

## A Study on Sustainable Tourism Development Practices in UAE

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**ABSTRACT :** The incline of the exponential tourism sector in UAE towards the augmented concept of sustainable tourism has brought forward various reforms and systematised development. The United Arab Emirates is amongst the most popular tourist destinations in the world, and it looks forward to building tourist destinations that would draw responsible travellers, encourage eco- friendly behaviours, and preserve their natural and cultural legacy for succeeding generations by incorporating sustainable tourism. The desert surrounded economy is nicknamed as the GulfTiger due to its rapid growth and development in the region, especially in the tourist sector. This study seeks to understand the mechanism behind the development of the sustainable tourism sector in the UAE. Its further stresses on the effective employment of the limited natural environment in the country and government reforms concerning growth of eco-tourism. Moreover, it looks into the efforts of the government to successfully construct natural habitatsto drive both domestic and international tourism.

**Keywords:** Sustainable tourism, Dubai; Tourism development, Environmental impact, Social impact, Economy of Dubai, Eco Tourism, UAE; Arabic culture, Traditional Bedouin Lifestyle,Sustainable Transport, Sustainable practices.

**Introduction:** His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the first president of the United Arab Emirates and the founding father of the nation started the tourism evolution of the country. His efforts concentrated on pushing the economy from an oil driven state to a business and tourism driven state. Tourism growth and diversification was among the country's foremost and highly prioritised plans. This came up as a realisation that UAE would one day run out of oil and the economy would fall apart, if no alternative courses of operations were decided. Through this realisation, UAE opened its first hotel in Dubai known as the 'Metropolitan Hotel' which was nicknamed amongst the international and local guests as a 'home away from home'. The motive behind this shift was to ease the criticality of the oil sector in terms of revenue generation. And in the modern day, UAE has successfully come to be known as an international holiday and business destination owing to the high-class infrastructure and sophisticated service set up. Additionally, the development of tourism in the nation brought forth substantial progress in business opportunities in the country transforming the nation into an international and diverse business centre.

The evolution of the tourism industry in UAE began in 1979 with the inaugural of the Metropolitan hotel in Dubai. Then proceeded with the establishment and development of infrastructure necessary for tourism and business. However, the UAE saw the need for sustainable development way before most nations in the world did. The flourishing tourism sector of UAE was drastically set apart by two variables, firstly, the modern tourism sector which constituted of highly sophisticated buildings, shopping centres, urban spots, etc. and secondly eco-tourism sector which concentrated on zoological parks, flower gardens, mountainous activities, desert safaris and many more. Both of these factors place a heavy emphasis on sustainable practices. The government aspires to merge these variables so as to enhance sustainability and productivity at all levels of tourism.

In order to effectively run this sector, the government established the Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing which is a successor of the Dubai Commerce and Tourism Promotion Board. The tourism sector has further been developed by the implementation of domestic tourism motives which were carried out to increase local tourists and facilitate the country's economic development through local sales.

Meanwhile, international tourism rates in the UAE are among the highest around the world. Dubai ranks 4th in the 'top cities visited by international visitors' criteria. This has been led by the modernisation and urbanisation efforts through a futuristic and sustainable outlook of the estate.

The World Travel and Tourism Council stated a rise of 32000 in the jobs generated by the UAE tourism sector in 2022. Similarly, in the same year, the estimate of international visitors was said to be around 14.36 million. According to Dr. Mohammad Al Asoomi, Researcher at Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research, presented that the non-oil sector of UAE holds 65 percent of the total GDP contribution, this has been greatly forwarded by the tourism industry along with the construction industry of UAE.

