in mind, it is not that Bayelsa State lacks the tourism or natural resources to prevent flooding, but that they lack the frameworks that will help to change the narrative. Therefore, it is important to take factors such as the environment, human perception, and policy into consideration when deciding if these emerging flood plains can become sustainable areas for tourism in the future.

Method

The study utilized cross-sectional mixed-method research design involving quantitative (survey) and qualitative approach. Cross-sectional design was used because assessment of tourism potential can be measured with objective socio-economic indicators and require understanding perceptions, acceptability and willingness to participate which are qualitative in nature. Therefore, triangulation of economic feasibility and social legitimacy were necessary to provide a comprehensive answer to the research questions as they are essential components needed for successful implementation of tourism development in hazard-prone areas. The place of study was purposively selected flood-prone communities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Specifically, communities in Yenagoa metropolis and other riverine communities that are prone to flood events and perceived as emerging floodplain landscapes were visited during data collection.

The study population consists of stakeholder groups within the communities that operate and reside within selected flood-prone communities in Bayelsa State. Such groups include adult residents that face yearly flooding threats and whose livelihoods may be altered with transformation into tourism communities, local businesses and entrepreneurs that can extend/receive services from tourism investments, youth groups and women groups since they form major participants in community activities and alternative livelihood creation. Local authorities such as traditional rulers and community leaders were also part of the study population because of their role and support at community level. Authorities that oversee tourism development such as the state tourism board were included as part of the population because they have statutory responsibility of providing oversight.

A multi-stage sampling approach was used for selection of respondents. First flood-prone communities with records of flood disasters and were identified as emerging floodplains were purposively selected. Second, households were selected randomly within selected communities to provide equal opportunity of being selected for all residents. Third, official and representatives of relevant institutional offices like the tourism board,

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National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), physical planning authorities and leaders were purposively selected.

233 respondents were sampled for the study. The sample size was determined using Taro Yamane's (1967) formula given as:

$$n = N / (1 + Ne^2)$$

where;

n= sample size

N= population size Which is 10,000

e = margin of error which is 0.05

A sample size of about 10–15 Key Informant Interviews (KII) was employed for the qualitative approach, thus gathering information from officials/institutions on issues bordering tourism development. A structured questionnaire used for quantitative data collection to answer research questions 1 and 2. This questionnaire featured items on a 4-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree options. Two sections were created in the questionnaire. Section A of the questionnaire measured indicators showing signs of Socio-economic potential. Section B measured the respondent's perception towards floodplain tourism development.

For qualitative data, Key Informant Interview (KII) guide was used to harness information from officials about institutional readiness, policy direction, investment challenges and governance issues affecting flood tourism development.

The content validation of the instrument was done to ensure relevant and items adequately capture the information that answered the research questions. Experts' validation was sought in area of tourism studies, environmental management, and research methodology. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha. Cronbach's Alpha greater than or equal to 0.70 was considered reliable. Pilot test was conducted among respondents that met the same criteria from a floodplain community not selected for the study.

Means and standard deviations were computed to ascertain the level of socio-economic potential flood tourism has among respondents. A Socio-Economic Potential Index (SEPI) was created by aggregating all the indicators that make up the socio-economic benefits tourism can bring to the communities. For Research Question 2 on community perception, descriptive statistics was used to summarize overall attitudes and levels of support. Content analysis was conducted on information gathered from key informants to identify institutional challenges and themes on governance affecting tourism development.

Questionnaires were administered to respondents after informed consent has been obtained. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study. Data collected was used for academic purposes only. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant body.

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Results

Research Question 1

What are the socio-economic potentials of transforming emerging floodplains into sustainable tourism destinations in Bayelsa State?

