

EXAMINING RESPONSIBLE TOURISM IN RURAL AREAS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA: A RESEARCH INVESTIGATION**¹Dr. RIYAS KALATHINKAL, ²Dr. SIBI JOHN and ³Dr. FARHANA SULTANA**¹Post Doctoral Fellowship Student, Sunrise University, Alwar, Rajasthan, Former Faculty of Business Studies
University of Technology and Applied Sciences²Faculty of Business Studies, University of Technology and Applied Sciences³Head of Unit Accounting and Finance, University of Technology and Applied Sciences**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Oman's Vision 2040 Tourism Strategy is a core pillar of national economic diversification, aiming to attract over five million international visitors and significantly increase contribution from domestic tourism. The strategy heavily emphasizes the development and enhancement of local culture as a primary promotional tool. This study assesses the critical role of Responsible Tourism (RT)—defined as sustainable visitor-host interactions where decisions prioritize the local community's best interests—in achieving sustainable societal development in Oman's rural areas during the post-COVID-19 recovery period.

While tourism contributed OMR 718 million (2.5% of GDP in 2019), and RT has vast, largely unexplored potential in the Sultanate for reducing regional imbalances, generating employment, and conserving the environment, its current growth is hampered by structural impediments.

This investigation analyzes the strengths, potential, challenges, and problems of rural tourism, identifying key obstacles through explorative and descriptive research, including interviews with stakeholders in regions like North Al Batinah. The core findings highlight issues related to fragmented governance and policy alignment, critical infrastructure deficits (particularly digital connectivity), a lack of specialized local human capital, and the absence of carrying capacity limits necessary to protect fragile rural environments.

The expected outcome of this study is the proposal of a Systematic Tourism Development Model and a comprehensive Strategic Action Plan. This model is designed to provide actionable measures—such as establishing a Unified Responsible Tourism Authority (URTA), simplifying SME financing, and enforcing environmental carrying capacity—to reduce regional imbalances, maximize RT's contribution to GDP, and ensure sustainable economic development. It calls for all stakeholders, from government to tourists, to embrace self-responsibility in shaping a sustainable future for Oman's rural economy.

Keywords: Responsible Tourism, Rural Tourism Potential, Sustainable Development, Diversification of Economic Development.

I. INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

The tourism industry is widely recognized as a significant contributor to the growth of many economies globally. This industry generates substantial revenue, creates thousands of employment opportunities, promotes cultural exchange, and facilitates infrastructure development. In fact, it is the world's largest revenue-generating sector, contributing a significant portion of most developed countries' GDP (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019). Oman, a country with rich history, culture, and a plethora of tourist attractions, is no exception to this trend.

Oman's Vision 2040 document emphasizes the importance of economic diversification initiatives, with one of its key pillars being the 2040 Tourism Strategy, which aims to attract over five million international visitors in addition to domestic visitors who can contribute significantly to the country's revenue generation. The strategy focuses on enhancing local culture, which can be a significant tool for promoting tourism in Oman.

Given the volatility in oil prices, the Omani government has been focusing on diversifying the economy by investing in non-oil sectors. Tourism is a key area of focus in Oman's attempts to diversify its economy, and it is one of the five priority sectors listed in the Sultanate's Ninth Five-Year Development Plan, alongside manufacturing, transportation and logistics services, fisheries, and mining. Public and private investments in tourism are projected to total RO 1.6 billion (approximately US\$ 4.1 billion) between 2016 and 2020.

In 2019, the tourism industry made a direct contribution of OMR 718 million to Oman's GDP, which was about 2.5% of the country's GDP, compared to 2.8% in 2016. The direct added value produced by Omani tourism increased from RO 505 million (approximately US\$ 1.3 billion) in 2009 to RO 719 million (approximately US\$ 1.8 billion) in 2017, making it one of the fastest-growing non-oil industries in the Sultanate. Tourism and travel currently sustain 72,500 jobs, which is 3.4% of the total national workforce. According to the World Travel and

Tourism Council, Oman's travel and tourism sector is expected to record one of the strongest growth rates in the world (18th rank out of 185 countries) between 2018 and 2028 (WTTC, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the tourism industry. Responsible tourism, which aims to make tourism more sustainable and improve the lives of local people, is gaining momentum. It calls for operators, hotels, governments, local people, and tourists to take action to ensure sustainability is maintained and addressed. Responsible tourism refers to the way visitors and hosts interact to ensure sustainability is maintained and addressed, and it requires visitors to make decisions based on what is best for the local communities.

