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The Relationship Between Tourism Stakeholder Awareness and Adoption of Sustainable Destination Management Practices

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between tourism stakeholder awareness and the adoption of sustainable destination management practices in The Gambia. Guided by the Theory of Planned Behavior, the study investigates how stakeholders' awareness influences their participation in sustainable tourism policy development and their intention to adopt sustainable practices. A quantitative case study design was employed, and data were collected from key tourism stakeholders, including government officials, tourism businesses, local communities, NGOs, and tourists. The data were coded in Microsoft Excel and analysed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise respondents' characteristics and key variables, while Pearson correlation and simple linear regression were applied to examine relationships among stakeholder awareness, policy development, and adoption of sustainable destination management practices. The findings show a moderate to high level of stakeholder awareness, particularly regarding the economic benefits of sustainable tourism, cultural preservation, environmental responsibility, and innovation for destination competitiveness. Stakeholders also demonstrated strong intentions to adopt, implement, and promote sustainable tourism practices. However, limited training, inadequate community awareness campaigns, insufficient participation in policy formulation, and financial constraints remain key barriers to implementation. The study concludes that stakeholder awareness supports positive attitudes and adoption intentions, but long-term implementation requires inclusive policy development, regular capacity building, stronger institutional coordination, and financial support. The study contributes empirical evidence from a developing country context and offers practical insights for strengthening sustainable tourism governance in The Gambia.

Keywords: *tourism stakeholder awareness, sustainable destination management, sustainable tourism, Theory of Planned Behavior, the Gambia*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism plays an important role in economic growth, employment creation, cultural preservation, and community development in many countries. However, the rapid expansion of tourism has also created environmental, social, cultural, and economic pressures, particularly in destinations that depend heavily on natural and cultural resources. These challenges have increased the need for sustainable destination management, which seeks to balance tourism growth with environmental protection, cultural heritage preservation, and the well-being of local communities [1], [2].

Sustainable destination management requires the active involvement of multiple stakeholders, including government institutions, tourism businesses, local communities, non-governmental organisations, and tourists. These stakeholders influence how tourism policies are developed, how sustainability initiatives are implemented, and how responsible tourism behaviour is encouraged [3], [4]. Therefore, stakeholder awareness is an important condition for sustainable tourism development. In this study, stakeholder awareness refers to the extent to which tourism actors understand the environmental, economic, social, and cultural impacts of tourism, as well as the benefits of sustainable practices. Stakeholder intention refers to their willingness, readiness, and commitment to adopt and promote sustainable tourism practices within their respective roles [5], [6].

The Gambia provides an important context for examining the relationship between stakeholder awareness and the adoption of sustainable destination management practices. Tourism has been one of the country's major economic sectors since the post-

independence period, supported by its coastal attractions, cultural heritage, wildlife, riverine landscapes, and hospitality services. Over time, the sector has contributed to employment, foreign exchange earnings, local enterprise development, and national economic growth. At the same time, tourism growth has placed pressure on coastal areas, cultural sites, natural ecosystems, and local communities. These pressures make sustainability an important priority for the long-term competitiveness and resilience of The Gambia as a tourism destination.

In recent years, The Gambia has increasingly recognised the importance of sustainable tourism in protecting its natural and cultural resources while improving benefits for local communities. The country's mangrove forests, wildlife reserves, river habitats, beaches, cultural festivals, music, dance, crafts, and community-based tourism activities are central to its destination identity. Protecting these resources requires more than government policy alone; it also depends on the awareness, participation, and behavioural intentions of all tourism stakeholders. Local communities, for example, are important custodians of culture and the environment, while tourism businesses influence visitor experiences and operational practices. Government institutions provide policy direction and regulation, NGOs support advocacy and awareness, and tourists affect sustainability outcomes through their consumption choices and behaviour.

