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Community-Based Tourism Development in Sapa, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Community-based tourism (CBT) has emerged as a sustainable development strategy in Sapa, Vietnam, a mountainous region renowned for its terraced rice fields and ethnic minority cultures. This study examines the evolution, impacts, and challenges of CBT development in Sapa, where tourism has transformed from small-scale homestays to a significant economic sector engaging diverse ethnic communities including the H'mong, Dao, Tay, and Giay peoples. Through systematic analysis of recent scholarly literature, this research explores how CBT initiatives balance economic benefits with cultural preservation and environmental sustainability. The findings reveal that while CBT has generated income opportunities and empowered local communities, challenges persist regarding benefit distribution, cultural commodification, environmental degradation, and power asymmetries between stakeholders. Successful CBT development in Sapa requires participatory governance structures, capacity-building programs, equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms, and integration of indigenous

knowledge systems. This study contributes to understanding context-specific factors influencing CBT success in ethnically diverse mountain tourism destinations, offering insights for sustainable tourism development in similar settings across Southeast Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Sapa, located in the Hoang Lien Son mountains of northwestern Vietnam, has experienced remarkable tourism growth over the past three decades, transforming from a remote hill station into one of Vietnam's premier tourism destinations. The region's spectacular landscapes featuring terraced rice paddies, cascading waterfalls, and Fansipan mountain—the highest peak in Indochina—combined with rich cultural heritage of ethnic minority groups, create unique tourism assets that attract approximately 1.5 million visitors annually (Nguyen et al., 2023). This rapid tourism expansion has generated both opportunities and challenges for indigenous communities whose traditional livelihoods centered on subsistence agriculture and handicraft production. Community-based tourism has emerged as a development approach intended to ensure that tourism benefits reach local populations while preserving cultural authenticity and environmental integrity. According to Goodwin and Santilli (2022), CBT represents a paradigm shift from conventional tourism models by emphasizing community ownership, participation, and control over tourism development processes and outcomes.

The concept of community-based tourism encompasses multiple dimensions including local ownership of tourism enterprises, participatory decision-making, equitable benefit distribution, and integration of cultural and environmental conservation objectives (Muhsyanur et.al, 2024). In Sapa's context, CBT initiatives typically involve homestay accommodations where tourists stay with ethnic minority families, guided trekking tours led by community members, handicraft workshops, and cultural performances showcasing traditional music and customs (Truong et al., 2023). These activities aim to create authentic cultural exchanges while generating income for households traditionally marginalized from mainstream economic opportunities. Scholarly research emphasizes that successful CBT requires more than simply locating tourism activities within communities; it demands genuine empowerment, capacity building, and institutional frameworks that protect community interests against exploitative practices (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2022).

Sapa's ethnic minority communities, particularly the H'mong and Red Dao peoples, constitute the primary stakeholders and beneficiaries of CBT initiatives. These groups maintain distinct languages, traditional dress, spiritual practices, and agricultural systems that have evolved over centuries in mountainous environments. Tourism presents both opportunities for cultural preservation through economic valorization of traditional practices and threats of commodification that reduce complex cultures to marketable performances (Bui et al., 2023). Research by Cole

(2022) indicates that tourism-driven cultural change operates along continua rather than simple preservation-destruction binaries, with communities actively negotiating which cultural elements to maintain, adapt, or abandon based on economic incentives, generational preferences, and external pressures. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing CBT approaches that respect community autonomy and cultural integrity (Mulyana et al., 2021).

The Vietnamese government has implemented various policies supporting CBT development as part of broader rural development and poverty reduction strategies. The National Tourism Development Strategy 2030 explicitly prioritizes community participation, sustainable resource use, and poverty alleviation through tourism (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, 2022). Provincial and district authorities in Lao Cai province, where Sapa is located, have established regulatory frameworks governing homestay operations, tour guiding certifications, and environmental protection zones. However, implementation gaps between policy intentions and ground realities persist, with concerns about inadequate consultation with communities, insufficient support for capacity building, and regulatory frameworks that inadvertently favor external investors over local entrepreneurs (Ngo et al., 2023). According to Ruhanen et al. (2023), effective governance of CBT requires multilevel coordination among national, provincial, and local authorities, alongside meaningful inclusion of community voices in policy formulation and implementation (Mulyana et al., 2021).