Oman is a newcomer to tourism, and there is no instability in the country despite conflict and strife in other Middle Eastern countries. Although it is still learning and developing, there is a demand for tourism to expand as it serves as the primary industry to replace oil. Maintaining the local economy while preserving the region's natural legacy, from the sea to mangroves, wadis to wilderness, will be a challenge, but not insurmountable.

This research aims to identify the strengths and opportunities in the field of responsible tourism in Oman, which has the potential to be a long-term revenue source for the country's expansion. It may aid in resource inflow from the urban to the rural economy, discourage migration from rural to urban areas, and require planning, execution, and monitoring on both a short- and long-term basis to avoid damage to rural areas. Responsible tourism growth requires environmental protection, community engagement.

II. SIGNIFICANCE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The role of Responsible Tourism in facilitating rural and regional development, as well as the optimal utilization of natural resources and local tourist destinations, cannot be overstated. It enables the realization of economic benefits while preserving local ecosystems and cultures, as well as mitigating the negative effects on society, the environment, and the economy. The present study aims to explore the potential of Responsible Tourism in promoting sustainable economic and social development in the North Al Batinah region of the Sultanate of Oman.

Tourism is a rapidly growing sector in many parts of the world, with the potential to generate significant economic benefits. It is responsible for attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and driving the development of local economies by creating various business opportunities and employment opportunities, thereby contributing to overall socio-economic development. In Oman, the tourism industry has been substantially supported by the government and private sector investments, which have boosted the sector's growth and changed its face. The government has also placed a strong emphasis on tourism growth, as seen in the country's Vision 2040, which aims to create half a million jobs in the sector by 2040.

The efforts made by the Oman government to attract both local and foreign investments towards the tourism sector have resulted in a rapid increase in the number of tourists visiting Oman in recent years. According to Colliers, the annual growth of tourists entering the Sultanate doubled in 2018-2019, with a significant percentage being Chinese tourists. It is expected that the number of tourists will continue to increase at a rate of 13-15% in the next few years.

The Ministry of Tourism in Oman has implemented several initiatives to promote tourism, including relaxed COVID-19 guidelines, quarantine facilities, easy access to rapid and PCR-testing, eased visa norms, and visa-free arrival facilities for many countries. Furthermore, the online visa application platform introduced by the Royal Oman Police in March 2018 has streamlined the application process for booking agents, hotels, and tour operators. The presence of a large airport with excellent facilities, capable of handling more than 20 million passengers annually, plays a significant role in attracting tourists.

However, despite the sector's progress, there are still potential drawbacks and hurdles that must be overcome to achieve the Vision 2040 goal. The key challenge is identifying hidden resources that can be utilized efficiently in strengthening ties, particularly between various stakeholders in the society, in building a much stronger tourism industry overall. In the past decade, numerous efforts have been made that have resulted in tremendous growth in the tourism industry, making it one of the key pillars of the Sultanate's social and economic development in the coming years.

I. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To ascertain the potential strengths of Responsible tourism in rural areas of Sultanate of Oman.
2. To identify and analyze the major obstacles hindering the development of Responsible tourism in rural areas following the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. To determine the roles of stakeholders in facilitating the growth of Responsible tourism in rural areas.
4. To propose measures aimed at maximizing the potential contribution of Responsible tourism to sustainable development in rural areas.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review discusses several studies that examine the impacts of responsible tourism, sustainable rural tourism development, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism. The studies highlight different aspects of tourism, including environmental protection, cultural aspirations, and the role of the local community in tourism development.

Markose, Nimi, Bindu Vazhakkatte Tazhathethil, and Babu George (2022) emphasize the crucial role of responsible tourism in promoting environmental protection and green tourism in Kerala. Their study identifies the challenges faced during the implementation process of responsible tourism in the region.

