



Exploring Sustainable Coastal Tourism in Fiji: An In-Depth Analysis

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Abstract: Small island nations encounter escalating difficulties as the growth of coastal tourism development poses significant risks to environmental preservation and the well-being of local communities. This investigation explores Fiji's strategy for sustainable coastal tourism by thoroughly analysing scholarly articles and governmental policies. Our study examines three essential elements: coastal tourism development's progression and present condition, the efficacy of current sustainability frameworks, and the socio-cultural interactions resulting from tourism's influence on local communities.

The findings illustrate a multifaceted environment where effective initiatives and ongoing obstacles exist. Although community-based tourism initiatives and marine protected areas have improved biodiversity conservation and provided local economic advantages, the sector still faces challenges such as economic leakage, environmental degradation, and the commodification of culture. The results underscore the importance of incorporating strong policy frameworks, fostering collaboration among various stakeholders, and implementing innovative conservation strategies to ensure the sustainable development of coastal tourism. This study expands the understanding of sustainable tourism practices in small island nations and provides actionable insights for policymakers and tourism stakeholders.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, coastal management, community-based tourism, small island developing states, South Pacific Tourism Organisation, Sustainable Development.

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INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations Environment Programme, Tourism is one of the world's most extensive and fastest expanding sectors, accounting for 10% of global GDP, 7% of global exports, and one of every ten employments globally (UNEP, 2024a). Its ability to attract significant investment, create employment, raise exports, and incorporate new and emerging technology makes it a crucial pillar for economic growth and development, particularly for least developed countries (LDCs) and small island developing states (SIDS). The global tourist industry is at a crossroads, particularly in coastal areas where environmental protection, economic growth, and community welfare mix in increasingly complicated ways. Coastal areas, which account for over 40% of the world's population and host a large amount of global tourism activity, are under increasing pressure from climate change, environmental deterioration, and heavy development (UNEP, 2024). Due to heavy population pressure on the coastlines, an increasing amount of the natural environment is being paved over or turned into ports, tourist beaches, and new settlements. The outcome is catastrophic beach erosion and heavy sedimentation. Whole benthic ecosystems, such as seagrass beds, are destroyed, while corals and other marine animals, incredibly fragile filter feeders, are eliminated. According to recent research, 34% of the

world's beaches are in high danger of degradation due to coastal development, while the remaining 17% are at medium risk. Europe is the most imperilled region, with 86%, and Asia has 69% of its coastal ecosystems under threat (UNEP, 2024). According to the World Bank (2016), human activity on beaches and seas has destroyed 20% of mangroves, 30% of seagrass beds, and 20% of coral reefs. Within this environment, small island developing states (SIDS) are well positioned to address these difficulties, providing critical case studies for understanding and implementing sustainable tourism practices.

Fiji, an archipelagic nation in the South Pacific with over 330 islands, shows both the benefits and problems of sustainable coastal tourist growth. With its gorgeous beaches, vivid coral reefs, and rich cultural legacy, Fiji has developed as a prominent tourist destination, accounting for over 40% of its GDP and the principal source of foreign exchange revenues (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2023). However, this economic success has resulted in significant environmental and social consequences, including coral reef damage, coastline erosion, cultural commercialization, and economic inequality.

The concept of sustainable tourism has developed considerably since its inception in the late

1980s, expanding from essential environmental conservation to include wider aspects of economic viability, social equity, and cultural preservation. International frameworks, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goals 8, 12, and 14, have established sustainable tourism as an essential catalyst for global sustainable development (UNWTO, 2016). These frameworks highlight the importance of integrated approaches that harmonize economic advantages with environmental conservation and community welfare. Within the Pacific context, regional organizations like the South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO) have established tailored frameworks to address the distinct challenges Pacific Island nations encounter. The Pacific Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework 2030, introduced in 2021, offers a detailed strategy for fostering resilient and inclusive tourism sectors throughout the region. The regional context is essential for comprehending Fiji's sustainable coastal tourism development strategy.

