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# THE ROLE OF TOUR GUIDES IN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AND LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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**Abstract:** Tour guides are often described as the "front line" of the tourism industry, yet their contribution to sustainability and to the economies of host communities is still treated as a side issue in much of the policy literature. This paper argues that guides occupy a strategic intermediary position: they shape how visitors behave at sites, how heritage is interpreted, and, perhaps most importantly, where tourist money is spent. Drawing on an integrative review of peer-reviewed studies, books and international policy documents published between 1957 and 2019, the paper organises the evidence around three functions — interpretive, behavioural-managerial and economic-brokering. The analysis shows that the interpretive and visitor-management roles are well documented, whereas the economic role, although frequently asserted, rests on a thinner and more case-specific evidence base. The paper also identifies the conditions under which guides actually deliver sustainability outcomes: formal training, licensing and quality assurance, fair employment terms, and genuine links with local suppliers. Implications are discussed for emerging heritage destinations, with particular reference to Central Asia, where guiding is expanding rapidly but remains weakly regulated.

**Keywords:** tour guiding, sustainable tourism, interpretation, local economic development, community-based tourism, heritage tourism

# BARQAROR TURIZM VA MAHALLIY IQTISODIY RIVOJLANISHDA SAYYOHLIK GIDLARINING O‘RNI

**Annotatsiya:** Sayyohlik gidlarini ko‘pincha turizm industriyasining “oldingi chizig‘i” deb atashadi, ammo ularning barqarorlikka va qabul qiluvchi jamoalar iqtisodiyotiga qo‘shgan hissasi siyosatga oid adabiyotlarda ko‘pincha ikkinchi darajali masala sifatida qaraladi. Ushbu maqolada ta’kidlanishicha, gidlar strategik vositachilik o‘rnini egallaydi: ular tashrif buyuruvchilarning diqqatga sazovor joylardagi xatti-harakatlarini, madaniy merosning talqin qilinishini va, ehtimol, eng muhimi, sayyohlar mablag‘larining qayerga sarflanishini belgilab beradilar. 1957–2019-yillar oralig‘ida chop etilgan ilmiy tadqiqotlar, kitoblar va xalqaro siyosiy hujjatlarni tahlil qilish asosida, maqolada gidlar faoliyati uchta asosiy funksiya — talqin qilish, xatti-harakatlarni boshqarish hamda iqtisodiy vositachilik — doirasida ko‘rib chiqiladi. Tahlillar shuni ko‘rsatadiki, gidlar tomonidan amalga oshiriladigan talqin qilish va tashrif buyuruvchilarni boshqarish vazifalari yetarlicha o‘rganilgan va hujjatlashtirilgan; iqtisodiy rol esa tez-tez tilga olinsa-da, u kamroq va faqat ayrim aniq holatlarga xos bo‘lgan dalillarga asoslanadi. Shuningdek, maqolada gidlar barqaror rivojlanish natijalariga erishishiga imkon beruvchi shart-sharoitlar — rasmiy tayyorgarlik, litsenziyalash va sifat nazorati, adolatli mehnat sharoitlari hamda mahalliy ta’minotchilar bilan mustahkam aloqalar — belgilab

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berilgan. Tadqiqot natijalari madaniy merosga asoslangan yangi sayyohlik yo‘nalishlari, xususan, gidlar faoliyati jadal rivojlanayotgan, ammo yetarli darajada tartibga solinmagan Markaziy Osiyo mintaqasi uchun muhim ahamiyatga ega.

**Kalit so‘zlar:** gidlik faoliyati, barqaror turizm, talqin qilish, mahalliy iqtisodiy rivojlanish, jamoalarga asoslangan turizm, madaniy meros turizmi

