

## Ecological tourism: pandemic lessons for Ukraine

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Our research was aimed to summarize the experts' first conclusions of the COVID-19 pandemic impact on ecotourism, specific recommendations for enhancing any tourist travel's environmental friendliness during the pandemic and the post-pandemic period, and to identify underdeveloped aspects of ecotourism transformation after the pandemic. The paper consists of an introduction, a review of the scientific literature that demonstrates that Ukrainian scientists have been actively researching ecotourism in the pre-pandemic period and continue this research nowadays; presentation of the methodology, information resources, and main results of the research; conclusions. The article's central part summarizes the experts' opinions of the pandemic's impact on ecotourism and the changes that should be expected in this sector after the pandemic. During the pandemic, ecotourism proved to be a "sustainable tourism." Although quarantine restrictions have influenced it heavily, there are prospects for its rapid revival soon. Special attention is also paid to the ecologization of all tourist travels. The post-pandemic tourist will attend to epidemiological safety, so the demand for ecotours and tours with high environmental friendliness will only increase. Ecotourism will also change, involving digital and other technologies. The conclusions and recommendations are given at the end of the paper.

**Keywords:** ecology, environmental friendliness, ecological tourism, COVID-19, pandemic, tourism, digitalization.

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### Introduction

Ecotourism is a relatively young phenomenon in the tourism industry, and it became widespread in the '90s. There has been much discussion concerning this term. However, now it is defined by the International Ecotourism Organization (TIES) as: "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education. Education is meant to be inclusive of both staff and guests" (The International, 2015). Experts identified ecotourism as one of the most promising types of tourism as it developed due to the tourist's demand for ecotours, and this demand was constantly growing (Khrabovchenko, 2003), which is an important fact, and we will address it further.

The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously harmed the entire tourism industry. As the Secretary-General of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) Z. Pololikashvili and the Secretary-General of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), A. Gurría noted, "The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has destroyed the economy of the tourism sector, leading to the unprecedented consequences for jobs and businesses. Tourism is one of the sectors most affected by the COVID-19 containment measures, and given the current travel restrictions and the impending global recession, it may be one of the last to recover" (Pololikashvili, 2020).

Indeed, UNWTO data show that of the 217 world destinations, 45 % have fully or partially closed their borders to tourists, 30 % have fully or partially stopped international flights, and 18 % have banned passengers from specific countries (COVID-19, 2020). Ukraine is not an exception. Thus, in September 2020, all the world's leading media reported that Ukraine did not allow Hasidic pilgrims to celebrate Rosh Hashanah, although they were at the border with Belarus and begged in Ukraine (Hasidic, 2020). Furthermore, this is just what has become known, and it is only one of the tourism ban manifestations.

Professionals around the world are worried about the future of ecotourism. For example, J. Refish, a partner of the United Nations Great Apes Survival Partnership Programme, in an interview presented on the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), asks the questions: what is the future of ecotourism? What are the potential consequences for the reserve, its employees, and their families for whom it is the only income source? What is ahead for the very animals, whom humans can infect, and there are no vaccines even for humans? (What COVID-19, 2020). Experts from Morocco (Sidi Imad, 2020) and other countries (Fletcher, 2020; Why we need, 2020) are also worried. Indeed, ecotourism facilities and the people working there depended on them. It was their business economy. However, the problem is much broader and includes those who work in the tourism industry itself.

The problem of unemployment in the tourism industry has become too acute even in developed countries. Thus, prof. A. Kogler, a Swiss expert on tourism, believes that the crisis will affect tour operators, whose own reserves and financial assets "as a reserve" are always minimal, so, obviously, a kind of "dinosaur extinction" is to be expected (Raaflaub, 2020). Moreover, if a tourist does not need an intermediary, the tour operator is a redundant profession.

At the same time, we should not forget about our "younger brothers" who live in ecotourism zones and whose existence in the conditions of a pandemic is in danger. As we can see, the issues are complicated.