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation on the socio-economic potential of transforming emerging floodplains into sustainable tourism destinations in Bayelsa State

S/N	STATEMENT	$\bar{x}$	SD	REMARK
1.	Development of tourism in floodplain areas will create employment opportunities for local residents.	2.55	1.13	**A**
2.	Floodplain-based tourism can diversify household income sources in this community.	2.44	1.13	**D**
3.	Tourism development in floodplain areas will stimulate the growth of local businesses.	2.48	1.05	**D**
4.	Floodplain tourism can attract private and public investment into the community.	2.34	1.11	**D**
5.	Developing tourism in floodplain areas will improve local infrastructure (roads, electricity, water supply).	2.43	1.12	**D**
	Floodplain-based tourism can contribute to poverty reduction in this area.	2.59	1.14	**A**
6.	Tourism development will provide meaningful economic opportunities for youths.	2.67	1.05	**A**
8.	Women in this community will benefit economically from floodplain-based tourism.	2.73	1.06	**A**
9.	Revenue generated from floodplain tourism can enhance community development projects.	2.55	1.12	**A**
10.	Floodplain tourism has strong long-term economic viability in Bayelsa State.	2.52	1.14	**A**
	GRAND MEAN	**2.53**		**A**

Source: Fieldwork (2026) *A=Agree, D=Disagree

From Table 1, it can be observed that floodplain tourism development as a viable source of sustainable livelihood opportunity is not strongly supported by respondents; however, respondents tend to agree slightly since the grand mean = 2.53 is above midpoint = 2.00. They agreed that emerging floodplains can provide youths with substantial income generation opportunities ($\bar{x}$ = 2.67), serve as women income generating activity ($\bar{x}$ = 2.73), reduce poverty level in society ($\bar{x}$ = 2.59), offer employment opportunities ($\bar{x}$ = 2.55), create revenue that can enhance community development ($\bar{x}$ = 2.55), and economically viable over time ($\bar{x}$ = 2.52). Respondents disagreed that floodplain tourism potentials contribute immensely to income diversification ($\bar{x}$ = 2.44), promotion of local small

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businesses ($\bar{x}$ = 2.48), draw private and public investments ($\bar{x}$ = 2.34), improve infrastructure development ($\bar{x}$ = 2.43) based on the "Disagree" comment. This question had a fair standard deviation between 1.05–1.14, implying that not all respondents gave the same response for this question.

Research Question 2

What are the communities' perception on the development of floodplain into tourism destinations in Bayelsa State?

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation on the community perceptions regarding the development of floodplain-based tourism in Bayelsa State

S/N	STATEMENT	$\bar{x}$	SD	REMARK
1.	I support the development of tourism in floodplain areas of this community.	2.42	1.06	**D**
2.	Floodplain tourism can be developed without causing serious environmental damage.	2.58	1.05	**A**
3.	I am concerned that tourism development may increase environmental risks in floodplain areas.	2.48	1.17	**D**
4.	Tourism activities in floodplain areas will respect and preserve our cultural values.	2.44	1.18	**D**
5.	I trust government agencies to properly manage floodplain tourism development.	2.61	1.11	**A**
6.	Tourism development in floodplain areas may lead to displacement of local residents.	2.53	1.09	**A**
7.	Community members should actively participate in planning floodplain tourism projects.	2.51	1.10	**A**
8.	I am willing to participate in tourism-related activities if opportunities arise.	2.48	1.12	**D**
9.	Floodplain tourism development can be sustained over time without harming future generations.	2.40	1.18	**D**
10.	The benefits of floodplain tourism will outweigh its potential risks.	2.40	1.12	**D**
	GRAND MEAN	**2.48**		

Source: Fieldwork (2026) *A=Agree, D=Disagree

Table 2 shows that respondents were neutral about supporting floodplain-based tourism development, which has a grand mean of 2.48. Respondents agreed that floodplain-based tourism can be developed with little or no long-term harm to the floodplain ecosystem ($\bar{x}$ = 2.58), believe that government institutions/agencies will adequately plan and regulate tourism development activities ($\bar{x}$ = 2.61), recognize that some level of displacement occur

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if floodplain-based tourism is developed ($\bar{x}$ = 2.53), and agreed that the community should have a role in planning ($\bar{x}$ = 2.51). However, respondents disagreed that they would personally support tourism development in the floodplain ($\bar{x}$ = 2.42), believe that tourism is compatible with the community's way of life ($\bar{x}$ = 2.44), are willing to be involved with tourism development in any way ($\bar{x}$ = 2.48), feel that tourism development is sustainable in the long-term ($\bar{x}$ = 2.40) and will have more benefits than disadvantages ($\bar{x}$ = 2.40). The standard deviations show that some variability exists in how respondents view floodplain-based tourism development ranging from 1.05 to 1.18.