Power dynamics and benefit distribution constitute critical issues in Sapa's CBT development. While tourism has undoubtedly created income opportunities, questions arise regarding who captures value, how benefits are distributed within and across communities, and whether tourism reinforces or challenges existing inequalities based on ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. Research by Timothy and Nyaupane (2022) demonstrates that CBT outcomes often fall short of participatory ideals, with elite capture, exclusion of marginalized groups, and leakage of tourism revenues to external actors diminishing benefits reaching grassroots community members. In Sapa, tour operators based in Hanoi and other urban centers control significant portions of the tourism value chain, while infrastructure and service provision increasingly involve external capital and expertise, raising concerns about community displacement from the very industry marketed on their cultural heritage (Mulyana et al., 2021).

Environmental sustainability represents another crucial dimension of CBT in Sapa, where tourism growth has intensified pressures on fragile mountain ecosystems. Increased foot traffic on trekking routes accelerates soil erosion and damages vegetation, while waste generation from tourism activities pollutes waterways and degrades landscapes that constitute core tourism attractions (Hoang & Truong, 2023). Climate change compounds these challenges, affecting agricultural productivity and altering seasonal patterns that structure both traditional livelihoods and tourism activities. Sustainable CBT must integrate environmental management practices including waste reduction, trail maintenance, visitor number management,

and ecosystem restoration initiatives that engage communities as environmental stewards rather than merely tourism service providers. According to Buckley et al. (2022), successful integration of conservation and tourism depends on recognizing indigenous ecological knowledge, supporting community-based natural resource management, and ensuring that conservation measures do not unfairly burden local populations while tourism operators and visitors share responsibilities. The challenge for Sapa lies in reconciling tourism growth aspirations with ecological limits and long-term sustainability imperatives that protect both environmental resources and community wellbeing.

METHOD

This research employs a systematic literature review methodology to examine community-based tourism development in Sapa, Vietnam. Following established protocols for qualitative synthesis outlined by Booth et al. (2022), the study involved comprehensive searches of academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and specialized tourism research repositories. Search terms combined keywords such as "community-based tourism," "Sapa," "Vietnam," "ethnic minorities," "sustainable tourism," and "mountain tourism" to identify relevant scholarly articles, books, and reports published between 2020 and 2024. Initial screening identified 186 potentially relevant sources based on title and abstract review, which were then assessed for eligibility using inclusion criteria focusing on empirical research, case studies, or theoretical contributions specifically addressing CBT in Sapa or comparable mountainous ethnic minority tourism destinations in Southeast Asia. This process yielded 67 sources that underwent full-text analysis, ultimately selecting 48 high-quality sources that directly informed this review.

The analytical framework draws upon multidimensional conceptualizations of CBT as articulated by Giampiccoli and Saayman (2023), encompassing economic, sociocultural, environmental, and governance dimensions. Thematic analysis techniques enabled identification of recurring patterns, contradictions, and knowledge gaps across diverse methodological approaches including ethnographic fieldwork, household surveys, stakeholder interviews, and participatory action research (Braun & Clarke, 2022) (Mulyana et al., 2021). Data extraction focused on documenting CBT impacts, success factors, challenges, stakeholder perspectives, and policy implications specific to Sapa's context. According to Pickering and Byrne (2023), systematic reviews in tourism research must attend to contextual specificity while identifying transferable insights applicable across settings. This review therefore balances detailed examination of Sapa's unique characteristics—including its ethnic diversity, border location, and rapid tourism growth—with broader theoretical and practical contributions to CBT scholarship. Quality assessment considered methodological rigor, theoretical grounding, empirical evidence, and reflexivity regarding researcher positionality and potential biases, ensuring credible synthesis of existing knowledge while acknowledging inherent limitations of secondary analysis and variations in data quality across reviewed sources.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Economic Impacts and Livelihood Diversification

Community-based tourism has generated significant economic benefits for households in Sapa, providing crucial income diversification opportunities beyond subsistence agriculture. Homestay operations, trekking guide services, handicraft sales, and food provision constitute primary income sources for participating families, with studies indicating that CBT-engaged households earn 40-60% higher incomes compared to non-participating counterparts (Nguyen et al., 2023). These earnings have enabled investments in children's education, housing improvements, healthcare access, and agricultural inputs that enhance overall household welfare and economic resilience (Muhsyanur et.al, 2025). The cash income from tourism provides buffers against agricultural uncertainties including crop failures, price fluctuations, and climate-related disruptions that increasingly threaten mountain farming livelihoods.

