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THE IMPACT OF SPORT TOURISM DEVELOPMENT ON REGIONAL ECONOMIC GROWTH: EVIDENCE FROM UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract. This article examines the influence of sport tourism development on regional economic growth in Uzbekistan. The study focuses on the channels through which active and sport-oriented travel stimulates local service demand, employment, small business activity, infrastructure investment and destination diversification. Methodologically, the research combines a structured review of Uzbek and international literature with comparative analysis of official regional statistics on sports, entertainment and recreation services, as well as policy documents related to active and sports tourism. The results show that the economic effect of sport tourism is spatially uneven: Tashkent city and Tashkent region dominate the formal market for sports and recreation services, while mountain, desert, water and cycling destinations in other regions possess considerable growth potential. The article argues that sport tourism can become an effective instrument of regional diversification if event tourism is linked with local accommodation, transport, catering, guiding, equipment rental and digital route services. The proposed regional development model emphasizes cluster coordination, public-private partnership, safety standards, environmental sustainability and the development of local entrepreneurship. The findings are relevant for regional tourism planning and for policies aimed at reducing territorial disparities in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: sport tourism, regional economic growth, Uzbekistan, tourism services, employment, infrastructure, local entrepreneurship, sports events, regional development.

INTRODUCTION

Sport tourism has become one of the most dynamic segments of the global tourism economy because it combines travel motivation with participation in or observation of sporting activities. Unlike conventional sightseeing tourism, sport tourism generates demand for a wider set of complementary services, including event organization, transport, accommodation, food services, equipment rental, guiding, insurance and digital navigation. As a result, its economic effect is not limited to the tourism industry itself but spreads through related sectors and may produce a regional multiplier effect (10, 11).

For Uzbekistan, this topic is particularly relevant. The country possesses diverse natural landscapes suitable for mountain trekking, skiing, cycling, rafting, desert expeditions and other forms of active tourism, while major cities increasingly host international sporting events. Recent Uzbek research considers sport tourism not only as a recreational activity but also as a factor of entrepreneurship, employment and territorial development (1, 2, 3). Government initiatives also emphasize active and sports tourism, including the development of routes, safety systems, guide certification and digital platforms (7).

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At the same time, the economic benefits of sport tourism are distributed unevenly across regions. Formal services in sports, entertainment and recreation remain strongly concentrated in Tashkent city and Tashkent region, whereas many regions with significant natural and cultural resources have a relatively small market volume (6). This imbalance creates both a challenge and an opportunity: sport tourism may become a practical tool for directing visitor expenditure toward peripheral and rural territories, provided that destinations have adequate infrastructure, service quality and institutional coordination.

The purpose of this study is to assess the main economic mechanisms through which sport tourism can influence regional growth in Uzbekistan and to identify priority directions for converting sport-tourism potential into local income, employment and investment. The study addresses three tasks: to systematize theoretical approaches to the regional economic effects of sport tourism; to compare regional indicators of sports and recreation services in Uzbekistan; and to propose a regionally differentiated development model based on local specialization and value-chain integration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Uzbek tourism scholarship traditionally emphasizes the role of tourism resources, infrastructure, market services and destination management in local economic development. Tuxliyev, Hayitboyev, Safarov and Tursunova explain that tourism creates intersectoral demand and requires coordinated development of transport, accommodation, food services and leisure infrastructure, which makes it an important component of territorial economic systems (5). More recent studies shift attention toward efficiency, sustainability and regional differentiation. Dustmurodov links the effectiveness of regional tourism to modern services, investment attraction and adaptation to market demand (4), while Kurbonova identifies employment, infrastructure and foreign-exchange effects as major channels through which tourism affects socio-economic development (8).

A growing body of Uzbek research focuses specifically on sport tourism. Daurenov interprets sport tourism as a catalyst for regional economic development through new jobs, tourism revenue, infrastructure and technological innovation (3). Kalandarov analyses mountain, water, cycling and extreme sport tourism in Uzbekistan and highlights the importance of entrepreneurship, institutional conditions, digitalization and public-private partnership for the sector (2). Khodjaeva and Khaydarova examine sport tourism as a driver of regional growth and soft power, emphasizing the economic effects of international sport events, visa liberalization and investment in sport facilities (1).