Key Informant Interviews (KII) Thematic Content Analysis Results

Four themes recurred during content analysis of Key Informant Interviews: perceived opportunity, lacking infrastructure and investment, government capacity, and trust and willingness to participate.

i. Perceived Opportunity

Generally, informants believed Bayelsa's fledgling floodplains did have assets attractive enough to be developed into tourism, namely eco-tourism, riverine recreation, cultural events and festivals, and wetland tourism. Informants noted Bayelsa' riverscape, biodiversity, and historical ties to aquatic livelihoods lent themselves well to attracting specific tourism sectors, if tourism were developed around these strengths. However, informants agreed that opportunity was lacking as there was little strategic vision or planning for tourism in Bayelsa. This theme somewhat correlates with the quantitative results. While participants were neutral to agreeing that tourism would create jobs, involve youth, and empower women, they did not show strong levels of agreement that it would change Bayelsa for the better.

ii. Lacking Infrastructure and Investment

Informants cited lack of infrastructure as one of the largest barriers to floodplain tourism. This included bad roads, little access to electricity, poor drainage, lack of waterways, and few hospitality venues. Tourism officials agreed that without large scale public investment and proper incentives for private investors, flood tourism would have little opportunity to grow beyond an idea. Qualitative data supports quantitative data. Participants disagreed with the statement that tourism would provide better infrastructure and attract investors.

iii. Government Capacity

A large theme among respondents was a lack of cohesion between different institutions. Informants believed there to be poor communication between environmental protection agencies, the ministry of tourism, and local government. A few went so far as to say there was no defined plan for floodplain tourism. A few environmental officials believed tourism threatened conservation efforts and should be regulated. As some participants only

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showed neutrality to trust in government to run tourism well, these comments help shape the understanding that citizens are more likely to support tourism if the government can prove it is trustworthy.

iv. Trust, Risk Perception, and Willingness to Participate

Leaders also mentioned that citizens would be unlikely to support floodplain tourism if they do not perceive the process to be transparent, if they will not benefit from it, or if it will negatively impact the environment. A few leaders claimed that many development projects in the Niger Delta have been enclosed by the elite, leaving little benefit for citizens. If citizens are able to participate in decisions and have some sort of ownership in the project, leaders believed they would be more supportive. Moderately agreeing that citizens should be able to participate in the process of tourism development aligns with leaders mentioning that citizens may not support tourism unless they are able to participate.

Discussion of Findings

Results for research question 1 show that the respondents were more affirmative when asked about livelihood aspects like youth employment, women empowerment, poverty alleviation and revenue generation for community members than structural benefits like attraction of investment to the area, increase in infrastructural development and promotion of business opportunities. It can be inferred that residents view tourism mainly as a means to supplement their livelihoods rather than an impactful venture that could lead to structural developments. This attitude corroborates previous studies on tourism development in Nigeria (Zuowei 2025; Obioma, 2013) which found tourism has capacity for economic diversification. However, it only thrives when there are institutional collaboration and arrangements, existence of supporting infrastructure and certainty of investment which are currently lacking in flood-prone communities in the Niger Delta.

Findings from the KII administered to tourism and environmental experts also revealed that although Bayelsa's floodplain ecosystems have several features like riverine topography, wetland vegetation and associated water-dependent livelihoods that could be leveraged for ecotourism and seasonal visitation by tourists; weak tourism facilities, poor private-sector investment, environmental hazards from oil-related activities and fragmentation of governance roles were counted against its development. This lines up with several empirical works on flooding and sustainable development conducted in Bayelsa State (Ajayi et al., 2019; Awokola & Adetunji, 2018) which cited institutional incapacity and infrastructural deficits as impediments to floodplain developments. That is why residents were hesitant to believe that transforming floodplains for tourism purposes will attract significant investment and infrastructure development. In other

words, although floodplains may provide aesthetically pleasing environments, weak institutional arrangements mitigate against its large-scale economic viability.

