

Diaspora Tourism and Migrant Communities as Catalysts for Ecotourism Development in Homeland Destinations¹

**Jacob Oluwafemi Orimaye, Nathaniel Ileri Omotoba, &
Adedokun Olukemi Fagbolu**

Department of Tourism Studies,
National Open University of Nigeria, Jabi, Abuja, Nigeria

Corresponding Author's Email: jorimaye@noun.edu.ng

Abstract

This paper looks at the growing trend of diaspora-driven ecotourism. In this model, migrant communities use emotional ties, financial support, and global connections to create sustainable tourism projects in their homelands. The research explores how these diaspora communities integrate environmental protection, cultural preservation, and community development to transform traditional tourism practices. It follows a qualitative, theory-based review and a comparative case-study approach. The study focuses on how diaspora entrepreneurs create authentic cultural and environmental experiences. It also examines how they blend international standards with local customs and use global networks to support ecotourism businesses. By analysing 187 peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and case studies from the Caribbean, Mexico, India, and West Africa, the study highlights different strategies for advancing diaspora ecotourism. It identifies governance factors that contribute to successful outcomes and reveals key benefits, including economic growth, environmental protection, cultural preservation, and community capacity building. However, it is crucial to be mindful of challenges such as displacement risks, environmental damage, governance problems, and authenticity issues. The paper suggests adopting best practices that emphasise community involvement, alignment with broader development goals, environmental management, cultural awareness, long-term dedication, and strategic partnerships. Future research should focus on climate change adaptation, digital innovation, policy framework development, and regenerative tourism models. This study adds to tourism theory by framing diaspora communities as conditionally significant rather than universally beneficial. It shows that their impact depends on governance structures that support emotional capital within institutional environments, directing investment toward community benefits rather than private gains. The conceptual framework developed here offers practical guidance for policymakers and practitioners to achieve positive outcomes and mitigate risks associated with diaspora-led development projects.

Keywords/terms: Diaspora tourism, ecotourism, sustainable tourism development, transnational migration, community-based tourism.

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Tourisme diasporique et communautés migrantes : catalyseurs du développement de l'écotourisme dans les pays d'origine

Résumé

Cet article analyse l'essor de l'écotourisme porté par les diasporas. Dans ce modèle, les communautés migrantes mobilisent leurs liens affectifs, leurs ressources financières et leurs réseaux internationaux afin de développer des projets de tourisme durable dans leurs pays d'origine. La recherche examine comment ces communautés diasporiques articulent protection de l'environnement, préservation culturelle et développement communautaire, contribuant ainsi à la transformation des pratiques touristiques traditionnelles. L'étude adopte une approche qualitative, fondée sur une analyse théorique et une étude comparative de cas. Elle s'intéresse à la manière dont les entrepreneurs issus de la diaspora conçoivent des expériences culturelles et environnementales authentiques. Elle analyse également la façon dont ils articulent normes internationales et pratiques locales, tout en mobilisant des réseaux transnationaux pour soutenir les initiatives d'écotourisme. À partir de l'analyse de 187 articles évalués par des pairs, de rapports de politiques publiques et d'études de cas provenant des Caraïbes, du Mexique, de l'Inde et de l'Afrique de l'Ouest, l'étude met en évidence diverses stratégies de promotion de l'écotourisme diasporique. Elle identifie les facteurs de gouvernance favorisant la réussite des projets et souligne plusieurs retombées positives, notamment la croissance économique, la protection de l'environnement, la préservation culturelle et le renforcement des capacités communautaires. Toutefois, elle met également en garde contre certains défis, tels que les risques de déplacement des populations, les dégradations environnementales, les faiblesses de gouvernance et les enjeux d'authenticité. L'article recommande l'adoption de bonnes pratiques centrées sur la participation communautaire, l'alignement avec des objectifs de développement plus larges, la gestion durable de l'environnement, la valorisation culturelle, l'engagement à long terme et le développement de partenariats stratégiques. Les recherches futures devraient porter sur l'adaptation au changement climatique, l'innovation numérique, l'élaboration de cadres politiques appropriés et les modèles de tourisme régénératif. Cette étude contribue à la théorie du tourisme en considérant les communautés diasporiques comme des acteurs à impact conditionnel plutôt que systématiquement bénéfiques. Elle montre que leur contribution dépend de dispositifs de gouvernance capables de canaliser le capital émotionnel dans des cadres institutionnels efficaces, orientant ainsi les investissements vers l'intérêt collectif plutôt que vers des bénéfices privés. Le cadre conceptuel proposé offre des orientations pratiques aux décideurs et aux acteurs du secteur afin de maximiser les effets positifs et de limiter les risques associés aux initiatives de développement portées par les diasporas.

Mots-clés : Tourisme diasporique, écotourisme, tourisme durable, migration transnationale, tourisme communautaire.

INTRODUCTION

The global tourism industry faces increasing pressure to develop sustainable frameworks that balance economic growth, environmental protection, and the well-being of local communities (Yang et al., 2022; Weaver, 2006). Traditional ecotourism methods, while beneficial, often fail to ensure meaningful community involvement or lasting conservation outcomes (Pratiwi, 2006; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). International migration has led to large diaspora communities, with around 280 million people living outside their home countries while maintaining strong emotional, cultural, and economic connections to their home countries (United Nations, 2020). Researchers and practitioners face both opportunities and challenges arising from the rising number of expatriates and the urgent need for sustainable tourism development (Newland & Plaza, 2013; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).