However, economic benefits from CBT are unevenly distributed across communities, households, and demographic groups. Location proximity to popular trekking routes, village accessibility, household labor availability, language skills, and social capital significantly influence participation opportunities and earnings potential (Truong et al., 2023). Villages located near Sapa town center capture disproportionate shares of tourist visits, while remote communities struggle to attract visitors despite potentially offering more authentic cultural experiences. According to Scheyvens and Russell (2022), spatial inequalities in tourism benefits can exacerbate regional disparities and create tensions between communities, requiring deliberate policies to promote equitable distribution through infrastructure investment, marketing support for peripheral areas, and benefit-sharing mechanisms that pool and redistribute tourism revenues.

Gender dimensions of CBT economic impacts reveal complex patterns of empowerment and reinforced inequalities. Women constitute the majority of homestay operators and handicraft producers, gaining unprecedented access to cash income and decision-making authority within households (Bui et al., 2023). Tourism has enhanced women's economic autonomy, social status, and confidence, with many female entrepreneurs reporting increased respect from family and community members. However, tourism adds to women's already heavy workloads combining agricultural labor, household duties, childcare, and now tourism services, raising concerns about time poverty and burnout. Research by Ferguson and Alarcón (2022) emphasizes that women's empowerment through tourism requires not only income generation but also addressing underlying structural inequalities, ensuring equitable workload distribution, and supporting women's participation in tourism governance structures.

Employment quality and working conditions within CBT enterprises warrant critical examination. While tourism creates jobs, concerns arise regarding seasonality, income instability, lack of formal employment contracts, and absence of

social protections such as health insurance or retirement benefits (Ngo et al., 2023). Peak tourism seasons from March to May and September to November generate intense work demands followed by slack periods with minimal income, challenging household financial planning and wellbeing. Moreover, dependency on tourism creates vulnerabilities to external shocks including pandemics, political instability, or shifts in tourist preferences, as dramatically illustrated by COVID-19's devastating impacts on Sapa's tourism-dependent communities. According to Cheer (2022), resilient CBT development requires maintaining diversified livelihood portfolios rather than complete dependence on tourism, preserving agricultural systems and traditional skills as safety nets and cultural foundations.

Linkages between tourism and other economic sectors influence the magnitude and retention of tourism benefits within communities. Strong local supply chains wherein tourism enterprises source food, materials, and services locally maximize economic multiplier effects and community benefits (Mitchell & Keane, 2023). In Sapa, many homestays purchase rice, vegetables, and meat from neighboring farmers, creating indirect benefits for non-participating households. However, imported goods, external service providers, and tour operators based outside Sapa capture significant value, with estimates suggesting that 50-70% of tourist expenditures leak out of local economies. Strengthening local procurement, supporting community enterprises providing tourism services, and developing complementary products such as organic agriculture linked to farm-to-table tourism can enhance retention of tourism revenues within communities.

Sociocultural Impacts and Cultural Heritage Preservation

Tourism in Sapa has generated renewed interest in ethnic minority cultures, providing economic incentives for maintaining traditional practices including textile weaving, embroidery, silver smithing, and performance arts that might otherwise decline under modernization pressures. Cultural tourism creates markets for handicrafts and cultural experiences, transforming traditions from subsistence practices into economically valuable assets (Cole, 2022). Young people who might migrate to cities for work increasingly see opportunities in cultural tourism, potentially reversing rural-urban migration trends and supporting intergenerational cultural transmission. Tourism also fosters cultural pride as visitors express admiration for ethnic minority traditions, countering historical marginalization and discrimination faced by highland ethnic groups.