In the pre-pandemic period, ecological tourism was well studied in the world and Ukraine. Analysis of the recent scientific works of domestic scientists demonstrates that some authors have devoted their researches to establishing the importance of ecotourism in the development of the tourism industry, including ensuring the industry and regions' sustainable development (Bondar, Ganzha, 2012; Novitska, 2018; Savitska, Savitska, 2017; Tymchuk, 2016; Ulyanchenko et al., 2019). Several types of research (Bozhanova, 2019; Zyma, Golub, 2015; Davydova, Polstyana, 2018; Osipchuk, 2018; Pimenov, 2018; Teodorovych, 2013; Kiselyov et al., 2020) are devoted to the conceptual and categorical apparatus, theoretical and methodological principles of ecotourism research. Korol, Atamanchuk (2016), and Ulyanchenko et al. (2020) have studied the international experience of ecological tourism development and its use in Ukraine. It has been noted that over the past 20 years the "green travel" has become popular among tourists, i.e., instead of recreation according to the "three S" formula (Sun - Sea - Sand), the formula "three L" has been offered (Landscape - Lore - Leisure) which opened up the prospects for the ecotourism development. The growing impact of ideas of the life ecologization on the tourism sphere was quite vivid even before the crisis associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Posokhov and Sagaidachna (2019) wrote about the prospects for ecological tourism development in Ukraine. In particular, Rutynsky and Topornytska (2019) studied ethnic festivals. Scientists noted that in Ukraine, ecological tourism is one of the main strategic directions, according to the Tourism and Resorts Development Strategy for up to 2026. The issues concerning the necessity of the ecologization of all types of tourism, the transition of tourism as a kind of environmental management to sustainable development in the model "human - nature" have been repeatedly mentioned in the international documents (Prygara, 2014; Sharko, 2014). Therefore, the Strategic Environmental Assessment Act of Ukraine, adopted in 2018, in Art. 2 "Purview of Law," includes tourism among many sectors of the economy (Law, 2018).

The publications' analysis demonstrates researchers' keen interest in ecotourism problems, which is explained by both the fashion trend and practical relevance. It has been observed that ecological tourism helps to learn about nature's beauty to feel the desire to preserve it. It is one of the leading areas of tourism in some countries, reflected in national tourism development concepts. Scientists reflect that Ukraine is very rich in ecotourism destinations, giving hope for its rapid development in our country. It is also interesting that Ukrainian scientists are interested in tourism crises (Kosar et al., 2016).

At the beginning of the pandemic and containment measures, scientists responded to the tourism industry's problems with increased attention. Thus, the researchers have analyzed the transformation of the world market under the pandemic's influence and how it adjusts trends in tourism and found that this primarily concerns the improvement of travel environmental friendliness (Lypchuk, 2020; Mykhailychenko, 2020). Rutynsky and Kushniruk (2020) wrote about the pandemic's impact on developing such an essential Ukrainian destination Lviv. M.M. Furdak (2020) devoted his article to the analysis of the ways of the tourism industry development in Ukraine in the face of challenges in 2020, concluding that Ukraine should insist on the development of domestic green and wine tourism. Belyaeva et al. (2020) insist on the increased attention to the environmental friendliness and safety in the organization of hotel services and accommodation. The experts' first experience and conclusions on the state of the tourism industry in general and various types of tourism, including, in particular, ecological, are generalized in the paper of O.V. Borysova (2020).

The researchers have admitted that the most sustainable and the first to recover and help the entire tourism industry are religious, ecological, and rural green types of specialized tourism. However, both need to summarize the experts' first conclusions and identify the underdeveloped aspects of ecotourism transformation under the influence of the pandemic and specific recommendations for enhancing the environmental friendliness of any tourist travel during the pandemic and post-pandemic period, which was the paper objective.

## Methods

The paper is based on the fundamental principles of modern economics, including institutionalism, the introductory provisions of the theory of economic organization, the private-property rights theory, and the use of shared resources. The methodological basis of the paper is a dialectical method and a systematic approach to the analysis of ecotourism as a phenomenon of organizing not only the travelers' recreation but also as the one that promotes meaningful, more environmentally friendly tourism, ecologization of hospitality, and awakes in Homo Viator respect for the environment. The leading method used by the authors is the Desk Research method. We also used expert interviews, information resources of the world computer network Internet, the official websites of Ukraine, official web sites and internet portals of international organizations: UN, UNWTO, the International ecotourism society, UNEP, and OESD.