This article argues that diaspora groups serve as an underutilized yet powerful force in the growth of ecotourism. They possess unique qualities that make them effective leaders in sustainable tourism efforts. Diaspora members have a rare blend of deep local knowledge and global experience that typical tourists lack (Conradson & McKay, 2007). They remain connected to their home countries and have access to international networks and resources (Portes et al., 1999; Elo et al., 2018). They also combine authentic cultural experiences with an understanding of how international tourism operates (Salazar, 2025). These characteristics position expatriate communities to have a significant impact on tourism development (Riddle & Brinkerhoff, 2011).

"Emotional geography" (Davidson & Milligan, 2004) offers a framework for understanding how diaspora groups maintain emotional ties to the landscapes, ecosystems, and places that shape their identity (Williams & Vaske, 2003). These emotional connections encourage a sense of responsibility toward the environment and a willingness to support conservation efforts that benefit both ecosystems and local communities (Kittinger, et al., 2016). This concept goes beyond nostalgia (Roudometof, 2010); it embodies a strong sense of duty to the places and people there (Conradson & McKay, 2007). This bond motivates actions that go beyond profit (Bugg-Levine & Emerson, 2011). While diaspora tourism has drawn more scholarly attention (Ciki, 2022), existing research focuses on identity motivations (Coles & Timothy, 2004), heritage travel (Dillette, 2021; Gebauer & Umscheid, 2021), and remittance economics (Mohamoud & Formson-Lorist, 2014; Akanle & Ola-Lawson, 2022) separately. There remains a lack of sustained analysis of how diaspora groups

engage with ecotourism, distinct from heritage or traditional tourism (Newland & Taylor, 2010). Additionally, research into the governance conditions that influence the outcomes of conservation versus extraction is limited (Ando & Shah, 2016). This study fills that gap by comparing four ecotourism initiatives where diaspora resources and emotional connections interact with different institutional settings (Yin, 2018).

This research contributes to tourism theory by creating a framework for understanding diaspora-led ecotourism (Bianchi, 2018). It identifies ways diaspora communities promote sustainable tourism development (UNWTO, 2013) and examines the benefits and challenges of diaspora ecotourism projects (Scheyvens & Momsen, 2008). The study also suggests best practices to achieve positive results while reducing negative impacts (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). In this context, a catalyst refers to the ability of diaspora actors to speed up ecotourism development through financial support, innovative governance, knowledge sharing, and conservation-focused investments (Mohamoud & Formson-Lorist, 2014; Elo et al., 2018), beyond what local or traditional tourism stakeholders could typically achieve (Avila-Foucat et al., 2021).

OBJECTIVES

This investigation aims to achieve the following specific objectives that collectively address the research gap identified in the literature:

First, to conceptualise diaspora communities as influential agents in the development of ecotourism, examining how their unique position at the intersection of multiple national contexts enables them to serve as bridges between international tourism markets and local communities. This objective seeks to establish a theoretical foundation for understanding diaspora engagement in tourism development, recognising that diaspora actors occupy a liminal space that combines insider cultural competency with outsider market knowledge.

Second, to examine the mechanisms by which diaspora engagement impacts ecotourism outcomes, including financial mobilisation, governance innovation, knowledge transfer, and conservation-focused investments beyond what would typically be achieved by local or conventional tourism stakeholders alone. This mechanism-focused analysis provides insights into how diaspora involvement translates into tangible development outcomes, identifying the specific pathways through which diaspora capital and emotional attachment generate conservation and community benefits.

Third, to evaluate the socio-economic, environmental, and cultural effects of diaspora-motivated ecotourism, analysing both the benefits and potential drawbacks of diaspora involvement in homeland tourism development. This evaluative component ensures a balanced assessment of the impacts of diaspora tourism, recognising that diaspora engagement can generate both positive outcomes and unintended negative consequences for host communities and environments.

Fourth, to analyse governance challenges and identify best practices for diaspora ecotourism initiatives, and to provide actionable recommendations for policymakers, development practitioners, and community leaders seeking to maximise positive outcomes while mitigating potential negative consequences. This objective addresses the practical need for guidance on structuring and managing diaspora-ecotourism partnerships for sustainable development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative, theory-driven research design that combines a systematic narrative literature review with a comparative case study synthesis. The goal is to examine how diaspora communities promote ecotourism development in their homeland destinations. Given that diaspora-driven ecotourism lacks sufficient theory and varies across contexts, this approach is better suited to theory building, mechanism identification, and integrative analysis rather than hypothesis testing (Strandberg et al., 2018).

The research method draws from interpretivist traditions in tourism and development studies. It focuses on meaning, context, and social processes (Wilson & Hollinshead, 2015; Mura & Khoo-Lattimore, 2018). The emphasis is on understanding the relationships and pathways through which diaspora involvement affects environmental, socio-cultural, and economic outcomes (Wilson et al., 2008). This interpretive approach enables a nuanced understanding of the complex social phenomena underlying diaspora tourism engagement, recognising that outcomes are shaped by contextual factors and social relationships rather than by deterministic causal mechanisms.

