

Correspondence

TOURISM IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: CULTURAL HERITAGE, BIODIVERSITY, AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

John McRobin

Niugini International Tours, PNG Education Inttitute Vanimu, Sandaun, Papua Nugini

johnmcrobin@catgroup.uk

* *Corresponding Author:* johnmcrobin@catgroup.uk

Abstract

Tourism in Papua New Guinea (PNG) plays a pivotal role in the Asia-Pacific region, shaped by its rich cultural diversity, unique ecosystems, and abundant biodiversity. As a developing nation, PNG has the potential for significant tourism growth, which could drive economic development, preserve cultural heritage, and promote environmental sustainability. With over 800 languages and numerous ethnic groups, PNG's cultural richness is evident in its festivals, such as the Mount Hagen Cultural Show, which attract international visitors (Zamzami et al., 2023). The country's natural beauty, including pristine beaches, rainforests, and coral reefs, offers opportunities for eco-tourism and adventure tourism, such as diving and hiking. However, challenges related to infrastructure, accessibility, and environmental conservation remain critical barriers to tourism development. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of PNG's tourism sector, but it also presented opportunities to focus on sustainable and resilient tourism practices. Through collaborative efforts between the government, local communities, and private stakeholders, PNG can position itself as a leading destination in the Asia-Pacific region, emphasizing cultural preservation and eco-conscious tourism.

Keywords: Papua New Guinea; Cultural tourism; Eco-tourism; Sustainable tourism; Environmental conservation

Introduction

Papua New Guinea (PNG), situated in the southwestern Pacific, is known for its extraordinary cultural diversity and ecological richness. The tourism sector in PNG offers tremendous potential, contributing not only to economic growth but also to cultural preservation and environmental sustainability. This paper examines the current state of tourism in PNG, exploring its key cultural and natural attractions, the challenges it faces, and the strategies required for sustainable growth. PNG's tourism potential lies in its rich cultural heritage, characterized by more than 800 languages, distinct ethnic traditions, and vibrant festivals, alongside its biodiversity, which supports eco-tourism (Zamzami et al., 2023).

As the world shifts towards eco-conscious and experience-driven travel, PNG's unique blend of cultural tourism and adventure activities positions it as a potential hotspot for global travelers. However, realizing this potential requires addressing significant challenges, including infrastructure deficiencies, limited accessibility, and ensuring that tourism development benefits local communities without damaging the environment (Trupp et al., 2022).

Cultural Tourism in Papua New Guinea

Cultural tourism in PNG is a major draw for international visitors, largely due to the country's extensive ethnic and linguistic diversity. With over 800 languages spoken and a plethora of distinct cultural practices, PNG's cultural richness is unparalleled. One of the most celebrated cultural events is the Mount Hagen Cultural Show, where different tribes gather to showcase traditional dances, music, and costumes (Zamzami et al., 2023). These festivals serve as important avenues for cultural exchange, allowing tourists to engage directly with PNG's rich heritage while providing local communities with a platform to celebrate and preserve their traditions.

In addition to festivals, local crafts, traditional practices, and rituals form an essential part of the tourism experience in PNG. Tourists are increasingly seeking authentic cultural experiences, which PNG is uniquely positioned to offer. This type of tourism also plays a crucial role in fostering cultural pride among local communities and in promoting the preservation of indigenous customs and knowledge (Gibson et al., 2020). By encouraging community-driven cultural tourism, PNG can ensure that the benefits of tourism extend beyond economic gain to reinforce cultural identities and heritage.

Eco-Tourism and Adventure Tourism

PNG's vast natural beauty makes it an ideal destination for eco-tourism and adventure tourism. The country's landscapes range from tropical rainforests and mountainous terrains to pristine beaches and coral reefs. These natural environments support activities such as hiking, birdwatching, and diving, appealing to eco-conscious travelers who are looking for sustainable tourism experiences. The coral reefs of PNG are particularly famous for their biodiversity, attracting divers from around the world who are keen to explore the rich marine life (Vijver et al., 2016). PNG's marine tourism, supported by its diverse underwater ecosystems, has grown steadily as diving enthusiasts seek out remote, untouched locations.

Adventure tourism is another growing segment in PNG, with its rugged landscapes providing opportunities for trekking, river rafting, and wildlife exploration. Mount Wilhelm, the country's highest peak, is a popular destination for hikers, while the Kokoda Track is world-renowned for its historical significance and challenging terrain (Gowianto, 2022). Such activities not only attract thrill-seekers but also contribute to the preservation of natural environments through responsible tourism practices.

Challenges Facing PNG's Tourism Sector

Despite its potential, PNG's tourism sector faces several challenges that limit its growth and development. One of the main obstacles is inadequate infrastructure, particularly in terms of transport and accommodation. Many of PNG's most attractive tourist destinations are located in remote areas, which are difficult to access due to poor roads and limited air travel options. This lack of infrastructure not only makes it difficult for tourists to reach these locations but also hampers the development of tourism-related businesses in these regions (Trupp et al., 2022).

