



An Analysis of the Challenges and Opportunities of Tourism in Balkh Province: Approaches to Development and Management

Mohammad Rasool Manawi^{1*}; Hassan Rasuli²; Shoaib Noori¹

¹Department of Development Management, Faculty of Public Policy and Administration, Balkh University, Afghanistan

²Department of Public Policy, Faculty of Public Policy and Administration, Balkh University, Afghanistan

*Corresponding Email: rasool.manawi@gmail.com, Phone Number: +93 795066690

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Abstract

Balkh Province is recognized as one of Afghanistan's key tourism regions due to its rich historical heritage and diverse cultural and natural attractions. This study aimed to examine the challenges and opportunities for tourism development in the province. A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted based on semi-structured interviews with eight tourism specialists, and the data were analyzed using MAXQDA. The findings indicate that major attractions such as the Shrine of Hazrat Ali, the Mausoleum of Mawlana, the Nine-Domed Masjid, the Qosh Tepa Canal, and the Amu River provide significant tourism potential. However, weak infrastructure, limited marketing, negative international perceptions of Afghanistan, and political instability constrain development. Key enabling factors include Balkh's strategic geographic position and inter-institutional collaboration. The study concludes that sustainable tourism development in Balkh requires infrastructure investment, targeted promotion, community participation, heritage conservation, establishment of protected areas, and the adoption of renewable energy. These measures can strengthen local economic growth, generate employment, and reinforce the region's cultural identity.

Keywords: Approaches, Balkh Province, Challenges, Development, Opportunities, Tourism.

Introduction

Tourism is often described as an "invisible export," the tourism sector significantly contributes to national income, international exchanges, and socio-cultural interaction (Fruzan, 2023). According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO), tourism now stands as the third-largest revenue-generating sector globally, following oil and automotive industries, and is projected to assume an even more dominant role in the world economy. For developing countries, many of which face high unemployment, limited foreign exchange reserves and dependency on single-product economies, tourism offers an important pathway for economic diversification, job creation and sustainable development (Rafiei Darani & Barati, 2015).

Beyond its economic contributions, tourism promotes cultural dialogue, mutual understanding, and global peace, earning the characterization of a "smokeless industry" due to its ability to foster development without heavy environmental destruction (Khaleeq, 2020). Modern tourism encompasses a wide spectrum cultural, religious, medical, eco-tourism and adventure tourism each contributing to regional identity formation, social welfare and inclusive growth (Waisi, 2017). Effective tourism management, especially in regions with substantial heritage and natural resources, requires coordinated planning, coherent policy frameworks, and stakeholder collaboration that integrate scientific approaches with creative and data-driven strategies (Fomenko, 2020).

Although tourism is often portrayed as a contemporary phenomenon, historical accounts show that travel has long been an integral part of human civilization. From ancient pilgrimage journeys to commercial and cultural exchanges during medieval eras, travel has shaped collective identities, transmitted knowledge and strengthened inter-societal relations (Khachaki & Behnam, 2008). After World War II, tourism experienced a profound transformation driven by urbanization, improved transportation, rising public awareness and regulatory reforms evolving into a defining symbol of modern society (Azimi, 2015). Contemporary definitions emphasize tourism as a multidimensional activity involving travel outside one's usual environment for leisure, business or cultural purposes without intent to generate income at the destination (WTO, 1991; Urry, 2003, 2005). The phenomenon consists of complex interactions among tourists, host communities, government institutions and service providers and influences economic development, cultural preservation and environmental sustainability (Aghajani & Faraji Rad, 2009).

Despite its global prominence, many developing countries, including Afghanistan, have struggled to leverage tourism for national development. Persistent infrastructural deficiencies, political instability, insufficient promotion and limited human resource capacity have constrained tourism's potential. This challenge is paradoxical in a country rich in natural landscapes, archaeological treasures, and cultural heritage (MazlumYar & Yasouri, 2023). Among Afghanistan provinces, Balkh stands out as a region of exceptional historical and cultural significance known as the cradle of the ancient Bukhdi civilization and a traditional hub of cultural interchange between East and West. Balkh is home to remarkable attractions such as the Shrine of Hazrat Ali, the Nine-Domed Masjid, ancient Buddhist sites and the Amu River. Yet, despite these assets, tourism development in Balkh remains limited due to weak transportation systems, insufficient hospitality services, lack of coordinated policies and inadequate community engagement (Khaleeq, 2020).