To be precise, sustainable tourism is a subset of tourism that prioritises the preservation of a destination's ecology, culture, and social structure while also benefiting the community. It tries to reduce the negative impact of tourism and increase its positive contributions. UAE pioneers the most advanced type of sustainable tourism, that is, regenerative tourism which strives to actively restore and regenerate a destination's natural and cultural resources. It entails utilising tourism as a tool for environmental and social regeneration and frequently entails collaborations between travel companies, regional communities, and conservation groups. The nation has also put in place a number of steps to alleviate the negative effects of tourism on the environment. For instance, hotels are urged to embrace sustainable measures including recycling, trash minimization, and energy and water conservation. Overall, the UAE's dedication to sustainable tourism is demonstrated by its initiatives to protect its natural and cultural heritage, assist local populations, and combat the adverse effects of tourism on the environment.

The goal of sustainable tourism is to have a positive and long-lasting effect on the local economy, culture, and environment. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), a specialised agency of the United Nations, defines sustainable tourism as, "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the

environment, and host communities." The Government of UAE has created a framework for a national sustainable tourism strategy that strives to strike an equilibrium between economic development, environmental conservation, and social well-being. Guidelines for sustainable tourism practices, such as lowering carbon emissions, protecting natural resources, and preserving cultural heritage, are included in the policy framework.

A major facet of tourism in the UAE is cultural tourism. This sector has a significant influence on sustainable growth and also has an immediate effect on sustainable tourism. The Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, the Dubai Museum, and the Al Ain Oasis are a few of the nation's cultural landmarks that lure tourists. In addition, the UAE government has set up an array of cultural festivals and events, including the Sharjah Light Festival, the Abu Dhabi Festival, and the Dubai Shopping Festival. These occasions highlight the nation's extensive cultural legacy and bring tourists from all around the world. The hospitality industry in the country also exhibits cultural experiences. The nation is home to various opulent hotels that provide visitors with a distinctive cultural immersion, including Arabic generosity, traditional cuisine, and architecture in the Arabian style. These hotels have emerged as an essential component of the nation's tourism sector, drawing upscale travellers eager to explore the legacy and culture of the place. The nation's tourist sector has launched a myriad of programmes to favour cultural awareness and historical preservation.

In the United Arab Emirates, culture and ecotourism are intertwined because so many ecotourism locations have cultural relevance. The Hatta Heritage Village, a reconstructed mountain town that offers visitors a glimpse of traditional Emirati life, is one historical and cultural landmark found within the Hatta Mountain Conservation Reserve. The Dubai Desert Conservation Area is another such site that is particularly significant culturally because it was originally inhabited by nomadic Bedouin tribes.

Therefore, by adopting sustainable tourism strategies, the UAE has distinguished itself from its international tourism rivals. These strategies have changed the game in terms of popularising the country's heritage and natural reserves as well as fostering

economic growth by sustaining modern tourist destinations and the tourism environment as a whole.

**Literature Review:** Sustainable tourism practices, such as environmental preservation, social and cultural responsibility, and economic sustainability are becoming more and more popular among visitors to the UAE. (Al-Hamarneh and Al-Nofli, 2020) The role of the government in the development of sustainable tourism is of great importance and the long term impacts of sustainable tourism directly align with economic and societal development. This shift in the tourist perspective has derived from the increasing significance of stabilising economic growth and environmental conservation to bring forth the highest possible standards of living for the present and future generations. The UAE has implemented a variety of initiatives aimed at fostering sustainable tourism practices in addition to the policy framework. For instance, the "Sustainable Tourism Certification Programme," which aims to encourage hotels, resorts, and other tourism facilities to embrace sustainable practices, was introduced by the Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority. The programme rates properties according to their social responsibility, waste reduction, energy efficiency, and conserving water.

