







Assessing Local Perceptions of Sustainable Tourism Development in National Parks: An Analysis Using SUS-TAS

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ABSTRACT

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Sustainable tourism has been recognized as a critical driver for enhancing both economic resilience and environmental stewardship in protected areas. To evaluate the perceptions of local communities regarding the impacts of sustainable tourism, a quantitative assessment was conducted across four national parks located in the Western Balkans: Bjeshkët e Nemuna National Park (Kosovo), Prokletije National Park (Montenegro), and Valbona and Theth National Parks (Albania). The validated Sustainable Tourism Attitude Scale (SUS-TAS) was employed to measure resident attitudes across seven conceptual dimensions, operationalized through a 44-item questionnaire. A total of 595 responses were obtained from residents in the target regions, with stratified samples from Kosovo (n = 325), Albania (n = 160), and Montenegro (n = 110). Statistical analyses were performed using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to identify significant differences among the national subgroups, followed by Scheffé post-hoc tests to specify intergroup contrasts. Findings revealed significant divergences in resident perceptions regarding the benefits and challenges associated with sustainable tourism, indicating a heterogeneous understanding of its value and impact. These differences suggest the necessity for region-specific strategies and collaborative policy frameworks aimed at enhancing awareness, fostering local engagement, and promoting equitable participation in environmental conservation and tourism planning. The results underscore the critical role of community-based perspectives in achieving long-term sustainability objectives within national park governance and highlight the importance of harmonizing cross-border efforts to strengthen sustainable tourism development in transboundary protected areas.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of tourism has brought increased effects on economic, social and environmental aspects. Since the late 1970s, numerous studies have been conducted on the impacts of tourism by various authors like Mathieson and Wall [1], McIntyre et al. [2], Lankford [3], Reed [4], Jafari [5], Tosun [6], Gursoy and Rutherford [7], Buckley [8], Higgins-Desbiolles [9], Ramkissoon [10], and Nguyen et al. [11]. Tourism, as one of the most influential sectors in the global economy, plays a crucial role in advancing sustainability efforts worldwide and ensuring that its sustainability directly affects global development, thereby making it essential to integrate tourism into sustainability strategies. Since it heavily relies on natural resources, particularly local ecosystems, tourism remains deeply connected to environmental conservation and inherently strives to uphold ecological balance and participant well-being [12]. Sustainable tourism development is considered a complex system that requires the achievement of many different objectives [13]. Similar to

other economic sectors, tourism relies on finite natural resources, potentially affecting and depleting them. Thus, adopting a long-term sustainability approach is essential [5]. Sustainable tourism development faces many challenges, which include infrastructure, processes, procedures, and necessary equipment. Achieving a balance between the environment, society, and the economy is a major challenge [14]. The development of sustainable tourism emphasizes the importance of communities, highlighting the regeneration of environmental, social, economic, cultural, and institutional advantages [15]. A community is defined as a collective of individuals with diverse traits, united by shared societies, common views, and collaborative activities within specific geographical areas or environments [16]. In this regard, it is evident that preserving the sustainability of tourism is one of the most successful methods for promoting community development in tourist destinations, where local people play an important role in this process [17].

Research has shown that the community plays an important role in the history of a region, which is why they should be the

main actors in tourism development [18]. They support the long-term preservation of natural resources within a specific community, as they have a closer and more direct connection to those resources [19]. Residents may observe that tourism differs from many other industries due to its unique ability to create and distribute income, fostering regional development and economic enrichment through its multiplier effect and utilizing a wide range of local goods and services [20]. Sustainable tourism can be achieved through effective planning and management led by local communities. Consequently, their engagement, responsibilities, and welcoming attitude toward visitors play a crucial role in the industry's growth [21]. Planning, collaboration, and partnerships among different stakeholders in the tourism development process make it possible to achieve a better quality of life for host communities, while tourists can benefit from satisfying services. Meanwhile, the tourism industry can make progress toward environmental protection for sustainable use by future generations [20]. In line with this, tourism development presents barriers to local community engagement, especially in new and remote tourist destinations [22]. Local communities are often seen as subjects of study rather than active collaborators in tourism development. The current discussion is not about their participation, but rather the timing and manner of their engagement. A key issue remains whether their involvement enhances management oversight and maximizes local benefits from tourism [23]. The host community is, in itself, a part of the tourism product. Genuine cooperation with the residents of these communities is essential, as their attitudes and behaviors make hospitality a valuable resource for the tourist destination [24].

All the studies mentioned above emphasize the importance of promoting community participation in tourism development [15, 16, 17, 19, 20]. Based on this perspective, which focuses on community inclusion and empowerment through tourism, this study utilizes the SUS-TAS model. SUS-TAS is an instrument developed to measure local residents' attitudes and perceptions regarding the sustainability of tourism development. This scale was developed to assess residents' attitudes towards the current status of sustainable tourism development, as well as to predict its expected extension in the future [25].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sustainable tourism development in national parks and protected areas

Protected areas and zones are unique public resources that serve a variety of societal needs, including biodiversity conservation, environmental education, recreation, and sustainable tourism development. In this context, to ensure that the management of these areas is structured and organized according to international standards, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) developed an initial system for categorizing protected areas. This system was reviewed by the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Following these revisions, the changes were approved at the IV World Parks Congress and by the IUCN General Assembly in 1994 and published as official guidelines [26]. According to these guidelines, "a protected area is defined as a geographical area dedicated to the protection of biodiversity and natural and

cultural resources, managed through legal or effective means" [26, 27]. According to another definition, national parks are natural areas designated to preserve large-scale ecological processes, as well as the species and ecosystems typical of the region. These parks also offer a basis for activities that are environmentally and culturally compatible, including spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational, and visitor-oriented opportunities [28]. National parks represent the positive impact that tourism can have on the environment and embody the principles of sustainability. The management of these tourist areas requires a sustainability-based approach. Tourism brings both benefits and challenges to protected areas, which are often interconnected in complex ways. Planners of protected areas must maximize benefits and minimize costs [29]. Consequently, the integration of tourism as a development model or socio-economic tool in protected areas, such as parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and biosphere reserves, has been endorsed in policies and programs as a necessary approach to foster an environment that supports the management of common interests and conflicts [30].

