

Attributes and competitiveness of ecotourism sites, and tourists' behavioral intention: Basis for an ecotourism development plan for Region VI

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Abstract

This study aimed to propose an ecotourism development plan for Region VI. The researcher assessed the attributes and competitiveness of ecotourism sites, and tourists' behavioral intention to ecotourism sites in Region VI. It tested the significant difference when grouped according to demographic and psychographic profiles of the respondents and tested the significant relationship among the given variables. The researcher used descriptive correlation research design. The respondents of the study were 395 tourists visited the approved ecotourism sites of Department of Tourism-Region VI. The instrument was adapted and modified from three different studies. Further, T-test and analysis of variance, together with post hoc analysis was used to test for differences on the variables, and Pearson correlation coefficient was used to establish possible relationships among the variables of this study. Majority of the respondents were 26 to 35 years old belonging to generation Y with which more than half were female and mostly are college graduates. In terms of travel, most of the respondents are domestic travels who have visited ecotourism sites 3 times. They recognized Region 6's ecotourism sites for their excellence, attributing it to their natural attractions which received high ratings. The region exhibits strong competitiveness in ecotourism, making it appealing to nature-seeking visitors. Moreover, respondents are likely to engage in positive word-of-mouth promotion. Lastly, the research paper proposed an Ecotourism Development Plan for Region VI.

Keywords: ecotourism, attributes, competitiveness, tourists' behavioral intention

Attributes and competitiveness of ecotourism sites, and tourists' behavioral intention: Basis for an ecotourism development plan for Region VI

1. Introduction

Ecotourism, characterized by its emphasis on responsible travel and environmental stewardship, has gained widespread popularity among travelers seeking meaningful experiences. These experiences, marked by memorable interactions with nature, educational value, and a dedication to sustainability, significantly influence tourists' desire to revisit (Kim et al., 2020). Additionally, the competitive advantage plays a crucial role. Factors such as uniqueness, restricted access for environmental preservation, a strong positive reputation, and ongoing development of innovative sustainable offerings all contribute to elevating these ecotourism destinations as preferred choices, enticing tourists to return for further exploration of these extraordinary locales.

In particular, the Philippines offers a promising landscape for ecotourism development. With over 24 million hectares of protected areas that include rainforests, coral reefs, and marine sanctuaries, the country is ideally positioned to capitalize on this growing trend. The abundance of natural and cultural attractions in the Philippines presents an excellent opportunity for the development of sustainable tourism practices that align with the principles of ecotourism. As an emerging ecotourism hotspot in Southeast Asia, this archipelago nation boasts an abundance of natural wonders and diverse cultural environments. This abundance makes it a viable ecotourism destination, consistently generating revenue, foreign exchange earnings, investments, and employment, with remarkable growth over the past five years. Furthermore, ecotourism has emerged as a central national strategy for fostering local development in the Philippines. Despite this focus, the country still lags in ecotourism progress, with many of its rural tourism resources remaining unexploited and undeveloped. This underutilization has led to a mediocre ranking among ASEAN countries and the Asia-Pacific region regarding tourism's total contribution to GDP. There is a notable lack of emphasis on the essential aspect of how ecotourism develops at the local level. There is a lack of attention given to how ecotourism development is initiated and implemented in municipalities and local areas (Brillo 2021). Region VI, with its stunning beaches and surroundings, possesses immense potential to attract tourists, generating income that can benefit the entire community. This observation highlights the potential of Region VI for ecotourism development. The absence of a current ecotourism development plan presents an opportunity to create a comprehensive strategy that capitalizes on the region's unique features to attract environmentally conscious tourists. This research should delve deeper into the specific attributes, competitiveness factors, and tourist behavioral intentions of individual ecotourism sites within Region VI.

This study of ecotourism in Region 6 utilizes three key variables. The first variable is the attributes, which are characterized by the distinctive features or characteristics that attract ecotourists (Abdurahman et.al. (2016) in Meretu et al., 2023). These attributes include the natural and cultural elements unique to the region, contributing to its appeal as an ecotourism destination. Second is the competitiveness characterized by the ability of the region to maintain its market position against competitors, often considered crucial for tourism destinations' success (Marasigan, et al, 2021). Lastly, tourists' behavioral intention which is tourists' likelihood to engage in specific behaviors related to travel (Borbon et al., 2022). They were utilized as the primary basis for the questionnaire construction as they posit the actual country specific industry setting. This study highlights that ecotourism attributes are based on factors such as culture, attraction, and community. Furthermore, each destination plans its development or improvement through positioning choices to remain competitive. The study emphasizes three primary determinants of competitiveness: core resources and key attractors, supporting factors and resources, and qualifying and amplifying determinants (Marasigan and Borbon, 2021).

By evaluating Region VI's potential as an ecotourism destination based on its key attributes derived from the three variables, stakeholders and tourism practitioners will gain a deeper understanding that can strengthen

revisions to tourism development policies. This research on ecotourism in Region VI is designed to empower stakeholders directly involved in shaping the region's ecotourism future. This includes key decision-makers like the Department of Tourism (DOT) Region VI, policymakers, and government agencies. The study equips them with crucial insights into tourist needs and preferences. This understanding will allow them to identify areas where Region VI's ecotourism offerings can be enhanced and develop targeted strategies to attract repeat visitors. This allows them to tailor their offerings and become more competitive. Local government units (LGUs) can leverage the study's findings to identify areas for development within Region VI's ecotourism industry, ensuring tourist expectations are met consistently. This fosters successful tourism initiatives that benefit the local government and its people. The study also benefits a broader range of tourism stakeholders which they can learn how ecotourism development contributes to the overall tourism industry's success in Region VI. Finally, this study could serve as a foundation for further academic inquiry.