Hotels in the UAE have introduced a range of sustainable techniques to reduce their impact on the environment, including the use of energy-efficient lighting and Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning (HVAC) systems, low-flow faucets, and garbage segregation and recycling programmes. The operational advantages of these sustainable methods have been clearly visible, such as lower costs, higher customer satisfaction, and better environmental performance. The Government of UAE addressed a number of obstacles to implementing sustainable practices in hotels in the UAE. They included a lack of management and consumer understanding and support, a lack of financial resources, and a lack of rules and regulations and other incentives from the government to encourage sustainable practices. To raise awareness and encourage sustainable activities beyond the fundamental levels, it was suggested that employees and the general public alike receive training on sustainable grounds. (Al Bulushi and Saleh, 2016)

With a low density of public transportation and a lacklustre infrastructure for walking and bicycling, the UAE has traditionally been a car-oriented country. However, it is pointed out that there have been some recent developments that are encouraging, such as the start of the tram system in Dubai and the implementation of bike-sharing programmes in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Expanding efforts to promote sustainable tourism in the nation, the UAE government has established goals to raise the proportion of public transportation and lower transportation-related carbon emissions. (Gohary and Shehata, 2020) Also since its 2009 debut, the Dubai Metro has grown to be a vital means of transportation for both residents and visitors. Buses, ferries, and water taxis are all part of the extensive public transit infrastructure that the Abu Dhabi Department of Transport has designed and constructed.

UAE's eco-tourism perspective is quite distinguished from the western views of eco-tourism, Ouis (2002) states that the Emirati households have developed greatly in terms of the living standards which have transitioned from the nomadic lifestyle to the western lifestyle norms. From the basic necessities of life to the finest comforts and luxuries of life. Therefore, when tourists visit deserts now, they travel by car rather than through camels and stay in posh tents equipped with air conditioners, electronic devices, swimming pools and other comforts instead of just woollen goat fabrics and food. The eco-tourism industry of the nation connects the individuals to the traditional Arabic culture of the Bedouins. It ties the Emiratis to their identity which is the Arabian desert life. The ideology of eco-tourism in UAE is a mix of sustainable comfort and everlasting nature. The desert regeneration programme undertaken by Al Maha Resort, Dubai seeks to provide analogous eco-tourism experiences through conservation of the desert heritage and ecology which usually consists of oasis maintenance, Palm tree, Ghaf tree and other types of replantation, enhancing camel and fauna rearing.

The Wadi Wuhayra conservation began in 2006, with the joint hands of the Emirates Wildlife Society and the World Wide Fund for Nature, officially making it the first protected mountain area in the region. The conservation programme consisted of not just protecting the flora and fauna but also the water bodies in the region which consisted of fresh water springs, pools and streams. Its identification as one of the

Ramsar sites in the country enhanced its international significance and gave pathway to the establishment of the Wadi Wurayha National Park. The park is managed by professionals in ecotourism and conservation who perform best practices and follow standards to ensure the best possible conservation efforts and expansion of the region to facilitate higher levels of eco-tourism. The development of this region has been greatly contributed by the Geographical Information System (GIS) due to its integrated decision making role. (Ahmad, Varkki and Ali, 2015)

Several programmes have been established across the country to aid the growth of tourists in the eco-tourism-oriented regions. One among those programmes was the revival of the Arabian Oryx which was extinct from the region for over two decades as the last few survivors were taken to phoenix, Arizona, to ensure conservation of the species. These were successfully brought back to the country in the region of Al Maha, where they have been bred and taken care of so far. More such fauna has been brought under the care of the official authorities such as the Arabian hare, Arabian red fox, Cheeseman's Gerbil, Gazelle, Gordon's wildcat, Rueppell's Fox and Sundevalls Jird. Reptiles and birds have been amongst the other animals to seek inhabitancy in the desert region. (Seddon & Khoja, 2003)

The Government of United Arab Emirates under the Ministry of Climate Change and Environment looks forward to establishing a tourism system that focuses majorly on sustainable and eco-tourism. The three-phase mechanism has been named as 'The UAE's Natural Wonders' which seeks to shape the country into one of the apex eco-tourism centres. It attempts to enrich the Arabic culture alongside enhancing the biodiversity of the nation. Such endeavours have a considerable impact on the tourism orientation of the nation and UAE is among the first countries to constitute regulations for the development of eco-tourism and thereby sustain the nation at the ground level.