Tourism in protected areas can play a crucial role in promoting the development of local communities [29, 31, 32]. While national parks are primarily created to preserve ecological diversity, they also aim to protect the interests of local communities and their environment. Therefore, it is essential for local residents to be involved in the management of these areas [33]. Engaging communities is a powerful strategy to support the growth of protected natural sites and to include local stakeholders in the process. As such, communities are seen as key players in both conservation efforts and sustainable development, with their participation being regarded as a modern approach to managing, protecting, and developing national parks [34]. Numerous studies have highlighted the need for additional research on the perceptions of residents, as the findings show a variety of factors that are linked to the quality of life of local communities and their readiness to get involved [35-40]. Research on sustainable tourism development and its application in national parks is vast, concentrating on strategies that harmonize environmental protection with socio-economic gains for local communities. Giampiccoli and Glassom [41] explored the opportunities and challenges of ecotourism in South Africa's iSimangaliso Park, emphasizing how tourism supports local communities and biodiversity preservation. Wondirada and Ewnetu [42] investigated the effects of tourism in Ethiopia's Bale Mountains National Park, focusing on community participation and the economic advantages of conserving the environment. Benu et al. [43] examined sustainable tourism development in Komodo National Park, Indonesia, evaluating how the growing number of visitors affects local communities and natural resources. Phung et al. [44] analyzed community support for ecotourism in four national parks in Vietnam's Mekong Delta, identifying crucial factors influencing support, including favorable perceptions and individual benefits. Bello [45] analyzed community involvement in tourism planning within the context of Majete Wildlife Reserve in Malawi, utilizing a participatory planning framework to promote sustainable tourism development. Similarly, after studying Kinabalu National Park, Malaysia, Rasoolimanesh and Jaafar [46] identified key barriers to local community participation, including limited knowledge and restricted opportunities for sustainable employment. Lawelai et al. [47] studied sustainable tourism marketing in Wakatobi National Park, Indonesia, highlighting the significance of collaboration

between stakeholders and local resources. Similarly, Kurniawan et al. [48] studied community-based sustainable tourism in Karimunjawa, Indonesia, emphasizing the importance of environmental conservation and the preservation of local culture.

Furthermore, Chen et al. [34] investigated community participation in the sustainable management of Wuyishan National Park, China, and explored participation mechanisms and park governance. Sustainable tourism has the potential to promote ecological restoration, provide additional income to resolve conflicts related to resource use, increase local residents' earnings, reduce national park management costs, and create broader community support. These aspects are of great importance for national parks [49]. The key to developing community-based tourism is the efficient management of national parks, with the aim of achieving sustainable development at the regional level. Sustainable tourism oriented towards national parks can bring economic and environmental benefits to local communities [50]. The engagement of the local community is seen as an important resource for tourism development, as this process takes place within their territory. Therefore, the local community is recognized as a stakeholder with legitimate and moral interests in this development [51].

3. AN OVERVIEW OF THE CASE STUDY AREA

This study was conducted in four national parks of the Western Balkans: Bjeshkët e Nemuna National Park (Kosovo), Prokletije National Park (Montenegro), and Valbona and Theth National Parks (Albania). Located in the southern region of the Dinaric Alps, these parks play a key role in the development of sustainable tourism, attracting both domestic and international visitors seeking to explore unspoiled nature, local culture, and outdoor recreational activities. Figure 1 shows the maps of the research area.

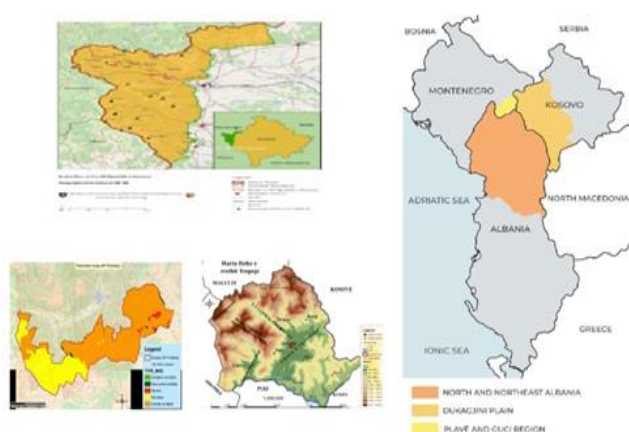


Figure 1. Maps of the research area: Bjeshkët e Nemuna National Park (top), Prokletije National Park (bottom left), Valbona and Theth National Parks (bottom right), and the cross-border area (right) [52, 53]