Existing academic studies further highlight the strategic potential and structural obstacles facing Afghanistan's tourism sector. Research conducted in recent years has identified natural landscapes, historical sites, geographic location, infrastructure development, media promotion, investment climate and legal facilitation as key determinants of tourism development across various Afghanistan provinces (Ayoubi, 2023; Karimi, 2023). SWOT based evaluations reveal that provinces like Balkh and Samangan possess substantial strengths and opportunities, yet remain hindered by infrastructural weaknesses, environmental neglect, insufficient tourism services, and policymaking gaps (Naderi & Seddiqi, 2023). Additional studies emphasize the need for training specialized tourism human resources, improving facilities for domestic and international tourists, and adopting sustainable strategies aligned with global best practices (Omid, 2023; Faiz, 2023;

Mahmoud, 2023). Moreover, research highlights the transformative potential of social media for promoting Afghan tourism, contingent upon addressing infrastructural and safety challenges (Hashimy & Halim, 2023).

Although prior studies have explored Afghanistan's tourism potential and structural challenges, limited research has employed qualitative expert-based thematic analysis to specifically investigate tourism development in Balkh Province. Consequently, there remains a methodological and region-specific gap in understanding the integrated dynamics of attractions, constraints, stakeholder interactions, and strategic opportunities within Balkh's tourism ecosystem.

Given this context, Balkh Province represents both a challenge and an opportunity within Afghanistan's broader tourism landscape. While its rich natural, cultural, and historical resources demonstrate substantial yet underutilized potential, existing structural limitations underscore the need for targeted and strategic interventions. Accordingly, the present study seeks to systematically evaluate Balkh's tourism ecosystem through an integrated qualitative analysis of its assets, barriers, stakeholder dynamics, and development prospects.

This study is guided by the central question: What are the key challenges and opportunities for tourism development in Balkh Province, and what managerial strategies are required to achieve sustainable growth in this sector? To address this overarching inquiry, the research examines several dimensions: (1) the capacity of Balkh's natural and cultural assets to attract tourists; (2) the infrastructural, managerial, and socio-political barriers hindering development; (3) the opportunities arising from geographic location, cultural heritage, investment potential, and external collaboration; and (4) the role of local communities and stakeholders in shaping tourism governance and sustainability.

Material and Method

This study adopts a qualitative applied research design utilizing thematic analysis. The literature review section examined prior research through articles, theses and related studies.

The Introduction to the Study Area

Balkh Province is one of the most significant and strategically vital provinces in northern Afghanistan. Mazar-I-Sharif, its capital, holds considerable political, economic, and demographic importance in the region. The province is geographically situated at 29° 31' North latitude and 68° 28' East longitude. It shares borders with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to the north and is adjacent to the Afghan provinces of Kunduz and Samangan to the east, Jowzjan to the west and Sar-e-Pol and Samangan to the south. According to the Central Statistics Office, Balkh spans 16,480 square kilometers while UNFPA data estimates its area at 16,186 square kilometers. Administratively, the province comprises 14 districts: Mazar-I-Sharif (the capital), Bandar-e-Hairatan (Hairatan Port), Nahr-e-Shahi, Dehdadi, Balkh, Dawlatabad, Chemtal, Sholgara, Charbolak, Kishindeh, Zari, Charkent, Shortepa, Kaldar, Marmul and Kholm.

Balkh is among the most ethnically diverse provinces in Afghanistan, home to nearly all major ethnic groups, including Uzbeks, Hazaras, Pashtuns and Tajiks, alongside smaller communities such as Aimaq, Baloch, Arabs and others (Naderi et al., 2021, p. 658).