## РОЛЬ ЭКСКУРСОВОДОВ В РАЗВИТИИ УСТОЙЧИВОГО ТУРИЗМА И МЕСТНОЙ ЭКОНОМИКИ

**Аннотация:** Экскурсоводов часто называют «передовой» туристической индустрии, однако их вклад в устойчивое развитие и экономику принимающих сообществ в большинстве программных документов рассматривается лишь как второстепенный аспект. В данной статье утверждается, что экскурсоводы занимают стратегически важную посредническую позицию: они определяют поведение посетителей на объектах, способ интерпретации культурного наследия и, что, пожалуй, наиболее важно, направления расходования средств туристами. На основе комплексного обзора рецензируемых исследований, книг и международных нормативных документов, опубликованных в период с 1957 по 2019 год, в статье систематизируются данные по трем основным функциям экскурсоводов: интерпретационной, организационно-поведенческой (управление поведением посетителей) и экономической (посредничество). Анализ показывает, что интерпретационная функция и роль в управлении потоками посетителей хорошо изучены, в то время как экономическая роль, хотя о ней часто упоминается, опирается на менее обширную и зачастую ситуативную доказательную базу. В статье также определяются условия, при которых деятельность экскурсоводов действительно способствует устойчивому развитию: наличие профессиональной подготовки, системы лицензирования и контроля качества, справедливые условия труда, а также реальные связи с местными поставщиками услуг. Обсуждаются перспективы для новых туристических направлений, связанных с культурным наследием — в частности, для стран Центральной Азии, где профессия экскурсовода активно развивается, но при этом остается слабо урегулированной.

**Ключевые слова:** экскурсионная деятельность, устойчивый туризм, интерпретация наследия, развитие местной экономики, общественный туризм (community-based tourism), туризм, основанный на культурном наследии

### Introduction

Few people in the tourism system spend as much uninterrupted time with visitors as the tour guide. A hotel receptionist may see a guest for a few minutes a day; a guide may accompany the same group for a week, explaining what they see, deciding where they stop for lunch, and quietly correcting behaviour that would offend residents or damage a monument. It is therefore somewhat surprising that guides have, for a long time, occupied a marginal place in tourism scholarship. Cohen's (1985) seminal paper on the origins and structure of the guiding role was one of the first serious attempts to

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theorise what guides actually do, and for the following two decades the field developed slowly and unevenly (Weiler & Black, 2015).

The debate on sustainable tourism, meanwhile, moved in a different direction. Since the 1990s the concept has been discussed largely at the level of destinations, policies and planning instruments (Butler, 1999; Sharpley, 2000; Saarinen, 2006). The UNWTO and UNEP (2005) framework, for example, sets out twelve aims for sustainable tourism, including local prosperity, visitor fulfilment, cultural richness and environmental purity. These aims are difficult to achieve through regulation alone, because they depend heavily on what happens during the visit itself — on the countless small decisions made by visitors and by the people who guide them. This is precisely the space in which guides work.

The question addressed in this paper is straightforward, although the answer is not: *in what ways, and under what conditions, do tour guides contribute to sustainable tourism and to the economic development of host communities?* Two sub-questions follow. First, which of the roles attributed to guides are supported by empirical evidence, and which remain largely normative? Second, what institutional and organisational factors determine whether guides act as "agents of sustainability" (Weiler & Kim, 2011) or simply as commercial intermediaries?

The topic has particular relevance for emerging destinations. In countries such as Uzbekistan, where historic cities like Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva have attracted growing international interest over the past decade, the guiding profession is expanding faster than the systems designed to train and regulate it. Understanding what guides can contribute — and what prevents them from doing so — is therefore not only an academic matter but a practical concern for policymakers and educators.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on the guiding role, interpretation, and tourism's economic linkages. Section 3 describes the integrative review method. Section 4 presents and discusses the findings around three functional dimensions of guiding, and Section 5 concludes with implications for policy and future research.

## Literature review

### Conceptualising the guiding role

Early sociological work treated the guided tour as a form of structured social interaction. Holloway (1981) described guides as performers who manage the impressions of their audience, while Cohen (1985) traced the role back to two historical figures: the *pathfinder*, who leads people through unfamiliar territory, and the *mentor*, who offers spiritual or intellectual guidance. From these he derived a framework of instrumental, social, interactionary and communicative spheres. Cohen also noticed a gradual shift in modern tourism, with the communicative component — selecting, explaining and interpreting — becoming more central than the purely logistical one. Later authors added further labels such as cultural broker, mediator and "ambassador" (Pond, 1993), but most of them can be read as elaborations of Cohen's original scheme.