Bjeshkët e Nemuna are a continuation of the Dinaric Alps, stretching in the western part of Kosovo, northern Albania, and southeastern Montenegro. These mountains, with their high and rugged peaks, are ranked among the most "wild" mountains not only in the country but also in Europe. In 2012, it was declared a national park of Kosovo [54]. The area of the

park extends across the territories of the following municipalities: Pejë (with 32,847 hectares or 52%), Deçan (with 16,786 hectares or 27%), Junik (with 5,273 hectares or 8%), Istog (with 5,074 hectares or 8%) and Gjakovë (with 3,048 hectares or 5%) [55]. The number of visitors to the western region of Kosovo, where Bjeshkët e Nemuna are located, reaches 166,824, highlighting the significance of this area as an attractive tourist destination [56]. The population of this region is distributed across 47 settlements within the five municipalities: Pejë, Deçan, Istog, Junik, and Gjakovë, with a total of 276,398 inhabitants [57]. Of these settlements, 20 are located within the boundaries of the Bjeshkët e Nemuna National Park, while 27 are outside its borders, reflecting a strong connection between the local communities and the tourist attractions in this area.

In Bjeshkët e Nemuna, protected natural areas and sites have been established, covering a total area of 4,615.86 hectares, starting from the year 1955 [58]. Many researchers have studied Bjeshkët e Nemuna National Park, analyzing various aspects of biodiversity, nature conservation, and sustainable tourism [59-64]. Prokletije National Park covers an area of 16,630 hectares (41,093 acres) and is one of the newest parks in the Dinaric region, as it was declared a national park in 2009. According to the 2011 census, the municipalities of Plav and Gusinje had a total population of 13,108, which represents 2.1% of the population of Montenegro. The majority of the population lives in rural areas (7,718 people or 55.88%), while 5,390 people (41.12%) reside in urban centers. The gender structure is balanced, with 50.84% males (6,665 residents) and 49.16% females (6,444 residents). The development of tourism in the cities of Plav and Gusinje as well as the area encompassing the Prokletije National Park is expected to have positive impacts on the local economy. A growth in the number of tourists and tourism revenue is anticipated through improvements in tourist infrastructure, services offered, road safety, the installation of directional signs on peripheral roads, and the strengthening of promotional activities [65]. Valbona National Park is located in the northern part of Albania (the Albanian Alps). According to Decision No. 102, dated 15.01.1996, it was declared a national park with an area of 8,000 hectares [66]. This park shares borders with the Prokletije National Park of Montenegro and the Bjeshkët e Nemuna National Park of Kosovo, thus creating one of the largest transboundary protected areas in the Balkans [67]. It is one of the most frequented tourist destinations in the Tropoja District and ranks among the most visited areas in the Albanian Alps. Thanks to its stunning landscapes, this area attracts both local visitors and foreign tourists, who are interested in exploring not only nature but also the culture, customs, and traditions of the northern villages of Albania.

Theth National Park is located in the Albanian Alps, between the Bjeshkët e Nemuna to the west and the Jezercë massif to the east, in the Shala Municipality, approximately 70 kilometers away from Shkodra. This park was declared in 1966, covering a total area of 2,630 hectares, of which 1,680 hectares are covered with forests, while the remaining area consists of pastures and rocky surfaces [68]. To the east, this biocorridor continues with the Valbona National Park and the Nikaj-Mërturi Regional Nature Park. This park and the surrounding area are rich in glacial and karst formations, such as cirques, glacial lakes, and karst caves, making it an attractive destination for mountaineers and cave explorers. The high mountain peaks surrounding the valley of Theth, the

mountain passes, and the river valleys offer excellent opportunities for hiking and exploring the beauty of the alpine landscape. The valley of Theth (700-1100 meters) is surrounded by high mountains, rising up to about 1500 meters above. The peaks of Radoina (2570 meters), Arapi (2217 meters), Jezerca (2694 meters), Papluka (2569 meters), and Alija (2471 meters) are part of the mountain blocks that naturally protect the valley. Although it may seem like a remote and isolated area, Theth is connected to Boga, Valbona, Plav, and Gucë through mountain passes [69].

4. DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF SUS-TAS

The development and implementation of SUS-TAS play a crucial role in measuring attitudes and behaviors toward sustainable tourism. Research on these attitudes and behaviors has gained significant attention in recent years, highlighting the need for reliable measurement instruments. Churchill [70], John Ap [71, 72], Lankford and Howard [3], DeVellis [73], Spector [74] and Delamere [75], were among the first researchers to develop approaches for constructing and validating measurement scales and measuring residents' perceptions of the impacts of tourism. They contributed with methods for selecting items and statistical analyses and the development of theoretical models of attitudes and tourism impacts. Building on these approaches, Choi and Sirakaya [25] developed and validated SUS-TAS to measure residents' attitudes toward sustainable tourism, collecting data from a small tourist community in New Braunfels, Texas. Sirakaya-Turk [76] did research using data from two different groups: one group from Izmir, Turkey, and another from Turkish Cyprus. This provided the study with a broader context for assessing the validity of SUS-TAS. Sirakaya-Turk et al. [77] evaluated SUS-TAS using data from Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Their findings showed that the final version of SUS-TAS offers good psychometric characteristics and can be used to assess residents' attitudes toward sustainable tourism development in intercultural contexts.

