

# Ecotourism Perceptions of Local Communities in Azdavay and Pinarbasi Districts Bordering the Kure Mountains National Park

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## Abstract

**E**cotourism development largely depends on the perception and interests of local and foreign tourists. The interest and attention of local and foreign tourists to visit ecotourism sites are usually driven by uniqueness of natural environment and favorable local community support, which in turn triggers economic activities that would generate income for local communities and contribute to national economy. The Kure Mountains National Park, which is situated within the borders of Pinarbasi and Azdavay districts in Kastamonu province, is one of the important ecotourism areas and awarded with Pan Parks Certificate due to its important value in the ecotourism industry in Turkey. Although this Park has been a favorite destination of local and foreign visitors for outdoor recreational activities, there has been limited documentations regarding the perceptions of local communities within the borders of the Park. This study aims to assess the perceptions of local communities in the Pinarbasi and Azdavay districts on the economic and potential environmental consequences of increased ecotourism activities in the Kure Mountains National Park. A survey was conducted with respondents from local communities to give their perceptions regarding the tourism benefits and potential environmental impacts of increased ecotourism activities in the Park. The respondents perceived that though the Park is an important ecotourism destination due to its unique natural texture, geomorphological features, and presence of canyons, the increased tourism activities have resulted in limited economic gains in local communities, particularly on the employment opportunities. The establishment of tourism infrastructures and increased number of local and foreign visitors also increased the potential of environmental disturbances and pollution.

**Keywords:** *Ecotourism, Kure Mountains, National Park, Environmental Impacts*

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## INTRODUCTION

Increased stressful living conditions in urban communities due to rapid population growth, hectic schedule, commercial activities, and other related problems have triggered the imperative need to take a break and travel into quieter and fresh environment, which is a common change of habits of many people in the urban areas [1]. This scenario resulted in the increased demands of outdoor recreational area, usually National Parks, which is developed as ecotourism sites in many places in Turkey. In the tourism industry in Turkey, many recreational options are available such as mountain climbing, water sports, rural tourism, and cultural tourism. In many instances, however, the rural tourism has gained interest of many recreationists, which is becoming a good alternative of sea holiday activities [2, 3, 4]. Many people have been interested in ecotourism activities, which they can enjoy throughout the year, and a way to commune with nature and an alternate of mass tourism in urban areas particularly during summer months [5].

With the increased demands on the use of these ecotourism sites, there is also a corresponding risks of over exploitation, which could result in unfavorable environmental consequences. Thus, the concept of sustainable ecotourism should be adapted in the management of these sites. Ceballos-Lascurain (1983) defines sustainable ecotourism as an environmentally responsible visit to unspoiled natural areas to observe and experience the landscape, wildlife, or wild nature [6, 7, 8]. Ecotourism supports tourism development, protects natural and cultural values, contributes to the economy of the local people without causing permanent damage, and makes a positive contribution to the development of socio-cultural relations [9, 10]. In relation to soio-economic contribution of ecotourism, the increased number of tourists visiting the sites results in increased demands for living spaces and services, increased experience and understanding with the natural environment, and sharing of cultural experiences hence, increasing cultural and environmental awareness, enriching local values, generating income to local communities, and contributing to national economy [2, 7, 11].

Although ecotourism is largely situated in rural areas, there are also studies that promote ecotourism in urban areas and develop ecotourism in this direction [12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17]. Stemming from the aforementioned scenarios, this study is focused on determining the existing ecotourism potentials in the Pinarbasi and Azdavay districts, which are located within the borders of Kure Mountains National Park, an ecotourism site of national and international importance. The Kure Mountain, which was declared as a national park in 2000, is also one of Turkey's top ten unique ecotourism sites and one of Europe's 100 tourism hot spots. In addition, the national park was awarded the Pan Parks certificate by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in 2012 [18]. The Azdavay district, with a total population of 7,268 people and an area of 770 km<sup>2</sup>, has unique natural beauties and has been endowed with unique and villages with houses made of wood and wooden logs using local architecture, Çatak Canyon, Horma Canyon, Çal Canyon, Medil Cave, Asar Rock, Monumental Tree, Akçasu Resort, Suğla Plateau, Mercimeklik Rock, Kız Rock, Tabaklı Rock. Besides, important man-made attraction and infrastructures, such as Aşar Castle and Lovers Bridge, are also found at the heart of the district. Similarly, the Pinarbasi district, which has a population of 2,436 people and an area of 512 km<sup>2</sup>, is rich in historical ruins, emerald green forests, unique canyons and caves, wooden houses, cute villages, and traditional lifestyle, as well as Valla Canyon, Ilgarini Cave, Ilica Waterfall, and Horma Canyon. Despite these natural and man-made attractions and assets and presence of local and foreign visitors, documentation of ecotourism perceptions and the economic potentials remains limited. This study aims to determine the perceptions of local communities on in the Azdavay and Pinarbasi districts regarding the importance of ecotourisms, deficiencies in ecotourism infrastructures, and demands of the local communities.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Study Location