Anna Polukhina, Marina Sheresheva, et al. (2021) underscore the importance of sustainable rural tourism development in Russia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their study highlights the role of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in rural tourism and the need for proper planning and implementation measures to judge policy implications.

Malati Kaini (2021) focuses on the factors influencing rural tourism in Nepal during the COVID-19 crisis. The study highlights the need for well-designed strategies and programs to overcome the pandemic and attract tourists to rural areas for economic development.

Jose Maria Lopez., Azucena Penelas, et al. (2021) examine the most influential areas of rural tourism, including tourist behavior, destination image, and satisfaction rate among tourists. Their study emphasizes the need to strengthen policies to promote sustainability in rural tourism, such as creating employment opportunities and encouraging local products.

Tanja Mihalic, Sahar Mohamadi, et al. (2021) highlight the potential contributions of different academic fields and stakeholders to sustainable tourism planning and policy drafting in prospective geographical areas.

S. Mondal and Samaddar (2021) explore the vast literature on the impact of various factors on tourism development in a region. The study reviews different theories and methodologies to understand the relationship between these factors.

Paul V Mathew and Nimmi P.M (2021) emphasize the concept of responsible tourism, covering economic, social, cultural, and environmental responsibilities. Their study analyzes the relationship between these four responsibilities and the community's life satisfaction in the required tourist destinations.

Eylla Laire M. Gutierrez (2019) examines the degree of local community participation in Community-Based Tourism (CBT) initiatives in the Philippines. The study highlights the different levels of contribution from stakeholders in CBT tourism initiatives.

Al-Badi, A., Tarhini, A., & Al-Sawaei, S. (2017) analyze the use of social media to promote local tourism in Oman. Their study emphasizes the importance of authenticating information posted on social media and sharing positive experiences to encourage local tourism.

Dr. Harmeet Matharu (2017) focuses on Bhutan's reputation in the global market as a sustainable tourism destination. The study highlights various strategies adopted by the Bhutan government, including privatization of the tourism sector and the participation of the local community in promoting eco-tourism and preserving nature to attract tourists to the region. The findings suggest that privatization of the tourism sector is a key factor in the success and growth of natural tourism and the safeguarding of the environment.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The proposed research methodology for investigating the potential impact of Responsible tourism in rural areas of North Al Batinah Region involves using the Triangulation research approach. The study will utilize both explorative and descriptive methods. Primary data will be gathered through personal interviews with government officials, visitors, hotel employees, and professionals in the field, as well as through structured questionnaires distributed to the local community and employees. The sample size will consist of 150 hotel employees and 250 individuals from the local communities of North Al Batinah Region, selected through Convenience Sampling Technique. The population statistics of North Al Batinah Region are outlined in Table 1.

The population of the wilayats of Al Batinah North Governorate**Table No. 1**

Area	Status	Population - 2020
Al Khabura	Wilayat	78,775
Suwaiq	Wilayat	184,561
Liwa	Wilayat	55,698
Saham	Wilayat	150,057
Shinas	Wilayat	82,741
Sohar	Wilayat	232,849
North Al Bathina	Governorate	784,681

Source: Sultanate of Oman, National Centre for Statistics and Information

VI. SOURCES OF DATA

The study will gather primary data from the local community in Al Batinah region and economic agents, such as hotels and service industries, through self-administered questionnaires and focus group discussions. Additionally, secondary data will be obtained from various sources, including websites, journals, and other relevant materials. The research will employ suitable quantitative and qualitative analysis methods to draw meaningful conclusions.