Avciokurt and Demirbulat [78] measured the attitudes of tour guides toward sustainable tourism in Trabzon, Turkey, using SUS-TAS. The results showed a positive approach of active guides toward sustainable tourism. Arslan Ayazlar [79] conducted a study to analyze the validity and reliability of SUS-TAS in Didim, Turkey, reducing the scale from 44 to 18 items and identifying the environment as the key dimension for local residents. Hsu et al. [15] tested the intercultural validity of SUS-TAS in three archipelagos in Taiwan, using comparative models and multigroup factor analyses. The findings showed that SUS-TAS retains the same psychometric qualities as in the original study by Choi and Sirakaya [25] and confirmed the stability of the cognitive structure in different cultural contexts. Obradović and Stojanović [80] examined the attitudes of the local community toward the development of sustainable tourism in the Gradac River Gorge in Serbia using SUS-TAS. Their findings suggest that residents strongly support sustainable tourism activities, offering significant implications for tourism planning and sustainable management in the area. Šaparnienė et al. [81] analyzed the attitudes and behavior of young people in tourist activities in

the Baltic Sea countries, namely Latvia, Lithuania, and Russia, highlighting the importance of their attitudes for the development of sustainable tourism using SUS-TAS. Jeelani et al. [82] examined the attitudes of local communities regarding the sustainable development of tourism in Pahalgam, Kashmir Himalayas, using SUS-TAS to assess its reliability and validity. Their findings provide a deep understanding of residents' attitudes toward tourism development in the area. Aprilia et al. [83] examined the impact of attitudes of tourists and the community towards the development of sustainable tourism in Alas Purwo National Park in Indonesia using SUS-TAS. Their findings show that both groups significantly contribute to the development of sustainable tourism. This development history of SUS-TAS serves as an important tool for examining attitudes towards sustainable tourism in different cultural and geographical contexts. It has been successfully tested in several countries, providing valuable insights into local perceptions. These studies demonstrate the flexibility of this scale and its importance in assessing attitudes and behaviors related to the development of sustainable tourism.

5. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted to assess the attitudes of residents towards sustainable tourism in four national parks of the Western Balkans: Bjeshkët e Nemuna National Park in Kosovo (n=325), Prokletije National Park in Montenegro (n=110), as well as Valbona National Park and Theth National Park in Albania (n=160). For this purpose, SUS-TAS, developed and validated by Choi and Sirakaya [25], was used. The research population consisted of residents living in settlements both inside and outside these four parks. One of the unique aspects of this study is that, until now, there have been no similar studies using SUS-TAS to measure residents' attitudes towards sustainable tourism in Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro, making this study a pioneering effort in this field. For the study, a questionnaire was used, containing socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, education, and length of stay) and the SUS-TAS instrument, which consists of seven components, structured into 44 variables (questions). The questionnaire was distributed in the respective three countries. Participants (595 respondents) were interviewed during 2024. Their responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 5 means "strongly agree" [84]. In this research, the one-way ANOVA test was used to analyze differences between groups of residents in the three countries. In addition, the eta squared (η^2) test was used to measure the effect size and assess the strength of the differences between the groups. To specifically identify which groups differ significantly from each other, the post-hoc test was applied using the Scheffé method, which ensures reliable comparisons between group means. However, it is important to note that, in this study, the SUS-TAS questionnaire was not validated through statistical analyses like previous studies, but this instrument was used to collect perceptions of the residents of Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro regarding sustainable tourism. Therefore, the aim of this study was to assess attitudes and perceptions using the relevant questionnaire, rather than to verify its validity and reliability through statistical analyses.

6. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Demographic characteristics of respondents

Table 1. Socio-demographic variables

Socio-Demographic Variables	Category	N	Percentage
Gender	Male	321	53.9%
	Female	274	46.1%
Age	Less than 20 years	84	14.0%
	21-30 years	117	19.6%
	31-40 years	184	30.5%
	More than 40 years	210	35.3%
	Primary	143	24.0%
Educational status	Secondary	157	26.4%
	University	179	30.1%
	Postgraduate	116	19.5%
Length of residence	≤1 year	75	12.6%
	1-3 years	95	16.0%
	4-6 years	100	16.8%
	7-9 years	85	14.3%
	10-15 years	115	19.3%
	≥16 years	125	21.0%
Employment	Part-time	118	19.8%
	Full-time	151	25.4%
	Students	133	22.4%
	Retired	93	15.6%
	Currently not employed	100	16.8%

According to Table 1, the study comprised a total of 595 participants from three different countries. This diverse sample allows for a comprehensive analysis of socio-demographic factors across various populations. The study sample includes a slightly higher proportion of males (53.9%) compared to females (46.1%). The largest age group is those over 40 years old (35.3%), followed by individuals aged 31-40 years (30.5%). In terms of educational background, the majority of participants have university education (30.1%),

while 26.4% have secondary education and 24.0% have primary education. Regarding the length of residence, most respondents have lived in their current area for over ten years (21.0%), while 12.6% have lived there for less than one year. Regarding employment, 25.4% of respondents are employed full-time. A significant proportion of participants are students (22.4%), while 19.8% are employed part-time. Additionally, 15.6% of the sample are retired, and 16.8% are currently not employed.

6.2 Analysis of variables and differences

The attitude of local communities towards the impacts of tourism is a key aspect for understanding the relationship between tourism development and the daily lives of residents. This questionnaire was developed to gather the perceptions of local residents in Kosovo (n=325), Albania (n=160), and Montenegro (n=110) regarding the impacts of tourism on their communities. Studying these attitudes helps identify the challenges and opportunities brought by tourism, enabling the development of policies that can balance the benefits and harms for local communities. Table 2 shows the description of the SUS-TAS dimensions.