Chart1 : Map of Balkh Province with its districts (PaintMaps, n.d.)

List of the most famous tourist attractions in Balkh Province

Balkh Province boasts a wealth of historical and cultural attractions making it a significant destination for both domestic and international tourists as highlighted in Table 2, which showcases the region's diverse and rich tourism potential.

Table 1. Tourist Attractions in Balkh Province, Afghanistan (Naderi et al., 2021) and supplementary data by the authors.

No.	District	Tourist Attraction Name	Location
1	Balkh	Bala Hesar	Balkh
2	Balkh	Historical Walls	Balkh
3	Balkh	Hunar Dal Fortress	Balkh
4	Balkh	Nawbahar Fire Temple	Balkh
5	Balkh	Ayyaran Tower	Balkh
6	Balkh	Khwaja Parsa Masjid	Balkh
7	Dawlatabad	Deh Rawān Fire Temple and Zadian Minaret	Dawlatabad
8	Nahr-e-Shahi	Takht-e-Pul Fortress	Nahr-e-Shahi
9	Nahr-e-Shahi	Takht-e-Pul Masjid	Nahr-e-Shahi
10	Kholm	Chahar Su Masjid	Kholm
11	Balkh	Khanqah of Sultan al-Ulama Bahauddin Walad	Balkh
12	Dehdadi	Jangi Fortress	Dehdadi
13	Dehdadi	Khanaqah-e Kalan (Sufi Lodge)	Dehdadi
14	Mazar-I-Sharif	Shrine of Hazrat Ali (Blue Masjid)	Mazar-I-Sharif
15	Balkh	Shrine of Abu Hafs Samarqandi	Balkh
16	Balkh	Shrine of Ibn Khazruya	Balkh
17	Balkh	Shrine of Abunasar Balkhi	Balkh
18	Balkh	Nine-Domed Masjid (Haj-e-Pada)	Balkh
19	Balkh	Mausoleum of Rabia Balkhi	Balkh

20	Dawlatabad	Shrine of Abu Hurairah	Dawlatabad
21	Dehdadi	Chehel Dokhtaran Fortress	Dehdadi
22	Dehdadi	Chehel Sotun Hill	Dehdadi
23	Chimtal	City of Jamshid	Chimtal
24	Balkh	Chahar Gonbad Mausoleum	Balkh
25	Balkh	Mausoleum of Mullah Mohammad Jan	Balkh
26	Chimtal	Shafa Spring	Chimtal
27	Sholgara	Khwaja Sikandar Spring	Sholgara
28	Bandar-e-Hairatan	Amu Darya River Sandbanks	Bandar-e-Hairatan
29	Kaldar	Qosh Tepa Canal	Kaldar
30	Mazar-I-Sharif	Shadian Valley, Plains and Mountains	Mazar-I-Sharif

Samples Collection

The statistical population comprised experts and specialists in relevant fields. A purposive sampling method was employed, selecting eight experts based on theoretical saturation. All participants were male. Regarding educational qualifications: two held bachelor's degrees, five held master's degrees and one held a doctoral degree. Participants' academic backgrounds included management, political science, environmental engineering, literature, social sciences and related disciplines.

Data Analysis

Each interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. Audio recordings were fully transcribed, and data were analyzed using coding techniques. To ensure data quality, methods such as researcher validation, member checking, precise interview documentation, and expert consensus were applied. Qualitative data analysis was conducted using MAXQDA 2020 software.

The seven-step Colaizzi strategy (Wirihana et al., 2018) was used for data analysis.

1. Initial Note-Taking: Preliminary documentation of raw data.
2. Extraction of Statements: Identifying and refining statements and revisions pertinent to the research topic.
3. Concept Formulation: Deriving core concepts from statements to reflect participants' primary perspectives.
4. Semantic Clustering: Grouping related concepts into semantic clusters and linking these clusters to broader categories.
5. Holistic Description: Synthesizing findings into generalized categories to construct a comprehensive description of the studied phenomenon.
6. Data Reduction: Eliminating redundant descriptions and streamlining data to establish a clear, actionable structure.
7. Validation: Conducting member checks to verify findings and enhance analytical accuracy and validity.