International accords have established specific goals to support states in advancing towards a more environmentally responsible future, including the Sustainable Development Goals on Biological Diversity (CBD, 2017). Ecotourism could play a crucial role in this situation. All 193 UN Member States have pledged to accomplish the ambitious 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 related targets by 2030 (United Nations, 2017). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) build upon the foundation set by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to create universally applicable standards for human well-being in all nations (Hajer *et al.*, 2015). The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (2016) identifies three specific Sustainable Development targets - targets 8, 12, and 14- that can be attained through tourism in diverse manners. Consequently, the development agenda established after 2015 incorporates sustainable tourism as a critical component. Additionally, the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (2004) confirms that the CBD endorses sustainable tourism by promoting education and capacity building and advocating for land-use changes that prioritize biodiversity.

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines tourism as a social, cultural, and economic phenomenon involving the movement of individuals to countries or locations beyond their usual surroundings for personal or business-related purposes. Individuals referred to as visitors, including tourists, excursionists, residents, and non-residents, engage in tourism-related activities, some of which entail tourism expenditure (UNWTO). It is widely acknowledged that a universally accepted definition of tourism may not exist, and it is more pragmatic to recognize the existence of multiple definitions, each serving its distinct purpose. In numerous developing countries, the tourism industry serves as a catalyst for the growth of local enterprises, enhancing the economy.

Insufficient regulation of tourism can harm ecosystems, local economies, and historical sites (Li, 2024). The publications in our corpus utilize the phrase 'sustainable tourism,' although we did not examine their definitions. Sustainability can only be realized when the three interconnected objectives of Planet, People, and Profit (3P) are met. If the instance or theory under consideration is fundamental to economics and the environment, a study centred on individuals should also address those issues.

This paper analyses the present condition of sustainable coastal tourism in Fiji, focusing on its development, execution, challenges, and future opportunities. Through analysing various secondary data sources, we seek to deliver a thorough overview of Fiji's initiatives to establish a more sustainable tourism model that fosters economic growth while safeguarding its natural and cultural heritage for future generations. This paper adds to the broader discussion on sustainable tourism development in at-risk coastal areas. It provides valuable insights for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and researchers.

Coastal Tourism Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism is defined as tourism that respects local people and the traveller, cultural heritage, and the environment. It seeks to provide people with an exciting and educational vacation that is also of benefit to the people of the host country. In Fiji, sustainable coastal tourism is significant due to the delicate marine ecosystems and the reliance of many local communities on marine resources for their livelihoods. Both academic studies and policy documents about the tourist industry now use the phrase 'sustainable tourism,' which first appeared in the late 1980s (Hall, 2011). The United Nations (UN) declared 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism and 2017 as the Year of Sustainable Tourism. 'One of the great success stories of tourism research and knowledge transfer' is the phrase 'sustainable tourism' and its extensive use in academic literature, industry, and policymaking (Hall, 2011). It seems to have failed to either further scientific understanding or provide governments, the tourist industry, and NGOs with information that would allow them to combat the climate change that tourism is causing (Scott, 2011). Although 'the unwillingness of key actors in tourism policy networks' to take scientific evidence into account and admit that their policies have failed might be to blame, nothing has changed. We postulate that it may be because of gaps in the tourism research field, as Hall (2011) suggested. For instance, according to Gren and Huijbens (2012), the theoretical framework underlying tourist studies disregards 'the earth' and many physical objects. If this is the case, the research will fail to offer compelling evidence for the necessary significant improvements in transportation and tourism (Preeters *et al.*, 2024).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

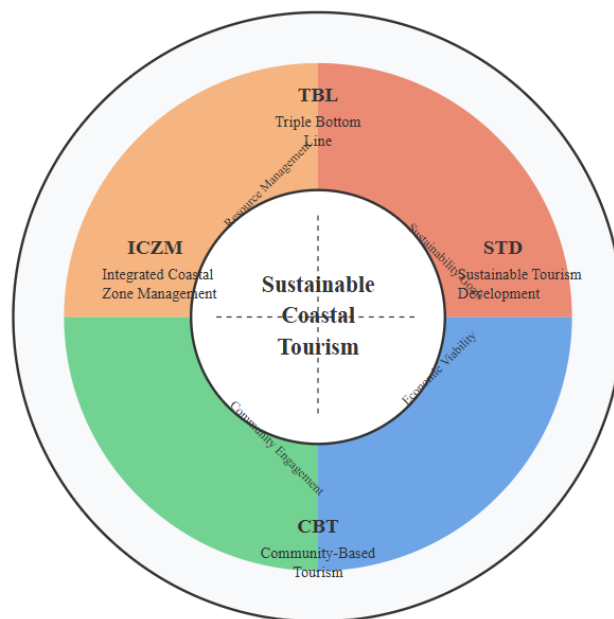


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework Design
Source: Author's Creation