Salazar (2005) brought an important corrective. In his ethnography of local guides in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, he showed that guides do not simply transmit "authentic" local culture; they actively construct it, blending local knowledge with global tourist imaginaries. This "glocal" view matters for

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sustainability, because it reminds us that guides have real power over how a community is represented, and that this power can be used well or badly.

**Interpretation and sustainability**

The link between guiding and sustainability runs largely through interpretation. Tilden (1957) defined heritage interpretation as an educational activity aimed at revealing meanings rather than simply communicating facts, and his principle that understanding leads to appreciation, and appreciation to protection, has shaped park and heritage management ever since. Ham (2013) later refined this into a more evidence-based model, distinguishing between interpretation that is merely enjoyable and interpretation that is designed to influence what visitors think and do.

Several studies have tested whether guides actually achieve this. Armstrong and Weiler (2002), analysing commentaries delivered by tour operators in protected areas in Victoria, Australia, found that guides communicated environmental messages far less often and less systematically than management agencies assumed. Randall and Rollins (2009), working with kayak tours in Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, Canada, reported that visitors valued guides mainly for safety and for natural history information, while their role as advocates of conservation was perceived as weaker. Hu and Wall (2012) responded to these mixed findings by proposing a framework for interpretive guiding that links the guide's activities to the economic, social-cultural and environmental objectives of sustainable development. The most comprehensive critical review remains Weiler and Kim (2011), who concluded that the sustainability role of guides is widely asserted in the rhetoric of industry and government but only partially demonstrated in research.

**Service quality, professionalism and regulation**

A second stream of research approaches guides from the perspective of service quality. Studies in Hong Kong and mainland China have consistently found that guide performance is a strong predictor of overall tour satisfaction (Zhang & Chow, 2004; Huang, Hsu & Chan, 2010). The same literature, however, exposes a darker side of the profession. Ap and Wong (2001) and Mak, Wong and Chang (2011) documented low and irregular pay, dependence on shopping commissions and tips, and the notorious "zero-fee" or "negative-fee" tour model, in which guides effectively pay operators for the right to lead a group and recover the cost through forced shopping. Under such conditions, guides have little incentive to promote responsible behaviour or to direct spending toward small local businesses. Black and Weiler (2005) reviewed the available quality assurance mechanisms — professional associations, codes of conduct, training, certification, licensing and awards — and concluded that their effectiveness depends heavily on enforcement and on industry buy-in.

**Tourism, linkages and local economic development**

The third relevant body of work concerns the economic effects of tourism on host communities. Research on pro-poor tourism has shown that the developmental value of tourism depends less on total visitor spending than on the share of that spending captured locally, through direct employment, supply chains and the dynamic effects on the wider economy (Mitchell & Ashley, 2010). Scheyvens (1999) argued that genuine benefits for communities require economic, psychological, social and political empowerment, not merely the presence of tourists. Tosun (2000), writing about developing countries, identified operational, structural and cultural limits to community participation, many of which also restrict who can become a guide and who benefits from guiding.

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What is notable is how rarely these two literatures meet. Studies of tourism value chains seldom single out the guide as an actor, while guiding research has paid limited attention to economic outcomes beyond the guide's own income. This gap provides the rationale for the present review.

## Methodology

The study adopts an integrative literature review design. Unlike a systematic review, which typically answers a narrow question by pooling comparable studies, an integrative review is suited to topics where the evidence is scattered across disciplines and methods, and where the aim is to build a new conceptual synthesis (Torraco, 2005; Snyder, 2019). This fits the present problem well: research on guiding sits at the intersection of sociology, environmental interpretation, service management and development studies, and the studies use very different designs, from ethnography to large visitor surveys.

**Sources and search.** Literature was identified through Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar, using combinations of the terms *tour guide*, *tourist guide*, *guiding*, *interpretation*, *sustainable tourism*, *community-based tourism*, *pro-poor tourism* and *local economic development*. Reference lists of key reviews, in particular Weiler and Kim (2011) and Weiler and Black (2015), were then followed backwards and forwards ("snowballing"). Foundational books and international policy documents were added where they are routinely cited as conceptual anchors.

