ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT STATE AND DYNAMICS OF TOURISM INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENT IN AKMOLA REGION, KAZAKHSTAN

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Abstract: Despite Kazakhstan's unique natural and climatic features, rich recreational potential, and developed sanatorium infrastructure, the country has not yet become a competitive international tourist destination. In particular, the Akmola region, which has notable natural assets, remains underdeveloped in terms of tourism, and its potential is not effectively utilized to attract foreign tourists. This study aims to analyze the current state of tourism in the Akmola region, identify key problems, and propose possible solutions to enhance its development. To assess public perception, a 14-item questionnaire was created based on relevant literature and distributed via social networks. Survey questions were offered in the form of docs.google.com to facilitate distribution. A total of 503 respondents participated in the survey. Results show that Burabai National Park was recognized by 43.1% of respondents as having high tourism potential, followed by Kokshetau National Park (28.2%) and Buiratau (16.5%). At the same time, as for the attractiveness of tourist and recreational facilities in Akmola region, 57.1% of respondents answered that they are unique in nature, and 26.2% believe that ecotourism has great opportunities. Because the unique nature of Akmola region is a diverse landscape that includes: mountains, lakes, rivers, forests and steppes. However, 71% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the level of hotel development in the region, and over 50% emphasized the need to improve tourism infrastructure. The findings highlight the necessity of integrated development of the region's tourist and recreational resources. In particular, it is necessary to repair the main roads, ensure the renewal of public transport and tourist routes. This allows us to provide accommodation in accordance with international standards, provide quality services at an affordable price and attract significant investment. Strengthening these aspects will not only improve the attractiveness of the region to global tourists but also contribute to the socio-economic well-being of the local population and foster the sustainable development of the Akmola region. Ultimately, the proposed strategies for the development of the tourism industry in Akmola region should be aimed at the effective use of local resources and increasing the competitiveness of the region, improving the socio-cultural level of the region by increasing the flow of tourists.

Keywords: tourism industry, analysis of the current state of tourism, circular tourism development, Akmola region, Kazakhstan

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become a lucrative industry, generating a large amount of money for the state's economy by providing recreational activities for millions of people. According to the World Tourism Organisation, tourism revenues have grown at 7.9% per year over the past ten years (UNWTO, 2022; Alatawi et al., 2023). Tourism accounts for 1/9th of the world's domestic national product, more than 11% of international investment, one in nine jobs in world manufacturing (Mehrad et al., 2023). In this regard, Kazakhstan has great opportunities to create a competitive tourism industry among Eurasian countries (Kenzhebekov et al., 2021), and after the pandemic period most of the generations are involved (Mishchuk et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2023; Gallardo Vázquez et al., 2023; Vardar et al., 2025).

In particular, convenient geographical location, political stability, aspiration for democracy, economic reforms, diversity of natural landscapes, flora and fauna, cultural and historical recreational resources determine high tourist potential of the region. According to the results of the current 2024 year, the inflow of foreign tourists to Kazakhstan increased to 11.5 million people, compared to 2023 doubled, the income of accommodation facilities increased by 27%. (Shaikin et al., 2021; National Bureau of Statistics, 2023; 2024). From this we can see that world tourists go to Kazakhstan, the main flow of tourists is directed to tourist destinations of Almaty, Astana and Turkestan, as well as Akmola region, as these cities are economic and financial centres of Kazakhstan (Issakov et al., 2023a; Dziekański et al., 2024).

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Despite favorable statistical trends and the richness of natural and cultural heritage, tourism development in Kazakhstan, particularly in the Akmola region, faces a number of challenges that hinder its full affirmation as a competitive destination. Previous research predominantly relies on theoretical frameworks or partial analyses, while comprehensive and critical evaluations of the actual state of tourism in the region particularly regarding local community perceptions, service and infrastructure availability, and institutional shortcomings are largely lacking. Moreover, the relationship between economic benefits and the constraints of spatial planning remains insufficiently explored, which complicates the formulation of effective development strategies.