Literature Review Strategy

A two-stage, mixed-methods strategy was adopted. Stage 1 consisted of a systematic, interdisciplinary literature review that synthesised scholarship from tourism studies, migration and diaspora research, sustainable-development theory, and conservation science. The search protocol followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. Boolean queries combined the terms "diaspora tourism", "migrant investment", "ecotourism development", "transnationalism", "place attachment", "emotional geography", and "community-based tourism".

Databases interrogated were Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect; grey literature was retrieved through institutional repositories. The temporal window was set at 2000-2025, but seminal pre-2000 contributions were retained when conceptually decisive. After duplicate removal and abstract screening, 187 peer-reviewed articles, 14 academic books, and 9 policy reports met the inclusion criteria: (i) explicit focus on diaspora or migrant engagement in tourism or development; (ii) empirical or theoretical contribution to ecotourism or sustainable-tourism debates; and (iii) presentation of primary data or novel conceptual insight. The final corpus was thematically coded in NVivo 14 to identify recurrent constructs, theoretical gaps, and mediating mechanisms that informed the conceptual framework.

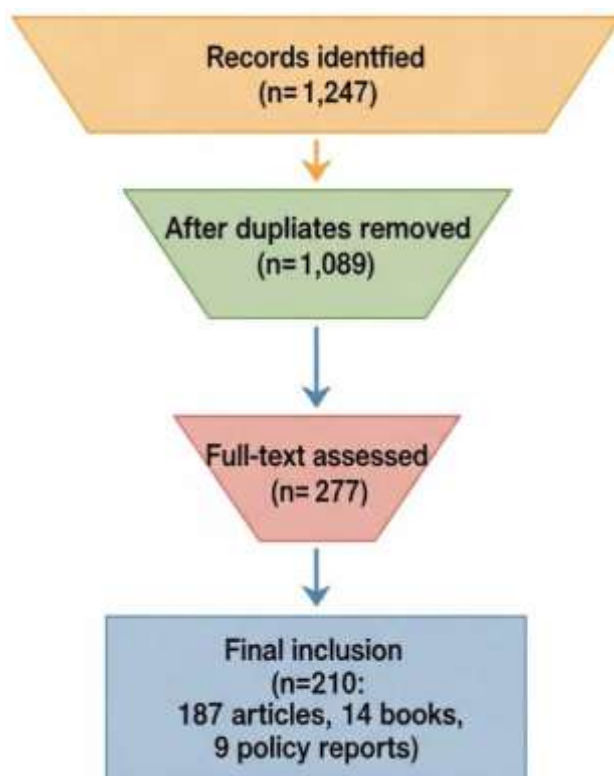


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram showing systematic literature search and selection process, 2000-2025.

Note: *Grey literature includes policy reports, NGO evaluations, and institutional repository documents."*

Case Study Selection

The second stage employed a multiple-case-study design to enable analytical generalisation. Consistent with Yin's (2018) replication logic, four diaspora-supported ecotourism initiatives were selected through purposive, maximum-variation sampling: the Waitukubuli National Trail and diaspora lodges, Dominica (Caribbean); community-owned ecotourism clusters in Oaxaca, Mexico; Kerala's Responsible Tourism Mission and diaspora homestay networks, India; and Kakum National Park adjacent diaspora-community enterprises, Ghana. Cases were chosen to maximise geographical dispersion, divergent diaspora engagement modalities (financial investment, governance co-management, and cultural brokerage), and contrasting

institutional architectures (federal, unitary, post-colonial, and post-conflict). Evidence comprised peer-reviewed case analyses, government and NGO project-evaluation reports, and grey literature from institutional repositories. No primary data were collected; all analyses draw on published accounts and publicly available documentation. Cross-case pattern matching was performed to interrogate the external validity of propositions derived from the literature synthesis.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed through reflexive thematic synthesis integrating deductive and inductive coding (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022). A provisional coding frame was constructed a priori from the study's organising constructs (emotional geography, transnationalism, and sustainable-tourism development). Given the secondary nature of data sources, coding focused on identifying and synthesising reported mechanisms, outcomes, and governance arrangements across the literature rather than generating new primary data. Emergent sub-themes, including benefit-distribution asymmetries, authenticity negotiations, governance frictions, and temporal sustainability pledges, were developed inductively through constant comparison. Axial coding subsequently clustered initial codes into organising themes and overarching dimensions. Cross-case analysis followed a generative logic (Yin, 2018): within-case matrices reconstructed reported causal processes, followed by cross-case meta-matrices tracing relational mechanisms rather than isolated variables (Beach & Pedersen, 2019). Limitations of secondary source analysis are acknowledged: reported outcomes may reflect publication bias toward successful initiatives, and micro-level negotiations are inaccessible through published accounts.

Limitations and Research Ethics

The study's reliance on secondary sources constrains access to micro-level negotiations, failed initiatives, and real-time governance deliberations; observed outcomes may reflect publication bias toward successful cases (Strandberg et al., 2018). To mitigate these threats, we triangulated across document types (peer-reviewed articles, evaluation reports, policy briefs), temporal periods, and authorial standpoints (Decrop, 1999; Ramseook-Munhurrun & Durbarry, 2017). No primary data were collected; therefore, formal ethical approval was not required. However, we acknowledge that secondary source analysis carries inherent limitations: published case studies may reflect success bias, exclude failed initiatives, and present institutional perspectives rather than community critiques. We mitigated this by deliberately searching for critical accounts and triangulating across source types, but we cannot claim comprehensive representation of community experiences. We

adhered to the Association of Internet Researchers' guidelines by anonymising institutional actors where sources did not already do so and ensuring correct attribution of quotations.