Findings

This study aimed to examine experts' perspectives on the challenges and opportunities for tourism in Balkh Province. Following data collection and initial coding, **85 meaningful** open codes aligned with the research objectives were extracted. These open codes were further categorized into 17 axial codes, each independently addressing distinct aspects of

tourism challenges and opportunities in Balkh Province. Ultimately, these axial codes were grouped under 3 core selective codes, forming the overarching framework for analyzing and presenting the research results. The selective codes included *challenges, opportunities* and *strategies for the sustainable development and management of tourism in Balkh Province*. This categorization enabled a structured examination of tourism-related issues in the region and provided actionable recommendations for industry development.

Table 2. Identified and Categorized Codes

Code Type	Code Titles	Count
Selective Code	Challenges, Opportunities, Strategies	3
Axial Codes	Main Themes	17
Open Codes	Detailed Aspects of Each Theme	85

The table above illustrates the coding structure: 3 selective codes (1 challenge, 1 opportunity, 1 strategy) organized into 17 axial codes (main themes) and **85 open codes** (each selective code corresponds to multiple open codes).

The challenges, opportunities, and strategies for tourism development in Balkh Province are categorized into three main sections:

1. Challenges to Tourism Development in Balkh Province.
2. Facilities and Opportunities for Tourism Development.
3. Strategies and Proposed Plans for Tourism Development in Balkh Province.

The coding details for these sections are provided in Tables 3, 4 and 5.

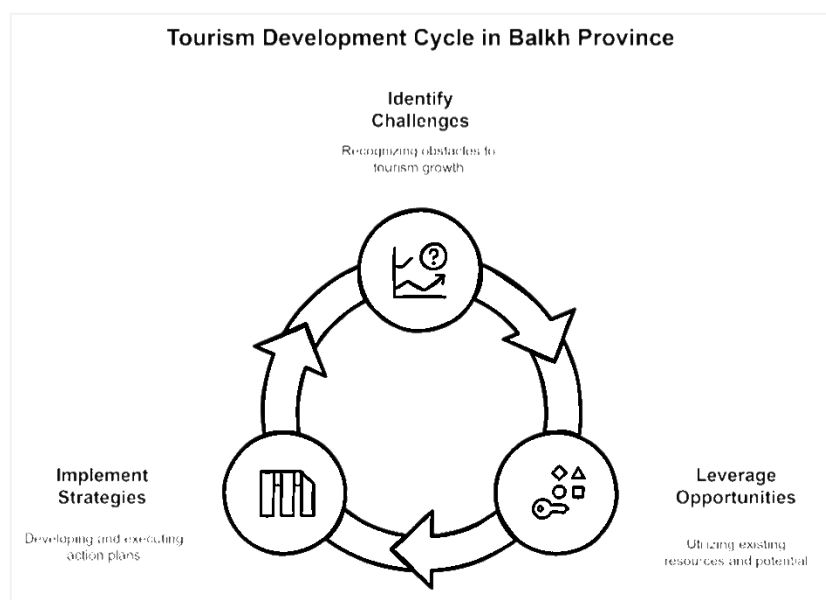


Figure 1: Conceptual research model (researcher-constructed)

Tourism Challenges in Balkh Province

Table 3 presents the extracted categories of challenges to tourism development in Balkh Province. For the category of tourism development challenges, six main dimensions,

cultural and social, political, economic, managerial, technological, and communication and environmental have been coded with 24 open codes based on the findings from Table 3.