The aim of this study is to examine the current state and development dynamics of the tourism industry in the Akmola region through a multidimensional approach that integrates statistical indicators with the views of the local population. The research focuses on identifying key issues, analyzing existing capacities, and formulating concrete proposals to enhance sustainable tourism. The significance of this research lies in its ability to address underexplored aspects of tourism development in the context of post-socialist and peripheral regions of Central Asia. By offering empirically grounded insights into infrastructure conditions, community perceptions, and governance challenges, the study moves beyond the normative scope that characterizes much of the existing literature. Its value rests in the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings to shape sustainable development models based on actual needs rather than assumed potentials. Through this analytical foundation, the research provides relevant guidelines for strengthening institutional capacities, improving resource management, and enhancing the region's competitiveness at both national and international levels. In doing so, it lays the groundwork for long-term, inclusive, and strategically oriented tourism development in the Akmola region, with broader implications for similarly positioned territorial contexts across Central Asia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The contemporary discourse on sustainable tourism highlights the growing need to balance the development of tourism infrastructure with the preservation of natural and cultural resources, especially in regions with rich yet underutilized potentials, such as those found in parts of Central Asia (Akiyanova et al., 2019; Rakhmetova et al., 2024). Managing tourism destinations in a sustainable manner involves not only infrastructure development and local engagement, but also the capacity to navigate institutional, economic, and environmental complexities, which are often heightened in post-socialist and structurally less integrated environments (Zhoya et al., 2024). Dodds (2025) underscores the importance of a multi-stakeholder approach in achieving long-term sustainability in tourism. Drawing on a 15-year case study of Tofino, her work demonstrates that enduring collaboration among local communities, governments, and private entities can mitigate the risks of overtourism and resource overexploitation. While valuable, the framework is rooted in contexts with relatively high levels of governance capacity and infrastructure, making direct applicability to Central Asian settings more challenging. In the context of innovation and leadership, Zada et al. (2025) examine how social media–driven service innovation, when paired with sustainable leadership, can accelerate the implementation of environmentally and socially responsible practices in tourism and hospitality. This model provides insight into adaptive organizational strategies, but it assumes the existence of advanced digital ecosystems and institutional frameworks, which are still evolving in many emerging tourism destinations. Mahmoud et al. (2025) open a provocative line of inquiry into how public perceptions of the metaverse influence the conceptualization of tourism. While their big-data approach advances the methodological landscape, the emphasis on virtual experience diverges from the pressing concerns of destination regions still facing barriers in accessibility, basic services, and physical infrastructure. Similarly, Bekele & Raj (2025) provide a broad bibliometric synthesis of digital transformation trends in tourism, identifying technology as a key driver of competitive positioning. However, the review offers limited engagement with ground-level conditions such as the logistical, spatial, and socioeconomic realities of underdeveloped destinations which critically influence the feasibility of implementing such digital solutions.

The study by Im et al. (2025) offers a socially oriented perspective, analyzing the experiences of women in executive positions within tourism. It reveals the persistence of structural inequalities and highlights the importance of inclusive leadership in ensuring organizational sustainability. Nevertheless, the study's urban and corporate focus leaves open questions regarding gender equity in decentralized, rural, and infrastructure-limited tourism sectors. Sports tourism has emerged as a potential vector for sustainable destination development, particularly in areas with natural seasonality and ecological appeal. Sudarmanto et al. (2025) address this potential through a systematic review, arguing that well-designed sports initiatives can promote local identity and economic diversification. Yet, the absence of localized case analysis weakens its relevance for areas where tourism remains fragmented, sporadic, and insufficiently promoted. On a more critical front, Zvaigzne et al. (2025) explore the unintended consequences of artificial intelligence integration in tourism, including the erosion of service authenticity and potential job displacement. While these findings raise important ethical and strategic considerations, they are peripheral to the immediate developmental concerns in regions where digital infrastructure is sparse and human capital is oriented toward more basic operational functions. Dogru et al. (2025) further elaborate on the theoretical underpinnings of generative artificial intelligence in tourism research and application. Although comprehensive in scope, the proposed framework assumes advanced technological readiness and institutional receptivity, which may limit its practical utility in less digitally mature environments. Katsaros (2025) offers a human-centered examination of employee burnout in tourism, focusing on how change-related uncertainty and communication dynamics affect staff well-being during periods of organizational transformation. This line of inquiry is useful in understanding workforce resilience, yet does not directly address broader developmental concerns such as spatial inequality or the marginalization of peripheral destinations in national tourism agendas. Finally, Zhang et al. (2025) introduce the application of multi-sensor network technology as a strategy to enhance the value of sports tourism. Although technically innovative, the

operational viability of such models depends on substantial investment in both digital and transport infrastructure, resources often lacking in remote and emerging regions, where tourism development is constrained by more fundamental deficits.

The challenges related to achieving sustainability in tourism, present across various geographical and institutional contexts, are particularly pronounced in countries with significant natural potential but substantial developmental limitations. Within this framework, increasing attention in contemporary literature is being directed toward Kazakhstan and the broader Central Asian region, where tourism is increasingly promoted as a tool for territorial development despite persistent mismatches between ambitions and actual capacities (Seken et al., 2019; Mutalieva et al., 2020; Assylkhanova et al., 2023; Tokbergenova et al., 2023; Doshan et al., 2023). Although Koshim et al. (2023) and Moldagaliyeva et al. (2024) recognize the need to preserve ecosystems in national parks and to organize tourism activities in line with sustainability principles, their work remains more normative than operational. These studies primarily rely on descriptive insights, lacking in-depth analysis of institutional barriers, economic pressures, or local conflicts related to resource use. The same applies to research focused on the well-known attractions of the Akmola region (Mussina et al., 2020; Kabil et al., 2023), where potential is often assumed to be sufficient for development, while factors such as inadequate infrastructure, limited human resources, and seasonal fluctuations are largely overlooked. The development problems of tourism in the Akmola region, identified by Tleubaeva (2019) and Kurmangozhina (2020), although specific, generally remain limited to listing individual factors, without attempting to conceptually integrate them into a comprehensive analytical framework. The absence of systematic and longitudinal analyses, along with insufficient operationalization of data from secondary sources (statistical reports), further complicates the formulation of evidence-based and sustainable development strategies (Barlykov et al., 2019).