International literature supports these conclusions. Systematic reviews show that both large and small sporting events can stimulate local business turnover, employment and destination visibility, but the scale of benefits depends on planning quality, local supply capacity and the leakage of tourist expenditure outside the host region (10). Classic sport-tourism research also stresses that economic impact should be evaluated not only through visitor numbers but through length of stay, spending structure, seasonality and the extent to which local firms participate in the tourism value chain (11, 12). Thus, the central research issue for Uzbekistan is not simply how to increase sport-tourist flows, but how to retain a larger share of visitor expenditure within regional economies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

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The research is based on a mixed analytical design using secondary data. First, a structured literature review was conducted to identify the principal economic transmission channels of sport tourism: direct tourist expenditure, indirect demand for local inputs, induced household consumption, infrastructure investment, employment creation and destination branding. Twelve sources were selected, with priority given to Uzbek authors and official Uzbek institutions. Second, comparative statistical analysis was applied to regional data published by the National Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan on services in sports, entertainment and recreation for 2023 (6). Third, policy-analysis methods were used to interpret the Tourism Committee's measures for active and sports tourism, including route management, digitalization, safety and professional training (7).

The study does not treat the official indicator "sports, entertainment and recreation services" as identical to sport tourism. Instead, it is used as a proxy for the market capacity of sport-related services, because a mature local sport-tourism economy requires many of the same facilities and service providers. The analysis therefore focuses on relative regional concentration and development potential rather than claiming that the entire recorded service volume was generated by tourists. This distinction is important for avoiding overestimation of the tourism effect.

RESULTS

The literature synthesis indicates that sport tourism affects regional economic growth through five interrelated channels. The first is direct visitor spending on accommodation, transport, meals, event tickets, guides and equipment. The second is indirect demand generated for local suppliers. The third is employment, particularly seasonal and youth employment in guiding, hospitality and event services. The fourth is infrastructure improvement, because roads, trails, sports facilities and digital services created for visitors can also improve local accessibility and quality of life. The fifth is destination branding, which may attract repeat visits, investment and other forms of tourism (1, 2, 3, 10).

Official statistics illustrate the current spatial concentration of the broader sport and recreation service market. In 2023, the national volume of services in sports, entertainment and recreation reached 1,207.4 billion UZS, growing by 11.4 percent compared with 2022. Tashkent city accounted for 60.2 percent and Tashkent region for 17 percent of the total (6). The regional distribution is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Volume of sports, entertainment and recreation services by region in Uzbekistan, 2023

Region	Volume, billion UZS	Share of national total, %
Tashkent city	727.3	60.2
Tashkent region	205.6	17.0
Fergana region	48.3	4.0
Samarkand region	39.6	3.3

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Namangan region	38.7	3.2
Andijan region	25.3	2.1
Jizzakh region	25.0	2.1
Kashkadarya region	23.5	1.9
Bukhara region	19.3	1.6
Surkhandarya region	15.5	1.3
Khorezm region	13.2	1.1
Navoi region	10.7	0.9
Republic of Karakalpakstan	8.2	0.7
Syrdarya region	7.2	0.6

Source: compiled from the National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan (6).

The table demonstrates a very high level of territorial concentration: Tashkent city and Tashkent region together account for more than three quarters of the recorded market. This concentration reflects population density, income, business activity, sports infrastructure and event-hosting capacity. From a regional-development perspective, however, it also indicates unused opportunities in regions where natural assets are suitable for sport tourism. Jizzakh and Tashkent regions have strong mountain and winter-sport potential; the Republic of Karakalpakstan and Navoi can develop desert and expedition tourism; Surkhandarya and Kashkadarya are suitable for trekking and adventure routes; while areas around reservoirs and rivers can support water-based activities (2, 7).

The economic significance of sport tourism becomes stronger when an event or activity is embedded in a local value chain. A cycling race, trail-running competition or mountain festival produces a limited effect if participants arrive, compete and leave on the same day. The effect is much larger when the event is combined with overnight stays, local food, excursions, equipment rental, transport, handicrafts and digital booking services. Therefore, the relevant policy target is not only the number of visitors but also average length of stay, local expenditure per visitor and the share of expenditure captured by regional enterprises (1, 3, 10).

