

## Rural Tourism As Promoter of Rural Development: A Conceptual Overview

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### Abstract

Economic, social and technological developments in recent years have led to significant changes and transformations in the tourism sector. There has been a growing interest in alternative tourism types such as rural tourism. This form of tourism is becoming increasingly popular as it offers an escape from urban life and allows people to reconnect with nature. Furthermore it is accepted that rural tourism is an important tool for socio-economic development and regeneration in rural areas where the economic return of agricultural activities is decreasing. The aim of the study is to explore the role of rural tourism in rural development and to provide recommendations for its more effective use. Preservation of cultural heritage, maintaining the unique natural features of rural regions and keeping traditional handicrafts alive are important for the development of rural tourism.

**Keywords:** Rural Development, Rural Area, Rural Tourism, Local People

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Today, problems such as environmental pollution, noise, traffic and stress are increasing as a result of rapid population growth, industrialisation and consequently intensive urbanisation. As these problems increase, the negative effects on people's well-being become more pronounced, creating a growing demand for relaxation, entertainment, sightseeing, and opportunities to spend time in natural, peaceful environments. Consequently, tourism activities are becoming increasingly important (Akbulak, 2016; Chen, Huang, Wu, Ip & Wang, 2023). The world is rapidly changing, transforming, and becoming more digital. This transformation has led to a rise in the number of people participating in tourism, as well as in interest in alternative tourism. Rural tourism, one of the alternative tourism, has also become popular (Chen, Huang, Wu, Ip & Wang, 2023).

Rural tourism is defined as a type of tourism that takes place in traditional, local, authentic, remote, sparsely populated and mostly agricultural areas in rural areas and in special destinations where tourists feel physically, socially or psychologically close and comfortable (Rosalina, Dupre & Wang, 2021). Rural tourism is not limited to agriculture-based tourism; it also encompasses a variety of tourism types, including nature-based tourism, cultural tourism, and heritage tourism (Irshad, 2010). It also ranges from birdwatching and farm tourism to adventure tourism, highland tourism, hiking, climbing, horseback riding, sports, health tourism, hunting, fishing, and educational travel (Ersoy, Tehci & Ersoy, 2018; Chen et al., 2023). What makes rural tourism particularly appealing is its focus on nature, small-scale experiences, outdoor activities, and opportunities for relaxation in a healthy environment. It offers unique experiences that contrast with urban lifestyles (Chen et al., 2023).

Rural tourism contributes to solving the problem of seasonality in tourism, as it is a type of tourism that can be practised in all seasons. It also serves as a balancing factor in the geographical distribution of tourism and prevents it from being concentrated only in certain regions, especially on the coastline. Rural tourism can be easily integrated with other types of tourism, allowing for a diverse array of activities. Additionally, it promotes the protection of resources such as the natural environment, historical and cultural heritage, authenticity, and local traditions. Seeing that these resources are valuable and provide economic contribution, local people and local businesses are more eager and attentive to protect these resources. Rural tourism is also a type of tourism that protects the diversity of agricultural and animal products that are intertwined with village life and exhibits a high degree of environmental sensitivity. Also, as rural tourism integrates and develops with the local population, it increases employment opportunities for local people and contributes to the regional economy. (Nagaraju & Chandrashekara, 2014; Neumeier & Pollermann, 2014).

Given the fact that it takes place in rural areas and its characteristics, rural tourism is recognised in many countries as a driving force and an important tool for the development of rural areas (Carius & Job, 2019). Rural development refers to the processes and organisations involved in the socio-economic and cultural development of people living in rural areas, improving production, income and welfare levels, redressing existing economic imbalances, improving rural infrastructure and optimising the use of agricultural products. (Ongun & Gövdere, 2015; Sakketa, 2023). In this context, rural tourism is recognised as a vital component for diversifying and revitalising the rural economy, preventing rural depopulation, protecting nature and ensuring regional development. Successful rural tourism practices allow local people, especially those involved in agriculture, to earn additional income, improve their welfare and share their cultural richness (Akbulak, 2016). The development of tourism in rural areas can stimulate rapid economic growth, create job opportunities and enhance the quality of life for residents. The economic value of rural tourism can be better understood by looking at the figures. The global rural tourism market reached around \$102.7 billion in 2023. By 2033, it is expected to reach approximately \$198.3 billion (Future Market Insights, 2023).