This study was conducted in the Azdavay and Pinarbasi

districts of Kastamonu province, which are located within the borders of the Kure National Park. Geographically, the Azdavay district is located between  $41^{\circ} 38'$  N latitude and  $33^{\circ} 17'$  E longitude while Pinarbasi district between  $33^{\circ} 07'$  N latitude and  $41^{\circ} 36'$  E longitude (Figure 1).

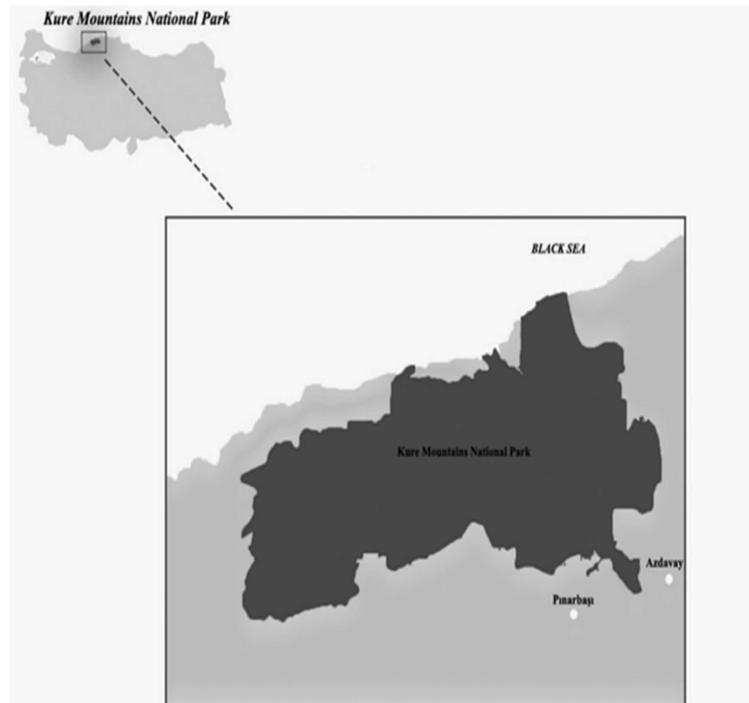


Figure 1. Location of Kure Mountains National Park, Azdavay, and Pinarbasi Districts

## Data Collection

Primary and secondary data were utilized in the conduct of the study and analysis. The primary data were collected directly from respondents through a survey technique. A snowball sampling approach, known as chain sampling, was used for the determination of sample size and selection of respondents [19, 20, 21]. A total of 70 respondents were randomly selected from both study sites. A semi-structured questionnaire containing questions related to the socio-demographic profile of the respondents was prepared. To assess the perceptions and expectations of the respondents, the following questions were asked:

- Reason(s) for choosing ecotourism activities
- Requirements to promote the ecotourism potentials and tourists preferences to visit these sites
- Needed tourism infrastructures to facilitate the promotion of

the sites and enhance the experience of visitors

- Contributions of ecotourism to the local economy
- Ecotourism demands in Azdavay and Pinarbasi
- Route request for ecotourism activities

The participants were asked to respond to questions that are applicable to them. Participants were asked to answer the last question (route request for ecotourism activities) with yes or no only.

The data obtained as a result of the survey were processed using a SPSS 23 statistical software, which is also used to calculate Cronbach Alpha, which is a tool to determine the reliability of data. The reliability analysis is a method that is frequently preferred in various fields such as tourism and economy, and gives effective and efficient results [21, 22, 23]. In this study, the Cronbach Alpha value of 0.758 suggests that the data are “quite reliable” (Table 1).