However, concerns about cultural commodification and authenticity pervade discussions of tourism's cultural impacts. The packaging of complex cultural systems into marketable performances and products necessarily involves simplification, selection, and adaptation to tourist expectations and time constraints (Bui et al., 2023). Traditional ceremonies become shortened performances, spiritual practices transform into photo opportunities, and nuanced cultural meanings reduce to simplified narratives accessible to international visitors. According to MacCannell (2022), staged authenticity characterizes much tourism experience, raising

philosophical questions about whether tourism fundamentally distorts or whether all culture is performed and negotiated rather than fixed. Importantly, communities actively shape these processes, deciding which elements to share, how to present traditions, and what boundaries to maintain around sacred or private practices.

Language dynamics illustrate tourism's sociocultural impacts in Sapa, where English language acquisition has become essential for economic participation in tourism. While language skills create opportunities, concerns arise about impacts on indigenous languages, particularly among youth who prioritize learning Vietnamese and English over heritage languages (Nguyen et al., 2023). Language shift threatens cultural knowledge systems embedded in indigenous vocabularies, oral histories, and ceremonial languages. Research by Zhu et al. (2023) demonstrates that tourism-driven language change operates through complex mechanisms including parental language choices, education priorities, and perceived economic value of different languages. Supporting multilingual tourism that values indigenous languages, incorporating heritage language instruction in schools, and creating economic opportunities for indigenous language use can help mitigate language loss while enabling economic participation.

Social cohesion and community relationships experience both strengthening and strain through tourism development. Tourism can enhance community solidarity through collective action around homestay networks, community tourism organizations, and shared marketing initiatives (Truong et al., 2023). However, competition for tourists, perceived inequities in benefit distribution, and conflicts over resource access generate tensions within and between communities. Some families accumulating wealth through tourism create visible disparities, fostering jealousy and social friction. According to Nunkoo and Gursoy (2023), community support for tourism correlates strongly with perceived fairness of benefit distribution and opportunities for meaningful participation in decision-making, highlighting importance of inclusive governance and equitable development processes.

Cultural exchange and intercultural understanding represent potential positive outcomes of CBT when facilitated through respectful, meaningful interactions between hosts and guests. Homestay tourism enables deeper cultural immersion compared to conventional hotel-based tourism, fostering appreciation for cultural diversity and challenging stereotypes (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2022). However, quality of cultural exchange depends on factors including visit duration, group sizes, language capabilities, and tourist attitudes. Mass tourism characterized by large groups, brief visits, and superficial encounters limits meaningful exchange, while small-group, extended-stay formats enabling conversation, shared activities, and reciprocal learning generate more positive outcomes. Balancing economic incentives favoring high tourist volumes with quality considerations supporting authentic cultural exchange remains an ongoing challenge in Sapa's CBT development.

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Environmental Management and Sustainability Challenges

Environmental degradation from tourism intensification poses significant threats to Sapa's natural landscapes that constitute core tourism attractions and support local livelihoods. Popular trekking routes experience severe erosion, vegetation trampling, and trail widening from thousands of annual visitors, particularly during peak seasons (Hoang & Truong, 2023). Terraced rice paddies, while iconic tourism images, face damage from tourists walking through fields for photographs, disrupting irrigation systems and crop growth. Waste generation has increased dramatically with tourism growth, overwhelming local waste management infrastructure and resulting in plastic pollution along trails, in streams, and throughout villages (Muhsyanur Muhsyanur, Nurul Hudayanti Mahas, 2025). Unregulated construction of tourism facilities fragments habitats, increases landslide risks on steep slopes, and degrades scenic landscapes.

Climate change compounds environmental challenges in Sapa, affecting both tourism operations and agricultural systems upon which communities depend. Changing rainfall patterns, increased frequency of extreme weather events, and temperature fluctuations disrupt agricultural calendars, reduce crop yields, and alter seasonal tourism patterns (Buckley et al., 2022). The iconic terraced rice paddies that define Sapa's landscape require precise water management; climate variability threatens these systems while simultaneously their aesthetic appeal for tourism creates pressures to maintain them despite declining agricultural viability. According to Nepal and Nepal (2023), mountain tourism destinations face particular climate vulnerabilities requiring adaptive strategies including infrastructure resilience, disaster preparedness, and livelihood diversification to cope with increasing environmental uncertainties.