Sustainable Tourism Development Theory

The theoretical underpinning of this analysis is grounded in the principles of Sustainable Tourism Development (STD), which emphasizes the need for tourism to be economically viable, environmentally sustainable, and socially equitable. STD integrates three main pillars: economic sustainability, environmental sustainability, and social and cultural sustainability. Economic sustainability ensures that tourism generates financial benefits for the host community, creating jobs and fostering local entrepreneurship while minimizing economic leakages. Environmental sustainability focuses on preserving natural resources and minimizing environmental impacts through responsible practices, conservation efforts, and environmental education. Social and cultural sustainability involves respecting and enhancing the cultural heritage of local communities, promoting social equity, and ensuring that tourism development benefits are equitably distributed. By addressing these pillars, STD aims to create a tourism model that balances the needs of visitors, the environment, and local populations. (Berno & Bricker, 2001).

Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM)

Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) provides a comprehensive framework for managing coastal resources sustainably. ICZM advocates for a holistic approach considering the interconnectedness of coastal ecosystems, economic activities, and community well-being. The key principles of ICZM include ecosystem-based management, participatory governance, and adaptive management. Ecosystem-based management involves maintaining ecosystem services and biodiversity. Participatory governance

involves local communities, stakeholders, and decision-makers in planning and management processes. Adaptive management involves implementing flexible strategies that can be adjusted based on monitoring and feedback. ICZM's holistic approach is essential for addressing the complex and dynamic nature of coastal areas, ensuring that development is sustainable and beneficial for all stakeholders.

Community-Based Tourism (CBT)

Community-based tourism (CBT) emerged as a response to the adverse effects of conventional or mass tourism, such as leakages and the loss of local control over natural resources (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2017, p. 2). Community-based tourism is experiencing a rise in popularity (Mearns & Lukhele, 2015, p. 2) and is being increasingly advocated to alleviate poverty and encourage the development of local communities (Runyowa, 2017, p. 2). CBT is a model that emphasizes the role of local communities in developing and managing tourism activities. CBT is based on the principles of participatory development, where community members are actively involved in decision-making, benefit-sharing, and resource management. The primary aims of CBT are to empower local communities by providing training, resources, and opportunities for locals to participate in and benefit from tourism; promote cultural preservation by encouraging the maintenance and promotion of local traditions, customs, and heritage; and enhance environmental stewardship by fostering a sense of responsibility among community members for protecting their natural environment. CBT ensures that tourism development is inclusive, equitable, and sustainable, benefiting communities (Lee *et al.*, 2024; Sharma *et al.*, 2024).

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) Approach

The concept of triple bottom line (TBL) was introduced by Elkington (1997) as a framework for measuring sustainability. The idea of sustainability may be traced back more than 130 years to the notion of 'spaceship earth' proposed by George in 1879/2009 (Dragicevic, 2020).

The construct became increasingly popular as the term 'sustainable development' emerged from the Brundtland Report in 1987. The study defined the word 'sustainable development,' which refers to meeting the requirements of current generations while ensuring that future generations may also fulfil their own needs (Brundtland, 1987, p. 43). The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach expands the traditional business focus on profits to include social and environmental considerations. In the context of sustainable tourism, TBL emphasizes three components: people, planet, and profit. 'People' refers to social responsibility, including community benefits, cultural sensitivity, and equitable development. 'Planet' focuses on environmental responsibility, including resource conservation, waste reduction, and ecological preservation. 'Profit' ensures that tourism activities are financially viable and contribute to local economic development. The TBL approach encourages businesses to adopt practices that are not only profitable but also beneficial to society and the environment, promoting a more holistic view of sustainability (Alhaddi, 2015).