Despite the growing emphasis on sustainable tourism, the effective adoption of sustainable destination management practices remains a challenge. Stakeholders may be aware of sustainability issues but may not always have the training, financial resources, institutional support, or policy involvement needed to translate awareness into long-term practice. This creates a gap between awareness, intention, and actual implementation. Addressing this gap is important because sustainable destination management cannot be achieved through awareness alone. It requires continuous capacity building, inclusive policy development, stakeholder collaboration, and mechanisms that support long-term behavioural change.

Guided by the Theory of Planned Behavior, this study examines the relationship between tourism stakeholder awareness and the adoption of sustainable destination management practices in The Gambia. The theory explains that behaviour is shaped by attitudes, intentions, perceived behavioural control, and social expectations. In this study, stakeholder awareness refers to the extent to which tourism actors understand sustainable tourism policies, benefits, responsibilities, and practices. Adoption refers to stakeholders' willingness, readiness, and practical commitment to implement sustainable destination management practices. Therefore, stakeholders with greater awareness of the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental benefits of sustainable tourism are expected to demonstrate stronger readiness to support and adopt sustainable practices. The conceptual framework of the study is built on this relationship, positioning tourism stakeholder awareness as a key factor influencing the adoption of sustainable destination management practices. The findings are expected to contribute to sustainable tourism literature and provide practical insights for strengthening inclusive, responsible, and long-term tourism development in The Gambia.

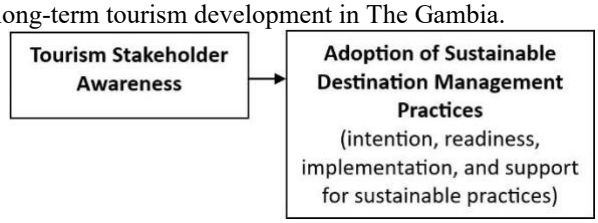


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework.

1.1. Significance of the Study

The rapid growth of tourism has created important development opportunities, but it has also contributed to challenges such as environmental degradation, cultural erosion, uneven community benefits, and socio-economic inequalities. These issues highlight the need for sustainable destination management practices that balance tourism growth with environmental protection, cultural preservation, and community well-being.

This study is significant because it provides empirical evidence on how tourism stakeholders' awareness influences their participation in policy development and their intention to adopt sustainable destination management practices in The Gambia. The findings can support the design of targeted awareness campaigns, capacity-building programmes, and stakeholder engagement strategies that promote sustainable tourism practices. The study may also assist policymakers, tourism businesses, community actors, NGOs, and destination managers in improving collaboration on environmental, socio-economic, and cultural sustainability issues.

In addition, the study contributes to academic literature by addressing the limited empirical research on stakeholder awareness and sustainable tourism adoption in developing country contexts. Its findings may be useful not only for The Gambia but also for other small and developing tourism destinations seeking to strengthen sustainable tourism planning, destination competitiveness, and long-term policy implementation.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the relationship between tourism stakeholders' awareness and their intention to adopt sustainable destination management practices in The Gambia. The specific objectives are:

1. To evaluate the relationship between tourism stakeholders' awareness and the development of sustainable destination management policies and practices.
2. To examine the relationship between tourism stakeholders' awareness and their intention to adopt sustainable destination management practices.
3. To assess how tourism stakeholders' awareness influences their participation in the implementation of sustainable destination management practices.

1.3. Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the relationship between tourism stakeholders' awareness and the development, adoption, and implementation of sustainable destination management practices in The Gambia. It examines sustainability from environmental, socio-cultural, and economic perspectives, with attention to how stakeholder awareness can support long-term destination competitiveness and responsible tourism development.