From the results presented in Table 3, the one-way ANOVA test shows that there are significant differences between the resident groups in the three countries regarding their perceptions of sustainable tourism development for the variables analyzed within the SUS-TAS framework. Based on this post-hoc test, differences were identified between the resident groups of Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro, where perceptions of sustainable tourism development are significantly different. Moreover, the eta squared (η^2) analysis demonstrates the magnitude of these differences, with values indicating the percentage of variance in perceptions that can be attributed to group differences. Variables with higher η^2 values, such as the growth rate of tourism and community participation, suggest stronger and more significant differences in perceptions among resident groups in Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro.

Table 2. Description of the SUS-TAS dimensions

No.	Dimensions	Number of Variables (Questions)	Description
1	Perceived social costs	8	It assesses the negative social impacts of tourism, such as overuse of local resources and pollution, and how these impacts affect the daily lives of residents.
2	Environmental sustainability	9	It focuses on perceptions regarding the importance of nature conservation and sustainable tourism development, including the protection of the environment and biodiversity.
3	Long-term planning	7	It assesses the importance of long-term planning for tourism development, ensuring sustainability and balanced growth.
4	Perceived economic benefits	7	It analyzes perceptions of the positive economic impacts of tourism, such as employment opportunities and increased income for the local community.
5	Community-centered economy	5	It focuses on how tourism contributes to the local economy, ensuring that its benefits are distributed fairly to the residents.
6	Ensuring visitor satisfaction	4	It addresses the importance of providing a high-quality and satisfying experience for visitors, which is essential for the success of the tourism industry.
7	Maximizing community participation	4	It assesses the opportunities and benefits of the active involvement of residents in decision-making processes and tourism development in their area.

Table 3. Analysis of variables and differences for resident perceptions towards sustainable tourism in the three countries

Variables	Local Residents of RKS (n=325)	Local Residents of ALB (n=160)	Local Residents of MNE (n=110)	F	p-Value	η^2	Scheffé
Perceived social costs							
PSC1: I often feel irritated because of tourism in my community.	2.0092	1.9500	2.3091	.790	.454	0.0026	
PSC2: Tourists in my community disrupt my quality of life.	2.0708	2.0625	2.2364	1.906	.150	0.0063	
PSC3: My community is overcrowded because of tourism development.	2.2400	1.9750	2.3000	2.760	.064	0.0092	
PSC4: Community recreational resources are overused by tourists.	2.2308	2.0937	2.1818	1.055	.349	0.0035	
PSC5: I believe the quality of the environment in my community has deteriorated because of tourism.	2.5354	2.0437	2.3364	8.216	.000	0.027	RKS > ALB
PSC6: Tourism is growing too fast.	3.5969	2.0875	2.2455	78.374	.000	0.2093	RKS > ALB, MNE
PSC7: My quality of life has deteriorated because of tourism.	2.1908	1.9688	2.2182	2.203	.111	0.0073	
PSC8: I do not feel comfortable or welcome in local tourist businesses.	2.2031	2.0937	2.1273	.488	.614	0.0016	
Environmental sustainability							
ES1: The diversity of nature must be valued and protected.	4.4031	4.1063	3.9818	8.966	.000	0.0293	RKS > ALB, MNE
ES2: Tourism must protect the natural environment.	4.5846	4.2375	4.0091	17.629	.000	0.0562	RKS > ALB, MNE
ES3: Proper tourism development requires that wildlife and natural habitats be protected at all times.	4.5231	4.2375	3.9818	12.812	.000	0.0414	RKS > ALB, MNE
ES4: The community environment must be protected now and for the future.	4.5692	4.0312	4.0545	22.099	.000	0.0694	RKS > ALB, MNE
ES5: Tourism development must promote positive environmental ethics among all parties with a stake in tourism.	4.5815	4.1375	4.0636	18.145	.000	0.0577	RKS > ALB, MNE
ES6: Tourism must be developed in harmony with the natural and cultural environment.	4.5969	4.0875	4.0909	21.749	.000	0.0684	RKS > ALB, MNE
ES7: I think tourism developers should strengthen efforts for environmental conservation.	4.5508	4.1625	4.0000	17.505	.000	0.0558	RKS > ALB, MNE
ES8: I believe tourism must improve the environment for future generations.	4.5415	4.1313	4.0909	14.405	.000	0.0464	RKS > ALB, MNE
ES9: Regulatory environmental standards are needed to reduce the negative impacts of tourism development.	4.4677	4.0688	4.0273	13.207	.000	0.0427	RKS > ALB, MNE
Long-term planning							
LTP1: I believe tourism development needs well-coordinated planning.	4.5446	4.0875	3.9455	21.405	.000	0.0674	RKS > ALB, MNE
LTP2: When planning for tourism, we cannot be shortsighted.	4.5169	4.1250	3.9727	15.803	.000	0.0506	RKS > ALB, MNE
LTP3: I believe that successful management of tourism requires advanced planning.	4.5415	4.0188	4.0000	21.726	.000	0.0683	RKS > ALB, MNE
LTP4: I believe we need to take a long-term view when planning for tourism development.	4.4492	4.0438	3.9455	14.733	.000	0.0474	RKS > ALB, MNE
LTP5: Tourism development plans should be continuously improved.	4.6154	4.0375	4.0091	30.265	.000	0.0927	RKS > ALB, MNE
LTP6: Tourism initiatives must plan for the future.	4.4031	3.9937	3.9636	12.482	.000	0.0404	RKS > ALB, MNE