Application to Fiji

Applying these theoretical frameworks to Fiji, the analysis of sustainable coastal tourism involves evaluating current practices against these principles and identifying areas for improvement. For economic sustainability, it is crucial to assess how tourism revenues are distributed within the community and identify strategies to reduce economic leakages. Environmental sustainability requires evaluating the impact of tourism on coastal and marine ecosystems and promoting practices that mitigate adverse effects. Social and cultural sustainability ensures that tourism development respects and enhances Fijian cultural heritage and that local communities benefit from tourism activities. By integrating the principles of Sustainable Tourism Development, ICZM, CBT, and TBL, this analysis provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and improving sustainable coastal tourism practices in Fiji. The goal is to create a balanced and sustainable tourism model that supports economic growth, environmental conservation, and social equity (MCTTT (2023); Singh *et al.*, 2021; Emose, 2021; Government of Fiji, 2022).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This research utilized a thorough desk research methodology to investigate sustainable coastal tourism development in Fiji. We conducted a thorough analysis of secondary data sources, concentrating on publications and reports from prominent organizations, such as the

World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), South Pacific Tourism Organization (SPTO), United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), and the Government of Fiji. The study focused on publications from the past five years to maintain relevance and timeliness.

Our methodological framework was informed by systematic review principles, enabling us to perform a comprehensive and impartial assessment of the available literature and data. This methodology guaranteed that our analysis encompassed diverse perspectives and findings concerning sustainable tourism practices in coastal regions. By synthesizing information from various sources, we aimed to identify trends, challenges, and opportunities for improving sustainability in Fiji's coastal tourism sector. This study aims to enhance the understanding of how Fiji can effectively manage the intricacies of tourism development, focusing on environmental conservation and the community's well-being.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of secondary sources reveals several key findings regarding the current state of sustainable coastal tourism in Fiji:

Economic Impact

Tourism remains a cornerstone of Fiji's economy, substantially contributing to employment and foreign exchange earnings. However, there is a pressing need to diversify tourism products and markets to reduce dependency on a few key regions and tourist demographics. Tourism contributes significantly to Fiji's economy, accounting for approximately 40% of GDP and providing substantial employment opportunities (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Sustainable tourism initiatives, particularly community-based projects, have shown potential for more equitable distribution of economic benefits. For instance, a Namena Marine Reserve case study reported a 40% increase in local household incomes over five years due to tourism-related activities (UNDP, 2022). However, economic leakage remains challenging, with an estimated 60% of tourism revenue leaving the country due to foreign ownership and imported goods (Mihalic, 2002; Utama *et al.*, 2022; Harrison & Prasad, 2013).

Environmental Challenges

Unsustainable tourism activities, such as overfishing, coastal development, and pollution, have led to significant environmental degradation. Human activities and climate change threaten coral reefs. Effective management strategies are essential to protect these vital ecosystems. Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) have been crucial in conservation efforts. The Locally Managed Marine Area (LMMA) network in Fiji now covers over 25% of the country's inshore area, contributing to improved fish stocks and coral reef health (Jupiter *et al.*, 2023). Eco-certification programs, such as

the Fiji Excellent Tourism Operations (FETO) certification, have encouraged resorts to adopt more sustainable practices. As of 2024, 45% of registered accommodations in Fiji have some form of eco-certification (Fiji Ministry of Tourism, 2024). Despite these efforts, challenges persist in waste management and plastic pollution. A recent study found microplastics in 80% of sampled beaches, highlighting the need for more comprehensive waste reduction strategies (Patel & Veitayaki, 2023).

Sociocultural Impacts

Successful sustainable tourism initiatives often involve local communities in decision-making processes. Community-based tourism (CBT) projects in Fiji have shown promising results in promoting environmental conservation and enhancing local livelihoods. For instance, the Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) managed by local communities have effectively preserved marine biodiversity. Community-based tourism initiatives have shown promise in preserving cultural heritage and empowering local communities. The case of Wayailalai Ecohaven Resort demonstrates how community ownership can lead to economic benefits and cultural revitalization (Movono & Dahles, 2022). The Wayailalai Ecohaven Resort is a simple luxury. Made up of a cluster of bures (small shelters) with various accommodation options such as privates and dorms, Wayailalai is situated right on the beach, with the gorgeous summit of Wayailalai rising majestically behind. However, concerns about cultural commodification and loss of authenticity persist. A survey of 500 tourists found that 30% felt their experiences with local culture were "staged" or "inauthentic" (Singh & Prakash, 2024).