Table3. Open, Axial and Selective Coding (Identified Concepts) for the Category of Tourism Development Challenges in Balkh Province Based on Expert Interviews

Selective Codes	Axial Codes	Open Codes
Challenges to Tourism Development in Balkh Province	Cultural and Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Infiltration of foreign culture (public preference for foreign countries over domestic tourism). - Lack of public engagement with historical and tourist sites. - Insufficient public awareness of tourism's importance. - Absence of urban culture and responsible environmental behavior.
	Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Delayed governmental recognition of tourism potential. - Distrust among foreign tourists due to Afghanistan's negative international image.
	Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low economic status of the population. - Insufficient budget for tourism investments. - Limited private-sector investment incentives. - Inadequate funding for infrastructure development and promotional activities.
	Managerial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Weak management and planning in tourism-related institutions. - Shortage of skilled and efficient personnel. - Absence of systematic initiatives for Balkh's tourism sector. - Abandonment of incomplete tourism projects (e.g., Mawlana House, Nine-Domed Masjid). - Lack of comprehensive programs and clear policies for tourism development. - Absence of professional guides and detailed guidebooks.
	Technological and Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited access to high-speed internet and digital services in tourist areas. - No online platforms to promote Balkh's tourist attractions. - Underutilization of modern technologies for tourism marketing and advertising.
	Environmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Destruction of natural and cultural resources (littering, water/air pollution). - Lack of conservation programs for historical site restoration. - Climate change and water scarcity. - Overexploitation of groundwater. - Non-compliance with environmental regulations in urban areas.

Note: Balkh Province, with its rich historical and cultural attractions, holds significant potential for tourism development. However, numerous challenges hinder progress. Cultural and social challenges include the lack of public engagement with

historical sites and insufficient awareness of tourism’s importance which complicates efforts to attract domestic and international tourists. **Economic challenges** such as the population’s low economic status, limited budget allocations for tourism investment and the absence of effective private-sector participation models further restrict industry growth. Additionally, managerial weaknesses in planning in tourism institutions, a shortage of skilled personnel, and incomplete tourism projects pose critical barriers.

Tourism Opportunities in Balkh Province

Table 4 presents the extracted categories of facilities and opportunities for tourism development in Balkh Province. For the category of tourism development opportunities, six main facilities and amenities, tourist attractions, infrastructure, cultural and social, economic, marketing, and promotion have been coded with 25 open codes based on the findings from Table 4.

Table 4. Open, Axial and Selective Coding (Identified Concepts) for the Category of Tourism Development Facilities and Opportunities in Balkh Province Based on Expert Interviews

Selective Codes	Axial Codes	Open Codes
Facilities and Opportunities for Tourism Development in Balkh Province	Facilities and Amenities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Availability of diverse hotels and restaurants in Mazar-e-Sharif. - Affordable prices for accommodation and tourism services. - Potential to establish new facilities such as recreational parks and shopping centers.
	Tourist Attractions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Historical and religious landmarks (e.g., Shrine of Hazrat Ali, Khanqah of Mawlana, Nine-Domed Masjid, Ayyaran Tower). - Natural attractions (Qush Tapa Canal, Amu Darya River, Bandar-e Hairatan Sandbanks, Khwaja Sikandar Spring, Shadian Plains).
	Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strategic geographic location bordering regional countries. - Presence of major regional organizations (e.g., UNESCO, Aga Khan Foundation). - Potential for sustainable infrastructure development (recycling systems, green public transportation).
	Cultural and Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Culture of hospitality and warm reception of tourists. - Rich cultural heritage and traditions of Balkh. - Local handicrafts (carpet weaving, pottery, embroidery). - Traditional foods and sweets. - Ancient and cultural festivals. - Foreign tourists' interest in Afghan culture. - Traditional and historical architecture (e.g., Bala Hesar Fortress, Khwaja Parsa Masjid, Ayyaran Tower). - Opportunities for local community involvement in tourism services (handicrafts, local cuisine, guided tours).
	Marketing and Promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Leveraging social media and digital platforms to promote tourist attractions. - Hosting international conferences and exhibitions to showcase Balkh.
	Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Income generation through direct employment (tour guides, translators, and hotel/restaurant staff).

- Sale of handicrafts and local foods as revenue sources.
- Exporting cultural patterns and handicrafts for international income.
- New entrepreneurial opportunities in tourism sectors.
- Collaboration with philanthropists and businesses in tourism projects.
- Government revenue through tourism-related taxes (hotels, restaurants).
- Reinvesting tourism income into developmental projects.