Rural tourism and rural development have been analysed from various perspectives in academic studies. Studies have examined spatial differentiation (Liao, Zuo, Law, Wang, & Zhang, 2022), destination competition (Lo, Chin, & Law, 2019), sustainability (Kim & Jamal, 2015; Long & Nguyen, 2018; An & Alarcón, 2020; Wang, 2022), motivation (Lewis & D'Alessandro, 2019), impacts (Çeken, Dalgın & Çakır, 2012; Sanagustin-Fons, Lafita-Cortés, & Moseñe, 2018), rural development (Nagaraju & Chandrashekara, 2014; Neumeier & Pollermann, 2014; Ongun & Gövdere, 2015; Wang, 2022) economic impacts (Carius & Job, 2019), experience (Chen et al., 2023). In the light of the studies listed, it can be seen that rural tourism has become a central element of economic development and income opportunities in rural areas where agricultural activities and income sources have decreased (Neumeier & Pollermann, 2014). From this point of view, the aim of the study is to draw the conceptual framework of rural development and rural tourism, to determine the role of rural tourism in rural development and to provide recommendations.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In line with the changes brought about by technological developments and the diversification of lifestyles and production methods, people's demands and expectations are also differentiating day by day. Today's tourists, who seek differences and are sensitive to sustainability and the environment in all areas, prefer to turn to different types and products of tourism based on special interests. Rural tourism, which is one of the alternative tourism type, is an important value in terms of playing a role in solving economic, social and psychological problems, saving tourism

from the domination of coastal tourism and providing additional income to agricultural producers. (Akbulak, 2016; Liao et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2023). In order to understand the impact of rural tourism on rural development, the concepts of rural area and rural development and then rural tourism are explained.

## **2.1 Rural Area**

Rural tourism specifically takes place in rural areas, so it is essential to define what constitutes a rural area and its characteristics, as not all places can be considered rural. While there is no universal definition that encompasses all the characteristics of rural areas, they are typically associated with geographical, socio-cultural, demographic, economic, environmental and spatial aspects (McAreavey & McDonagh, 2011). A rural area is defined as a place characterised by rural settlements and agricultural activities. For example, the OECD defines rural areas as regions with a population density of 150 inhabitants per square kilometre, while Eurostat defines rural areas as places with a population density of less than 100 inhabitants per square kilometre. (Rosalina, Dupre & Wang, 2021). Common indicators for defining rural areas include low population density and distance from urban centers.

As can be seen, there is no complete consensus on the indicators that define rural areas. Rural areas can be multifunctional, serving not only as sites for agricultural practices, but also playing an important role in preserving unique natural beauty, protecting biodiversity, creating employment opportunities and improving living standards. Other definitions emphasise that rural areas have a unique cultural structure, economic constraints tied to natural resources and a slower adaptation to technological change than urban areas. Life in these areas is often characterised by tradition and tends to be less prosperous than in other regions. (Zhou, Wall, Zhang & Cheng, 2021; Du, Wang & Wang, 2023).

Based on these definitions, rural areas can be defined as regions where life and economic activity depend to a significant extent on the use and exploitation of natural resources. In these areas, economic, social and cultural development tends to be slow and traditional values continue to play an important role in shaping everyday life. Face-to-face interactions remain important, while the impact of technological advances on life and production takes longer to manifest. In addition, rural areas are characterised by their distance from urban centres and their distinct socio-economic characteristics (D.P.T. (2000). In terms of rural tourism, it is seen that rural areas are defined as secluded, quiet areas outside of sand-sea-sun tourism, away from urban settlements, where the natural and cultural, traditional structure specific to the countryside is preserved (Soykan, 1998; Ongun & Gövdere, 2015; Rosalina, Dupre & Wang, 2021). Rural areas are suitable for nature-based tourism types such as bicycle tourism, river tourism, camping and caravan tourism, eco-tourism, green tourism, cave tourism, plateau tourism, mountain tourism, winter tourism, hunting tourism, paragliding (Ongun & Gövdere, 2015).

## **2.2 Rural Development**

Rural areas and rural settlements are of historic importance in terms of agricultural production and human existence. They are also critical for sustainable development, which is necessary for the future of the planet. Due to its importance for humanity, rural development has been on the agenda of countries and researchers (Torre & Wallet, 2016). The differences in development between rural and urban settlements and migration from rural areas to large cities for employment reasons highlight the need to integrate rural development into national policies. Rural development aims to increase income levels and improve the living standards of the rural population by addressing the imbalances between rural and urban areas. It is defined as the

overall improvement of the economic and social welfare of rural inhabitants and the improvement of their institutional and physical environment (Keane, 1992; Torre & Wallet, 2016).