The study was conducted in Region VI- Western Visayas, where the respondents will be tourists who have visited ecotourism sites in the region to provide their insights into the key factors influencing destination attributes and competitiveness that are most important in proposing for a competitive ecotourism development plan. As a response to the call of Borbon et al (2022) who identified a knowledge gap regarding tourist motivations for visiting the region, this study hopes to aid the underlying factors influencing tourists' interest and motivation in visiting Region VI. This research holds particular significance for Region VI, which currently lacks an Ecotourism Development Plan, equipping policymakers, tourism practitioners, and local communities with actionable insights. This empowers them to formulate data-driven strategies and evidence-based policies that prioritize a three-pronged approach aimed at achieving: environmental responsibility, community empowerment, and the long-term sustainability and competitive advantage of ecotourism sites.

The study specifically focused on the seven approved ecotourism sites within Region VI, Western Visayas. This region was chosen due to its rich tapestry of ecosystems, encompassing diverse landscapes like coral reefs, mountain ranges, and areas inhabited by indigenous communities. Furthermore, the Department of Tourism in Region VI maintains a rigorously evaluated list of approved ecotourism sites. By concentrating on these designated locations, the data reflects the highest standards for responsible tourism practices within the region. This targeted approach allows for a more in-depth analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities specific to Region VI's well-established ecotourism industry. The respondents of the study were based on day-tourist arrivals from the record of DOT Region VI. According to the list released by the DOT Region VI, the following are the approved ecotourism regional sites: Sibalom Natural Park and Mararison Island in Antique, Taklong Island National Marine Reserve in Guimaras, Bulabog-Putian National Park and Bucari Pine Forest in Iloilo, Bakhawan Ecopark in Aklan, and Gawahon Ecopark in Negros Occidental. The respondents of the study will be tourists of legal age (18 years old and above) visiting ecotourism sites in Region VI. The population was based on the records of the Department of Tourism.

Objectives of the study - This study aimed to comprehensively understand and evaluate the ecotourism landscape in Region VI by examining the demographic profile of visitors, assessing ecotourism site attributes, gauging site competitiveness, and exploring tourists' behavioral intentions. More precisely, this study assessed the attributes of ecotourism sites in terms of cultural, attraction, and community; assessed the level of competitiveness of ecotourism sites in terms of core resources and attractors, supporting factors and resources, and qualifying and amplifying determinants; assessed tourists' behavioral intentions in terms of revisit intention, word of mouth, willingness to pay more, and loyalty; and tested the significant relationship between attributes and competitiveness of ecotourism sites on tourists' behavioral intention.

2. Methods

Research Design - This study employed descriptive correlation analysis with a comparative research design. The descriptive correlation analysis utilized quantitative data to explore the relationships between attributes, competitiveness, and tourists' behavioral intention in the region. A comparative design is used to identify

relationships across various tourist segments or destinations within the region. This combined approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon by both characterizing the variables and comparing them across relevant groups.

Participants - Basing on the approved ecotourism sites of Department of Tourism-Region VI, there are only seven in the region namely Sibalom Natural Park and Mararison Island in Antique, Taklong Island National Marine Reserve in Guimaras, Bulabog-Putian National Park and Bucari Pine Forest in Iloilo, Bakhawan Ecopark in Aklan, and Gawahon Ecopark in Negros Occidental. This report was the basis of locale of the study to ensure accurate findings. This research employed stratified random sampling to identify 395 respondents, selecting a representative group of tourists from the Department of Tourism's records, specifically those who have visited ecotourism sites in Region VI, excluding the province of Capiz due to the absence of approved ecotourism sites within its borders. Additionally, potential respondents were qualified with three questions: (1) if they are of legal age and is willing to take part on the study; (2) if they have visited ecotourism sites in any of the provinces in Region VI; and (3) to which province in Region VI have they visited recently.

Instrument - The study commenced by profiling the respondents, describing their characteristics, which constituted the initial segment of the instrument. Subsequent sections were structured to correspond with the study objectives. Questionnaires adapted from three sources, obtained from online repositories and scientific journals, represented the main variables. The first variable, attributes, drawn from the theory of Abdurahman et.al. (2016) in Meretu et al. (2023), encompassing three sub-variables: cultural, attraction, and community. The second variable, competitiveness, was adapted from Marasigan et al. (2021), incorporating sub-variables: core resources and attractors, supporting factors and resources, and qualifying and amplifying determinants. Lastly, the third variable, tourists' behavioral intention, adapted from Borbon et al. (2022), included sub-variables: revisit intention, word of mouth, willingness to pay more, and loyalty.