VII. CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

This study, conducted by Omani researchers, aims to provide a policy framework to the government and suggest the incorporation of tourism education at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences. It also sheds light on the potential for sectorial development in various aspects of the tourism industry such as sport tourism, ecotourism, adventure tourism, and water tourism. Responsible rural tourism is a crucial part of the tourism industry, and the results of the study aim to cover the various benefits as described below:

a) Economic Benefits to the Sultanate:

- Contribution to the country's GDP
- Generation of opportunities for balanced regional development
- Increase in purchasing power

b) Benefits to the Sultanate's Youth:

- Generation of employment opportunities in rural tourism
- Enhancement of entrepreneurial opportunities
- Promotion of tourism education and possibilities for new learning

c) Benefits to the Sultanate's Industry:

- Development of infrastructure
- Market for local industry products
- Support for auxiliary industries
- Better scope for tourism marketing
- Stimulate cost-effective activities

d) Benefits to the Sultanate's Society:

- Community-based participation to encourage responsible rural tourism
- Increase in the quality of life for local people
- Improvement in the income of rural people
- Creation of markets for handicrafts and locally developed products
- Encouragement of the protection of natural flora and fauna
- Promotion of local enterprising activities
- Protection of local culture

- Protection of the environment
- Preservation and conservation of historical monument

VIII RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

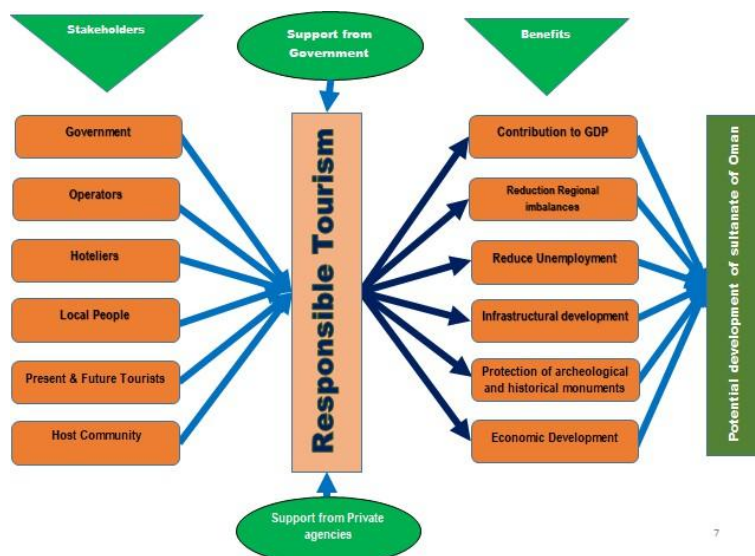


Figure No .1

Key findings: obstacles to sustainable growth

The analysis of Oman's rural tourism sector identifies specific bottlenecks across three core pillars of sustainability:

Economic Hurdles

- **Minimal Rural Revenue Contribution:** Despite the richness of its natural and cultural assets, the economic contribution of rural areas to Oman's overall tourism GDP remains low.
- **Expatriate Labor Dependency:** There is a critical shortage of **specialized, trained Omani youth** in responsible tourism practices and entrepreneurship, leading to a reliance on foreign labor that diminishes local financial benefits.
- **Infrastructure Deficiencies:** Basic infrastructure, particularly **reliable digital connectivity (internet)**, quality roads, and certified sustainable accommodation (e.g., eco-lodges), is insufficient to meet the needs of high-value international and domestic tourists.
- **SME Funding Barriers:** Local communities and SMEs face restrictive access to government funding and complex, lengthy bureaucratic procedures for establishing tourism-related businesses.

Socio-Cultural Challenges

- **Community Exclusion in Planning:** While local communities are highly willing to engage and share their cultural heritage (*Aflaj* systems, local crafts, traditional cuisine), they often feel excluded from the initial planning and decision-making phases.
- **Fragmented Governance:** A lack of clear, coordinated communication and policy execution exists between key entities, including the **Ministry of Heritage and Tourism**, local Municipalities, and the private sector, resulting in implementation delays.
- **Risk of Cultural Commodification:** Stakeholders noted a tension between leveraging local culture for tourism appeal and the risk of **oversimplifying or cheapening authentic traditions** to meet the demands of mass market tourism.

Environmental Concerns

- **Prioritizing Conservation:** There is universal stakeholder consensus that the **fragility and diverse ecology** of Oman's rural sites (wadis, mountains, coastal areas) mandate that environmental conservation must be the paramount priority over rapid development.

- **Absence of Carrying Capacity Management:** Key rural sites lack systematic assessment and regulation of their **ecological and social carrying capacity**, leading to unmanaged visitor traffic and risk of environmental degradation.
- **Inadequate Waste Infrastructure:** Effective, sustainable waste management and recycling systems are often missing in remote areas, posing an escalating threat to the environment as tourism numbers increase.