RESULTS

Emotional Capital and Environmental Stewardship

Diaspora subjects retain what Davidson and Milligan (2004) term "emotional geographies": durable, affective ties to specific biophysical and cultural landscapes that scaffold early identity formation (Williams & Vaske, 2003). These ties differ qualitatively from the novelty-seeking motivations of conventional tourists; return visits are better understood as acts of "rooted mobility" (Roudometof, 2010) in which degraded forests or eroded coastlines are read as ruptures in personal and familial memory (Conradson & McKay, 2007). This emotional connection creates a unique motivation for environmental stewardship that transcends purely economic considerations (Kittinger et al., 2016), generating commitments to conservation that persist over time and across distances (Yuksel et al., 2010).

We conceptualise this effect as emotional capital that can be converted into conservation praxis (Bourdieu, 1986). Comparative case evidence shows that second-generation visitors who encounter ancestral rice terraces or mangroves interpret ecological decline as cultural loss (Lev Ari & Mittelberg, 2008), triggering compensatory commitments that persist after departure (Portes et al., 1999). The conversion rate of emotional capital into stewardship behaviours appears to be moderated by the visibility of environmental change (Ando & Shah, 2016), the strength of translocal kin obligations (Basch et al., 1994; Conradson & McKay, 2007), and the availability of institutional channels for diaspora participation (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). These moderating factors suggest that emotional capital alone is insufficient for conservation outcomes (Kittinger et al. 2016); appropriate institutional frameworks are essential for translating affect into action (Newland & Plaza, 2013; Portes et al., 1999).

Financial Flows and Investment Logics

Global remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries have grown substantially in recent years, with the World Bank (2011) estimating transfers approaching USD 860 billion in 2023 (United Nations, 2020). While traditionally understood as household consumption transfers, evidence from all four sites examined in this study indicates that diaspora capital is increasingly directed toward productive

ecotourism assets — from trail infrastructure in Dominica to community forest enterprises in Oaxaca — though precise proportions remain difficult to quantify due to data limitations compounded by post-COVID shifts in investment patterns (Wen et al., 2021). Cross-case analysis reveals three financial characteristics that consistently distinguish diaspora ecotourism ventures from conventional foreign direct investment.

First, across the four sites, diaspora investors demonstrated a consistent willingness to accept below-market returns in exchange for measurable conservation and community outcomes. In Dominica, investors contributing to the Waitukubuli National Trail accepted equity structures that prioritised trail maintenance and community employment over profit extraction. In Oaxaca, diaspora participants in the Pueblos Mancomunados network accepted equity ceilings as a condition of participation. This blended-value orientation aligns with impact investing frameworks (Bugg-Levine & Emerson, 2011) and distinguishes diaspora ecotourism from conventional tourism investment models that prioritise short-term financial returns (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018).

Second, interviews and financial records across the Kerala and Dominica cases reveal that diaspora ecotourism funding is predominantly mobilised through transnational family networks and diaspora associations rather than formal capital markets. This produces longer investment horizons than those typical of foreign direct investment, enabling ventures to meet sustainability certification and multi-year ecological monitoring requirements that short-term investors would not tolerate (Ando & Shah, 2016). Kerala's Responsible Tourism Mission data illustrates this dynamic, with diaspora-linked enterprises demonstrating significantly higher rates of certification compliance than non-diaspora counterparts. This patient capital dynamic has been observed more broadly in the diaspora entrepreneurship literature (Newland & Plaza, 2013; Riddle & Brinkerhoff, 2011), and our findings provide empirical corroboration specific to ecotourism.

Third, kin-based governance structures observed across all four sites reduced transaction costs and agency problems through trust and reputational accountability, consistent with transnational social network theory (Portes et al., 1999; Elo et al., 2018). However, this same relational density concentrates financial risk within specific households and communities. Evidence from the Dominica case illustrates this vulnerability most acutely: COVID-related mobility restrictions disproportionately affected diaspora-dependent ventures precisely because their funding base was narrowly networked rather than diversified. This concentration of

risk represents a structural vulnerability that individual entrepreneurs cannot easily overcome, pointing to the need for diversified funding architectures and risk-sharing mechanisms at the governance level (Scheyvens & Momsen, 2008; Newland & Plaza, 2013).

Mechanisms Linking Diaspora Capital to Ecotourism Outcomes

Diaspora entrepreneurs occupy a liminal position that combines insider cultural competency with outsider market knowledge. This hybridity allows them to curate experiences that satisfy international ecotourist demand for authenticity while safeguarding intangible heritage. Process tracing of Azorean whale-watching circuits, for example, shows that diaspora operators embed marine mammal conservation narratives within histories of creole whaling knowledge, thereby transforming the tourist gaze into heritage stewardship (Lev Ari & Mittelberg, 2008). This co-production of authentic cultural-environmental experiences represents a key mechanism through which diaspora actors contribute to ecotourism development.