The next phase involved subjecting the questionnaire to expert validation. The panel included two tourism industry experts: the Chief Tourism Operations Officer from the Municipality of Malay, Boracay, and the Provincial Government Department Head of the Aklan Provincial Tourism Office, Province of Aklan. Additionally, an academic expert, the Dean of the College of Management at Iloilo State University of Fisheries, Science, and Technology, who holds a Doctor of Development Management degree specializing in Ecological Tourism, provided input. Their feedback was welcomed and incorporated into the final questionnaire, which was subsequently reviewed by the researcher's adviser for final adjustments and comments.

The questionnaire underwent reliability testing with 32 respondents who have visited ecotourism sites in Region 4A: CALABARZON. The results showed high reliability, with the first variable, attributes, achieving a Cronbach's alpha of .958, indicating reliability. This was further detailed with sub-variables: cultural (.925) and attraction (.934), both rated as "Excellent," and community (.874), rated as "Good." The second variable, competitiveness, achieved Cronbach's alpha of .979, also indicating high reliability. Sub-variables core resources and attractors (.947), supporting factors and resources (.947), and qualifying and amplifying determinants (.958) all received "Excellent" ratings. The third variable, tourists' behavioral intention, attained a Cronbach's alpha of .978, confirming its reliability. Sub-variables revisit intention (.920), word of mouth (.973), willingness to pay more (.919), and loyalty (.958) all received "Excellent" ratings, demonstrating their reliability for use in the study.

Data Gathering Procedure - The procedure of gathering the prescribed data started after approval of research instrument from the Department of Tourism Regional Office. A face-to-face approach was adopted for data collection, visiting ecotourism sites across five provinces in Region 6: Aklan, Antique, Guimaras, Iloilo, and Negros Occidental. Traveling by private vehicle, the data collection spanned ten days for the mainland provinces and six days for Guimaras and Negros Occidental. Potential participants were approached respectfully and invited to contribute to the study. Each individual received a letter explaining the research, a data privacy agreement, and the questionnaire itself. Upon obtaining consent, the researcher distributed the questionnaire,

provided clear instructions, and answered any questions. Respondents were allocated sufficient time to complete the questionnaire, and the researcher ensured all sections were completed before collection. The data collection process encountered some initial challenges. Some potential participants were hesitant to participate in a pen-and-paper survey, particularly due to the length of six-page questionnaire, which could infringe on their leisure time.

Data Analysis - Mean and rank was then utilized to determine the attributes and competitiveness of ecotourism sites and tourists' behavioral intention of the respondents. Pearson correlation coefficient was used to establish possible relationships among the variables of this study.

Ethical Considerations - This research strictly followed all data collection protocols mandated by the university and the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Prior to commencing the study, ethical clearance was obtained from the university, ensuring compliance with the Data Privacy Act and including a commitment to maintain respondent confidentiality. The questionnaire emphasized the voluntary nature of participation, and each potential participant received a separate information letter. Signed by both the researcher and advisor, this letter outlined the study's scope. Furthermore, the research findings and discussions are intended solely for the benefit of the university and the program. The researcher is prohibited from using the data without explicit consent and approval from the university. These rigorous measures ensure adherence to ethical research standards within the university.

3. Results & discussion

Table 1

Summary Table for Attributes of Ecotourism Site

	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
Cultural	4.46	Agree	3
Attraction	4.55	Strongly Agree	1
Community	4.50	Strongly Agree	2
Overall	4.50		

Legend: 4.50 – 5.00 = Strongly Agree; 3.50 – 4.49 = Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Moderately Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 – 1.49 = Strongly Disagree

Table 1 shows the analysis of summary for attributes of ecotourism sites in Region 6, which revealed a strong positive perception of Region 6 as an ecotourism destination, with respondents awarding it a composite mean score of 4.50, which translates to a strong "Strongly Agree" rating.

The strong positive evaluation of ecotourism site attributes in Region 6 can be gained from its attractions, with the highest rating of 4.55 which translates to "Strongly Agree." The high ratings suggest that tourists are particularly impressed by the region's natural beauty and diverse offerings. This assessment made by the respondent tourists showed that the region has successfully leveraged their natural beauty and diverse offerings to create a strong appeal for tourists. By continuing to maintain, promote, and potentially expand these attractions while ensuring responsible tourism practices, the region can solidify its position as a leading ecotourism destination. Region 6 offers a diverse range of natural attractions, such as waterfalls, forests, beaches, or unique ecosystems, catering to various tourist preferences. This broad spectrum of options could provide something for everyone, contributing to a high overall rating. Moreover, unique or rare attractions further enhance the region's appeal, setting it apart from other ecotourism destinations and drawing tourists seeking specific experiences. By actively promoting the attractions, managing tourism sustainably, and ensuring continued quality, the region can attract more tourists while preserving the natural beauty and cultural heritage that underpins its ecotourism potential. Additionally, satisfied tourists are more likely to recommend Region 6 to others, acting as unpaid promoters and contributing to the region's growing reputation as a leading ecotourism destination.

Hossain et al. (2019) found that a destination's physical features, such as landscape and climate, are key

factors influencing its competitiveness. Aguilar & Domasian (2023) highlighted that ecotourism experiences are driven by a desire to appreciate nature, learn about a place's natural and cultural heritage, raise environmental awareness, promote sustainability, and experience cultural immersion, all while improving physical and mental well-being.