Domestic studies (Tiberghien et al., 2018; Belgibayeva et al., 2020; Sadykova et al., 2025) have to some extent succeeded in highlighting the institutional weaknesses that hinder effective tourism governance, yet they rarely address the relationship between local and national policies or the implications of political decentralization for tourism development. Research specifically focused on the Akmola region (Yegemberdiyeva et al., 2020; Iskakova et al., 2021) provides valuable insights into the area's natural and cultural assets, but remains largely descriptive, lacking in-depth analysis of the socio-economic impacts of tourism or the resilience of the destination. Although Sherimova (2024) offers a contemporary perspective on innovation management and digitalization, her work insufficiently considers institutional capacities and the barriers to implementing digital systems, as well as the issue of limited digital infrastructure in peripheral areas. Moreover, her conclusions tend to be more speculative than grounded in concrete practical evaluations.

A similar pattern is evident in international research. Arifin et al. (2025) emphasize the importance of communication among stakeholders in achieving sustainability but overlook the influence of cultural barriers and the uneven distribution of power among institutions and local communities. Karshalova et al. (2025) advocate for the integration of human capital and green technologies; however, their analysis is based on idealized scenarios without consideration of the economic costs of transitioning to such models. While Artemyev et al. (2025) adopt a more methodologically rigorous approach, their study concentrates on the physical burden on tourist sites, failing to integrate social dimensions or user experience analysis. In the context of digital transformation, Tashpulatova & Suyunova (2025) neglect regional disparities in access to and adoption of digital solutions among tourism stakeholders. Despite its analytical strength, the study by Ibragimov et al. (2025) on outbound tourism from Central Asia does not explore the underlying causes that hinder the development of domestic and inbound tourism, nor does it examine inefficiencies in the supply and marketing of domestic destinations. Conversely, Pyagay et al. (2025) identify contradictions in the implementation of eco-innovations, yet their findings remain insufficiently connected to the tourism sector specifically. Kanatuly et al. (2025) provide a useful historical retrospective, but do not offer clear directions for future institutional positioning of tourism. Ecological research, such as that conducted by Gafforov et al. (2024), while valuable in terms of biodiversity conservation, remains disconnected from tourism integration strategies. Similarly, Gulnur & Kamshat (2025) present theoretical sustainability models in specific geographic zones but fail to offer operational recommendations for policymakers or local actors. Finally, although Nadeem et al. (2025) introduce technically advanced methods for analyzing tourist attitudes, their applicability in contexts characterized by limited digital literacy and weak internet infrastructure remains questionable thus constraining the practical value of such tools in peripheral regions of Central Asia.

Previous studies on tourism development in Kazakhstan and the broader Central Asian region have provided important theoretical and empirical insights into the potential of natural and cultural resources, the possibilities of applying digital tools, and the necessity of adopting a sustainable planning approach. However, several limitations have been identified that reduce the applicability of these findings in complex regional contexts. Most of the existing literature relies on normative approaches, while the operationalization of sustainable tourism remains underdeveloped or fragmented. In addition, many studies are predominantly descriptive, lacking a comprehensive analysis of the interrelationships between infrastructure, governance, local participation, and market dynamics. In the case of the Akmola region characterized by its abundance of natural attractions and historical significance there is a lack of research that simultaneously assesses the actual state of tourism capacities, local community perceptions, and institutional challenges in destination management. Based on these identified gaps, it becomes evident that an integrative analytical approach is required one that combines the assessment of tourism infrastructure, community perspectives, and the real level of utilization of natural and cultural resources. For these reasons, this study has been designed as a response to the previously identified methodological and thematic inconsistencies, with the aim of providing a detailed analysis of the current development dynamics of the tourism industry in the Akmola region.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Akmola region is located in the north-central part of the Republic of Kazakhstan, bordering Kostanay region in the West, North Kazakhstan region, Pavlodar region in the east and Karaganda region in the south (Aitzhanova & Zhaparova,