Policy and Governance

The Fijian government has implemented various policies to promote sustainable tourism, including the Fiji Green Growth Framework and the National Tourism Development Plan. However, there is a need for more robust enforcement mechanisms and greater coordination among stakeholders to ensure these policies are effectively implemented. Fiji's Tourism Development Plan (2021-2025) emphasizes sustainability as a core principle, setting targets for carbon reduction, waste management, and community engagement in the tourism sector. Implementation of policies remains challenging, particularly in remote areas. A study of 30 small-scale tourism operators found that only 40% were aware of national sustainability guidelines (Narayan & Pratt, 2023).

Climate Change Adaptation

Climate change poses a significant threat to Fiji's coastal tourism. Sea rise and increased cyclone intensity have impacted coastal infrastructure and ecosystems (SPTO, 2024). Adaptation efforts include coral reef restoration projects, mangrove replanting, and climate-resilient infrastructure development. However, the scale of these efforts is not yet commensurate with the projected impacts of climate change (Nalau *et al.*, 2022). The private sector is crucial in driving sustainable tourism practices. Several resorts and tour operators in Fiji have adopted eco-friendly practices, such as waste reduction, energy conservation, and support for local communities. However, widespread adoption of these practices is still lacking.

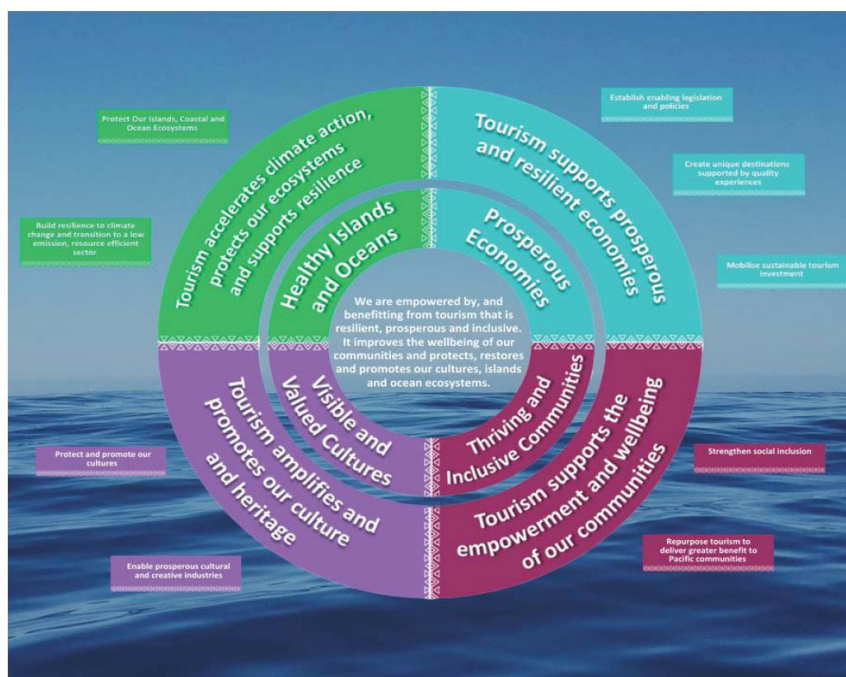


Figure 2: Pacific Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework: Goals and Priorities
Source: SPTO, Pacific 2030 Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework, April 2021

Figure 2 depicts a circular design that showcases a complete strategy for sustainable tourism growth in island and coastal locations, with a probable emphasis on the Pacific Ocean area. The flowchart is situated against a backdrop of azure sky and ocean, representing the pivotal role of the marine environment in the approach. The graphic features a mission statement positioned at its core: "We are empowered by, and deriving advantages from, tourism that is resilient, prosperous, and inclusive." It enhances the welfare of our communities and safeguards, rejuvenates, and advocates for our cultures, islands, and ocean habitats.

This figure illustrates a comprehensive tourism development strategy that achieves a harmonious equilibrium between economic advancement, safeguarding of cultural heritage, conservation of the environment, and empowerment of local communities. It highlights the interdependence of these factors in establishing a sustainable and advantageous tourist sector for island and coastal areas (MCTTT, 2023).

The findings indicate that Fiji has made significant progress in implementing sustainable coastal tourism practices, particularly in marine conservation and community-based tourism. The success of LMMAs and eco-certification programs demonstrates the potential for aligning tourism development with environmental conservation goals.