Furthermore, attraction of investment and infrastructure development recorded low mean values because several studies on flood-risk perception and livelihoods (Nkwunonwo et al., 2016) found areas that are prone to flooding are typically avoided by investors. Development by large-scale investments will only be possible if there are appropriate regulatory mechanisms in place. From these findings, it can be concluded that floodplains may serve as potential opportunities for tourism development given its perceived socioeconomic benefits for stakeholders like youths and women but cannot by itself, trigger immediate or significant structural economic transformation. Instead, floodplain development for tourism should be complemented with other deliberate interventions like public–private partnerships and investment in flood management strategies.

Results on Research Question 2 indicate a neutral stance because the grand mean score is 2.48. While respondents agreed that the government can effectively handle tourism-related developments and planning should be participatory, they were generally not willing to completely accept the idea of tourism expansion into floodplains. Residents may be open to the idea of floodplain tourism if certain conditions are met. However, they are not fully convinced about its sustainability, consistency with their way of life and if the community derives more benefits than disadvantages from it. This signifies that host communities are neither completely for nor against flood-based tourism development. Their acceptance is dependent on certain factors. Studies on flood-risk perception and tourism in Nigeria (Nkwunonwo et al., 2016; Ajayi et al., 2019) indicated people's experiences with flooding has shaped the way they perceive floodplains. In Nigeria, floodplains are associated with danger. As such, residents are less likely to accept initiatives that they feel will jeopardize their safety, environment and livelihoods even if it promises development opportunities this could be linked to the anxiety caused by years of oil-related activities in the Niger Delta which damaged their livelihoods and esthetics environment.

Interviews with tourism and environmental stakeholders revealed that although Bayelsa has scenic riverine and wetland topography which can be harnessed for tourism; lack of political will, poor enforcement of existing environmental laws and poor collaboration among government ministries could hinder its development. Similarly, leaders within the communities expressed concerns about land rights. They believed that if host communities are not well informed about how tourism will be developed in their areas and who specifically it is for, they may fear being displaced. This means that for tourism to function properly all its elements; community, environment, infrastructure and governance should be in synergy. Results from the questionnaire revealed stakeholders

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moderately agreed when asked if the community should have a say in tourism development. This signifies that residents want a voice in tourism initiatives being proposed in their communities and would want it developed in a way that they can participate and have control over it.

This means that residents doubt the sustainability of tourism development in the long-run and do not believe there will be more benefits than drawbacks if tourism was to develop along the floodplains. Findings from previous studies on tourism development (Ballard & Agbai, 2021; Obioma, 2013) supports this claim. Obioma (2013) posits that community perception plays a huge role in tourism development. If residents do not trust the developers, they are likely to reject the ideas even if it is actually viable.

Conclusion

Based on the objective of this research, it can be concluded that floodplains emerging in Bayelsa State have the potentials for tourism development which can help in ensuring sustainability, if necessary, measures like institution building, infrastructural development, and community participation are put in place. Although there are mixed reactions from communities on tourism development to harness the potentials of floodplains since they believe it can create jobs, empower youths and women, and help in reducing poverty; there are also sentiments that tourism cannot attract investors, create infrastructure, guarantee sustainability, and have more advantages than disadvantages. It is evident from research that communities are not wholly ready to support floodplains' tourism development, but if they can be assured of good leadership, the environment is protected, and they are properly involved.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were put forward:

1. The government and relevant stakeholders should invest in infrastructure and provide incentives to attract both public and private investment for sustainable floodplain tourism development in Bayelsa State.
2. Local communities should be actively involved in planning and decision-making processes to ensure environmental safeguards, cultural preservation, and equitable distribution of tourism benefits.

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