LTP7: I think residents must be encouraged to assume leadership roles in tourism planning committees.	4.4985	4.0688	3.9455	19.55 7	.000	0.061 9	RKS > ALB, MNE
Perceived economic benefits							
PEB1: I believe tourism is a strong economic contributor to the community.	4.2523	4.0625	4.1455	1.702	.183	0.005 7	
PEB2: Tourism benefits other industries in communities.	4.2154	4.0625	4.0545	1.440	.238	0.004 8	
PEB3: I believe tourism is good for communities' economies.	4.1015	4.1000	4.0909	.004	.996	0.000 0	
PEB4: Tourism diversifies the local economy.	4.1200	4.0375	4.0909	.275	.760	0.000 0	
PEB5: Tourism creates new markets for our local products.	4.1231	3.9625	4.0727	1.023	.360	0.003 4	
PEB6: I like tourism because it brings new income to communities.	4.1662	4.0937	4.0909	.297	.743	0.001 0	
PEB7: Tourism generates substantial tax revenues for the local government.	3.9508	4.0625	4.1000	.768	.464	0.002 5	
Community-centered economy							
CCE1: I think tourist businesses should hire at least one-half of their employees from within the community.	4.3569	4.1063	4.0000	5.922	.003	0.019 6	RKS > MNE
CCE2: Community residents should receive a fair share of benefits from tourism.	4.2246	4.1437	4.0909	.736	.480	0.002 4	
CCE3: The tourism industry should obtain at least one-half of their goods and services from within the community.	4.4492	4.0875	3.9909	11.32 1	.000	0.036 8	RKS > ALB, MNE
CCE4: Tourism initiatives must contribute to community improvement funds.	4.3600	4.1000	4.0364	5.386	.005	0.017 8	RKS > ALB, MNE
CCE5: Community residents should be given more opportunities to invest in tourism development.	4.3446	4.1437	4.0091	4.840	.008	0.016 0	RKS > MNE
Ensuring visitor satisfaction							
EVS1: Tourist businesses must monitor visitor satisfaction.	4.4092	4.0688	4.0455	9.025	.000	0.029 5	RKS > ALB, MNE
EVS2: The tourism industry must ensure good quality tourism experiences for visitors.	4.4738	4.1250	4.0273	11.08 6	.000	0.036 1	RKS > ALB, MNE
EVS3: It is the responsibility of tourist businesses to meet visitor needs.	4.5292	4.1500	4.0727	13.52 9	.000	0.043 7	RKS > ALB, MNE
EVS4: Community attractiveness is a core element of ecological "appeal" for visitors.	4.4308	4.1063	4.0000	10.57 8	.000	0.034 5	RKS > ALB, MNE
Maximizing community participation							
MCP1: Tourism decisions must be made by all in communities regardless of a person's background.	4.6708	4.3563	4.1545	19.19 2	.000	0.060 8	RKS > ALB, MNE
MCP2: Full participation in tourism development management by everyone in the community is a must for successful tourism development.	4.7169	4.3312	4.0091	32.20 4	.000	0.098 1	RKS > ALB, MNE; ALB > MNE
MCP3: Community residents should have the opportunity to be involved in tourism development management.	4.4400	4.2875	4.0727	6.055	.002	0.020 0	RKS > MNE
MCP4: Sometimes, it is acceptable to exclude a community's residents from tourism development decisions.	2.6000	4.1063	2.5727	74.51 7	.000	0.201 1	ALB > RKS, MNE

Note: RKS, ALB, and MNE indicate Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro, respectively.

a) Social cost: Residents' attitude towards the perceived impact of tourism development

ANOVA shows that the perception of the social costs of tourism among residents of Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro does not differ significantly for most indicators, as the p-values are above the statistical significance threshold ($p > 0.05$) and the effect size is small ($\eta^2 < 0.01$). For example, no

significant differences were identified in the perception of irritation caused by tourism ($F = 0.790$, $p = 0.454$, $\eta^2 = 0.0026$), quality of life ($F = 1.906$, $p = 0.150$, $\eta^2 = 0.0063$), overcrowding due to tourism ($F = 2.760$, $p = 0.064$, $\eta^2 = 0.0092$), and misuse of recreational resources by tourists ($F = 1.055$, $p = 0.349$, $\eta^2 = 0.0035$). However, statistically significant differences were identified in two key indicators:

residents of Kosovo perceive a greater deterioration in environmental quality as a result of tourism compared to those of Albania ($F = 8.216$, $p = 0.000$, $\eta^2 = 0.027$), while they also perceive the growth of tourism to be much faster compared to those of Albania and Montenegro ($F = 78.374$, $p = 0.000$, $\eta^2 = 0.2093$, large effect). The Scheffé test confirms that these differences are more pronounced between Kosovo and Albania for environmental impact, as well as between Kosovo and the other two countries for the pace of tourism development. These findings suggest the need for targeted policies for the more sustainable management of environmental impacts and tourism growth in Kosovo, addressing the concerns of the local community.

b) Environmental sustainability: Residents' attitude towards the perceived impact of tourism development