Another significant challenge is ensuring that tourism development in PNG is sustainable and does not come at the expense of the environment or local communities. PNG's ecosystems are fragile, and mass tourism poses a risk to its biodiversity. Coral reefs, in particular, are susceptible to damage from overfishing, pollution, and unregulated tourism activities (Vijver et al., 2016). To protect these environments, PNG must adopt strict conservation measures and promote eco-friendly tourism practices that minimize the environmental impact of visitors.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the tourism industry in PNG, as it has worldwide. Travel restrictions and border closures brought international tourism to a halt, resulting in significant economic losses for local communities that rely on tourism for their livelihoods (Wong et al., 2013). The pandemic has highlighted the vulnerabilities of PNG's tourism sector, particularly its dependence on international visitors and the lack of resilience in the face of global crises.

Post-COVID Tourism Recovery and Sustainability

As the world begins to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, PNG has an opportunity to rethink its tourism strategies. One of the key lessons from the pandemic is the importance of developing a more resilient and sustainable tourism sector that can withstand future crises. This includes diversifying the tourism market to attract more domestic and regional visitors, as well as promoting sustainable tourism practices that prioritize environmental conservation and community welfare (Dang et al., 2020).

Sustainable tourism in PNG involves engaging local communities in tourism development, ensuring that they benefit economically while preserving their cultural and environmental resources. By involving local stakeholders in decision-making processes and promoting community-based tourism initiatives, PNG can create a more inclusive tourism sector that empowers local populations and safeguards their interests (Takahashi, 2019). Additionally, the use of digital platforms and technologies can help promote PNG as a destination to a wider audience, providing virtual experiences and enhancing the marketing of lesser-known locations.

Role of Government and Stakeholders in Tourism Development

The government and local stakeholders have a crucial role to play in shaping the future of tourism in PNG. Collaborative efforts between the government, local communities, and private sector stakeholders can lead to the development of policies that promote sustainable tourism practices while enhancing the overall visitor experience (Takahashi, 2019). For example, investment in infrastructure, such as improved transport links and eco-friendly accommodations, can make PNG's remote destinations more accessible and appealing to tourists.

Moreover, the government must take an active role in regulating tourism activities to ensure that they do not harm the environment or disrupt local communities. Implementing environmental regulations, such as limits on the number of tourists allowed in certain areas or requirements for eco-friendly certifications for tourism businesses, can help protect PNG's natural resources and ensure the long-term sustainability of the tourism sector (Brown & Vacca, 2022).

In addition to environmental protection, the government should focus on building the capacity of local communities to engage in tourism. This can be done through training programs that teach local people the skills needed to work in tourism-related jobs, as well as through financial support for community-based tourism initiatives (Zamzami et al., 2023). By prioritizing community involvement in tourism development, PNG can ensure that the benefits of tourism are distributed more equitably and that local cultures and traditions are preserved.

Conclusion

Tourism in Papua New Guinea holds significant potential for economic development, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability. With its unique cultural heritage and rich biodiversity, PNG has the opportunity to position itself as a leading destination in the Asia-Pacific region. However, the challenges of infrastructure, accessibility, and sustainability must be addressed to realize this potential fully. By focusing on community engagement, sustainable practices, and government collaboration, PNG can create a tourism sector that not only attracts international visitors but also preserves its cultural and natural assets for future generations.

References

- Brown, S., & Vacca, F. (2022). Cultural sustainability in fashion: Reflections on craft and sustainable development models. *Sustainability Science Practice and Policy*, 18(1), 590-600. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2022.2100102>
- Dang, H., Nguyen, T., Wang, C., Day, J., & Dang, T. (2020). Grey system theory in the study of medical tourism industry and its economic impact. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(3), 961. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17030961>
- Gibson, D., Pratt, S., & Iaquinto, B. (2020). Samoan perceptions of travel and tourism mobilities – The concept of malaga. *Tourism Geographies*, 24(4-5), 737-758. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1780632>

- Gowianto D. (2022). Tourism resilience to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the tourist attraction of the Malino Pine Forest. *Journal of World Science*, 1(7), 581-589. <https://doi.org/10.36418/jws.v1i7.64>
- Takahashi, K. (2019). Tourism demand and migration nexus in small island developing states (SIDS): Applying the tourism demand model in the Pacific region. *Island Studies Journal*, 14(1), 163-174. <https://doi.org/10.24043/isj.84>
- Trupp, A., Pratt, S., Stephenson, M., Matatolu, I., & Gibson, D. (2022). Representing and evaluating the travel motivations of Pacific Islanders. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 24(5), 653-666. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.2528>
- Vijver, E., Derudder, B., O'Connor, K., & Witlox, F. (2016). Shifting patterns and determinants of Asia-Pacific tourism to Australia, 1990–2010. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 21(12), 1357-1372. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10941665.2016.1175490>
- Wong, E., Jiang, M., Klint, L., Dominey-Howes, D., & DeLacy, T. (2013). Evaluation of policy environment for climate change adaptation in tourism. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 13(4), 201-225. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1467358414524978>
- Zamzami, Z., Hartono, B., & Isnaini, I. (2023). The role of the tourism office in increasing regional original income in the maritime tourism sector. *Journal of Education Humaniora and Social Sciences (JEHSS)*, 5(4), 2591-2596. <https://doi.org/10.34007/jehss.v5i4.1664>