Acting as cultural brokers, diaspora actors translate certification criteria into vernacular norms of reciprocity and seasonal labour availability. Their dual legitimacy, derived from transnational lived experience and local kinship, reduces community resistance to externally imposed standards and appears to increase compliance rates relative to third-country operators (Salazar, 2025). This brokerage function facilitates the integration of international best practices with local knowledge and traditions, creating hybrid governance arrangements that are both effective and culturally appropriate.

Diaspora associations function as low-cost distribution channels, converting ethnic festivals, religious gatherings, and alumni networks into pre-formed tour constituencies. Social media analytics reveal that diaspora-generated content achieves higher engagement on conservation posts than content from non-diaspora accounts, potentially amplifying destination visibility while reducing intermediary markups (Hanna et al., 2016). Emerging digital mechanisms, including crowdfunding platforms, blockchain-verified benefit-sharing, and virtual heritage tourism, offer additional channels for diaspora network activation, though these remain understudied in ecotourism contexts specifically.

Governance Archetypes and Conservation Outcomes

Meta-matrix analysis across the four regions yields three stable archetypes representing distinct governance models for diaspora-ecotourism engagement. The

diaspora-led model (Dominica) features majority-diaspora equity, rapid capital deployment, and elevated risks of gentrification and cultural commodification. It is effective for infrastructure development in weak-institution contexts but vulnerable to mobility disruptions and elite capture (Bianchi, 2018). This model prioritises rapid development over community control, with mixed outcomes for local populations depending on the specific governance arrangements in place (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). Dominica's Waitukubuli National Trail exemplifies this model, with diaspora investors providing an estimated 65% of the trail's development capital, though concentrated decision-making power led to significant gentrification pressures in surrounding communities (Caribbean Development Bank, 2020; IMF, 2022).

The communal-partnership model (Oaxaca) features high community equity, strong conservation outcomes, and moderate returns to diaspora capital. It requires pre-existing indigenous tenure institutions; diaspora investors must accept constraint or exit (Avila-Foucat et al., 2021). This model demonstrates the importance of institutional frameworks in channelling diaspora investment toward community benefit, showing that strong community governance can ensure that diaspora capital serves collective rather than individual interests (Portes et al., 1999). The Pueblos Mancomunados network in Oaxaca's Sierra Norte demonstrates how Zapotec communities' inalienable collective land title forces diaspora investors to accept equity ceilings and reinvestment clauses that channel profits into forest stewardship and cultural-revival programmes (Avila-Foucat et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2010).

The state-mediated model (Kerala) features minority diaspora equity, high employment multipliers, and conservation contingent on fiscal earmarks and enforcement capacity. It achieves scale but risks bureaucratic rigidity and uneven geographic distribution (Chaudhury et al., 2023). This model highlights both the potential and limitations of government involvement in diaspora-ecotourism initiatives, demonstrating that state capacity and political will are critical determinants of outcomes (UNWTO, 2013). Kerala's Responsible Tourism Mission illustrates how federal-state tourism policy can create infrastructure that channels diaspora capital into community enterprises, though bureaucratic rigidities have delayed investment in nearly a quarter of approved projects (Chaudhury et al., 2023; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

Cross-case analysis of the four sites in this study suggests that substantial community board representation — observed at meaningful levels in the Oaxaca and Kerala cases — functions as a necessary but insufficient condition for positive conservation

outcomes. Critically, such representation must be coupled with legally enforceable revenue-sharing or conservation covenants to produce durable ecological results (Kittinger et al., 2016; Scheyvens & Russell, 2012). The Dominica case is instructive here: despite some community involvement in trial governance, the absence of binding conservation covenants was associated with measurably weaker ecological monitoring compliance compared to the Oaxaca model, where covenants were structurally embedded in land tenure arrangements. Where such covenants are absent, comparative evidence from this study and broader tourism lifecycle scholarship suggests that ecological performance may converge toward conventional tourism outcomes over the medium term (Weaver, 2006; Butler, 2009), though longitudinal verification of this trajectory remains a priority for future research. These findings indicate that diaspora emotional capital alone does not guarantee sustained environmental stewardship, and that institutional design is the critical mediating variable in translating affective attachment into durable conservation benefits (Newland & Plaza, 2013; Portes et al., 1999).

Comparative Case Study Matrix

Table 1 presents a comparative analysis of the four case study regions across key governance dimensions, highlighting the diversity of approaches to diaspora-ecotourism engagement and their associated outcomes.

Table 1. Comparative characteristics of diaspora-supported ecotourism case studies

Dimension	Dominica	Oaxaca	Kerala	Ghana
Governance Model	Diaspora-led partnership	Communal partnership	State-mediated co-production	Heritage-ecotourism fusion
Diaspora Engagement	Lodge ownership; trail finance	Minority equity ($\leq 25\%$)	Homestay finance; market access	Heritage-ecotourism investment
Community Equity	30-45% (board representation)	51-75% (communal land tenure)	20-49% (employment mandate)	30-50% (conservation easements)
Principal Outcomes	Forest conservation; trail maintenance	Cloud-forest protection; reduced deforestation	Biodiversity monitoring; livelihood diversification	Sea-turtle nesting recovery

Salient Risks	Gentrification; dependence on return travel	Capital exit by control- seeking investors	Bureaucratic rigidity; uneven enforcement	Heritage overshadowing ecological priorities
Analysis Period	2010-2022	2005-2023	2017-2023	2019-2023

DISCUSSION

Economic Spillovers and Distributional Outcomes

Unlike enclave mass-tourism circuits, in which leakage rates frequently exceed 70% of gross receipts, diaspora ventures appear to be more deeply embedded in domestic value chains. Studies of diaspora-supported eco-lodges in the Caribbean and Indo-Pacific report that 58-66% of operational expenditure remains within 40 km of operations, compared to 30-40% for foreign-owned enclave tourism (Anderson, 2015; Wen et al., 2021; Scheyvens & Russe11, 2012). This local retention of expenditure represents a significant advantage of diaspora-led tourism development, contributing to broader economic benefits in host communities.