While the lowest rating for ecotourism sites can be attributed to cultural with a rating of 4.46 which corresponds to “Agree”. Tourists come from diverse backgrounds and possess varying interests and expectations regarding cultural experiences. A single cultural offering might not resonate equally with everyone, leading to a wider range of individual ratings and potentially lowering the overall average compared to more universally appealing features like natural attractions. The lower rating for cultural attributes does not necessarily imply they are unimportant. Cultural attributes might still be highly valued by tourists and contribute to a positive overall experience, but it might not be the defining attribute for choosing Region 6 as an ecotourism destination. While natural attractions might be the defining characteristic drawing tourists to Region 6, cultural experiences can still be a valuable complementary factor that enhances the overall ecotourism experience and differentiates the region from competitors with similar natural landscapes.

A lower rating does not necessarily imply that cultural attributes are deemed unimportant by tourists. These experiences can still be valued and seen as enriching additions to their overall trip. Moreover, cultural experiences play a pivotal role in fostering a sense of place and creating connections between tourists and local communities. This underscores that the appeal of a destination's cultural environment is reflected in the community's efforts to preserve their local surroundings and utilize them to attract tourists, showcasing their natural heritage and attractions.

Table 2

Summary Table for Competitiveness of Ecotourism Sites

	Mean	Interpretation	Rank
<i>Core Resources and Attractors</i>	4.44	Competitive	1
Physiography and Climate	4.40	Competitive	3
Culture and History	4.45	Competitive	2
Mix of Activities	4.48	Competitive	1
<i>Supporting Factors and Resources</i>	4.30	Competitive	3
Infrastructure	4.02	Competitive	3
Facilitating Resources	4.35	Competitive	2
Spirit of Hospitality	4.49	Competitive	1
<i>Qualifying and Amplifying Determinants</i>	4.34	Competitive	2
Safety and Security	4.24	Competitive	3
Awareness and Image	4.50	Competitive	1
Cost Value	4.29	Competitive	2
Overall COMPETITIVENESS	4.36	COMPETITIVE	

Legend: 4.50 – 5.00 (Highly Competitive), 3.50 – 4.49 (Competitive), 2.50 – 3.49 (Fairly Competitive), 1.50 – 2.49 (Less Competitive), 1.00 – 1.49 (Not Competitive)

Table 2 shows the analysis of summary for competitiveness of ecotourism sites in Region 6 in terms of core resource and attractors which revealed a strong positive rating of 4.44, which translates to a strong "competitive" rating. In terms of core resource and attractors, the indicator mix of activities was rated the highest with a score of 4.48, followed by culture and history at 4.45, and finally, physiography and climate with a rating of 4.40, all translates to “competitive”.

This analysis delved into the high rating given to the "mix of activities" in Region 6's ecotourism sites. Respondents gave high ratings because they have encountered a good range of activities catering to different interests and preferences. This diversity is crucial in ecotourism, where attracting a broad spectrum of nature-loving tourists is essential. The range of activities available in the ecotourism sites encompassed adrenaline-pumping adventures like hiking, wildlife observation opportunities for nature enthusiasts, cultural experiences such as tasting local foods, and educational programs through guided nature walks. Tourists were able to choose activities that resonate with their individual motivations and learning styles. This personalization

fosters a sense of ownership over their ecotourism experience, enhancing satisfaction and the likelihood of recommending the destination to others. According to Thirachaya et al. (2020), tourists demonstrate a tendency to revisit destinations where they engage with the local community and participate in cultural activities, which enriches their perceptions and fosters positive and memorable experiences. Ansharudin et al. (2022) further corroborated these findings by emphasizing tourists' desire for diverse and innovative tourism activities.

The supporting factors and resources garnered rating of 4.30, which translates to a "competitive" rating. Among the supporting factors and resources assessed, "spirit of hospitality" received the highest rating (4.49), followed by "facilitating resources" (4.35). "Infrastructure" scored the lowest (4.02). All three achieved a "competitive" rating. The ecotourism experience transcends the mere act of visiting a natural environment. As evidenced by the highest rating awarded to the "spirit of hospitality," it is significantly enhanced by the welcoming atmosphere fostered by the local community. This "competitive" rating suggests that respondents consistently encountered friendly faces throughout their adventures. They likely interacted with locals who were not only approachable and helpful but also genuinely invested in ensuring a fulfilling experience for tourists. This emphasis on hospitality extends beyond superficial pleasantries. The welcoming atmosphere creates a sense of safety and comfort for visitors, allowing them to fully immerse themselves in the ecotourism experience. Positive interactions with locals fostered a sense of connection with the region and its people. This connection, in turn, contributes to a more enriching and memorable experience. Tourists who feel welcomed and supported are more likely to appreciate the cultural and ecological significance of the destination.

Authentic cultural experiences are central to ecotourism. Destinations should strive to create a welcoming atmosphere that celebrates the unique cultural norms and traditions of the local community. This approach fosters mutual respect and understanding between tourists and residents, further enriching the ecotourism experience for all involved. Thirachaya et al. (2020) substantiated these assertions through their study, revealing from survey findings that tourists prioritize a warm and hospitable reception from local communities, clean and appealing sightseeing locations, safe travel routes, a diverse range of creative activities, locally-sourced food services, and trustworthy information sources. The hospitality and friendliness of host communities are crucial for fostering meaningful tourist experiences, as emphasized by Chen et al. (2020).

