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THE MAIN DIRECTIONS OF DEVELOPMENT OF ECOTOURISM IN THE REPUBLIC OF KARAKALPAKSTAN

Abstract: Currently, tourism in Uzbekistan has great prospects for development, but there are many limiting factors that hinder this process in the regions. Since the main tourist centers of the country are well developed and tourists visit them constantly, there are many problems in the regions that prevent these territories from becoming tourist areas. The article will consider the main problems faced by regions remote from the main tourist centers and give some examples. Some options for solving problems are also considered.

Key words: tourism, ecotourism, tourism in Karakalpakstan, tourism problems.

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Introduction

Tourism in the modern world is seen as a socio-economic phenomenon that has a direct and indirect impact on the development of all related infrastructure. Modern tourism is based on a high level of development of transport, the social sphere and the service sector, which ultimately turns it into a highly profitable sector of the economy.

According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO), today tourism is one of the most profitable and most dynamic world economies. In terms of profitability, it is second only to production and a shortage of capital. Tourism accounts for about 6% of international transport costs and 5% of all tax shipments. In this regard, in many countries, the tourism industry is actively developing with state support[1].

As part of the development strategy of the "New Uzbekistan for 2022-2026", about 300 laws were adopted aimed at reforming all spheres of life of the state and society; some of them are also directly or indirectly connected with Karakalpakstan and/or Khorezm, as well as with the tourism sector[2].

The introduction of the mahalla model is intended to provide the necessary resources and opportunities to address development issues in each territory by encouraging entrepreneurship and employment while taking measures to reduce poverty. This includes the creation of infrastructure such as sports, cultural and environmental facilities, as well as business facilities and training centers through public-private partnerships. Within this framework, a thorough study of the problems and opportunities of each region creates the basis for programs aimed at improving the integrated socio-economic development for the period 2022-2026, also referred to as the "Road Map"[2].

An important aspect of the development strategy is the improvement of road infrastructure to improve transport connectivity as well as road safety, both of which are relevant to the tourism sector[2].

The most notable aspect of the road development plan, as one of many other aspects of the five-year development program adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers, focuses on the following:

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Construction of 240 km of roads under Corridor 2 of the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program financed by a US\$274 million loan from the Asian Development Bank. The project will modernize a section of the Guzar-Bukhara-Nukus-Beineu (A380) highway in the Republic of Karakalpakstan, which will expand the capacity of one of the key trade routes in the region. This project will improve transport links in Western Uzbekistan and neighboring Kazakhstan[2].

Another goal is to increase the export of tourism, transport, information and other services by 1.7 times, which corresponds to an export volume of 4.3 billion US dollars. As for the development of tourism and an increase in the number of local tourists, within the framework of the Travel Uzbekistan program, it is planned to increase this number to 12 million, and the number of foreign tourists to 9 million. Part of these efforts is the creation of barrier-free tourism infrastructure in the main tourist areas, as well as doubling the number of people employed in the tourism sector to 520,000 people by 2026[2].

A prerequisite for this growth is the further development of tourism infrastructure and cultural heritage sites through the adoption of a state program for the efficient use of more than 8,000 cultural heritage sites.

In particular, with regard to the Republic of Karakalpakstan and the Aral Sea region, the new airport in Muynak is conceived as an engine for development, while the tourism sector in the Khorezm region should simultaneously become the main engine for creating new jobs. The Aral Sea region is also prepared for further strengthening of social support for the population living in this area.

For the transport system, the unification of all modes of transport is envisaged, which makes it possible to create conditions for facilitating the possibility of daily trips along regular transport routes between major cities of the country.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has changed the policy framework for tourism development by taking measures such as visa liberalization, creating incentives for the establishment of tourism businesses, and restructuring what was formerly the State Committee for Tourism Development and is now the Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Heritage. Some of these measures had an almost immediate effect, and Uzbekistan experienced a steady increase in tourist traffic, which also benefited Karakalpakstan until the coronavirus pandemic brought tourism to a temporary halt. As the pandemic slowly fades away, a return to the previous growth model is crystallizing, and the opportunities associated with this require a constant increase in the level of professionalism. As tourism by its very nature is a multi-stakeholder activity involving both a range of public sector institutions and many private sector companies, a tourism strategy is increasingly becoming a necessity, creating a

comprehensive framework of reference for each member of the Karakalpakstan tourism industry.

The development of this tourism strategy can be seen as a continuation of many previous efforts related to tourism development in product development, marketing, destination management, stakeholder engagement and capacity building. However, for the first time, all these areas of activity are combined into a single integral complex, which will allow Karakalpakstan to reach the next stage in its development as a unique tourist destination in Uzbekistan. This will not only facilitate the implementation of activities, but also strengthen a common understanding of the challenges in general that need to be addressed, a sense of commitment to jointly address these problems.