However, several challenges remain. The high level of economic leakage suggests a need for policies that promote local ownership and strengthen links between tourism and local industries. The persistent issues with waste management and plastic pollution highlight the need for more comprehensive environmental management strategies that extend beyond protected areas.

The sociocultural impacts of tourism present a complex picture. While community-based initiatives show promise in preserving cultural heritage and providing economic benefits, concerns about authenticity and commodification suggest a need for more nuanced approaches to cultural tourism that prioritize community agency and cultural integrity.

The gap between policy formulation and implementation, particularly among smaller operators, indicates a need for more effective communication and support mechanisms to ensure the widespread adoption of sustainable practices across the sector.

Climate change adaptation emerges as a critical challenge for the future of Fiji's coastal tourism. While some adaptation efforts are underway, the scale and pace of these initiatives may need to be significantly increased to address the projected impacts of climate change on coastal ecosystems and infrastructure.

The analysis highlights both encouraging advancements and considerable obstacles in Fiji's efforts towards sustainable coastal tourism. Despite significant achievements, including the Locally Managed Marine Area network encompassing 25% of inshore regions and a 40% rise in local household incomes through initiatives such as the Namena Marine Reserve, these successes are counterbalanced by ongoing structural challenges. The significant economic leakage rate of 60% highlights a critical flaw in the existing tourism model, indicating that, despite policy frameworks such as the Fiji Green Growth Framework, the economic advantages are not adequately preserved within local communities. The situation is exacerbated by environmental pressures, as demonstrated by the concerning presence of microplastics in 80% of sampled beaches and the increasing threats posed by climate change. The socio-cultural dimension reveals a notable paradox: Although community-based initiatives such as the Wayailai Ecohaven Resort showcase effective local engagement, the observation that 30% of tourists view cultural experiences as 'staged' indicates a possible disconnect between authenticity and commercialization. Furthermore, the discovery that merely 40% of small-scale tourism operators are cognizant of national sustainability guidelines indicates a significant disconnect between policy development and practical application, underscoring the necessity for enhanced stakeholder engagement and capacity building at the grassroots level.

These findings underscore the complexity of achieving sustainable coastal tourism in a small island developing state like Fiji. They highlight the need for integrated approaches that simultaneously address economic, environmental, and sociocultural dimensions supported by robust policy frameworks and community engagement.

CONCLUSION

The achievement of sustainable coastal tourism in Fiji is a challenging yet crucial objective for the future of the nation's tourist sector. Despite notable obstacles such as environmental deterioration and the need for more community engagement, several prospects still exist for favourable transformation. Fiji can build a tourist strategy that promotes economic growth and preserves its natural and cultural heritage by taking a comprehensive approach that engages the government, commercial sector, and local communities. Successful implementation of sustainable tourism practices necessitates the presence of comprehensive policies, stringent enforcement mechanisms, and active engagement from all parties involved. Future research should prioritise the development of novel solutions to tackle the stated difficulties and closely assess the lasting effects of sustainable tourism projects. By implementing coordinated initiatives, Fiji has the potential to serve as a prominent model for effectively managing the growth of

tourism while prioritising environmental conservation and the welfare of local communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Strengthen local supply chains and promote local ownership to reduce economic leakage and enhance the multiplier effect of tourism spending.
2. Invest in innovative waste management solutions and expand marine conservation efforts beyond protected areas.
3. Develop more nuanced approaches to cultural tourism that prioritize community agency and authentic cultural exchange.
4. Enhance support mechanisms for small-scale operators to implement sustainable practices, including targeted training and financial incentives.
5. Accelerate climate change adaptation efforts, integrating them into all coastal tourism planning and development aspects.
6. To address complex sustainability challenges, Foster stronger partnerships between government, industry, local communities, and research institutions.

In conclusion, while Fiji has made significant progress in developing sustainable coastal tourism, the path forward requires continued innovation, collaboration, and commitment to balancing economic growth with environmental and cultural preservation. As a small island developing state at the forefront of climate change impacts, Fiji's experiences offer valuable lessons for other destinations grappling with similar challenges. By addressing these challenges head-on, Fiji could position itself as a leader in sustainable coastal tourism, setting a model for other small island nations and contributing to the global dialogue on sustainable development in vulnerable coastal

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