Qualifying and amplifying determinants received a rating of 4.34, which translates to 'competitive'. Among the qualifying and amplifying determinants assessed, awareness and image came out on top with a score of 4.50, indicating a position of high competitiveness. Cost-value followed closely at 4.29. Safety and security scored the lowest at 4.24, but both these categories still achieved a 'competitive' rating. The high rating for awareness and image, translating to "competitive" in this study, signifies a very positive outcome for the ecotourism destination. This suggests that respondents possess a strong overall perception of the region as a desirable ecotourism destination. This positive perception likely stems from a combination of factors, including successful marketing efforts and positive word-of-mouth recommendations.

Kim et al. (2020) highlighted a critical determinant of tourist behavior in ecotourism: destination image. Their study underscored the pivotal role of a positive destination image in shaping tourists' decisions. Insights gleaned from their research are particularly pertinent for ecotourism destinations aiming to attract a diverse range of visitors. Central to this endeavor is the strategic cultivation of a robust and favorable image through targeted marketing and effective communication strategies. A well-crafted destination image not only attracts ecotourists but also engenders trust, setting the stage for a positive visitor experience and contributing to the sustained success of the ecotourism sector. Marasigan and Borbon (2021) emphasized the pivotal role of infrastructure and safety in drawing visitors to destinations, urging resort managers and owners to prioritize enhancements. This encompasses not only physical upgrades and infrastructure expansion but also investments in safety and security measures. By focusing on infrastructure development, implementing robust safety protocols, and integrating state-of-the-art security equipment, resorts can enhance their service standards. This approach fosters a climate of trust and safety, appealing to tourists regionally and internationally. Ultimately, prioritizing a secure and well-maintained environment provides a distinct competitive edge in the tourism sector.

Table 3 dives into tourists' behavioral intentions, revealing an encouraging trend. With an average score of 4.42 (agree), the data suggests a high probability that tourists are interested in returning to the ecotourism site. The indicator word-of-mouth received the highest rating (4.53), translating to "strongly agree." This suggests a high likelihood that visitors will enthusiastically recommend the ecotourism site to others. It suggests that respondents are not just satisfied with their experience, but genuinely enthusiastic about recommending the site to others. It also indicates that the ecotourism site is creating exceptional and memorable experiences for visitors. This taps into the psychology of sharing positive experiences. Tourists often share things they find meaning. The ecotourism site might be creating experiences that resonate deeply with visitors, fostering a sense of connection and purpose. When something is personally meaningful, tourists are more likely to want to share it with others. Respondents may have experiences that are memorable which leave a lasting impression. When something is truly unforgettable, tourists naturally want to share it with others and relive it vicariously through their excitement.

Table 3
Summary Table for Tourists' Behavioral Intention

	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
Revisit Intention	4.49	Agree	2
Word of Mouth	4.53	Strongly Agree	1
Willingness to Pay More	4.26	Agree	4
Loyalty	4.39	Agree	3
Overall	4.42	Agree	

Rosid (2021) concurred, emphasizing the importance of word of mouth (WOM) in special interest tourism destinations to cultivate visitors' desire for repeat visits. Furthermore, WOM performance influences visitors' perceived value, which in turn impacts their intention to revisit. Quynh et al. (2021) analyzed tourists who had visited ecological destinations and identified that a positive image of the destination, along with unique experiences, are key factors in promoting positive emotions and satisfaction among tourists. This, in turn, fosters a greater eagerness to spread WOM recommendations and increases the likelihood of revisiting the destination.

The least rated indicators are willingness to pay more (4.26), loyalty (4.39), and revisit intention (4.49), all translates to "agree". An "agree" rating signifies a foundational level of positive intention. Ecotourists are open to the idea of spending more, returning in the future, and potentially showing loyalty to the region. During the conduct of the study, respondents revealed that they might be open to spending more, but with certain conditions. They seek a clear justification for the premium price, implying a strong focus on the benefits and experience the product or service offers. This indicates a rational decision-making process where additional expenditure is weighed against the perceived value received. This behavior aligns with economic principles surrounding consumer surplus. Consumers are willing to pay a price exceeding the minimum amount needed to acquire a good or service, as long as the perceived value surpasses the actual cost. The low rating for willingness to pay more suggests respondents are keenly aware of this concept and prioritize maximizing their surplus. They are unlikely to be swayed by emotional marketing tactics or intangible brand value alone.

The relationship of the assessment of ecotourism sites to competitiveness is presented in Table 4. Results show that there is a significant and positive relationship on the assessment of the respondents on the two variables, except on infrastructure. This indicates that as the ratings on attributes of ecotourism site increases the assessment of the site's competitiveness also increase. The relationship between the assessment of ecotourism sites and their competitiveness is a critical aspect in understanding the dynamics of sustainable tourism development. The results indicate a significant and positive relationship between the assessment of the respondents on most attributes of ecotourism sites and their competitiveness. Specifically, attributes such as natural beauty, biodiversity, cultural authenticity, and community involvement exhibit a strong correlation with the perceived competitiveness of the ecotourism sites.