Note: Balkh Province possesses diverse and unique tourist attractions, which serve as significant advantages for attracting visitors. Enhancing infrastructure, such as improving high-speed internet access and digital services in tourist areas could elevate the visitor experience. Additionally, implementing comprehensive long-term tourism development plans and utilizing modern technologies for marketing and promotion would substantially boost industry growth. By addressing existing challenges and leveraging opportunities, Balkh Province can emerge as a key tourism hub in the region.

Strategies for Tourism Development in Balkh Province

Table 5 presents the extracted categories of strategies and proposed plans for tourism development in Balkh Province. For the category of proposed strategies, five main educational and promotional measures, infrastructure and policy-making, cultural and social actions, administrative, environmental and natural resource protection have been coded with 36 open codes based on the findings from Table 5.

Table 5: Open, Axial, and Selective Coding (Identified Concepts) for the Category of Strategies and Proposed Plans for Tourism Development in Balkh Province Based on Expert Interviews

Selective Codes	Axial Codes	Open Codes
Strategies and Proposed Plans for Tourism Development in Balkh Province	Educational and Promotional Measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conducting workshops for tourism guides and local businesses. - Training local communities in hospitality, foreign languages, and tourism management. - Educating locals on environmental and cultural heritage preservation. - Utilizing national and private media to encourage domestic tourism. - Hiring experts in tourism institutions. - Promoting attractions via social media and digital platforms. - Publishing multilingual brochures and catalogs. - Organizing international conferences and exhibitions to showcase Balkh. - Collaborating with embassies and international organizations for tourism promotion.
	Infrastructure and Policy-Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Constructing hotels, restaurants, and tourist facilities near historical and natural sites. - Developing transportation infrastructure (roads, public transportation systems). - Establishing recreational parks and shopping centers. - Restoring historical and religious landmarks. - Allocating dedicated budgets for tourism.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Simplifying visa procedures for international tourists. - Coordinating tourism-related organizations. - Improving high-speed internet and digital services in tourist areas. - Establishing a specialized tourism management office. - Formulating clear policies and roadmaps for tourism development. - Enhancing collaboration between government, private and international entities. - Setting service standards for tourism. - Encouraging private-sector investment in tourism projects. - Facilitating access to financial resources for local entrepreneurs.
Cultural and Social Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hosting cultural festivals and events to attract tourists. - Supporting local handicrafts and cuisine as income sources. - Encouraging community participation in tourism services. - Promoting respectful treatment of tourists by locals and officials. - Training local guides to enhance service quality. - Strengthening cultural exchange between locals and tourists. - Streamlining tourist visa processes and reducing bureaucratic barriers.
Administrative Measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Providing high-quality services (e.g., professional guides, healthcare and welfare). - Implementing online reservation systems to facilitate travel planning.
Environmental and Natural Resource Protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enforcing regulations to prevent damage to historical and natural sites. - Establishing protected zones for cultural and natural attractions. - Educating locals on environmental and heritage conservation. - Promoting eco-friendly tourism practices.

Note: To address the identified challenges in Balkh Province's tourism development, practical and strategic measures are essential. For instance, cultural and social challenges can be mitigated through educational programs to raise awareness about tourism's importance and heritage preservation. Economic challenges require attracting domestic and foreign investments via financial incentives and streamlined regulations for private-sector engagement. Strengthening management and planning in tourism institutions alongside training specialized personnel are critical steps. Modern technologies for marketing attractions can significantly boost tourist influx and industry growth. By integrating these strategies, Balkh Province can overcome barriers and emerge as a sustainable tourism hub.