The results of the one-way ANOVA show that there are statistically significant differences ($p < 0.001$) between residents of Kosovo, Albania and Montenegro for all analysis questions. Higher mean values for all variables were reported by residents of Kosovo. For example, the perception of the need for tourism to protect the environment is higher in Kosovo ($M = 4.5846$) compared to Albania ($M = 4.2375$) and Montenegro ($M = 4.0091$), with a small effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.0562$, $F(2, 807) = 17.629$, $p = 0.000$). Similarly, for the importance of community protection for the future, Kosovo has a higher mean ($M = 4.5692$) than Albania ($M = 4.0312$) and Montenegro ($M = 4.0545$), with a medium effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.0694$, $F(2, 807) = 22.099$, $p = 0.000$). The post-hoc Scheffé test confirms that for all variables, Kosovo shows a significant difference compared to Albania and Montenegro, while the differences between Albania and Montenegro are not statistically significant in most cases. For example, for the variable "tourism should be developed in harmony with nature and culture," Kosovo ($M = 4.5969$) has a significantly higher mean than Albania ($M = 4.0875$) and Montenegro ($M = 4.0909$), with $F(2, 807) = 21.749$, $p = 0.000$, $\eta^2 = 0.0684$. The Scheffé test shows that Kosovo is significantly different from both Albania and Montenegro ($p < 0.05$). The effect size for most variables is small (η^2 between 0.0293 and 0.0577), except for two variables where it reaches a medium effect size ($\eta^2 > 0.06$), indicating that although the differences are statistically significant, they have a moderate practical impact.

c) Long-term planning: Residents' attitude towards the perceived impact of tourism development

The results of the one-way ANOVA show statistically significant differences ($p < 0.001$) among the residents of Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro regarding perceptions related to the planning and sustainable development of tourism. For all the questions in the analysis, residents of Kosovo report higher ratings, emphasizing stronger support for the need for well-coordinated and long-term tourism planning. The use of the Scheffé test shows that the differences are significant for all comparisons, with Kosovo having higher ratings than Albania and Montenegro. For example, in the question "tourism needs well-coordinated planning," Kosovo has an average of $M = 4.5446$, significantly different from Albania ($M = 4.0875$) and Montenegro ($M = 3.9455$), with a medium effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.0674$) and $F(2, 807) = 21.405$. Additionally, for the question "tourism should be developed with long-term planning," Kosovo reported an average of $M = 4.4492$, with a small effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.0474$) and $F(2, 807) = 14.733$. Overall, for variables that require continuous planning and community

engagement, such as "tourism planning should be continuously improved," Kosovo ($M = 4.6154$) had significantly higher ratings than Albania and Montenegro, with a medium effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.0927$) and $F(2, 807) = 30.265$. All the results are statistically significant, confirming that residents of Kosovo have a stronger perception of the need for sustainable planning and community involvement in the tourism development process compared to residents of Albania and Montenegro.

d) Perceived economic benefits: Residents' attitude towards the perceived impact of tourism development

The results of the one-way ANOVA show that for questions related to the economic impact of tourism on communities, there are no statistically significant differences between residents of Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro, as the p-values are greater than 0.05 for all questions (ranging from $p = 0.183$ to $p = 0.996$). This suggests that the perceptions of residents in these three countries are similar regarding the economic impact of tourism, such as the assessment of its impact on local economies, the creation of new opportunities for local products, and the generation of revenue for local governments. The effect size (η^2) is also very small for all the questions, indicating that the variability between the groups is minimal. For the question "I believe tourism is a strong economic contributor to the community," $\eta^2 = 0.0057$ and $F(2, 807) = 1.702$, indicating that the differences between the groups are insignificant. Additionally, for questions such as "tourism creates new markets for our local products" and "tourism generates substantial tax revenue for the local government," the effect sizes are also very small ($\eta^2 = 0.0000$), and the p-values are greater than 0.05, confirming that there are no statistically significant differences. Thus, based on these results, it can be concluded that the perceptions of residents in Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro regarding the economic impact of tourism are quite similar, with no significant differences between them.

e) Community-centered economy: Residents' attitude towards the perceived impact of tourism development

The results of the one-way ANOVA show statistically significant differences between the groups of residents from Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro for several questions related to community involvement in the benefits and employment from the tourism industry. For the question "tourism businesses should employ at least half of their workforce from the local community," there is a significant difference between the groups ($F(2, 807) = 5.922$, $p = 0.003$), with a small effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.0196$). The Scheffé test showed that residents of Kosovo have higher ratings compared to residents of Montenegro, highlighting stronger support for this idea. For the question "the tourism industry should source at least half of its goods and services from within the community," there are also significant differences ($F(2, 807) = 11.321$, $p < 0.001$), with a small effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.0368$), where Kosovo has higher ratings than Albania and Montenegro. Similarly, for the question "tourism initiatives should contribute to community improvement funds," there is a significant difference ($F(2, 807) = 5.386$, $p = 0.005$), with a small effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.0178$), where Kosovo again has higher ratings than Albania and Montenegro. For the question "community residents should have more opportunities to invest in tourism development," there is also a significant difference ($F(2, 807) = 4.840$, $p = 0.008$), with a small effect

size ($\eta^2 = 0.0160$), where Kosovo has higher ratings than Montenegro. Regarding the question "community residents should receive a fair share of the benefits from tourism," no significant differences were found between the groups ($F(2, 807) = 0.736$, $p = 0.480$), indicating that perceptions are similar across the groups on this aspect. Overall, Kosovo shows greater support for community involvement in the tourism industry, particularly in aspects such as employment, sourcing goods and services from the community, and contributing to funds for community improvement.

f) Ensuring visitor satisfaction: Residents' attitude towards the perceived impact of tourism development