2023). The relief of the region's territory is diverse: most of the land is occupied by plains, shallow waters, vulnerable dissected river valleys, forested mountains. Akmola region is very rich in natural recreational resources, here mountains, clean air, beautiful lakes and forests adorn the region's edge (Beisenova et al., 2024). The climate of this place is ideal for the creation of an outdoor recreation area and the development of a resort industry (Smagulov, 2021). In addition, in Akmola region along with natural monuments there are a large number of historical and cultural resources, namely historical towns, houses, castles, monuments, military fortifications and modern high-rise buildings attract tourists. Famous Burabai here has long been famous for its unique and inimitable nature, healing climate, as well as rich ancient history (Shulembayeva et al., 2023). Besides Burabai, there are many picturesque regions in Akmola region, for example, in Zerendi district there are many recreation places, including winter ones. Many small houses have been built on the territory of Korgalzhyn Fund for holidaymakers. In Sandyktau, several projects are being implemented to involve private people in tourism activities. Akmola region has a large number of natural resources and natural attractions such as lakes, rivers, mountains and forests, which contribute to the development of active recreation and ecotourism, which requires tourism and recreation development (Štetić et al., 2019; Pantić et al., 2022; Kadyrbekova et al., 2024). In this regard, the development of the cluster system of the resort area of Akmola region, the capital recreation area, sacred reserves and natural areas (Figure 1) will increase the tourism potential of Akmola region and improve the current state of the tourism industry.
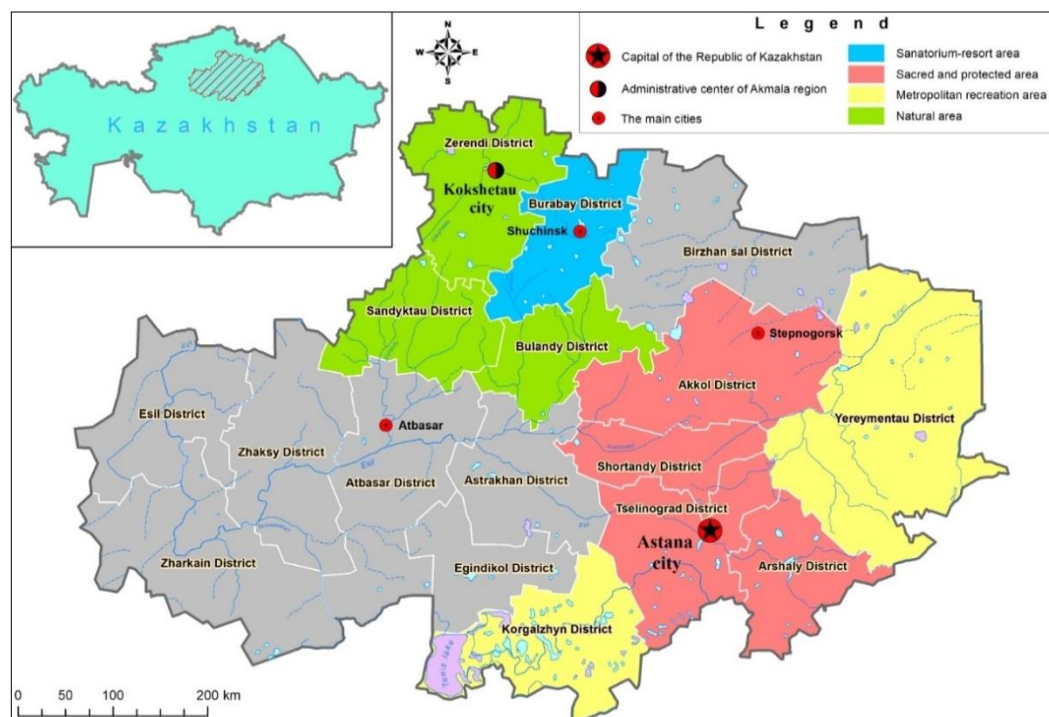

Figure 1. Prospective areas of tourism industry development in Akmola region (Source: Created by the authors)

This study was based on reliable materials from national and state libraries and scientific funds, as well as on scientific articles published in journals in Scopus, Web of Science. A total of 42 literature reviews were conducted, and valuable works of domestic and foreign scientists who studied tourism and recreational resources of Akmola region were analysed. The literature review was conducted from 01.01.2024 to 31.05.2024 at the Kazakh Academy of Sport and Tourism, located in Almaty. Long analytical work allowed to fully and comprehensively assess the tourism potential of Akmola region, to determine and theoretically justify the relevance of this study. In addition, during the research 503 respondents' answers to the questionnaire of 14 pre-prepared questions were received to find out the opinion of the society. The survey questions were distributed to all districts of Akmola region via social networks (WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram). The survey questions were offered in docs.google.com form to facilitate distribution. The methods used in the study helped to determine the level of satisfaction of local residents and tourism entrepreneurs with the quality of tourism facilities and services in the region (Demirović et al., 2016; Purwono et al., 2024). In addition, the survey provided an understanding of the main objectives and needs of tourists visiting the region's tourist sites. The survey questions (Q) were as follows:

Q1. Place of birth (region)?
Q2. What is your gender?
Q3. How old are you?
Q4. Are you satisfied with the current state of natural resources of Akmola region (rivers, forests, lakes)?
Q5. In your opinion, what tourist and recreational places in Akmola region have high tourist potential?
Q6. What is the attractiveness of tourist and recreational places in Akmola region?
Q7. What are the disadvantages of tourist facilities in Akmola region?
Q8. In your opinion, is the number of recreation places in Akmola region sufficient for tourists?
Q9. What services do you think are lacking in holiday destinations?