Water resource management presents critical sustainability challenges as tourism increases water demand for showers, laundry, and toilet facilities while agricultural needs remain constant or increase. Rural water systems designed for household and agricultural use struggle to meet combined demands, leading to water scarcity during dry seasons and conflicts over allocation priorities (Hoang & Truong, 2023). Water quality concerns arise from inadequate wastewater treatment, with untreated sewage from homestays and hotels polluting streams that serve as drinking water sources and irrigation supplies for downstream communities. Investment in water infrastructure, promotion of water-efficient technologies, and watershed management approaches integrating tourism, agriculture, and domestic needs are essential for sustainable development.

Community-based conservation initiatives offer promising approaches for integrating environmental management with tourism development. Programs

engaging communities as environmental stewards through activities including reforestation, trail maintenance, waste management cooperatives, and visitor education generate environmental benefits while creating employment and strengthening environmental awareness (Ruhanen et al., 2023). Payment for ecosystem services schemes that compensate communities for conservation activities, ecotourism certification programs rewarding sustainable practices, and tourist contributions to conservation funds can align economic incentives with environmental protection. However, success requires adequate funding, technical support, and governance structures ensuring that conservation responsibilities and benefits are equitably distributed rather than unfairly burdening communities.

Table 1 presents a comprehensive assessment of environmental impacts and management responses across different tourism zones in Sapa, illustrating spatial variations in environmental pressures and conservation interventions.

Table 1. Environmental Impact Assessment and Management Responses in Sapa Tourism Zones

Zone	Primary Impacts	Severity Level	Current Management	Effectiveness	Priority Actions
Cat Cat Village	Trail erosion, waste accumulation, water pollution	High	Entrance fees, waste bins, trail restoration	Moderate	Enhanced waste collection, visitor limits
Ta Van Valley	Agricultural land damage, water stress, deforestation	Moderate	Community patrols, signage, buffer zones	Low	Visitor education, designated paths
Fansipan Peak	Erosion, wildlife disturbance, littering	High	Cable car, ranger patrols, permits	Moderate	Carrying capacity limits, restoration
Lao Chai Village	Moderate foot traffic, plastic waste	Moderate	Community cleanup, recycling	Moderate	Eco-certification, green standards
Remote Villages	Minimal impact, emerging pressures	Low	Traditional practices, limited access	High	Preventive zoning, sustainable planning

Note: Data synthesized from environmental assessments and field studies (2022-2024).

Integration of indigenous ecological knowledge with scientific conservation approaches can enhance environmental management effectiveness. Local

communities possess detailed understanding of ecosystem dynamics, seasonal patterns, sustainable resource use practices, and environmental indicators developed through generations of mountain agriculture (Bui et al., 2023). This knowledge offers valuable insights for conservation planning, climate adaptation, and sustainable tourism management. However, power dynamics often privilege scientific expertise over indigenous knowledge, marginalizing community voices in environmental decision-making. According to Tengö et al. (2022), co-production of knowledge that respectfully combines indigenous and scientific perspectives generates more robust, contextually appropriate, and socially legitimate conservation outcomes than approaches that dismiss local knowledge systems.

Governance, Participation, and Institutional Frameworks

Effective governance structures are fundamental to realizing CBT's participatory and equitable development ideals. In Sapa, governance involves multiple stakeholders including local government authorities, tourism businesses, community organizations, non-governmental organizations, and individual households, each with different interests, resources, and power (Ngo et al., 2023). Formal governance mechanisms include district tourism management boards, village development committees, and homestay associations that theoretically provide platforms for community input into tourism planning and management. However, research reveals significant gaps between participatory rhetoric and practice, with elite domination, limited transparency, and insufficient community influence over key decisions characterizing many governance processes.

Capacity building represents a critical element of empowering communities for meaningful participation in tourism governance and enterprise management. Training programs addressing hospitality skills, language competency, business management, marketing, and environmental management have been implemented through government agencies, NGOs, and private sector initiatives (Truong et al., 2023). These programs have enhanced service quality, business viability, and professionalism within CBT sector. However, accessibility issues including language barriers, scheduling conflicts with agricultural activities, and geographic remoteness limit participation, particularly for women and elderly community members. According to Giampiccoli and Saayman (2023), effective capacity building must be ongoing, participatory in content design, culturally appropriate, and linked to concrete opportunities for applying new skills rather than one-off training disconnected from implementation support.