The study covers key tourism stakeholders, including government institutions, tourism businesses, local communities, tourism-related associations, NGOs, and tourists. The selected institutions and sites include the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture; the National Centre for Arts and Culture; the Gambia Tourism Board; the National Tourist Guide Association; the Bird Watchers Association; Kachikally Crocodile Pool; craft market representatives; Senegambia Beach Hotel; Bakadaji Hotel; and African Princess Hotel. These stakeholders were selected because of their direct involvement in tourism planning, service delivery, cultural preservation, community participation, and sustainable tourism implementation in The Gambia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Tourism Stakeholders Awareness

Stakeholder awareness is a critical foundation for the successful development and implementation of sustainable destination management strategies. In the context of tourism, stakeholders include a wide range of actors such as government agencies, tourism businesses, local communities, non-governmental organizations, and tourists themselves. Awareness in this case refers to the degree to which these stakeholders understand sustainability issues, the impacts of tourism, relevant policies, and their specific roles in promoting and adopting sustainable tourism practices [7], [8]. According to Gössling, Hall, and Weaver [4], stakeholder education and effective communication campaigns are essential in triggering behavioral change and achieving compliance with sustainability standards. Education programs tailored for specific stakeholder groups such as hoteliers, tour operators, and community leaders can demystify complex sustainability concepts and demonstrate practical ways to integrate sustainable practices into everyday operations. In addition, awareness campaigns can bridge information gaps, challenge unsustainable practices, and encourage collaboration across sectors.

Awareness is not only about understanding problems but also about knowing solutions. For example, stakeholders who are informed about energy-efficient technologies, waste reduction methods, and green certifications are more inclined to adopt these innovations, especially when they see long-term cost savings and reputational benefits [9]. Furthermore, when stakeholders are made aware of the broader goals of sustainable tourism, such as poverty alleviation and climate change mitigation, they are more likely to support policies and practices that promote inclusive and sustainable growth. However, stakeholder awareness is not uniform. Factors such as education level, access to information, institutional support, and stakeholder type (public, private, or community) affect the depth and effectiveness of awareness [10]. Therefore, awareness-building strategies must be context-specific, continuous, and participatory. Engaging stakeholders in the planning and decision-making process further deepens their understanding and fosters a sense of ownership in sustainable destination initiatives. Ultimately, stakeholder awareness and knowledge are the bedrocks of sustainable tourism governance. Without a well-informed stakeholder base, efforts to implement policies, adopt innovations, or build sustainable tourism systems may be resisted or fail due to ignorance, misconceptions, or lack of motivation [5]. Thus, enhancing stakeholder awareness must be a strategic priority in national tourism development agendas, especially in developing countries like The Gambia, where institutional capacities and public awareness may be limited.

2.2. Behavioral Intentions and Readiness for Adoption

Behavioral intention is a fundamental psychological construct that offers critical insights into whether stakeholders in the tourism industry are prepared and motivated to adopt sustainable practices. Rooted in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), behavioral intention is defined as an individual's motivation or plan to engage in a particular behavior, which is in turn influenced by their attitudes, perceived social pressures (subjective norms), and their perceived control over the behavior [11]. In the context of tourism, this model has proven valuable in understanding the factors that drive or inhibit stakeholders such as hoteliers, tour operators, government agencies, and local communities from participating in sustainable destination management [12]. According to [11], behavioral intention serves as a strong predictor of actual behavior; that is, individuals are more likely to perform a behavior when they have the intention to do so. This predictive capacity is especially important in tourism, where the successful adoption of sustainability practices often depends on the proactive engagement and voluntary commitment of a diverse range of stakeholders [13]. For instance, a hotel manager's intention to implement water-saving or energy-efficient technologies typically precedes and motivates the actual investment and behavioral change.

Moreover, the intention to engage in sustainable tourism is shaped by several interrelated factors. Attitudes reflect stakeholders' positive or negative evaluations of sustainability practices for example, whether they believe eco-friendly measures will benefit the environment, improve customer satisfaction, or enhance brand reputation [14]. Subjective norms refer to perceived social pressures, such as government mandates, tourist expectations, or community values that encourage or discourage sustainable behavior. Perceived behavioral control, meanwhile, deals with whether stakeholders believe they have the resources, knowledge,