XI. Report Recommendations: Strategic Action Plan

The following actions are required to transform the potential of Responsible Tourism (RT) in Oman's rural areas into a sustained driver of economic, social, and environmental development, aligning with **Vision 2040**:

I. Governance and Institutional Alignment

1. **Establish a Unified Responsible Tourism Authority (URTA):** Create a high-level, cross-ministerial body (involving the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, local Municipalities, and relevant environmental bodies) with the mandate to **streamline and enforce** a single, consistent RT policy across all jurisdictions.
2. **Mandate Community-Led Planning:** Formally shift the planning process to a **bottom-up approach**, ensuring that local community endorsement and input are mandatory prerequisites for the approval of any new rural tourism development project.

II. Infrastructure and Investment

1. **Prioritize Sustainable Infrastructure Investment:** Direct Public-Private Partnership (PPP) funding toward targeted rural clusters to establish crucial enabling infrastructure, specifically **reliable high-speed internet connectivity** and certified **eco-lodges** that meet strict environmental standards.
2. **Simplify SME Access to Capital:** Launch a dedicated **Rural Tourism Seed Fund** offering simplified micro-loan and grant access, along with streamlined licensing, to encourage and support community-owned and operated tourism ventures.

III. Human Capital and Economic Empowerment

1. **Develop a National RT Certification Program:** Create specialized training and certification programs for Omani youth focused on RT principles, sustainable hospitality, and cultural interpretation, addressing the **skills gap** and ensuring job creation adheres to the 'Omanization' policy.
2. **Support Authentic Cultural Presentation:** Institute a framework, managed by the URTA, to guide communities in monetizing their cultural assets (e.g., local crafts, cuisine, heritage sites) in a manner that generates income while strictly **preventing cultural commodification** or dilution of Omani traditions.

IV. Environmental and Resource Management

7. **Enforce Ecological Carrying Capacity Limits:** Immediately fund and execute site-specific studies to determine the **maximum ecological and social load** for all fragile rural attractions. Implement mandatory visitor control measures, such as time-slot booking or rotational closures, to prevent degradation.
8. **Upgrade Waste Management Systems:** Mandate and finance the installation of integrated, sustainable **waste sorting and recycling facilities** in all designated rural tourism areas, supported by compulsory educational signage and strict enforcement of anti-littering regulations.

XII. CONCLUSION: THE IMPERATIVE FOR RESPONSIBLE RURAL TOURISM IN OMAN

The pursuit of Responsible Tourism (RT) in Oman's rural areas is not merely an option but a strategic imperative that directly underpins the nation's goals under Vision 2040. This study confirms that RT serves as a powerful catalyst for sustainable societal development by simultaneously achieving key objectives: reducing regional economic imbalances, generating localized employment, conserving the unique natural environment, and empowering underprivileged community groups.

Oman is currently well-positioned to capitalize on the post-COVID-19 global travel shift toward authentic, sustainable, and less-crowded destinations, evidenced by its recent international tourism awards, relaxed COVID-19 guidelines, and eased visa norms. This creates an attractive confluence of market demand and institutional readiness.

However, realizing this potential requires overcoming the challenges identified in the findings—specifically, fragmented governance, infrastructure gaps, and a lack of localized capacity building.

The comprehensive planning model and strategic recommendations derived from this investigation—including the establishment of a Unified Authority, enforcing Carrying Capacity, and implementing bottom-up planning—provide a robust framework to address these shortcomings. This conceptual framework is readily adaptable at regional and international levels, enabling other destinations to leverage their unique rural strengths to promote sustainable economic development and positive social change.

Ultimately, the success of this strategy hinges on the commitment of every participant. Each stakeholder in the sustainable development of Oman's economy, post-COVID-19 pandemic, must embrace self-responsibility—a commitment this study is designed to aid and reinforce. By acting decisively on these recommendations, Oman can solidify its reputation as a global leader in responsible, sustainable tourism, ensuring that the benefits of travel enrich not only the visitor experience but also the host communities for generations to come.

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