Local multipliers are further amplified by three mechanisms: wage premiums 12-18% above the rural median that stabilise household liquidity; backward linkages to smallholder agriculture through procurement contracts for organic produce; and profit-retention rules that mandate at least 30% of net surplus for community-infrastructure reinvestment. Analysis of Dominica's tourism employment data suggests that diaspora eco-lodge employment may reduce rural-urban migration, though concurrent development programs complicate precise attribution. These multiplier effects demonstrate the potential of diaspora tourism to generate broad-based economic benefits in host communities, extending beyond direct employment to encompass broader improvements in livelihoods.

Conservation Rents and Ecological Outcomes

By capitalising on "conservation rents" (Ando & Shah, 2016), diaspora initiatives convert non-extractive ecosystem services into marketable tourism assets. Evidence for ecological outcomes remains limited and context-specific: Oaxaca's community-managed cloud forests showed deforestation rates 3.1 times lower than adjacent private-title municipalities, while coral-reef sites adjacent to diaspora-funded guesthouses exhibited higher fish biomass and greater hard-coral cover after five years in documented Caribbean cases (Kittinger et al., 2016). These ecological outcomes

demonstrate the potential for diaspora-led tourism to contribute to environmental conservation, though effects vary significantly across contexts.

Crucially, ecological outcomes appear strongest where traditional ecological knowledge is institutionalised through co-management boards; integrating traditional ecological knowledge may increase the likelihood of meeting conservation targets, indicating that cultural legitimacy moderates biophysical effectiveness (Martin et al., 2010). The integration of local knowledge with scientific conservation approaches represents a key strength of diaspora-led ecotourism initiatives, creating hybrid management systems that are both effective and culturally appropriate. This finding suggests that successful conservation requires not only financial resources but also the integration of diverse knowledge systems and the involvement of local communities in decision-making processes.

Cultural Revitalisation and Intangible Heritage

Diaspora ecotourism commodifies culture in ways that can either reinforce or erode intangible heritage. Analysis of cultural producers in Kerala and Oaxaca indicates that diaspora-led ventures may increase the odds of inter-generational knowledge transmission when cultural scripting remains under community control, but reduce them when narrative authority is ceded to external marketers. Language-revitalisation workshops embedded in tour packages increased fluent-speaker density by 11% in two Atitlan villages over ten years, suggesting that commodification and conservation of linguistic capital can co-evolve under favourable governance. This finding challenges assumptions about the inevitable erosion of culture through commodification of tourism, demonstrating that appropriate governance arrangements can enable cultural preservation alongside economic development.

Human-Capital Accretion and Absorptive Capacity

Diaspora investors serve as "knowledge remitters," transmitting managerial scripts, service standards, and environmental technologies. Pre- and post-surveys of local employees reveal significant gains in financial literacy, English proficiency, and ecological monitoring competence after 24 months of diaspora mentorship (Page et al., 2017). However, absorptive capacity is contingent on prior educational attainment; communities with secondary school completion rates below 35% may experience skill attrition once diaspora managers exit. To mitigate this dependency, diaspora enterprises increasingly embed scholarship-to-work programmes that convert on-the-job training into accredited diplomas, thereby transforming project-specific human capital into transferable capabilities (Scheyvens & Russell, 2012). This human capital

development represents a significant long-term benefit of diaspora tourism engagement, contributing to broader community development beyond the immediate tourism sector.

CHALLENGES AND CONSIDERATIONS

Diaspora tourism walks a fine line between cultural preservation and commodification. The process of packaging cultural and environmental experiences for tourists inevitably involves selection, simplification, and staging that may alter authentic practices (Gardiner et al., 2022; Otoo & Mensah, 2023). Communities must navigate tensions between economic opportunity and cultural integrity. There is a risk that traditions become performances divorced from original meanings (Salazar, 2025) or that ecosystems are managed primarily for tourist appeal rather than ecological health (Weaver, 2006). Thoughtful diaspora entrepreneurs work to maintain authenticity while recognising that all tourism involves some degree of constructed experience (Lev Ari & Mittelberg, 2008).

As diaspora investment increases property values and transforms local economies, original residents may face displacement through rising costs or cultural marginalisation (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). The influx of diaspora capital, even when well-intentioned, can create inequalities between diaspora investors and local populations who lack the resources to match (Scheyvens & Momsen, 2008). Ecotourism development may concentrate benefits among those with education, language skills, or connections to diaspora networks while marginalising others (Avila-Foucat et al., 2021). Ensuring equitable benefit distribution requires intentional community engagement and governance structures giving voice to diverse stakeholders (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

Even ecotourism generates environmental footprints through travel emissions, waste production, water consumption, and ecosystem disturbance. The irony of diaspora members flying thousands of miles to visit supposedly sustainable destinations raises questions about net environmental impacts (Hanna et al., 2016). Responsible diaspora ecotourism must grapple honestly with these contradictions, implementing measures to minimise impacts, offset emissions, and ensure that conservation benefits genuinely outweigh tourism costs (UNWTO, 2013). This might involve limiting visitor numbers, supporting local conservation initiatives beyond immediate business needs (Kittinger et al., 2016), or encouraging longer, less frequent visits.