## Results

Historically, crises are inevitable, but in a sense, they are necessary because they are associated with negative phenomena and processes; they almost always open up additional opportunities for further growth and development. The term "crisis" (from Greek "krisis" – decision, turning point) in the broadest sense means abrupt changes, a sharp break, a complex transition condition of something. There are many interpretations of this concept, which reflect the peculiarities of the unstable state of the phenomenon or process when the means of achieving goals become ineffective (Verevychev, 2019). There are different classifications of crises: by the degree of manageability (managed and unmanaged), by duration (long-term, medium-term, short-term), by the nature of origin (economic, managerial, technical), and by the scale (microeconomic, macroeconomic).

Tourism is influenced by many factors of economic, political, social, natural, and technical nature. Among them are terrorism, human-made disasters, uneven distribution of tourist flows, political instability in some regions of the world, protracted global recession, exchange rate volatility, the priority of national rather than international norms in tourism (Lohuntsova, 2020). It is noteworthy that tourism in crises becomes quite vulnerable. However, it responds quickly to changes that occur, and its recovery period is relatively short. Simultaneously, the demand for its services and products is declining, but not disappearing (Keller, 2013). It is not the first time that human civilization is facing a pandemic. However, the current one is fundamentally different: the "non-infectious pandemic" came along with it (the "fear pandemic"), which is associated with the development of information technology and the rapid spread of information around the world. In this regard, several prominent tourism experts have suggested that the fear of infection leads humanity to a metaphorical extension of "quarantine" as a radical rejection of "otherness" (Korstanje, 2020), which is very dangerous for tourism because the category of "otherness" is one of the foundations of the anthropology of tourism. If it is destroyed, it destroys the very anthropological essence of tourism. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), in collaboration with some other international organizations, has developed recommendations to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on tourism. The recommendations are divided into three interrelated blocks: measures during a pandemic (crisis management, mitigation of the consequences, and stimulation of the accelerated recovery of the tourism industry). The third block is the preparation for tomorrow, in which we are interested. It provides the diversification of markets, products, and services; investments in both market research and digital transformation, and human capital; improvement of the tourism management efficiency at all levels; ensuring preparedness for crises; transition to a zero-waste economy and the adoption of sustainable market goals (UNWTO, 2020).

"The Concept Note: Covid-19 and Transforming Tourism" is also essential; international tourism organizations developed it under the United Nations' auspices. It contains provisions directly related to ecotourism: "Tourism related to nature and oceans is an important motivation to travel and source of revenues. A 2015 United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) survey determined that 14 African countries generate an estimated US\$142 million in protected-area entrance fees. The shutdown of tourism activities has meant months of no income for many protected areas and the communities living around them, many highly dependent on tourism for survival and no access to social safety nets. The loss of tourism income further endangers protected and other conserved areas for biodiversity, where most wildlife tourism occurs. Without alternative opportunities, communities may turn to the over-exploitation of natural resources, either for their consumption or to generate income" (Concept, 2020). It is further pointed out that according to the Conservation International report, the crisis has resulted in a rise in wild meat consumption in Africa and increased deforestation in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The Uganda Wildlife Authority reported double the number of poaching incidents this year compared to 2019, while in Cambodia, three critically endangered giant ibises were killed for meat in early April following the collapse of tourism demand. If conservation work cannot resume, the current biodiversity crisis could be further aggravated (Concept, 2020).

This document provides a "Roadmap" for the tourism sector transformation. It identifies five priority areas, the fourth of which is entitled "Foster sustainability and inclusive green growth." It provides for the investment of green investments, including the protected natural objects (Concept, 2020), i.e., ecological tourism's main objects. After all, the document especially emphasizes the vast potential of tourism in preserving biodiversity. Seven percent of world tourism is wildlife tourism, and this segment increases by about three percent each year (Concept, 2020). "A roadmap towards a more sustainable and inclusive tourism sector" is in Part 2 of this document (Concept, 2020). Both the title and the content of this part of the Concept Note show that international tourism organizations' efforts will improve the environmental friendliness and safety of any tourist travel.