Q10. In your opinion, what measures aimed at nature protection should be carried out on the territory of the region?
Q11. How seriously do visiting tourists care about preserving environmental cleanliness?
Q12. What are the priority directions of agrotourism development in Akmola region?
Q13. Are you satisfied with the level of hotel industry development in Akmola region?
Q14. What suggestions do you have for improving the tourism resources of Akmola region?

The main advantage of using the survey method in the research is that it allows to directly determine the respondents' opinions and suggestions. Therefore, the answers of this survey are effective in determining the level of development of tourism infrastructure and the quality of tourism services in Akmola region. In discussing the survey results, statistical data was used to help understand the current state of development of tourist facilities in the region, tourism infrastructure and general level of service. Statistical data were obtained from the reports of the Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Statistics. Also in the course of the study the areas of potential directions of tourist development of the region were identified using the cartographic method. Taking into account demographic, economic and infrastructural factors, in what direction the development of tourism in Akmola region is forecasted in the future.

Proposals for improving the tourism sector in Akmola region have been developed, including improving infrastructure, introducing new tourist routes and improving the quality of services. This study will serve as a basis for the development of specific proposals for tourism development in the region and will help to make decisions aimed at increasing the impact of tourism on the regional economy (Chernyshev et al., 2023). The methods used in this study have their significance, especially since the survey method allowed us to directly find out the needs of the population in tourism services and their level of satisfaction. This has also made it possible to identify the main problems and directions of the region's development, make accurate forecasts for the future and propose specific steps to improve tourism (Gajić et al., 2023). It will be the basis for the creation of a comprehensive strategy for the development of the tourism industry in Akmola region. The flowchart of this research in full is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Research Flowchart (Source: Compiled by the authors)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a result of studying the dynamics of development of tourism and recreational resources of Akmola region it was found that the region has great potential for the development of agrotourism, ecotourism, ethno-tourism and cultural tourism. The Imantau-Shalkar resort area and historical monuments and tourist sites of the Ayirtau district are of particular interest to both foreign and domestic tourists. However, lack of infrastructure and poor quality of services are some of the main obstacles. Tourism experts note the need to improve roads, develop hotels and recreational facilities, and promote tourism to effectively utilise the natural and cultural resources of Akmola region. Also, respondents note that through the development of sustainable tourism with the preservation of environmental and cultural values across the region, it is possible to contribute to the economy of the region and improve the quality of life of the population. This is evidenced by the answers to the questions of questionnaires, in which the residents of Akmola region (503 respondents) took part. At that, 31.2% of respondents who took part in the survey were residents of Akmola region (Table 1).

Table 1. Residential address of respondents who took part in the survey (Source: Authors research)

Economic regions of Kazakhstan	Regions	Number	Percentage (%)
North-Kazakhstan	North Kazakhstan	32	6.3
	Pavlodar	13	2.6
	Kostanay	8	1.6
	Akmola	157	31.2
East Kazakhstan	East Kazakhstan	52	10.3
	Abay	3	0.6
Central Kazakhstan	Karaganda	21	4.2
	Ulytau	4	0.8
South Kazakhstan	Almaty	11	2.2
	Zhetysu	3	0.6
	Zhambyl	16	3.2
	Turkestan	43	8.5
	Kyzylorda	27	5.4
West Kazakhstan	Aktobe	16	3.2
	Atyrau	9	1.8
	West Kazakhstan	12	2.4
	Mangystau	15	3.0
Cities of republican significance	Almaty city	9	1.8
	Astana city	38	7.5
	Shymkent city	14	2.8
Total		503	100

In addition, 31.3% of respondents were aged 16-24 years, while 18.8% were respondents aged 25-35 years (Figure 3A) and 61% of respondents by gender were female (Figure 3B). Of all respondents, 44.4% were dissatisfied with the current state of natural resources in Akmola region (rivers, forests, lakes) (Figure 3C).
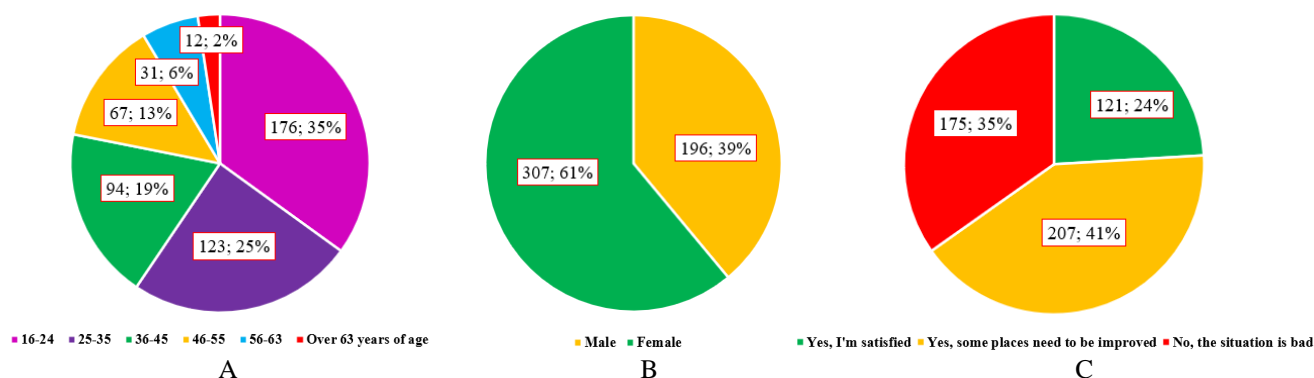