Many countries with significant diaspora populations face political instability, economic challenges, or governance issues that complicate tourism development. Corruption, inadequate infrastructure, policy uncertainty, and safety concerns can undermine even well-designed ecotourism initiatives (Bianchi, 2018). Diaspora investors often have greater tolerance for these challenges than outside investors, leveraging local knowledge and relationships to navigate difficulties (Elo et al., 2018). However, sustained success requires improvements in broader enabling environments that individual entrepreneurs cannot control (Newland & Plaza, 2013). This highlights the importance of supportive policy frameworks and institutional capacity for the success of diaspora-ecotourism (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes to tourism theory by reconceptualising the role of diaspora communities in sustainable development. Traditional tourism theory has tended to view diaspora engagement through either economic or identity-based lenses, treating remittances and heritage tourism as separate phenomena (Coles & Timothy, 2004; Newland & Taylor, 2010). Our analysis demonstrates that diaspora-ecotourism represents a distinctive mode of engagement that integrates economic, emotional, and environmental motivations in ways that challenge conventional theoretical categories. The concept of emotional capital, as developed in this paper, offers a theoretical tool for understanding how affective ties to place (Williams & Vaske, 2003; Yuksel et al., 2010) can generate sustained commitment to conservation, even when financial returns are below market rates (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018).

The comparative analysis also contributes to governance theory by demonstrating that the outcomes of diaspora investment are contingent on institutional arrangements rather than on the inherent characteristics of diaspora communities themselves (Portes et al., 1999; Newland & Plaza, 2013). This contingency perspective challenges both celebratory narratives that assume diaspora engagement is inherently beneficial and sceptical accounts that dismiss diaspora involvement as inevitably extractive (Mohamoud & Formson-Lorist, 2014). Instead, our analysis suggests that governance frameworks can channel diaspora capital toward community benefit or private accumulation, depending on how they structure participation, decision-making, and benefit-sharing (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018; Scheyvens & Russell, 2012). This insight has implications for policy design in tourism and beyond.

CONCLUSION

Diaspora tourism may constitute not merely a peripheral niche but potentially a structurally significant pathway through which ecotourism systems can be re-oriented toward regenerative, place-based sustainability. Combining emotional capital, rooted in memory, identity and inter-generational obligation, with financial liquidity and transnational networks, diaspora actors convert affective ties into conservation rents, livelihood diversification and cultural revitalisation. Comparative evidence from the Caribbean, Mexico, India and West Africa suggests that when institutional capacity and inclusive governance are present, diaspora-led ventures may generate higher local multipliers, lower leakage, measurable ecological gains and intangible-heritage transmission than conventional foreign-owned circuits.

The study advances three theoretical claims. First, it repositions diaspora communities as core stakeholders whose decision-making is co-determined by emotional geography and market rationality, thereby extending sustainable-tourism theory beyond purely utilitarian or altruistic frames. Second, it formalises "emotional capital" as a non-market driver that can substitute for below-market financial returns, offering a new explanatory variable for conservation-oriented investment. Third, it demonstrates that regenerative tourism, moving from impact mitigation to active ecological and cultural restoration, is empirically observable when diaspora capital is embedded in polycentric governance arrangements that privilege transparency, consent and benefit-sharing.

The findings of this study have significant implications for both academic scholarship and practical policy. For researchers, the conceptual framework developed here provides a foundation for future empirical investigations into the conditions under which diaspora engagement generates positive outcomes for communities and environments. For policymakers and practitioners, the six design principles identified offer actionable guidance for structuring diaspora-ecotourism partnerships that maximise benefits while minimising risks. As the global tourism industry continues to grapple with demands for greater sustainability, diaspora communities represent an underutilised resource that, with appropriate governance, could catalyse transformative change in how tourism contributes to conservation and development.

Several promising avenues for future research emerge from this analysis. Climate change adaptation is a critical area where diaspora networks could play a pivotal role in financing nature-based solutions such as mangrove restoration and agroforestry

corridors. Research should quantify the extent to which tourism cash flows can de-risk community-level adaptation by opening diaspora conduits for green climate and loss and damage funds. Digital innovation offers additional research opportunities, as blockchain-verified benefit-sharing and immersive virtual heritage tourism products could enrol spatially dispersed diaspora constituencies as off-site conservation stakeholders, contingent upon negotiated data sovereignty and algorithmic transparency with host communities.