The primary goal of rural development is to minimize the socio-cultural and economic gaps between urban and rural areas. This can be achieved by effectively utilizing the resources of rural areas and settlements, boosting employment opportunities in these regions, and raising the living standards of their inhabitants. Enhancing the number and quality of services—such as infrastructure, healthcare, and education—in rural areas is also a key component of rural development (Ongun & Gövdere, 2015). As evidenced, rural development seeks to foster the social, cultural, and economic advancement of rural regions and enhance the welfare of local populations.

Positive results can be achieved through restructuring in rural development. It is stated that restructuring the use of rural areas and agriculture in these areas will also improve the economic, social and cultural structure in rural areas. Rural development must focus on increasing opportunities for local people to access better living conditions and support their aspirations for change. It is also argued that mobilising local communities, ensuring equality in income distribution between urban and rural areas, increasing income levels, improving education and improving existing conditions through infrastructure projects are of great importance. (Haider, Boonstra, Peterson & Schlüter). It can be seen that rural tourism stands out in the restructuring of the use of rural areas.

### **2.3 Rural Tourism**

Rural tourism is a multi-component type of tourism that promotes economic, social and spatial transformation and reconstruction of rural areas. Since the 1980s, environmental awareness has increased and more attention has been paid to the ecological environment. The global 'green movement' has encouraged the development of rural tourism, making it an important component of sustainable tourism in many countries. (Liao, Zuo, Law, Wang & Zhang, 2022).

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (2024), rural tourism is defined as "a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's experience is connected to a variety of products, often related to nature-based activities such as agriculture, rural lifestyles, local culture, sightseeing, hiking, and fishing." This may involve staying in local chalets constructed from wood, adobe, or stone, utilizing bed and breakfast services, and enjoying hospitality offered by local families (Ongun & Gövdere, 2015). Lane (1994) describes rural tourism as occurring in small-scale settlements with a low population density and open spaces, usually with a population of less than 10,000. It takes place in rural areas where land use is mainly limited to agriculture, forestry and natural areas. Based on these definitions, rural tourism can be defined as an alternative type of tourism that is carried out in close contact with local people living in rural settlements, where many tangible and intangible rural attractions constitute the tourism product, and is carried out according to the principles of sustainability (Çeken, Dalgın & Çakır, 2012; Ongun & Gövdere, 2015; Rosalina, Dupre & Wang, 2021; Liao et al., 2022). Looking at the definitions, it is assumed that rural tourism is based on rural-specific experiences such as enjoying the outdoors, contacting nature and engaging with local communities. It usually involves physical activities related to nature, such as walking, cycling and fishing. It takes place in villages and small towns and meets the needs of visitors through a large number of private and often family-owned micro-enterprises, run as part-time or additional work (Šajin & Finer, 2023).

Rural tourism significantly contributes to rural economies. It complements other economic activities and aiding in GDP growth, job creation. Many tourist destinations experience over-tourism during certain months and seasons, leaving them empty during off-peak times. Rural tourism is seen as a remedy to this situation, known as the seasonality problem of the tourism