Figure 3. Information on respondents: A) age B) gender C) attitudes towards current natural resources (Source: Authors research)

The survey asked the question: 'In your opinion, what tourist and recreational places in Akmola region have high tourist potential?', as a result 43.1% of respondents gave the answer Burabai National Park. The share of those who chose Kokshetau National Park was 28.2%, and those who chose Buiratau - 16.5% (Figure 4).

In this regard, it is natural that the largest number of votes was received by the National Park Burabai, because the National Park Burabai is known throughout Kazakhstan and is a famous park, on the territory of which there are 14 lakes. The lakes of the Burabai resort area, the rivers Zhukey, Katarkol, Maibalyk, Bolshaya and Malaya Shybysh can compete with the famous resorts of the CIS countries in terms of the beauty of the landscape, ideal recreation places. These findings are consistent with the results of Artemyev et al. (2025), who, in their study of the tourist and recreational load in Kolsai Lakes National Park in Kazakhstan, also identified a high perceived natural value of the destination among visitors, alongside concerns related to accessibility and sustainable use of the area. Their analysis suggests that the physical attractiveness of a location is a strong driver of tourist demand, yet the lack of infrastructure and controlled access leads to uneven usage and potential disruption of ecological balance. A similar dynamic was observed in this study, particularly regarding the recognizability of Burabai Park and respondents' simultaneous statements about the lack of quality services and access infrastructure. This confirms the importance of balanced development that simultaneously ensures the preservation of natural value and the improvement of service capacities.
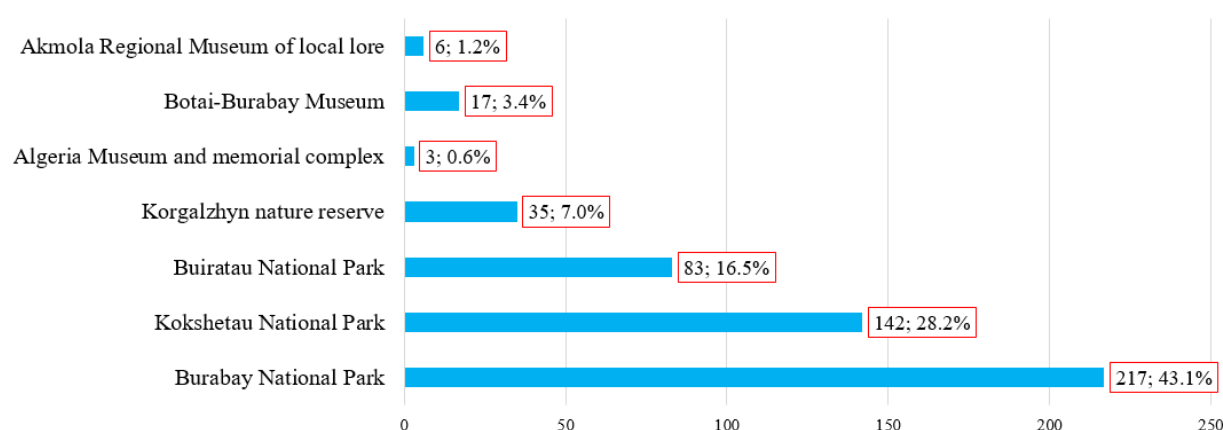

Figure 4. Main tourist attractions in Akmola region (Source: Authors research)

What is the attractiveness of tourist and recreational places in Akmola region? to the survey question 57.1% of respondents answered unique nature, and 26.2% answered there are no ecotourism opportunities (Figure 5A). After all, Akmola region has a diverse landscape that includes unique nature: mountains, lakes, rivers, forests and steppes.