**Inclusion criteria.** Sources were retained if they (a) were published in English in peer-reviewed journals, academic books or by recognised international organisations; (b) dealt explicitly with the role, behaviour or regulation of guides, or with the local economic linkages of tourism; and (c) offered either empirical evidence or a substantive conceptual argument. Purely promotional material and non-academic web content were excluded.

**Analysis.** The retained sources were read in full and coded thematically, following the six-phase procedure of Braun and Clarke (2006). Initial codes were derived inductively from the texts and then grouped into higher-order themes. Cohen's (1985) role framework served as a sensitising device rather than a fixed template, which allowed the economic-brokering function — largely absent from his original scheme — to emerge as a separate theme. For each theme, the strength of evidence was assessed qualitatively according to the number of independent studies, the diversity of settings and the use of empirical rather than purely normative argument.

**Limitations.** The review is restricted to English-language sources and is therefore likely to under-represent research published in Russian, Chinese and Central Asian languages. It synthesises existing evidence rather than generating new primary data; the conclusions about Central Asian destinations should be read as propositions for further empirical testing, not as established findings.

## Results and Analysis

The thematic synthesis produced three functional dimensions through which guides influence sustainability and local development, together with a set of enabling and constraining conditions. Table 1 summarises the dimensions and the relative strength of the evidence behind each.

**Table 1.** Functional dimensions of tour guiding in sustainable tourism

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| Dimension | Main mechanisms | Sustainability pillar | Strength of evidence | Key sources |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Interpretive | Explaining heritage and nature; framing meaning; representing the host community | Socio-cultural, environmental | Moderate to strong | Tilden (1957); Salazar (2005); Ham (2013); Kuo et al. (2016) |
| Behavioural-managerial | Role-modelling; on-site rules; group control; reducing physical impacts | Environmental, socio-cultural | Moderate, but uneven in practice | Armstrong & Weiler (2002); Randall & Rollins (2009); Weiler & Kim (2011) |
| Economic-brokering | Steering spending to local suppliers; local employment; extending length of stay | Economic | Limited, mostly case-based | Ap & Wong (2001); Mitchell & Ashley (2010); Mak et al. (2011) |

**The interpretive dimension**

The evidence that good interpretation improves the visitor experience is fairly robust. Studies from very different settings show that tourists who rate the guide's interpretation highly also report greater satisfaction and, in some cases, a stronger intention to return or recommend the destination (Huang et al., 2010; Kuo et al., 2016). Satisfaction is not sustainability, of course, but it does matter for local economies, because loyal and well-informed visitors tend to stay longer and spread positive word of mouth.

More interesting from a sustainability point of view is the guide's power of representation. Salazar's (2005) work shows that the stories guides tell about a place can either reinforce stereotypes or give visitors a more nuanced understanding of local life. In heritage cities, the guide is often the only channel through which residents' perspectives reach the visitor at all. Where guides are themselves members of the community, this channel tends to be richer; where they are outsiders reciting a standard script, the community becomes a backdrop rather than a participant.

**The behavioural-managerial dimension**

In principle, guides are well placed to reduce the negative impacts of tourism — they can keep groups on paths, explain dress codes at religious sites, discourage the purchase of souvenirs made from protected species, and model respectful photography. Hu and Wall (2012) see this as a core part of the guide's contribution to environmental and socio-cultural sustainability.

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The empirical picture, however, is less encouraging than the rhetoric. Armstrong and Weiler (2002) found that conservation and minimal-impact messages appeared only occasionally in guides' commentaries, and Randall and Rollins (2009) found that visitors did not see guides primarily as environmental advocates. The synthesis suggests a plausible explanation: guides are rarely trained or rewarded for this function. When performance is judged mainly by customer satisfaction scores and tips, guides understandably prioritise entertainment and comfort over messages that may feel restrictive. In other words, the managerial role is real but contingent; it does not appear automatically.