and capacity to implement sustainability practices effectively [11]. The application of TPB in sustainable tourism reveals that enhancing behavioral intentions requires more than awareness alone. Stakeholders must not only recognize the importance of sustainability but also believe in their ability to contribute meaningfully to it. Weaver [15] suggests that behavioral readiness is cultivated through a combination of enabling environments, incentive structures, and the removal of psychological and structural barriers. These may include access to financing, technical training, policy support, and peer learning networks that reinforce sustainable practices as both feasible and rewarding. In addition, stakeholders' readiness to adopt sustainable practices is significantly influenced by perceived benefits, such as long-term cost savings, enhanced competitiveness, and improved relationships with tourists and host communities [9]. Conversely, perceived risks such as financial burdens, uncertainty about returns on investment, or resistance from staff can undermine intentions and delay adoption. Importantly, behavioral intention is not static; it evolves with exposure to information, changes in socio-economic conditions, and shifts in policy or market demand. Therefore, strategies aimed at promoting sustainable tourism must continuously engage stakeholders through education, policy dialogues, participatory planning, and demonstration projects to maintain and strengthen behavioral intentions over time [4].

3. METHOD

This study adopted a quantitative case study design to examine the relationship between tourism stakeholders' awareness and their intention to adopt sustainable destination management practices in The Gambia. A structured, closed-ended questionnaire was used to collect primary data from key tourism stakeholders. The questionnaire measured three main areas: stakeholders' awareness of sustainable tourism, their participation in sustainable destination policy development, and their intention to adopt sustainable tourism practices.

The target population consisted of major stakeholder groups within the tourism sector, including government officials, local communities, tourism businesses, non-governmental organisations, and tourists. Respondents were selected from relevant tourism institutions, hotels, community-based tourism sites, craft markets, tourism and hospitality businesses, and tourism-related associations in The Gambia.

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure that all major stakeholder groups were represented. The estimated population for the study was 500. Using Krejcie and Morgan's [16] sample size determination formula, the required sample size was 217 respondents. The sample was distributed across the stakeholder groups as follows: government officials, 44; local community members, 80; tourism business representatives, 132; NGO representatives, 63; and tourists, 63. However, 207 valid responses were obtained and used for the final analysis, representing a response rate of 95.4%. Of these, 130 questionnaires were administered in hard copy and direct field administration, while 77 were distributed through WhatsApp groups.

The data were coded in Microsoft Excel and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores, were used to summarise respondents' socio-demographic characteristics and the main study variables. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the strength and direction of relationships among stakeholder awareness, policy development, and adoption of sustainable destination management practices. Simple linear regression analysis was then used to test the predictive relationships among the variables. Model significance was assessed using ANOVA, while beta coefficients, t-values, p-values, and R^2 values were used to interpret the strength, significance, and explanatory power of the hypothesised relationships.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the 207 respondents. Male respondents formed the majority, accounting for 148 respondents (71.5%), while female respondents accounted for 59 respondents (28.5%). This suggests that the tourism sector, at least within the sampled groups, remains largely male dominated.

Most respondents were within economically active age groups. The largest group was aged 25–34 years (34.3%), followed by those aged 35–44 years (26.6%) and 45–54 years (22.2%). Respondents aged 18–24 years represented 7.2%, while those aged 55 years and above accounted for 9.7%. This indicates that the study captured views from stakeholders who are actively engaged in the tourism sector.

In terms of educational background, the respondents were relatively well educated. The largest proportion held diploma, technical, or vocational qualifications (35.3%), followed by those with secondary education (28.5%). Respondents with bachelor's degrees accounted for 17.9%, while those with master's degrees or higher represented 6.3%. Only a small proportion had primary education (6.3%) or no formal education (5.8%). This educational profile is important because awareness, understanding, and adoption of sustainable tourism practices may be influenced by stakeholders' level of education and exposure to tourism-related information.

Regarding stakeholder categories, tourism and hospitality representatives formed the largest group (44.9%), followed by local community members (33.3%). Government officials accounted for 10.1%, NGO representatives for 9.7%, and tourists for 1.9%. This distribution shows that the study included diverse stakeholder groups directly or indirectly involved in

tourism planning, service delivery, community participation, and sustainability practices. In terms of experience, the largest proportion of respondents had more than 15 years of experience in the tourism sector (37.2%), followed by those with 1–5 years (24.2%) and 6–10 years (18.8%). This suggests that the study benefited from the views of experienced stakeholders whose insights are relevant to sustainable destination management.