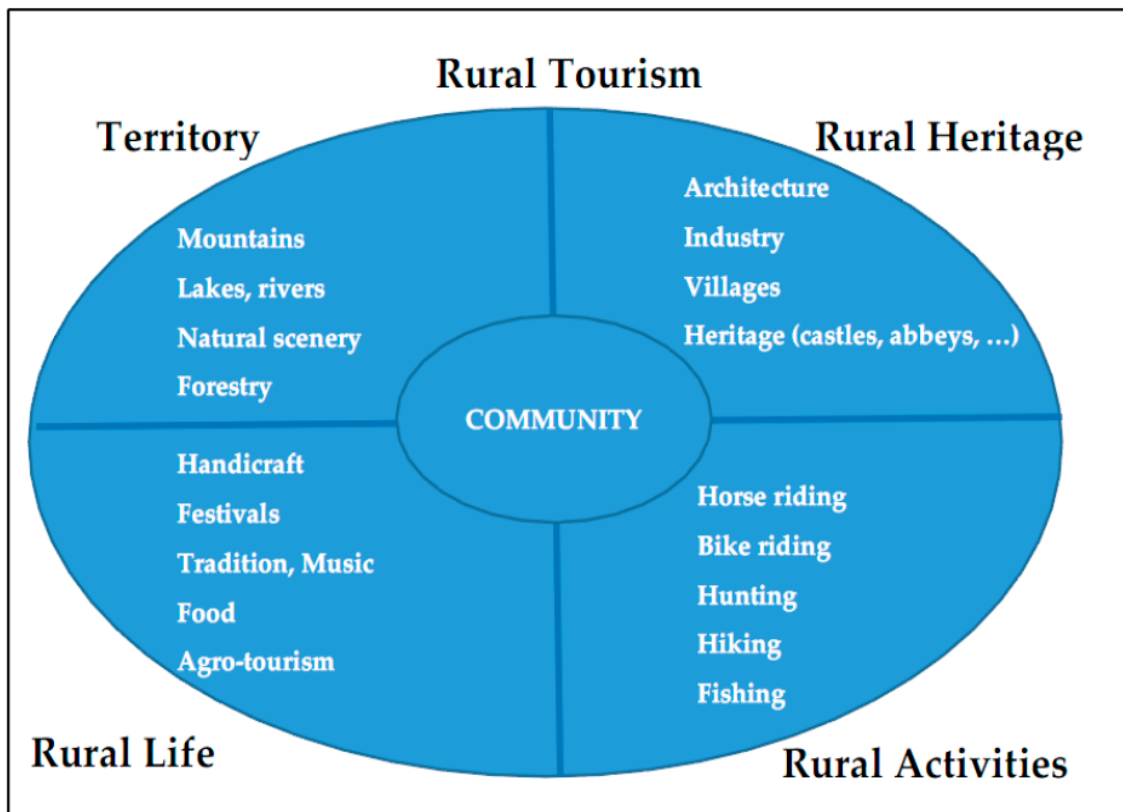
sector. Another important economic contribution of rural tourism is that it enables local people to earn income from non-agricultural activities. As rural tourism is a type of tourism based on rural areas and natural resources, it is an important economic income generating component due to its protection of the natural environment, its contribution to sustainable tourism and its economic contribution to the region and local people (Ongun & Gövdere, 2015). According to Eurostat (2021), a large part of tourism in the EU takes place in rural areas. Rural areas accounted for % 43.8 of tourism accommodation beds in the EU. Rural areas also account for %37 of all nights spent in tourist accommodation (Şajn & Finer, 2023). According to forecasts, rural tourism revenue will reach approximately \$198.3 billion worldwide in 2033 (Future Market Insights, 2023).

Rural tourism can be integrated with many alternative types of tourism depending on the characteristics of the region. It encompasses cultural heritage tourism, nature-based tourism, ecotourism, agrotourism, farm tourism, village tourism, highland tourism approaches etc. Cultural heritage tourism is a vital aspect of rural tourism, focusing on both tangible and intangible historical and cultural elements from the past and present. This type of tourism involves visiting sites and engaging in activities that showcase these cultural characteristics. The second important component is nature-based tourism/ecotourism, which refers to the process of visiting natural areas and engaging in activities to enjoy the landscape, including wildlife. Nature-based tourism includes observation or outdoor recreation or adventure activities.

Agrotourism is the third important form of rural tourism, where visitors explore farms or agricultural enterprises for recreation, education, or active participation in farming activities. It is a type of tourism that allows visitors to practice farming activities such as planting crops, harvesting, caring for animals, and experiencing farm life in natural environments such as farms (Irshad, 2010).

Interest in rural tourism is increasing day by day. The reasons for this can be listed as follows (Irshad, 2010; Lewis & D'Alessandro, 2019):

- Rural tourism provides an opportunity to escape the stresses of city life and reconnect with a quieter, more peaceful way of living.
- Travellers are increasingly seeking unique and original experiences instead of conventional tourism activities, making rural tourism more appealing.
- Growing environmental awareness and interest in sustainable practices have highlighted the value of rural tourism experiences.
- Improved transportation has made rural areas more accessible.
- Educated travellers are becoming more interested in cultural heritage and nature-based tourism, looking for distinctive and memorable experiences.
- As people's interest in healthy living increases, so does their attraction to rural tourism.
- Interest in authentic experiences, including interaction with local people, has increased. It is believed that authenticity can be captured in real rural experiences and lifestyles.