As the local government increases the level of planning and preparation, new opportunities usually appear - opportunities for funding, strategic partnerships, joint activities and previously unimagined synergies. The investment climate is becoming more attractive, marketing is becoming more targeted, and more tourists are starting to arrive as measures are implemented. An important advantage of such a process is that the locals, namely the Karakalpaks themselves, learn to cherish and appreciate the diverse sights of their region like never before. The World Tourism Organization of the WTO at the UN has stated that a tourist destination cannot be truly ready to receive foreign tourists if its own local population does not appreciate the sights and culture of their homeland. By ensuring broad participation and awareness of the tourism strategy, Karakalpakstan is thus preparing to attract local, domestic and foreign tourists.

The Tourism Strategy of Karakalpakstan is a highly differentiated expression of the common mission and vision of all stakeholders associated with the tourism industry, reflecting the desire to take tourism to a higher level. The mission and vision capture the essence of what a tourist destination like Karakalpakstan is. While the mission describes the main business directions of Karakalpakstan, its goals and ways to achieve these goals, the vision is more predictable and describes the desired perspective for the future.

In other words, mission focuses on today and vision focuses on tomorrow.

A well-defined mission and vision can provide a sense of clarity, unity and purpose that will help strengthen the bond between all tourism players in Karakalpakstan and therefore can lead to better decision-making with broader support, ensuring that Karakalpakstan takes the lead tasks related to the development of its tourism, in an efficient manner.

After the great contribution of the tourism business players in Karakalpakstan, the Mission and Vision can be formulated as follows:

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Karakalpakstan offers travelers an incomparable experience, allowing guests to discover the true soul of a unique and preferred tourist destination within Uzbekistan.

The main objective of the strategy is to promote the development of tourism in Karakalpakstan, based on five key principles:

- Provide travelers with unique and unforgettable experiences that they will have for a lifetime.
- Promote sustainable tourism development through careful planning, co-management and participation of key stakeholders in each area.
- Ensure that tourism always benefits local communities in Karakalpakstan in terms of economic, environmental and socio-cultural impact.
- Continuously promote research, innovation, capacity building and knowledge management for better tourism management and marketing.
- Build influence through strategic alliances with partners inside and outside Karakalpakstan, including national authorities, neighboring Khorezm and international trading partners.

The stakeholders of the tourism sector of Karakalpakstan, committed to the development of tourism in Karakalpakstan, share the following core values:

Value Creation: Tourism is not an end in itself, but an activity that creates real value, both for the tourist and for the communities visited and service providers. Quality, honesty and high standards of service inspire any tourism activity.

Preservation: tourism is a tool for preserving and enhancing the natural and cultural heritage of Karakalpakstan. Tourism allows for a genuine expression of the identity and traditions of Karakalpakstan, while avoiding the simplification of Karakalpak culture or the adaptation of typical designs.

Regional Development: Tourism is seen as one aspect of regional development and investment in tourism is focused on developing rural areas, improving infrastructure that benefits the general population and enhancing leisure opportunities for the local population.

Competitiveness: Because tourism is an economic activity, it is through result-oriented and

professional destination management and marketing that Karakalpakstan successfully competes with other tourism destinations.

According to the findings, Karakalpakstan, with its combination of the Aral Sea, the Ustyurt plateau, the desert and the Amudarya river delta, offers a unique landscape for both national and foreign tourists, with great potential for ecotourism. In particular, over the past 40 years, the retreat of the coastline has led to a dramatic change in the Aral Sea region. Thus, this area can become an attractive destination not only for nature and adventure tourism, but also for educational tourism, providing tourists with a deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of this man-made disaster and the measures being taken to overcome the many problems associated with this disaster.

However, according to this study, it will be a long time before ecotourism products can be implemented in Karakalpakstan, as there are practically no initiatives for:

- a) Obtaining direct financial benefits for conservation purposes.
- b) Establishing effective participation of the population in tourism at the village level.
- c) Training guides, tour operators and ecotourism consultants.
- e) Provision of environmentally friendly housing and transportation.

According to the study, the main reasons for the reluctance of Uzbekistan Tour Operators to actively promote ecotourism in the Aral Sea area include the following:

- Lack of experience (in the design and development of ecotourism products and services).
- Lack of competencies (in promoting ecotourism products and services).
- Lack of international networks to promote and market ecotourism products and services.
- The main demand for ecotourism coming from domestic tourists, who were far from wealthy, resulted in shorter ecotourism tours and limited profitability.

Thus, although Karakalpakstan is considered an attractive place for nature tourism, closely related to cultural tourism, it cannot yet be considered a destination for ecotourism.

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