Through ecotourism initiatives that priorities environmental education and the preservation of the natural world, UAE is also promoting sustainable and ecological leisure. As an illustration, the Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary in Dubai provides guided tours that highlight the area's biodiversity and raise public awareness of

environmental issues. Similarly, in order to boost eco-tourism, UAE has established a variety of sanctuaries. The Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve is a predominantly visited tourist spot and the largest nature reserve in the UAE. It practices sustainability through the conservation of various desert species and improvement and maintenance of land by the Municipality. The tourists visiting the site participate in a plethora of harmless activities which involve camel and horse riding, hiking, sandboarding, camping, bird watching, etc. These activities promote understanding and appreciation of nature amongst the tourists. Another such location is Al Marmoom Desert Conservation Reserve which is home to one of the largest renewable energy projects in UAE, it is also a site of great archaeological and cultural significance due to the presence of Saruq Al Hadid. Further, Al Hatta Dam is one among such tourist spots that is a habitat for various animals and plants. It is a mountainous region with a water reservoir open for activities like kayaking, fishing, trekking and many more.

The Dubai Butterfly Garden is a popular tourist spot in UAE and is an sustainable and eco- tourism specimen due to the presence of over 15000 butterflies. It is a sanctuary that provides naturisque and educational experiences, that is, visitors are allowed to touch butterflies under supervision and guided with regards to the biological and behavioural facts about them. The garden has globally come to be referred to as the largest butterfly indoor garden. By sanitising the recycled wastewater to make it safe for irrigation, it further supports sustainability. There are numerous advantages utilising treated sewage water for agriculture. First and foremost, it effectively conserves water by lowering the demand for freshwater resources. This is crucial in a country like the UAE that lacks access to water. Also, it aids in lowering wastewater flow into the environment that could result in water contamination and environmental deterioration. Instead, the cleaned sewage water is used for irrigation, which supports sustainable growth. Also, it has been discovered that using treated wastewater water for irrigation has a good impact on plant development and soil quality. Essential nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus, which are good for plant growth, are present in the treated sewage water. The water also aids in enhancing the fertility and structure of the soil, which supports the growth of healthy plants.



Tourists link UAE to fascination. (Maceda, 2017) This linkage has come from the highly sophisticated infrastructure of the country along with its diverse quality services. The nation is renowned for drawing tourists with its first-rate architectural design, wide range of services, cultural and Islamic heritage, natural physique, and abundance of entertainment venues. The expansion of tourism operations in the Al Ain Oasis, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is one illustration of sustainable tourism in the United Arab Emirates. By foot or by bicycle, visitors can tour the oasis, discover how traditional irrigation works, and eat regional cuisine at the on-site restaurants.

### **Findings and Conclusion**

UAE has made a determined effort to promote its own culture and customs ever since the country's tourism industry first began to take off. Traditional Arab living in the desert is one of the most notable examples of this. The UAE has always appreciated the significance of its heritage as a desert nation and has made great efforts to protect and promote it.

The growth of the UAE's tourist industry has been significantly influenced by the sustainable tourism sector. The nation has adopted a number of approaches to encourage tourists to respect the environment and local culture, and has made a deliberate effort to promote responsible and sustainable tourism practices. To lessen the negative effects of tourism on the environment, the UAE has made significant investments in eco-friendly infrastructure, including solar-powered hotels and environmentally friendly modes of transportation.

The UAE has concentrated on sustainability while also trying to diversify its tourism offerings. Although the country has created a variety of other attractions, from world-class shopping malls and pristine beaches to theme parks and cultural centres, the traditional desert lifestyle continues to be a primary lure for tourists. Because of this, the UAE has been able to attract tourists from all over the world while simultaneously fostering economic development and job creation in the nation.

Therefore, UAE's dedication to responsible and ecological tourism has contributed to the establishment of a large and potent tourism sector. The nation has established itself as a top vacation destination catering to sustainable development for tourists seeking an experience that will truly stand out from the rest by presenting its distinctive culture and traditions while simultaneously embracing innovation and diversification.

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