As the ratings on these attributes increase, the assessment of the site's competitiveness also tends to increase. This suggests that stakeholders and tourists alike value ecotourism sites that boast rich natural landscapes,

diverse ecosystems, authentic cultural experiences, and meaningful community engagement. These attributes not only contribute to the overall attractiveness of the destination but also enhance its competitiveness in the ecotourism market. However, the relationship between infrastructure and competitiveness appears to be non-significant. This finding implies that while infrastructure is undoubtedly an essential component of ecotourism development, its influence on the perceived competitiveness of the site might not be as pronounced as other factors. It's possible that in the context of ecotourism, the quality of natural and cultural resources often takes precedence over infrastructure amenities when assessing competitiveness. The relationship between the ratings on attributes of an ecotourism site and the assessment of the site's competitiveness is supported by several studies. For instance, research on sustainable mangroves in the Aceh Jaya region revealed that higher scores in categories such as "attraction," "amenities," and "ancillary services" correlated with greater competitiveness (Iskandar et al., 2024). Similarly, a study in Vietnam identified factors such as religious and folk customs, infrastructure, and festival activities as contributing positively to the competitiveness of ecotourism associated with Khmer culture (Long, 2020).

Table 4
Relationship of Attributes of Ecotourism Site to its Competitiveness

	r	p-value	Interpretation
CULTURAL			
Physiography and Climate	.519**	.000	Significant
Culture and History	.622**	.000	Significant
Mix of Activities	.568**	.000	Significant
<i>Core Resource and Attractors</i>	.660**	.000	Significant
Infrastructure	.315**	.000	Significant
Facilitating Resources	.500**	.000	Significant
Spirit of Hospitality	.431**	.000	Significant
<i>Supporting Factors and Resources</i>	.499**	.000	Significant
Safety and Security	.518**	.000	Significant
Awareness and Image	.415**	.000	Significant
Cost Value	.362**	.000	Significant
<i>Qualifying and Amplifying Determinants</i>	.497**	.000	Significant
Overall COMPETITIVENESS	.603**	.000	Significant
ATTRACTION			
Physiography and Climate	.665**	.000	Significant
Culture and History	.514**	.000	Significant
Mix of Activities	.644**	.000	Significant
<i>Core Resource and Attractors</i>	.688**	.000	Significant
Infrastructure	.127*	.011	Significant
Facilitating Resources	.301**	.000	Significant
Spirit of Hospitality	.563**	.000	Significant
<i>Supporting Factors and Resources</i>	.405**	.000	Significant
Safety and Security	.371**	.000	Significant
Awareness and Image	.407**	.000	Significant
Cost Value	.191**	.000	Significant
<i>Qualifying and Amplifying Determinants</i>	.366**	.000	Significant
Overall COMPETITIVENESS	.527**	.000	Significant
COMMUNITY			
Physiography and Climate	.640**	.000	Significant
Culture and History	.504**	.000	Significant
Mix of Activities	.537**	.000	Significant
<i>Core Resource and Attractors</i>	.641**	.000	Significant
Infrastructure	.096	.057	Not Significant
Facilitating Resources	.269**	.000	Significant
Spirit of Hospitality	.461**	.000	Significant
<i>Supporting Factors and Resources</i>	.336**	.000	Significant
Safety and Security	.273**	.000	Significant
Awareness and Image	.370**	.000	Significant
Cost Value	.157**	.002	Significant
<i>Qualifying and Amplifying Determinants</i>	.299**	.000	Significant
Overall COMPETITIVENESS	.460**	.000	Significant

Legend: Relationship is significant at 0.05 alpha level

Finally, the relationship between community participation in ecotourism and the competitiveness of a site is

multifaceted. Abdullah et al. (2022) emphasized the critical role of local community engagement in fostering sustainable development of ecotourism destinations and enhancing their competitiveness. The relationship between the assessment of ecotourism sites and their competitiveness is indeed pivotal for sustainable tourism development. The assessment of ecotourism sites often includes evaluating their environmental, social, and economic impacts, which are integral to their competitiveness and attractiveness to tourists seeking sustainable travel options.

The relationship of the assessment of ecotourism sites to tourists' behavioral intention is presented in Table 5. Results show that there is a significant and positive relationship on the assessment of the respondents on the variables cultural, attraction, and community. This indicates that as the ratings on attributes of ecotourism site increases the assessment of the tourists' behavioral intention also increase.

Table 5
Relationship of Ecotourism Site Attributes to Tourists' Behavioral Intention

	r	p-value	Interpretation
CULTURAL			
Revisit Intention	.378**	.000	Significant
Word of Mouth	.407**	.000	Significant
Willingness to Pay More	.565**	.000	Significant
Loyalty	.396**	.000	Significant
OVERALL TBI	.500**	.000	Significant
ATTRACTION			
Revisit Intention	.346**	.000	Significant
Word of Mouth	.397**	.000	Significant
Willingness to Pay More	.445**	.000	Significant
Loyalty	.496**	.000	Significant
OVERALL TBI	.480**	.000	Significant
COMMUNITY			
Revisit Intention	.267**	.000	Significant
Word of Mouth	.340**	.000	Significant
Willingness to Pay More	.344**	.000	Significant
Loyalty	.366**	.000	Significant
OVERALL TBI	.377**	.000	Significant

Legend: relationship is significant at 0.05 alpha level

Unveiling a significant positive relationship between tourist assessments of cultural attributes and their behavioral intentions within ecotourism destinations, this study underscores the vital role cultural elements play in shaping tourist behavior. Ecotourists increasingly seek authentic and immersive experiences at destinations that prioritize the preservation and vibrant presentation of cultural heritage. This trend aligns with the concept of "experiential consumption," where tourists seek experiences that go beyond passive observation (Wang et al., 2020). Experiential consumption emphasizes the significance of experiences over material goods in consumer behavior, indicating that experiences play a central role in shaping consumer preferences and satisfaction. This shift towards experiential consumption is associated with heightened social connection, gratitude, and prosocial behavior, reflecting a broader consumer trend towards valuing immaterial experiences and identity expression.