4.2. Descriptive Statistics of Tourism Stakeholders Awareness Sustainable Destination Management Policies

The results indicate a moderate to high level of awareness among tourism stakeholders regarding sustainable destination management policies and practices in The Gambia. Most respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had received sufficient information about sustainable tourism policies (65.7%) and understood the benefits of adopting sustainable tourism practices (67.6%). These findings suggest that many stakeholders have been exposed to sustainability-related information, which may influence their attitudes toward responsible tourism practices.

Awareness was particularly strong in relation to the economic, cultural, environmental, and innovation dimensions of sustainable tourism. A high proportion of respondents recognised the economic benefits of sustainable destination management for local communities (72.9%). Similarly, respondents showed strong awareness of the importance of cultural preservation in strengthening The Gambia's destination attractiveness (86.0%). Awareness of the role of innovation in improving destination competitiveness was also high (83.6%), while 79.8% agreed or strongly agreed that stakeholders have responsibilities to implement sustainable environmental practices.

However, the findings also reveal areas requiring improvement. Participation in training programmes recorded a lower mean score of 3.21, while community education and awareness campaigns recorded a mean score of 3.04. These results suggest that although stakeholders generally understand the importance of sustainable tourism, training opportunities and community-level awareness initiatives remain limited or inconsistent. This gap is important because awareness alone may not lead to effective implementation unless stakeholders are given practical knowledge, skills, and institutional support. Therefore, more regular training, community sensitisation, and practical capacity-building programmes are needed to strengthen stakeholder participation in sustainable destination management.

4.3. Descriptive Statistics of Tourism Stakeholders' Adoption of Sustainable Destination Management Policies

The findings show a strong positive intention among tourism stakeholders to adopt sustainable destination management practices in The Gambia. Most respondents expressed willingness to integrate sustainable practices into their future business operations, with 81.6% agreeing or strongly agreeing. Similarly, 86.5% indicated that they intended to frequently implement sustainable tourism practices in their future activities.

Stakeholders also demonstrated willingness to promote sustainability beyond their own operations. A total of 84.5% agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend the adoption of sustainable tourism practices to other stakeholders. In addition, 81.6% expressed commitment to using available resources and strategies to implement sustainable practices, while 88.9% indicated willingness to consistently apply such practices in their business activities. Furthermore, 88.4% agreed or strongly agreed that they would support other stakeholders in adopting sustainable tourism practices.

The findings also show that stakeholders recognise the business value of sustainability. A large majority of respondents (90.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that adopting sustainable tourism practices can support business growth and development. This suggests that stakeholders do not only view sustainability as an environmental or social obligation, but also as a strategic approach to improving business performance, competitiveness, and destination attractiveness.

Despite this strong intention, lack of funding emerged as a major barrier to implementation. A total of 84.1% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that financial constraints hinder the implementation of sustainable tourism practices. This finding is important because it shows that positive attitudes and willingness may not automatically translate into action if stakeholders lack the financial resources, technical support, and enabling policy environment required for implementation.

4.4. Discussion of Findings

The study examined how tourism stakeholders' awareness influences their participation in sustainable destination policy development and their intention to adopt sustainable destination management practices in The Gambia. Overall, the findings indicate that stakeholders possess a moderate to high level of awareness and a strong willingness to adopt sustainable tourism practices. This supports the view that awareness is an important foundation for sustainable tourism behaviour.

The mean score of 3.54 for awareness of sustainable tourism concepts, policies, and practices suggests that many stakeholders have a reasonable understanding of sustainability issues. Similarly, the mean score of 3.59 for awareness of the benefits of sustainable tourism practices indicates that stakeholders increasingly recognise the value of sustainability in tourism development. This awareness is reflected in their recognition of the economic benefits of sustainable tourism for local communities, which recorded a mean score of 3.71. Stakeholders also demonstrated strong awareness of the role of innovation in destination competitiveness, with a mean score of 4.03, and the importance of cultural preservation, with a mean score of 4.00.