Source: Sanagustin-Fons et al, 2018.

Rural tourism generally consists of four dimensions: Territory, Rural Life, Rural Activities, and Rural Heritage, as illustrated in Figure 1. **The Territory** dimension encompasses the natural resources of the region, including mountains, lakes, rivers, and forests. These attractions are key in drawing visitors to the area, as rural tourism often focuses on nature-based experiences. Consequently, the region's scenic landscapes play a vital role in tourism appeal. Under the **Rural Life** dimension, aspects such as handicrafts, festivals, traditions, music, food, and agro-tourism are included. Local life is as significant to rural tourism as natural resources. Visitors interested in rural tourism seek to learn about and experience the lifestyles of local people, including their cuisine, leisure activities, crafts, music, and customs. The **Rural Activities** dimension features various activities available in the area, including horse riding, biking, hunting, hiking, and fishing. One of the major benefits of rural tourism is that it offers an escape from the chaos of urban life, allowing people to enjoy outdoor activities. Finally, the **Rural Heritage** dimension showcases local architecture, industries, villages, and historical sites such as castles and abbeys. Rural tourism is more than just engaging in nature-based activities, attending local festivals, or sampling traditional foods; it also involves exploring the architectural and cultural heritage of the countryside (Sanagustin-Fons, Lafita-Cortés, & Moseñe, 2018).

Rural tourism has both positive and negative effects on local communities in rural areas. When examining the positive impacts, it is evident that rural tourism offers numerous benefits to local residents. One of its key contributions is to strengthen the local economy by creating new job opportunities. It plays an important role in maintaining essential services, improving living conditions, preventing migration, and slowing population decline in the area. It also supports the conservation of both natural and cultural heritage and the maintenance of a region's distinctive rural character. For example, traditional lifestyles, cuisine and food culture, traditional crafts such as lace making, knitting and carpet weaving, which are at risk of being lost, can be



preserved. Because rural tourism relies on local resources, culture, traditions, and customs, local people come to appreciate the value of these resources. This recognition fosters a sense of pride in their community and strengthens social bonds. Furthermore, through agrotourism, farmers have the opportunity to promote their farms and unique regions. Visitors who stay on farms, experience rural life, and purchase agricultural products provide direct additional income to farming families. As rural tourism involves many nature-based activities, forests can serve as recreational areas. This contributes to the diversification of income sources in forest villages and to the promote of forestry. As a result of all these developments, it is ensured the protection of local products, agricultural land, in short, the rural area (Šajn &Finer, 2023).

Rural tourism plays a vital role in sustaining employment in rural areas, particularly in service sectors such as transportation, accommodation, and food and beverage. In addition to preserving existing jobs, it has the potential to create a significant number of new positions in these areas and foster the development of new businesses. Moreover, rural tourism can provide additional income for farmers, as well as for foresters and fishermen in some cases. The tourism sector is widely recognized as an exciting and growing industry that appeals to the energy and enthusiasm of young people. It can offer valuable job opportunities for youth in their own regions, reducing the need for migration to urban areas. Consequently, this may lead to a decrease in urban migration. Furthermore, as rural areas become popular tourist destinations, there is often an increased focus on infrastructure development, including improvements to roads and sewerage systems (Irshad, 2010; Liao et al., 2022).

Despite its many positive aspects, tourism can also have negative consequences for rural communities. There is always a risk that an influx of visitors may damage fragile ecosystems. Additionally, pollution in rural areas can arise, including noise and litter. As rural destinations grow in popularity, the cost of living may increase due to foreign buyers purchasing second homes and the emergence of large-scale tourism businesses. This rise in housing prices can become unaffordable for local residents, leading to a general decline in affordability. Tourism can also result in the destruction of "unexplored" areas and natural landscapes. Furthermore, urbanization may begin to encroach on rural regions, resulting in the depletion of local resources and overloading existing infrastructure. This situation can cause local communities to become overly dependent on tourism. More importantly, the harmful effects of these issues threaten to diminish the long-term attractiveness of rural regions (Šajn & Finer, 2023). Therefore, it is crucial to organize rural tourism activities in a manner that minimizes harm to the environment and rural communities (Ersoy, Tehci & Ersoy, 2018; An & Alarcón, 2020).