Discussion

Balkh Province, with its profound historical legacy and diverse cultural and natural resources, demonstrates considerable tourism potential. The findings confirm that attractions such as the Shrine of Hazrat Ali, Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi Khanqah, Nine-Domed Masjid, as well as natural assets like the Amu Darya River and Qosh Tepa Canal, create a strong foundation for destination attractiveness. Consistent with Naderi et al. (2023) and Mahmoud (2023), the study reaffirms that historical authenticity and natural

diversity significantly enhance destination appeal. However, unlike prior research that predominantly emphasized potential, this study reveals a more complex reality in which structural and managerial constraints significantly limit the conversion of potential into performance.

While previous studies (e.g., Shojaei & Abedi, 2023; Karimi, 2023) largely attribute tourism stagnation to infrastructure deficiencies, this study expands the discussion by demonstrating that institutional fragmentation, weak destination governance, and image-related challenges are equally influential. The findings suggest that infrastructure alone is not sufficient; coordinated destination management and strategic branding are necessary to create a competitive tourism system.

Similarly, Hashimy and Halim (2023) highlight social media as a promotional tool; however, the present findings indicate that digital marketing without parallel improvements in service quality and accessibility may produce limited long-term results. Therefore, this study critically argues that marketing must be integrated within a broader destination development framework rather than treated as an isolated intervention.

The findings indicate that Balkh's tourism challenges stem primarily from weak infrastructure, ineffective promotion, and institutional fragmentation. Limited transportation networks, inadequate accommodation facilities, and insufficient visitor services reflect prolonged political instability, low public investment, and the absence of an integrated tourism master plan. In addition, Afghanistan's negative international image, shaped by global media narratives reinforces perceived risk and discourages travel, while the lack of professional branding further weakens destination competitiveness. Bureaucratic complexity and overlapping institutional mandates also hinder investment and coordination, revealing deficiencies in destination governance structures.

From a SWOT perspective, Balkh possesses significant strengths, including rich cultural heritage, strategic location, and strong community hospitality, alongside opportunities such as cultural events and international partnerships. However, infrastructure gaps, limited marketing capacity, and security perceptions constrain these advantages. Sustainable growth therefore, requires leveraging internal strengths while systematically addressing structural weaknesses.

Consistent with Destination Management Theory, effective tourism development depends on coordinated planning, stakeholder integration, and strategic branding. The current fragmented system limits synergy among public institutions, private investors, and local communities, suggesting the need for a centralized Destination Management Organization (DMO). Moreover, in line with Community-Based Tourism principles, structured community participation is essential to ensure equitable benefit distribution and maintain authenticity.

Overall, the study supports a phased and balanced development approach. Infrastructure improvement, branding strategies, and international collaboration (e.g., with organizations such as UNESCO) should progress incrementally to ensure environmental protection, cultural preservation, and long-term institutional sustainability. The findings demonstrate that tourism development in Balkh is governance-dependent rather than merely resource-dependent, requiring systemic coordination and sustained commitment.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that Balkh Province possesses significant tourism potential due to its historical landmarks, cultural diversity, natural attractions, and strategic location. However, the results also reveal critical barriers, including inadequate transportation and hospitality infrastructure, weak institutional coordination, limited marketing efforts, and bureaucratic constraints. These challenges currently limit the province's ability to fully capitalize on its tourism assets. From a policy perspective, the study highlights the need for integrated tourism development strategies that prioritize infrastructure investment, streamlined administrative procedures, and coordinated planning among relevant authorities. Strengthening public-private partnerships and empowering local communities should be central to tourism policy to ensure sustainable and inclusive growth. It is recommended that the government invest in road networks, accommodation facilities, and visitor services; implement targeted national and international marketing campaigns; simplify regulatory processes for tourism businesses; and enhance capacity-building programs for local stakeholders. Community-based tourism initiatives should also be promoted to preserve cultural heritage while generating local income. This study has some limitations, including reliance on a limited sample size and a geographic focus restricted to Balkh Province, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research could employ comparative studies across multiple Afghan provinces, use larger datasets, and apply mixed-method approaches to gain deeper insights into sustainable tourism development in Afghanistan. Overall, the results suggest that with strategic planning and effective stakeholder collaboration, tourism can contribute significantly to economic growth, employment generation, and cultural preservation in Balkh Province.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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