**Table 1. Reliability Analysis**

Criteria	Cronbach's Alpha*	N of Items
Reason(s) for preferring ecotourism activities	0.758	6
Factors that will increase the preference of the area		
The requirements of the field in terms of ecotourism		
Contributions of ecotourism to the local economy		
Ecotourism activities demanded in Azdavay and Pinarbasi		
Ecotourism route demand in Kastamonu		

\*interpretation guide

0.00<0.40 is unreliable

0.40<0.60 has low reliability

0.60<0.80 is quite reliable and 0.80<1.00 highly reliable

The frequencies and percentages of responses of the parameters in the questionnaires were analyzed. A Likert scale was developed with the following scale:

- $0 < pv < 60$ : Low level (LL)
- $pv > 60$  and above: High level (HL)
- pv: percent value

A Chi-square analysis was performed in the SPSS program to determine whether there was a statistically significant relationship between the ecotourism route demands of the participants and their demographic profiles, and the strength of the relationship.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Results

Male respondents composed a large proportion of the respondents (52%) than female (48%). Middle age (36 to 45 years old) individuals constituted the highest proportion of respondents (41%) while young ages (teenagers) the lowest (4%). Most respondents are professionals (56%) although not necessarily with graduate educational level (13%).

Table 2. Demographic Profile of Participants

		n	%
Gender	Male	37	<b>52</b>
	Female	33	48
Age	18-25	3	4
	26-35	14	20
	36-45	29	<b>41</b>
	46-55	24	35
Education	High school	22	31
	University	39	<b>56</b>
	Graduate	9	13

The answers of the participants were evaluated within the scale developed within the scope of the study. In these evaluations, it is seen that all answers are in the low-level range. Preferences of the respondents to ecotourism sites and the reasons for such choice are displayed in Table 3. Most of respondents preferred to visit the sites due to their intention to discover or explore what nature has offered in the site. Similarly, most respond-

ents (31%) also expressed their desire to see the original conditions of the site and reasons for its conservation.

**Table 3. Reason(s) for Participants to Prefer Ecotourism Activities**

	<b>Questions</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
	Exploring nature	63	<b>40</b>
	Doing recreational activities	14	9
	Self-discovery and listening	7	4
	Meeting people and cultural trip	19	12
	Passion for adventure	0	0
	Silent environment request	0	0
	Scientific and social curiosity	7	4
	See original values for protection	49	<b>31</b>
<b>Total</b>		159	100

Respondents also expressed their desire to benefit economically from the ecotourism activities. Most of them intended to create new business establishments for site considered as ecotourism potentials (24%) and to advertise through the internet (17%) as a medium to promote their businesses (Table 4).

**Table 4. Factors Affecting the Preferences of Tourists to Visit the Site**

	<b>Questions</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
	Business opportunities	44	<b>24</b>
	Creating alternative income sources for rural and ecotourism for local people	26	14
	Orientation of the tour agency	0	0
	Tourist or acquaintance advice	26	14
	Advertising via the Internet	31	17
	Promotion with written and visual media	13	7
	Strengthening transport links	13	7
	Increasing the service quality of accommodation facilities	31	17
<b>Total</b>		184	100

Strategies that need to be done by local authorities and managers to promote ecotourism is summarized in Table 5. It can be observed that respondents pointed out that job creation (22%) could expand economic activities associated with ecotourism. The increase of employment opportunities creation could be done through increasing the government budget for ecotourism development, promoting ecotourism support infrastructures such as roads and accommodation. A science-based ecotourism management through research and proper planning is also needed to ensure sustainability of the tourism sites. Protection and conservation of the natural sites should also be given attention by tourism managers and local authorities. Strict enforcement of environmental regulations should be observed to protect the sites against pollutions and other associated environmental problems.

**Table 5. Strategies to Promote Ecotourism in these Sites**

Strategies	n	%
It is necessary to increase the budget and promotions for ecotourism of the field	19	10
Long-term planning studies are required for rural tourism.	7	4
More attention should be paid to the protection of natural areas	26	13
Accommodation and transportation problems need to be solved in regions with ecotourism potential.	31	16
Employment efforts for ecotourism need to be increased.	44	<b>22</b>
It is necessary to find a solution to the environmental pollution problem in areas with ecotourism potential and where the necessary care is not shown.	34	17
It is necessary to increase the reinforcement elements (plaque, seating unit, garbage cans, lighting units, etc.).	23	12
In the construction of buildings in Şenpazar and Azdavay districts, it is necessary to choose building materials suitable for natural structures rather than reinforced concrete materials.	13	7
Total	197	100

Perceptions of respondents on how ecotourism helps local economy and awareness of visitors is presented in Table 6. The

responses showed that employment opportunities (55 %) sense of responsibility (34%) garnered high scores.

**Table 6. Contributions of ecotourism to the Local Economy**

Criteria	n	%
Employment opportunities	71	55
Close communication with nature	13	10
Good communication with people	1	1
Understanding nature	0	0
Bringing a sense of responsibility	44	34
Total	129	100

The most common activities in the Azdavay and Pinarbasi ecotourism sites are summarized in Table 7. Trekking (34 %) and picture taking (26%) garnered the highest percentages.