These names create excellent opportunities for various outdoor activities and excursions, such as hiking in the mountains, fishing, hunting, cycling and much more (Issakov et al., 2024). In addition, Akmola region can offer various opportunities for recreation and entertainment and be attractive to tourists from all over the world. In recent years, the region has been actively developing tourism infrastructure. New hotels, restaurants, cafes, tourist equipment rental outlets and many other things have appeared here. However, some tourist sites in the region are poorly equipped, for example, there are no comfortable resting places or lack of information signs. Some tourist sites have difficulties with access due to lack of roads or public transport. What are the disadvantages of tourist facilities in Akmola region? 34.4 % of respondents answered that the lack of quality services and 33.6 % insufficient infrastructure (Figure 5B). This is because in tourist destinations the choice of free time for visitors may be limited, reducing their appeal.
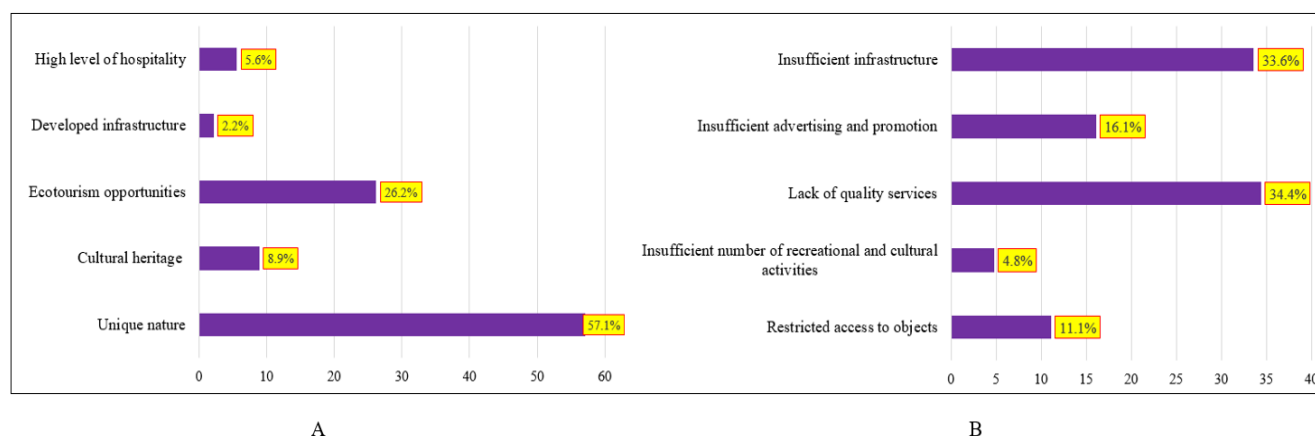
Figure 4. Attractiveness (A) and disadvantages (B) of tourist and recreational destinations in Akmola region (Source: Authors research)

Similar observations regarding the importance of natural attractions, as well as infrastructural shortcomings, were noted by Karshalova et al. (2025), who emphasized that many regions of Kazakhstan suffer from a pronounced imbalance between rich natural resources and the actual capacity to develop them for tourism purposes. Their analysis confirms that physical and landscape diversity is a key advantage, but without investment in infrastructure and service quality, this potential remains largely untapped. Additionally, Gulnur & Kamshat (2025), in their study on sustainable tourism in the Balkhash-Alakol region, identified comparable challenges highlighting the ecological value of the territory alongside the absence of informational infrastructure and accessibility. Their findings suggest that the lack of modern signage, rest areas, and access roads is one of the main obstacles to longer tourist stays an insight also confirmed by our study. This reinforces the conclusion that tourism development cannot rely solely on natural resource endowments but requires systematic and coordinated infrastructural and institutional support.

However, Akmola region is a diverse and beautiful region offering a variety of tourist and recreational attractions. Such sights as the ancient settlement of Bozok, rich in history and culture, Auliekol ethnographic museum, the famous Korgalzhyn state nature reserve, included in the UNESCO World Heritage list, are very popular (Toktarova et al., 2021; Vardar et al., 2025). The region has tourist sites that allow for hiking, camping and wildlife. These places offer opportunities for skiing, skating and snowboarding in winter and hiking, horseback riding and fishing in summer. Overall, the appeal of Akmola region's tourist and recreational destinations lies in its diverse natural beauty, rich history and culture, and the wide range of outdoor activities that visitors can enjoy (Dziekański et al., 2024).

However, the survey showed that "In your opinion, is the number of recreation places in Akmola region sufficient for tourists?" 73.2% of respondents answered "not enough" and 26.8% answered "enough" to this question. To the next question 'What services do you think are lacking in holiday destinations?' the majority of respondents (42.3%) answered that they lacked accessible transport services and guides and tour guides (37.2%) (Table 2).