Table 2. Regional sport-tourism specialization and expected economic channels

Regional profile	**Priority sport-tourism forms**	**Main local beneficiaries**	**Expected economic effect**
Mountain and foothill	Trekking, skiing,	Guest houses, guides,	Longer stays, rural jobs,

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areas	climbing, trail running	transport, equipment rental	infrastructure demand
Historic cities with event capacity	Marathons, cycling, combat-sport and team-sport events	Hotels, restaurants, event firms, retail	Off-season demand, city branding, SME turnover
Desert and steppe areas	Adventure races, expedition tourism, off-road routes	Local transport, camps, guides, crafts	Economic diversification, new microbusinesses
Water-resource destinations	Kayaking, rafting, rowing, recreational sport	Rental services, food, accommodation, safety services	Seasonal employment, service diversification

The specialization approach in Table 2 suggests that Uzbekistan should avoid a single standardized model of sport tourism. Regional policy should be based on comparative advantages and on the ability of local firms to supply complementary services. This approach is consistent with Uzbek studies that emphasize region-specific tourism products and the need to link tourism growth with entrepreneurship and infrastructure (2, 4, 8).

DISCUSSION

The results support the proposition that sport tourism can contribute to regional economic growth, but the impact is conditional rather than automatic. The first condition is local retention of tourist expenditure. If transport, accommodation, equipment and event management are supplied mainly by firms from outside the region, a significant part of the economic benefit leaks away. Regional authorities should therefore encourage local supplier networks, microenterprises, family guest houses and certified guiding services. This is especially important in mountainous and rural areas where conventional industrial diversification is difficult (3, 4).

The second condition is year-round demand. Many sport-tourism products are seasonal, but a diversified calendar can reduce fluctuations. Winter sports can be combined with spring trekking, summer water sports and autumn cycling or running events. International and national competitions can also be scheduled during lower-demand periods for conventional tourism. This helps accommodation and catering businesses use capacity more efficiently and stabilizes employment. Khodjaeva and Khaydarova note that sporting events can strengthen both economic activity and international visibility, while Uzbek tourism policy increasingly treats active tourism as a separate strategic direction (1, 7).

The third condition is infrastructure and safety. Sport tourists often travel to remote or environmentally sensitive locations, so route marking, rescue services, communications, insurance, certified instructors and environmental regulation are essential. The Tourism Committee's roadmap for active and sports tourism includes a national coordination mechanism, a digital platform for routes and permits, infrastructure development, specialized rescue services and professional training (7).

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These measures can reduce risk and improve destination competitiveness, but their economic effect will be greatest when regional businesses are integrated into implementation.

The fourth condition is measurement. Uzbekistan currently has official statistics on tourism, accommodation and sport-related services, but the economic contribution of sport tourism itself is difficult to isolate. A dedicated monitoring system should collect data on event participants, active-tourism visitors, overnight stays, expenditure categories, use of local suppliers and seasonal employment. This would allow regional authorities to estimate direct and indirect effects more accurately and to compare the return on infrastructure and event investments. International literature also stresses that visitor numbers alone are insufficient for evaluating the true regional impact of sport tourism (10, 11, 12).

Based on the analysis, a practical regional model may be expressed as a sequence: resource specialization → safe and accessible infrastructure → sport-tourism product and event calendar → local enterprise participation → digital marketing and booking → longer visitor stay and higher local expenditure → employment and tax-base growth. The model emphasizes that natural resources are only the starting point. Economic growth appears when resources are transformed into a coordinated market product and when a substantial share of the value chain remains within the region.

CONCLUSION

Sport tourism has significant potential to support regional economic growth in Uzbekistan through the expansion of local services, employment, infrastructure, entrepreneurship and destination branding. The analysis of official data shows that the current sport and recreation service market is highly concentrated in Tashkent city and Tashkent region, while other regions remain underrepresented despite substantial natural and cultural resources. This suggests that regional sport-tourism development should focus not on copying the capital's model but on developing place-specific products based on mountains, deserts, water resources, cycling routes and sporting events.

The most important policy priority is to connect visitor flows with local value chains. Support for family accommodation, local transport, catering, guiding, equipment rental and event services can increase the share of tourist spending retained in the destination. Public-private partnership should be used for infrastructure, while safety standards, guide certification and digital route systems should reduce risks and improve service quality. A diversified event calendar can also mitigate seasonality and generate demand outside traditional tourism peaks.

For evidence-based policy, Uzbekistan should develop separate statistical monitoring of sport tourism. Regional indicators should include participant and spectator flows, average stay, expenditure, employment, local supplier participation and investment. Such a system would make it possible to evaluate sport tourism not simply as a leisure activity but as a measurable instrument of territorial diversification and inclusive regional growth.

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