### 3. CONCLUSION

Rural tourism is defined as a set of activities carried out in small settlements with small-scale businesses that provide accommodation, food, beverages and other services to visitors who want to be intertwined with agricultural or local values in rural areas (Qiu et al., 2019; Liao et al., 2022). Rural tourism has several key characteristics, which can be categorized into location, function, scale, and tradition. Location: it should be located in rural areas. Function: it should reflect the unique aspects of rural life, including small-scale businesses, open spaces, and connections with nature, as well as local heritage, traditional societies, and practices. Scale: Typically, rural tourism operates on a small scale. This is evident in the size of houses, shops, and the settlements themselves. Tradition: on the other hand, it should have a traditional and natural character. Development should occur gradually and organically, rather than rapidly, fostering a connection with local families and communities. Rural tourism should be owned and developed by local people due to its long-term positive contribution to the region (Lane, 1994, Irshad, 2010). In short,

it should be located in rural areas, be "functionally" rural, be small-scale, traditional in character, grow gradually and be controlled by the local community (Lane, 1994).

It is seen that rural development is necessary for the welfare of societies. In rural areas, it is necessary to create a diversity of goods and services both within and outside the agricultural sector, increase added value, encourage innovation and sustainable rural development. At this point, rural tourism emerges as a key component of maintaining vitality in multifunctional rural areas (McAreavey & McDonagh, 2011). Economically, rural tourism is significant for creating employment opportunities for local residents and increasing household incomes. Additionally, it plays an important role in protecting the natural environment, strengthening local communities, and preserving traditional cultural heritage (An & Alarcón, 2020). Rural regions with their untouched historical and natural richness can turn into an important economic value through tourism. Rural tourism contributes to local economic growth as it enables tourism demand, which has the handicap of seasonality, to spread over all seasons and prevents tourism from being trapped only in coastal areas and makes it possible to spread it to a wider region (Šajn & Finer, 2023). And local culture and heritage are preserved through this process. There is a mutual relationship between local arts and crafts and rural tourism. Local arts and crafts are a strong attraction factor for rural tourism. It plays an important role in attracting visitors to the region. Because of this feature, local people endeavour to keep local arts and crafts alive and even to develop them.

However, Rural tourism faces several challenges that can hinder its development. One of these is inadequate infrastructure. Inadequate roads, ports and airports providing access to rural areas, problems related to basic services such as sewerage, electricity and water systems, difficulties in communication, inadequate internet can be counted. Another challenge is the decrease in population, especially due to the migration of younger generations to urban areas. This situation may lead to a lack of human resources required for tourism services. But, it is essential for visitors engaged in rural tourism to have personal interactions with local residents throughout their experience (Šajn & Finer, 2023). Sustainability is also a critical concern for rural tourism. While the rapid development of rural tourism increases economic income, it may also pose risks to rural areas. Rural resources with local characteristics are the resources that emphasise the characteristic aspect of the countryside. However, as a result of urbanisation and commercialisation due to tourism, the rural region may face the danger of deterioration of its natural beauty and loss of its characteristic features (Wang, 2022).

Rural tourism has emerged as a significant economic development tool, particularly for rural communities seeking to enhance their socio-economic conditions. In many countries, it serves as a strategic approach to counteract agricultural decline and bolster rural incomes (Irshad, 2010). To effectively leverage rural tourism for development, several strategic proposals can be implemented. Firstly, strengthening basic infrastructure—such as roads, water supply, and electricity—is essential to support tourism activities in rural areas. Concurrently, protecting and promoting local culture and heritage is vital, as these elements are central to the appeal of rural tourism. This includes preserving handicrafts, traditional cuisines, and regional architecture. Additionally, transforming agricultural and handicraft products into commercial offerings can generate supplementary income for local producers. Encouraging low-impact tourism activities, such as ecotourism, trekking, and cycling tours, can further enhance the attractiveness of rural areas while minimizing environmental degradation. To stimulate investment in rural tourism, incentives in the form of tax breaks, grants, and low-interest loans can be introduced. It is crucial that the strategies adopted for supporting rural development remain adaptable, accommodating innovative local initiatives and evolving trends in rural tourism (Nagaraju & Chandrashekara, 2014). Implementing these recommendations can contribute to improving the welfare of local



populations by fostering economic diversity in rural regions, thereby creating a sustainable development model. The ongoing discourse surrounding the future and development of rural areas necessitates thorough analysis and strategic policymaking by stakeholders, ensuring that appropriate development policies are in place to facilitate progress.

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