It should be noted that there are two models of ecotourism development: "German" or "European" (tours of mainly cognitive nature which include the development of local culture knowledge) and "Australian" (recreational tours including visits to natural parks, biosphere reserves), which is also known as "a trip to natural reserves" (Borysova, 2020). The Concept Note deals mainly with the second type of ecotourism. However, since the flow of international tourists has also decreased significantly in European countries, such as Germany and Switzerland, it can be assumed that ecotourism in the countries of the "German" model more or less remained "afloat" mainly due to domestic tourism (Raaflaub, 2020), the same situation is in Ukraine (Rutynskyi, Kushniruk, 2020). Ecotourism of the "Australian" model could suffer more because it depends more on international tourism. That is why international documents give them more attention.

However, despite all the negative consequences of today's crisis, it is worth noting that the modern tourism industry has long been anticipating significant changes, which finally became apparent in 2019 when the world's largest travel company Thomas Cooke went bankrupt. It was a historical, significant event because the "empire" of a man who went down in history as one who, in fact, "invented tourism" (Borysova, 2020) ceased to exist. Thus, we can say that tourism, which the world has known for more than 200 years, is over. A pandemic will only speed up this process. The more active introduction of virtual and augmented reality technologies and the experience economy will become more relevant. The tools to meet the tourists' needs will also change, facilitated by the online society that has long been formed (Onlajn..., 2020).

Although the world and Ukrainian tourism have good prospects because, along with the spread of digital technologies in tourism, another post-pandemic trend is ecotourism; the "pandemic of fear" will remain for some time – people, fearing infection, will avoid mass traveling, weighing their desires and possible risks that can increase ecotourism popularity. It involves traveling to the relatively untouched by the man-induced impact areas. It is also aimed at the environmental education of travelers, raising the level of their environmental culture. Experts talk about increasing the role of meaningful tourism (Detusheva, 2020) and where to get "thoughts" if not in education? Simultaneously, ecotourism is good for locals because the more popular the tourism facilities located in their territory, the greater their income and income to protect these same facilities and the environment.

It is also worth mentioning that ecotourism has grown precisely because of the tourists' demand for ecotourism, i.e., an organically economic phenomenon. Moreover, since international tourism organizations' efforts will strengthen environmental friendliness, it has already been demonstrated that tourists want to travel more environmentally friendly (Schmidt, 2020;

Turizm..., 2020). It seems the very nature of ecotourism will guarantee its reasonably rapid recovery. Experts talk about the phenomenon of "deferred demand" (Detusheva, 2020), which can be manifested concerning ecotourism. Also, unlike other tourism types, ecotourism provides a minimum amount of infrastructure, which can be profitable from an economic point of view.

## Conclusions

Thus, the world experience has shown that ecotourism's essential characteristic is its relative resilience during crises and its relatively rapid recovery after them. The current crisis in tourism, which results from the COVID-19 pandemic, is unprecedented in expected losses and consequences. However, a sizeable deferred demand will be accumulated in the tourism industry by the end of the pandemic and the opening of borders between countries. Moreover, since there will be a fear of large crowds, tourism will become more individual, meaningful, and ecotourism's popularity will grow. Tourists' more careful attention to travel safety, sanitary and epidemiological situation, and the preference for more environmentally friendly tours in any tourism is another expected consequence of the crisis. A necessary consequence will be an even more significant strengthening of the long-standing trend towards digitalization of tourism, including ecological one.

In connection with the above presented, the following recommendations for the development of ecotourism in Ukraine are offered:

1. First of all, it is necessary to reorient the internal market of tourism.
2. To develop new proposals and products focused on the economic option of tourism, individual tours, and tourism in small groups.
3. To develop new eco-routes, to use advanced promotions and ideas of the experience economy.
4. To strengthen the epidemiological safety of travel and the quality of the insurance product.
5. Mastering the digitalization of services using the latest technologies.

To paraphrase Nietzsche, we can say that if the coronavirus pandemic did not kill the tourism industry, it made it more robust and certainly different. Tourism will no longer be the same as before, and it is being transformed today. People want to travel safely, in the vicinity, and preferably for as long as possible. Tour operators are being transformed from tour sellers into individual travel consultants. The industry's digitalization will facilitate this: a wide variety of routes, means of transportation, and types of accommodation will be available online, and cashless payment from anywhere in the world will make it easy and convenient to create an individual tour. Moreover, soon, the concept of traveling as a pastime will be a thing of the past – we will travel around the world without taking time off.

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