The results of the one-way ANOVA show statistically significant differences between the residents of Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro regarding perceptions related to the role of the tourism industry in managing visitor experiences and their needs. For the question "tourism businesses should monitor visitor satisfaction," there is a significant difference between the groups ($F(2, 807) = 9.025$, $p < 0.001$), with a small effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.0295$). The Scheffé test showed that residents of Kosovo have higher ratings than those of Albania and Montenegro, suggesting that residents of Kosovo place more importance on monitoring visitor satisfaction. For the question "the tourism industry should provide good experiences for visitors," there is a significant difference ($F(2, 807) = 11.086$, $p < 0.001$), with a small effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.0361$), where residents of Kosovo again have higher ratings than those of Albania and Montenegro. Similarly, for the question "it is the responsibility of tourism businesses to meet the needs of visitors," there is also a significant difference ($F(2, 807) = 13.529$, $p < 0.001$), with a small effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.0437$), where residents of Kosovo once again show higher ratings. For the question "community attractions are an essential element of the ecological 'appeal' for visitors," there are also significant differences ($F(2, 807) = 10.578$, $p < 0.001$), with a small effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.0345$), where residents of Kosovo again have higher ratings than those of Albania and Montenegro. Ultimately, the results indicate that residents of Kosovo have a stronger perception of the importance of monitoring visitor satisfaction, ensuring the safety of tourism experiences and meeting the needs of visitors, compared to residents of Albania and Montenegro.

g) Maximizing community participation: Residents' attitude towards the perceived impact of tourism development

The results of the one-way ANOVA show statistically significant differences between the groups of residents from Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro regarding perceptions related to community participation in tourism development decision-making processes. For the question "tourism decisions should be made by everyone in the community, regardless of individuals' passports," a significant difference was found ($F(2, 807) = 19.192$, $p < 0.001$), with a moderate effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.0608$). The results of the Scheffé test show that residents of Kosovo have higher ratings for this aspect, compared to those from Albania and Montenegro, reflecting stronger support for an inclusive approach to decision-making regarding tourism. Additionally, for the question "full community participation in the management of tourism development is essential for its success," a significant difference was observed ($F(2, 807) = 32.204$, $p < 0.001$), with a moderate effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.0981$). Residents of Kosovo again rate the need for full participation higher than those from

Albania and Montenegro, while residents of Albania rate it higher than those from Montenegro. For the question "residents should have the opportunity to be involved in tourism development management," a small difference was observed ($F(2, 807) = 6.055$, $p = 0.002$), where residents of Kosovo rate it higher than those from Montenegro. Finally, for the question "sometimes, it is acceptable to exclude residents from decision-making about tourism development," a very large difference was found ($F(2, 807) = 74.517$, $p < 0.001$), with a large effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.2011$), where residents of Albania express a higher tendency to accept the exclusion of certain groups from decision-making compared to those from Kosovo and Montenegro. The overall summary shows that the residents of Kosovo favor a broader and more equal inclusion of all individuals in the decision-making processes for tourism development, while those of Albania are more inclined to support the possibility of excluding certain groups from these processes.

7. CONCLUSION

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the residents' perceptions regarding the sustainable development of tourism in four national parks of the Western Balkans: Bjeshkët e Nemuna National Park in Kosovo, Prokletije National Park in Montenegro, as well as Valbona National Park and Theth National Park in Albania. These parks, located in the southern part of the Dinaric Alps, are distinguished by their rich biodiversity and the natural beauty they offer. The study was conducted using SUS-TAS to assess the residents' attitudes towards sustainable tourism in these areas. The findings of the study indicate that residents of Kosovo have a higher perception of the economic benefits of tourism and the importance of community participation in its development compared to residents of Montenegro and Albania. The results also suggest that residents of Kosovo are more aware of the positive impacts of tourism and support the development of sustainable tourism, emphasizing aspects such as ensuring quality experiences for visitors and engaging local resources. This different perception reflects the impact of national factors, as shown by the eta squared analysis, where the differences between the studied groups suggest that local factors have a significant influence on residents' attitudes and perceptions regarding the development of tourism.

Moreover, previous studies of SUS-TAS, including those by Choi and Sirakaya [25], Zhang et al. [50], Hsu et al. [15], Sirakaya-Turk et al. [76], Avcıkurt and Demirbulut [78], Arslan Ayazlar [79], and Šaparnienė et al. [81], have confirmed its validity and reliability in different cultural and geographical contexts. These studies validate that SUS-TAS is a powerful tool for assessing residents' attitudes towards sustainable tourism and identifying key factors that influence tourism development at the local level. By using this instrument, this study contributes to enhancing the understanding of local perceptions and provides valuable implications for the planning and management of sustainable tourism in national parks. The findings suggest that to ensure sustainable tourism development, it is essential to consider the active engagement of the community and support for the inclusion of local resources, thereby ensuring a sustainable balance between economic development and the preservation of the natural environment [42, 44, 50, 51]. Therefore, in line with the findings, policymakers from the three countries

should develop and implement community-based tourism strategies that ensure the active involvement of the local community in decision-making processes, particularly in national parks. These strategies should focus on creating inclusive frameworks that promote the engagement of residents, offer training and professional development opportunities, and ensure that tourism initiatives are aligned with the needs and interests of the community, while also contributing to environmental protection and the preservation of protected natural resources.

This study is significant as it is one of the first to use SUS-TAS in Albania, Montenegro, and Kosovo, particularly in these national parks. It provides valuable insights into assessing local residents' attitudes towards sustainable tourism in this region, contributing to the development of more sustainable and inclusive tourism.

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