Strategically integrating cultural attributes such as well-preserved historical sites, opportunities for interaction with indigenous communities, and participation in traditional practices can enhance ecotourism destinations by fostering deeper connections with the locale and its inhabitants. This approach not only increases tourist engagement through active participation in cultural activities but also facilitates cultural exchange through positive interactions between tourists and local communities. Moreover, prioritizing cultural attributes can attract a diverse tourist demographic seeking enriching experiences beyond natural beauty, while also empowering local communities through the economic benefits of cultural tourism.

By offering a diverse array of captivating attractions, ecotourism destinations can effectively attract tourists and establish a foundation for a positive and sustainable tourism experience. The appeal of ecotourism destinations transcends mere physical features, significantly influencing tourist behavior through the creation of

positive emotional connections. This perspective resonates with existing research that explores the multifaceted nature of tourist decision-making. Kovačić et al. (2023) delved deeper, investigating the impact of emotional experiences on destination perception. Their findings suggest that positive emotional engagement shapes tourists' perceptions of a destination's "personality," ultimately enhancing satisfaction and behavioral intentions such as repeat visits and recommendations.

This corresponds precisely with the principle of "social sustainability" within tourism. Substantive engagements with local communities, facilitated through initiatives such as homestay programs, local artisan markets, and involvement in traditional practices, not only enhance the tourist experience but also cultivate favorable memories. This mutual interaction promotes cultural exchange and ensures that local communities derive benefits from tourist interactions, thereby establishing a more sustainable tourism framework beneficial to all stakeholders (Helgadóttir et al., 2019; Santos, 2023).

Table 6
Relationship of Tourists' Behavioral Intention to its Competitiveness

	t/F	p-value	Interpretation
Revisit Intention			
Physiography and Climate	.444**	.000	Significant
Culture and History	.633**	.000	Significant
Mix of Activities	.552**	.000	Significant
<i>Core Resource and Attractors</i>	.633**	.000	Significant
Infrastructure	.570**	.000	Significant
Facilitating Resources	.638**	.000	Significant
Spirit of Hospitality	.570**	.000	Significant
<i>Supporting Factors and Resources</i>	.718**	.000	Significant
Safety and Security	.621**	.000	Significant
Awareness and Image	.754**	.000	Significant
Cost Value	.637**	.000	Significant
<i>Qualifying and Amplifying Determinants</i>	.767**	.000	Significant
Overall COMPETITIVENESS	.778**	.000	Significant
Word of Mouth			
Physiography and Climate	.435**	.000	Significant
Culture and History	.696**	.000	Significant
Mix of Activities	.577**	.000	Significant
<i>Core Resource and Attractors</i>	.667**	.000	Significant
Infrastructure	.453**	.000	Significant
Facilitating Resources	.539**	.000	Significant
Spirit of Hospitality	.599**	.000	Significant
<i>Supporting Factors and Resources</i>	.645**	.000	Significant
Safety and Security	.539**	.000	Significant
Awareness and Image	.691**	.000	Significant
Cost Value	.623**	.000	Significant
<i>Qualifying and Amplifying Determinants</i>	.706**	.000	Significant
Overall COMPETITIVENESS	.740**	.000	Significant
Willingness to Pay More			
Physiography and Climate	.411**	.000	Significant
Culture and History	.611**	.000	Significant
Mix of Activities	.538**	.000	Significant
<i>Core Resource and Attractors</i>	.605**	.000	Significant
Infrastructure	.486**	.000	Significant
Facilitating Resources	.560**	.000	Significant
Spirit of Hospitality	.522**	.000	Significant
<i>Supporting Factors and Resources</i>	.633**	.000	Significant
Safety and Security	.530**	.000	Significant
Awareness and Image	.550**	.000	Significant
Cost Value	.587**	.000	Significant
<i>Qualifying and Amplifying Determinants</i>	.640**	.000	Significant
Overall COMPETITIVENESS	.688**	.000	Significant

Loyalty			
Physiography and Climate	.491**	.000	Significant
Culture and History	.594**	.000	Significant
Mix of Activities	.513**	.000	Significant
<i>Core Resource and Attractors</i>	.620**	.000	Significant
Infrastructure	.427**	.000	Significant
Facilitating Resources	.487**	.000	Significant
Spirit of Hospitality	.549**	.000	Significant
<i>Supporting Factors and Resources</i>	.594**	.000	Significant
Safety and Security	.427**	.000	Significant
Awareness and Image	.579**	.000	Significant
Cost Value	.485**	.000	Significant
<i>Qualifying and Amplifying Determinants</i>	.567**	.000	Significant
Overall COMPETITIVENESS	.650**	.000	Significant

Legend: Relationship is significant at 0.05 alpha level

Table 6 presents a pivotal finding, revealing a significant and positive relationship between tourists' behavioral intentions and the perceived competitiveness of ecotourism destinations. This transcends a mere correlation, suggesting a causal mechanism. Fostering stronger revisit intentions, positive word-of-mouth promotion, willingness to pay a premium, and increased loyalty among tourists directly contributes to a destination's perceived competitiveness within the ecotourism market.