These findings suggest that tourism stakeholders in The Gambia understand that sustainable destination management is not limited to environmental protection. Rather, it also includes cultural preservation, community benefits, innovation, and long-term destination competitiveness. This is consistent with the arguments of [1] and [5], who emphasise that stakeholder awareness is a key condition for sustainable tourism development. Knowledgeable stakeholders are more likely to support policy formulation, participate in sustainability initiatives, and promote responsible destination management. Similarly, [17] and [18] argue that stakeholder knowledge and awareness influence the level of participation in sustainable tourism planning and development.

However, the findings also reveal a gap between general awareness and practical implementation capacity. Training participation recorded a mean score of 3.21, while community education and awareness campaigns recorded a mean score of 3.04. These relatively lower scores suggest that while stakeholders may be aware of sustainable tourism, they may not have sufficient access to structured training, technical guidance, or community-based education programmes. This finding directly highlights the need for more practical and inclusive capacity-building initiatives. Regular training can help stakeholders understand not only why sustainable tourism is important, but also how to apply it in daily operations, policy implementation, environmental management, cultural protection, and community engagement.

The findings on adoption intention are strongly positive. Stakeholders expressed willingness to adopt sustainable tourism practices, implement them frequently in the future, recommend them to others, use available resources, and support other stakeholders. This reflects positive attitudes and behavioural intentions toward sustainability. From the perspective of the Theory of Planned Behavior, these results suggest that stakeholders' awareness may shape favourable attitudes, which in turn can strengthen their intention and readiness to adopt sustainable practices. The findings are consistent with [19], [20], who note that tourism businesses increasingly recognise the economic, reputational, and competitive benefits of sustainability practices.

Nevertheless, the study also shows that intention alone is not enough. Financial constraints were identified as a major barrier, with 84.1% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that lack of funding hinders implementation. This finding supports [21], who observe that small tourism enterprises often face financial and technical difficulties when attempting to implement sustainable practices. In The Gambia, many tourism stakeholders, particularly small businesses, community actors, and local associations, may be willing to adopt sustainable practices but unable to do so without financial assistance, technical support, and institutional coordination.

The findings therefore suggest that stakeholder awareness must be translated into long-term policy implementation through practical mechanisms. First, sustainability policies should be developed through inclusive consultation so that government institutions, tourism businesses, local communities, NGOs, and tourists understand their roles and responsibilities. Second, awareness campaigns should be supported by regular training programmes that focus on practical implementation, such as waste management, energy efficiency, cultural heritage protection, visitor education, and community-based tourism standards. Third, financial and institutional support should be provided through grants, incentives, partnerships, or technical assistance to help stakeholders move from intention to action. Finally, monitoring and evaluation systems should be established to ensure that sustainable destination management practices are not only adopted temporarily, but integrated into long-term tourism planning and operations.

Overall, the findings confirm that tourism stakeholders in The Gambia show strong awareness and positive intentions toward sustainable destination management. However, effective implementation requires more than awareness. It requires inclusive policy development, practical training, community sensitisation, financial support, and institutional mechanisms that enable stakeholders to convert awareness and intention into sustained practice.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to the field of sustainable tourism development by providing empirical evidence on the relationship between tourism stakeholder awareness, policy development, and the adoption of sustainable destination management practices in The Gambia. The findings show that stakeholders generally have a moderate to high level of awareness and demonstrate strong willingness to adopt sustainable tourism practices. This suggests that awareness can play an important role in shaping positive attitudes, strengthening behavioural intentions, and encouraging participation in sustainable destination management.

However, the study also confirms that awareness alone is not sufficient to ensure effective and long-term implementation. Key challenges, including financial constraints, limited training opportunities, inadequate community sensitisation, limited participation in policy formulation, and regulatory barriers, continue to affect the adoption of sustainable tourism practices. These barriers may prevent stakeholders from translating their awareness and intentions into consistent action.

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