**The economic-brokering dimension**

This is the dimension most frequently claimed and least systematically examined. Conceptually, guides influence local economic outcomes in at least three ways. First, guiding is itself a source of employment, often accessible to young, educated, multilingual people in regions with limited alternatives. Second, and more significantly, guides decide — or strongly influence — where visitors eat, which workshops they visit and which artisans they buy from. They are, in effect, gatekeepers to the local value chain, which is precisely where Mitchell and Ashley (2010) locate most of tourism's poverty-reduction potential. Third, a skilled guide can extend the length of stay by revealing attractions beyond the main circuit, which spreads spending geographically.

The same gatekeeping position, however, can work in the opposite direction. The Hong Kong and Macau studies (Ap & Wong, 2001; Mak et al., 2011) show how commission-driven guiding concentrates spending in a few designated shops, often owned by outside interests, and damages both visitor trust and destination image. The economic effect of guides, then, is not inherently positive; it depends on whose interests the guide's income is tied to.

**Conditions that enable or constrain the sustainability role**

Across the three dimensions, four conditions consistently separate guides who contribute to sustainability from those who do not:

1. **Training and competence.** Interpretation and minimal-impact communication are learnable skills, but they are rarely part of basic guide training. Where training explicitly includes them, guides' practice improves (Black & Weiler, 2005; Weiler & Black, 2015).
2. **Quality assurance and licensing.** Licensing systems, codes of conduct and professional associations raise standards only when they are enforced and recognised by the industry (Black & Weiler, 2005).
3. **Employment conditions.** Fair and stable pay reduces dependence on commissions and gives guides the freedom to recommend genuinely local, rather than commission-paying, businesses (Ap & Wong, 2001; Mak et al., 2011).

**Embeddedness in the community.** Guides who live in, or are linked to, the host community are more likely to channel benefits locally and to represent it faithfully, which echoes broader arguments about empowerment and participation (Scheyvens, 1999; Tosun, 2000).

**Implications for emerging heritage destinations**

These findings carry a specific message for destinations such as Uzbekistan and its neighbours. Here, the core product — Silk Road heritage cities — is highly interpretation-dependent: a visitor without a good guide sees beautiful buildings but understands little of their history. This makes the interpretive role especially valuable. At the same time, rapid growth creates the very risks described in Section:

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informal guiding, price competition, and shopping arrangements that favour a few large outlets over small craft workshops and family guesthouses. The synthesis suggests that investment in guide education, a credible licensing and certification scheme, and deliberate links between guides and community-based enterprises (for instance, craft centres in the old cities or rural homestays) would be among the most cost-effective tools available for spreading tourism's benefits more widely. These remain propositions, however, and need to be tested empirically in the regional context.

## Conclusion

This paper set out to clarify how tour guides contribute to sustainable tourism and local economic development. The review suggests that the answer depends less on the nature of guiding as such than on the system in which guides work. Guides are structurally well positioned to interpret heritage, manage visitor behaviour and channel spending into host communities. Yet the evidence for these contributions is uneven: the interpretive role is well supported, the managerial role appears inconsistently in practice, and the economic role, despite being widely claimed, has been studied mostly through isolated cases — and some of those cases show guides concentrating rather than distributing benefits.

The main theoretical contribution of the paper is to bring the economic-brokering function alongside Cohen's (1985) classic dimensions and to connect guiding research with the literature on tourism linkages and pro-poor development. Treating the guide as a gatekeeper to the local value chain helps explain why identical guiding practices can produce very different outcomes in different institutional settings.

For policymakers, three practical implications follow. First, guide training should include interpretation, minimal-impact communication and knowledge of local enterprises, not only history and languages. Second, licensing and certification need real enforcement and industry recognition to be meaningful. Third, the economic incentives facing guides — pay, commissions, contracts — deserve as much attention as their knowledge, because they largely decide where visitor spending goes.

Future research should move beyond satisfaction surveys toward studies that trace visitor expenditure along guided itineraries, compare community-based and conventional guiding models, and examine the profession in under-researched regions, including Central Asia. Only with such evidence will it be possible to say with confidence not just that guides *can* serve as agents of sustainability, but when and how they actually do.

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