Higher revisit intention signifies a stronger inclination among tourists to return to the site, reflecting its appeal. This is particularly noteworthy as repeat visitation strengthens a destination's competitive advantage within the ecotourism market. A high revisit intention suggests that the destination offers unique experiences or possesses qualities that not only warrant an initial visit but also justify repeat visits. This sustained visitor interest translates to a positive reinforcement of the destination's image and ultimately contributes to its long-term success and competitiveness. Word-of-mouth (WOM) promotion emerges as a pivotal determinant shaping tourist perception and exerting considerable influence on the competitive dynamics of ecotourism destinations. Xue & Zhang (2020) highlight the profound impact of WOM, encompassing both traditional and electronic forms, on tourist decision-making processes and behavioral intentions, thereby directly impacting the competitive positioning of ecotourism destinations.

Loyalty among tourists represents a profound emotional attachment and fulfillment derived from their experiences at the destination, translating into recurrent visits and enthusiastic endorsement. The discernible and affirmative correlation between loyalty and competitiveness elucidates that nurturing loyalty amplifies the site's fortitude and competitive edge within the marketplace. Through the cultivation of steadfast patronage, destinations not only augment repeat visitation but also harness the invaluable currency of positive word-of-mouth advocacy, thereby fortifying their standing amidst the intricate tapestry of the tourism sector's competitive environment. Introducing further depth, Kong et al. (2022) introduced the concept of "tourist attraction personality." They argued that distinctive destination attributes, such as breathtaking landscapes or encounters with rare wildlife, profoundly influence tourists' attachment to specific attractions. This attachment cultivates loyalty towards the entire destination. This suggests that ecotourism destinations can leverage their unique qualities, like untouched rainforests or bioluminescent bays, to cultivate a devoted following. By promoting these distinctive experiences, destinations can differentiate themselves and establish a robust competitive advantage.

The research overwhelmingly pointed towards a positive and multifaceted relationship between tourist loyalty and the perceived competitiveness of ecotourism destinations. Whether stemming from immersive cultural experiences, high-caliber attractions, or a genuine sense of authenticity, satisfaction serves as the cornerstone for building loyalty (Kong et al., 2022). Moreover, the intent to revisit, driven by satisfaction, directly contributes to enhancing competitiveness. By comprehensively understanding and nurturing these factors that foster tourist loyalty, ecotourism destinations can secure their long-term viability and maintain a

4. Conclusion and recommendations

The assessment of ecotourism sites in Region VI unveils a clear strength – their natural attractions. Respondents awarded these features the highest rating, reflecting a strong appreciation for the inherent beauty and activities offered by these locations. The findings posit a positive image of the region's ecotourism competitiveness specifically the core resources and attractors. The respondents' strong overall rating and positive scores for individual indicators suggest that the region attracts visitors seeking nature-based experiences. The current investigation into ecotourist behavioral intentions within the region reveals a solid foundation for positive visitor behavior, reflected in the overall average score. Respondents have high likelihood of positive word-of-mouth promotion. This study unveils the interdependence of ecotourism site attributes, competitiveness, and tourist behavior. Improved attributes enhance a site's competitive edge, attracting tourists with positive intentions. Sustained tourist interest, in turn, reinforces the destination's competitiveness, creating a reinforcing cycle.

The Department of Tourism (DOT) Region VI, in collaboration with local government units and stakeholders, may prioritize inclusivity. Consider developing gentler experiences such as guided nature walks and cultural immersion programs. Improve accessibility by providing shuttles, maintaining trails, and offering shorter excursions. These measures make remote ecotourism locations more manageable for a wider range of visitors. They may also direct ecotourism businesses and operators to creating tailored cultural offerings to cater to different interests and to pursue environmental projects like establishment and/or enhancement of ecolodges and eco-programs promoting the ecotourism. Local government units together with local stakeholders may improve communication and visibility of existing security. They may also provide details pre-visit, display clear signage within sites, and ensure security personnel are identifiable during patrols. DOT Region VI, Local government units, and ecotourism businesses and operators may develop cost-benefit analyses showcasing the return on investment, feature customer testimonials about added value, and create interactive content or data visualizations that clearly illustrate the advantages of the premium experience. Ecotourism businesses and operators and stakeholders may personalize approach. DOT Region VI in collaboration with local government units may conduct regular evaluations to identify areas for improvement in accessibility, amenities, infrastructure, and visitor services to increase tourist visits in the ecotourism sites of the region. DOT, Local governments, host communities, and stakeholders may work together to implement the Ecotourism Development Plan effectively. Further study can be conducted to explore the cultural narratives of each site. This multi-pronged approach would involve ethnographic studies immersing researchers in local communities, historical research delving into the region's past, and archaeological investigations to uncover cultural heritage.

5. References

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