**Table 7. Ecotourism Activities Demanded in Azdavay and Pinarbasi**

Criteria	n	%
Hiking	58	34
Mountain biking	9	5
Take a photo	44	26
Plant watching	8	5
Orienteering (goal finding)	2	1
Visiting cultural sites	10	6
Planting activities	14	8
Wildlife watching	26	15
Total	171	100

Finally, the participants were asked whether or not they wanted any travel itinerary in the field of ecotourism. While 39% of the participants stated that they wanted a route, 31% stated that they did not want it.

A Chi-square analysis was conducted to determine the statistical relationship between travel itinerary requests and the demographic profiles of the participants. Results showed that there

is a significant relationship at the  $p < 0.001$  level between the travel route request and the gender, age groups, and education levels of the participants. It can be observed that the demand for travel routes for ecotourism is higher in male participants than in females. In age groups, the travel route demands of the participants between the ages of 36-45 are higher than the other age groups. Finally, it was revealed that the participants with a university level of education have more ecotourism trip demands (Table 8).

Table 8. Chi-square Analysis Results

		1 (I want)	2 (I don't want)	Chi-square	p
Travel itinerary request	Female	19	14	70.876	0.000
	Male	20	17		
	18-25 age	1	2	53.009	0.000
	26-35 age	8	6		
	36-45 age	16	13		
	46-55 age	14	10		
	High school	13	9	29.082	0.023
	University Graduate	21	17		
		5	5		

## Discussion

Küre Mountains National Park is a region suitable for recreational uses due to its unspoiled natural, cultural and aesthetic resource values [5]. Aside from Kure Mountains, Azdavay and Pinarbasi districts are also an important alternative tourism area of Turkey due to presence of natural and man-made ecotourism sites. The study showed that the local communities bordering the Kure Mountain National Parks, specifically the Azdavay and Pinarbasi districts. Expressed their interest to discover nature and see the original conditions of these natural and man-made ecotourism attractions. Most the respondents preferred hiking and nature photography as ecotourism activities.

Ecotourism activities have offered many benefits to local communities, which is one of the biggest sources of income for the local communities and national economy in Turkey [24, 25, 26]. The fact that most of the participants wanted to benefit eco-

nomically from ecotourism activities through increased employment opportunities suggest the important role of ecotourism in driving economic growth in areas within the route of tourists in the Kure Mountain National Park, particularly the Azdavay and Pınarbaşı districts.

Although male demands for tourism routes are higher than females, it is evident that ecotourism routes are very important regardless of sex, suggesting that both sexes have recognized the great importance to ecotourism activities. Middle-age participants, particularly those who belong to age classes between 36 to 45 and with university degree, have chosen excursion and sightseeing as their ecotourism activities in the region.

#### IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Kastamonu province is endowed with rich natural and cultural tourism sites, which could be developed into fully functional ecotourism destinations. However, there is need to adjust the existing cultural practices and provide the needed infrastructures to ensure sustainability of the ecotourism business in the province. Development of ecotourism corridor (route) is necessary to facilitate movement of tourists and promote the ecotourism industry in the city.

For efficient and planned use of the canyons in the research area, it is necessary to complete the markings with the detailing of the walking routes in the canyons and the placing of the walking platforms where necessary. The fact that the canyons are at the center of tourism destinations will be the main value in tourism orientation in the North West region of Kastamonu, which we can call the Canyons Region, especially in the Northwest region of Kastamonu, where the districts of Pınarbaşı, Azdavay are located.

It is also necessary to pay attention to this in tourism projects to be implemented in the region. Priority should be given to more comprehensive sports tourism based on nature sports, as well as recreational activities such as all kinds of sightseeing, sightseeing, and resting. Thus, it will be possible to develop tour-

ism activities after the necessary infrastructures such as transportation, accommodation, and promotion are created with the aim of an alternative and sustainable tourism without deteriorating the natural structure in the region. Thus, it will be possible to contribute to rural development through alternative and sustainable tourism activities to be implemented in the region. In this way, job opportunities and economic opportunities will be increased in Pınarbaşı and Azdavay districts.

Nowadays, tourism managers and authorities should aim to establish an exemplary national park that incorporates nature conservation in the tourism management plan and development, and does not impose too many restrictions for the local people. The concept of conservation sustainable ecotourism should be an avenue to create new opportunities for the benefit of the local people. Conservation of biodiversity and creation of alternative livelihood opportunities for local people (e.g., development of recreational services for visitors, placing local foods on the market, etc.) to ensure effective conservation is the most important factor for sustainable natural resource management.

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