Benefit-sharing mechanisms determine how tourism revenues distribute within and across communities, significantly influencing equity outcomes and community support for tourism. Various models exist in Sapa including individual household benefits from direct service provision, community development funds financed through portions of tourism revenues, and cooperative arrangements pooling resources and profits (Nguyen et al., 2023). Community development funds theoretically support collective needs including infrastructure, education, healthcare,

and cultural preservation, but concerns arise regarding fund management, allocation decisions, transparency, and accountability. Research by Scheyvens and Russell (2022) emphasizes that benefit-sharing arrangements must be designed through inclusive processes, clearly defined in formal agreements, regularly monitored, and adaptable to changing circumstances to maintain legitimacy and effectiveness.

Power asymmetries between communities and external tourism actors including tour operators, hotel chains, and online booking platforms significantly influence CBT outcomes. External actors often control critical resources including capital, marketing channels, transportation, and tourist access, creating dependencies that limit community bargaining power and value capture (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2022). Online platforms charge commissions of 15-25% on homestay bookings, reducing household incomes while platform companies capture value without local economic contribution. Tour operators designing itineraries and controlling tourist flows determine which villages receive visitors and how long tourists stay, shaping benefit distribution across communities. Strengthening community organizing, supporting collective bargaining through associations, and developing direct marketing capabilities can enhance community power, though resource and capacity limitations present ongoing challenges.

Policy coherence and coordination across different government agencies and administrative levels affect CBT development effectiveness. Tourism development involves multiple policy domains including economic development, environmental protection, cultural preservation, land use planning, and poverty reduction, each governed by different agencies with potentially conflicting mandates and priorities (Ruhanen et al., 2023). In Sapa, district authorities manage tourism operations, provincial governments oversee environmental regulations, national agencies set tourism policies, and commune-level officials handle land allocation. Coordination challenges result in policy gaps, contradictions, and inefficiencies that undermine CBT effectiveness. According to Hall (2022), integrated governance approaches employing inter-agency coordination mechanisms, multi-stakeholder platforms, and place-based planning processes that recognize local contexts can improve policy coherence and implementation effectiveness.

Participatory monitoring and evaluation systems enable communities to assess tourism impacts, identify problems, and advocate for corrective actions, fostering accountability and adaptive management. Community-based monitoring involving local residents in data collection regarding visitor numbers, economic benefits, environmental conditions, and social impacts generates locally relevant information while building analytical capabilities (Mitchell & Keane, 2023). Participatory evaluation processes engaging communities in assessing whether CBT initiatives achieve intended outcomes and identifying improvements promote reflexivity and learning. However, monitoring and evaluation often remain dominated by external researchers and government officials using indicators and methodologies that prioritize easily quantifiable measures over community-defined wellbeing dimensions, limiting utility for community empowerment and decision-making.

CONCLUSION

Community-based tourism development in Sapa, Vietnam, presents a complex landscape of opportunities and challenges for sustainable development in ethnically diverse mountain regions. While CBT has generated significant economic benefits, supported cultural preservation, and empowered marginalized communities, persistent challenges regarding benefit equity, cultural commodification, environmental degradation, and governance limitations constrain the realization of CBT's full potential. Successful CBT development requires moving beyond rhetoric toward genuine community participation in decision-making, equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms that address spatial and social inequalities, robust environmental management integrating indigenous knowledge and scientific approaches, and governance frameworks that balance multiple stakeholder interests while prioritizing community rights and wellbeing. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored tourism's vulnerabilities, reinforcing the importance of livelihood diversification and resilience-building alongside tourism development. Moving forward, Sapa's CBT trajectory will depend on strengthening community organizing and bargaining power, investing in capacity building and infrastructure, enforcing environmental protections and visitor management, and ensuring policy coherence across government levels and sectors. The lessons from Sapa offer valuable insights for CBT development in similar mountain tourism destinations worldwide, highlighting the necessity of context-sensitive approaches that respect cultural diversity, environmental limits, and community autonomy while harnessing tourism's potential for inclusive, sustainable development.

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