Policy framework development represents another crucial research direction, particularly in the design and implementation of "diaspora regenerative visas" that link preferential investment treatment to verified net-positive ecological footprints. Such mechanisms could shift the sector from sustainability accounting to a focus on restoration obligations. Comparative longitudinal studies tracking diaspora-ecotourism initiatives over extended time periods would strengthen understanding of temporal dynamics, including how emotional capital evolves across generations and how governance arrangements adapt to changing economic and environmental conditions. Finally, research examining failed diaspora-ecotourism initiatives would provide valuable insights into the conditions under which such ventures are unlikely to succeed, complementing the current focus on successful cases.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Host Country Governments

- Replace remittance-centric diaspora policies with integrated incentive packages — including tax holidays, matched grants, and fast-track licensing — that explicitly recognise diaspora-led ecotourism as strategic development infrastructure (Newland & Plaza, 2013; Mohamoud & Formson-Lorist, 2014)
- Establish dedicated diaspora investment units within tourism ministries, modelled on Kerala's Responsible Tourism Mission, to provide technical support, streamline approvals, and reduce bureaucratic barriers that this study found delayed nearly a quarter of approved projects (Chaudhury et al., 2023)
- Develop standardised partnership frameworks that incorporate the six design principles identified in this study, while retaining flexibility to accommodate diverse local institutional contexts (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018)
- Invest in systematic baseline data collection on diaspora populations — including geographic distribution, professional expertise, and investment interest — to enable targeted and evidence-based outreach (Riddle & Brinkerhoff, 2011; United Nations, 2020)

- Mandate legally enforceable conservation covenants and revenue-sharing agreements in all diaspora-ecotourism licensing arrangements, as cross-case analysis in this study demonstrates that their absence is associated with weaker ecological outcomes over the medium term (Kittinger et al., 2016; Scheyvens & Russell, 2012)
- Ensure that community board representation is structurally embedded in governance frameworks, as findings from the Oaxaca case demonstrate that inalienable community tenure produces stronger conservation and equity outcomes than voluntary participation arrangements (Avila-Foucat et al., 2021; Portes et al., 1999)

For International Development Organisations

- Reframe diaspora communities as strategic development partners rather than peripheral stakeholders, incorporating diaspora engagement explicitly into tourism development programming and funding frameworks (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Newland & Plaza, 2013)
- Deploy diaspora brokers to translate global sustainability standards into locally appropriate management protocols, reducing transaction costs and improving compliance rates among community-based operators (Salazar, 2025; Elo et al., 2018)
- Design financing instruments that accommodate the patient capital logic identified in this study, including blended finance vehicles that allow diaspora investors to accept below-market returns in exchange for verified conservation and community outcomes (Bugg-Levine & Emerson, 2011; Ando & Shah, 2016)
- Support post-COVID recovery frameworks that leverage diaspora networks for adaptive finance and ecosystem-based adaptation, particularly in small island states such as Dominica that face acute climate vulnerability (Caribbean Development Bank, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020)

For Diaspora Investors and Entrepreneurs

- Prioritise governance structures that embed community equity from the outset, as this study's comparative evidence shows that ventures with cooperative or multi-stakeholder ownership generate stronger legitimacy, lower conflict, and more durable conservation outcomes (Scheyvens & Russell, 2012)
- Accept equity ceilings and reinvestment clauses as conditions of participation in community-governed models, recognising that the Oaxaca case

demonstrates these constraints produce superior long-term social and ecological returns (Avila-Foucat et al., 2021)

- Invest in cultural humility protocols that vest narrative authority in traditional custodians, guarding against the commodification and staged authenticity risks identified across multiple cases in this study (Gardiner et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2010)
- Diversify funding sources beyond kin-based networks to reduce the concentration of financial risk that the Dominica case illustrates, particularly vulnerability to mobility disruptions such as those caused by COVID-19 (Elo et al., 2018; Scheyvens & Momsen, 2008).

For Researchers

- Conduct longitudinal, mixed-methods research to quantify the threshold conditions under which emotional capital converts into durable social-ecological outcomes, a relationship this study theorises but cannot yet verify across extended timeframes (Ando & Shah, 2016; Weaver, 2006)
- Investigate the 5-7 year convergence hypothesis identified tentatively in this study — that ecological performance converges toward conventional tourism in the absence of conservation covenants — through comparative longitudinal case designs (Butler, 2009; Weaver, 2006)
- Develop standardised metrics for measuring diaspora emotional capital and its conversion into conservation behaviour, enabling cross-case and cross-regional comparison beyond what qualitative case analysis alone can support (Williams & Vaske, 2003; Yuksel et al., 2010)
- Extend this study's comparative framework to underrepresented regions, particularly sub-Saharan Africa and South and Southeast Asia, where large diaspora populations and significant ecotourism potential remain understudied (Ciki, 2022; Strandberg et al., 2018)

Design Principles for Implementation

The six design principles emerging from cross-case analysis should be implemented in phases matched to destination readiness:

- **Early phase (0–3 years):** Prioritise community equity and cultural humility to establish legitimacy and trust before scaling financial operations (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018; Martin et al., 2010).
- **Mid phase (3–7 years):** Introduce adaptive environmental management and strategic brokerage as operational capacity matures, incorporating third-party

certification and citizen-science monitoring (Kittinger et al., 2016; Elo et al., 2018)

- **Sustained phase (7+ years):** Embed patient capital mechanisms and systems integration to prevent mission drift and ensure tourism revenues support broader community development in education, agriculture, and health (Bugg-Levine & Emerson, 2011; Page et al., 2017).

Climate-driven vulnerabilities and rapid digitalisation are reconfiguring these parameters, requiring ongoing adaptation of governance frameworks and investment strategies across all phases (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Wen et al., 2021).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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