Table 2. Activities to be improved in recreational facilities (Source: Authors research)

Types of activities	Description	Number	Percentage (%)
Medical services	Primary health care centres or dispensaries should be available to provide medical assistance to injured or sick tourists	9	1.8
Transport services	Public transport (buses, minibuses, minibuses) should be organised to enable tourists to move easily between different attractions and hotels.	213	42.3
Guides and tour guides	There is a lack of qualified guides who can provide information about local attractions, the history of the region and the culture of the peoples living in the area	187	37.2
Entertainment services	Various entertainment and animation such as cultural performances, sporting events and theme parties should be developed for tourists	32	6.4
Facilities for children	For young tourists, playgrounds, animators and entertainment programmes are needed to make the holiday comfortable for the whole family	62	12.3
Total		503	100

In this regard, there is a need to develop spas, sports games, diving, fishing and other activities in holiday destinations. After all, the quality of services provided for these types of services does not correspond to the established amounts of funding, and it is expensive. Due to high competition, manapol is in a situation where tourism is not developing at the proper level. These findings align with the results of Pyagay et al. (2025), who examined the implementation of eco-innovative strategies in Central Asian tourism SMEs and observed that one of the main limiting factors is not the absence of natural attractions, but the lack of functional support systems that enhance the overall visitor experience. Their analysis underlined that insufficient transport connections, limited availability of professional guiding services, and underdeveloped local infrastructure significantly reduce the competitiveness of regional

destinations. Similar to our results, respondents in their study emphasized the need for strategic investment in mobility and interpretative services to better support both domestic and international tourism flows.

In the context of Akmola, this further confirms that the region's current shortcomings are not resource-based but system-based, reinforcing the need for comprehensive tourism development planning. In addition, to strengthen environmental protection measures on the territory of the region, 18.3% of respondents consider it necessary to 'reduce and recycle waste', while 16.1% - 'create protected natural areas' and 14.5% - 'biodiversity protection programmes' (Table 3). After all, the installation of containers for separate waste collection and recycling is a requirement of the time. It is also necessary to implement effective programmes for the conservation of rare species of plants and animals in the region and the protection of flora and fauna populations.

Table 3. Main areas where environmental protection measures should be implemented in Akmola region (Source: Authors research)

Type of activities	Description of the main environmental protection measures	Number	Percentage (%)
Establishment of protected areas	Increase the number of reserves and natural parks to preserve unique ecosystems and rare species of plants and animals	81	16.1
Land restoration	Restoration of disturbed lands, including restoration of lands subject to erosion or pollution	34	6.8
Reforestation	Organisation of forest plantations and reforestation to combat soil degradation and improve climatic conditions	42	8.3
Water protection	Monitoring and cleaning of water bodies from pollution, protection of fresh water sources, restoration of wetlands	20	4.0
Biodiversity protection programmes	Implementation of programmes aimed at protecting and restoring populations of rare and endangered species of flora and fauna	73	14.5
Environmental education	Conducting campaigns to raise public awareness of the importance of environmental protection, organising environmental tours and the 'Clean Coast' campaign	56	11.1
Sustainable agriculture	Promotion of sustainable farming practices, use of biological fertilisers and reduction in the use of chemical pesticides	18	3.6
Waste Reduction and Utilisation	Development of waste recycling programmes, installation of containers for separate waste collection	92	18.3
Environmental monitoring	Conducting regular research and monitoring of the region's ecology, including air, water and ecosystem conditions	59	11.7
Co-operation with local communities	Involvement of local residents in environmental initiatives, creation of a volunteer movement aimed at nature conservation	28	5.6
Total		503	100

Therefore, these activities can significantly improve the environmental situation in Akmola region, contribute to the sustainable development of the region and tourism development. This is due to the fact that the state of the region's ecology, including the state of air, water and ecosystems, has a very strong impact on tourists visiting the region. Similar perspectives are reflected in the study by Gafforov et al. (2024), who emphasize the importance of biodiversity mapping and species conservation in Central Asia as essential for maintaining ecological resilience in the face of tourism pressure. Their research shows that integrating conservation priorities with tourism planning, particularly in sensitive ecosystems, yields long-term benefits not only for nature protection but also for the sustainability of tourism flows.

In the context of the Akmola region, where tourist interest is increasingly directed toward protected areas such as Korgalzhyn Reserve, the absence of structured biodiversity programmes could lead to unintended ecological degradation. Therefore, as our results confirm, environmental protection is not merely an ethical or legal obligation, but a strategic investment into the long-term viability of tourism in the region. When asked how seriously tourists who came to the territory of Akmola region take the observance of environmental cleanliness, the majority of respondents (57%) expressed disappointment. This is due to the fact that there are a large number of tourists who do not throw garbage in the right place and do not observe safety. Respondents emphasized that due to frequent failure to clean garbage bins, the volume of garbage increases and is released into the environment. Nevertheless, 43% of respondents believe that tourists' adherence to environmental cleanliness depends on a number of factors, including awareness, cultural sensitivity, age, economic status and opportunity. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in ecotourism among travelers, and tourists have a positive attitude towards how they try to follow responsible behavior. As one of the first steps we can mention the use of reusable bottles, bags and other items to reduce plastic waste.

To the next question of the research questionnaire "What are the priority directions of agrotourism development in Akmola region?" respondents offered answers in different variants. Special mention should be made of: creation of favorable conditions for accommodation and recreation in agro-industrial complexes (improvement of transport, hotel and information infrastructure); promotion of organic agriculture and organic production for tourists interested in ecotourism; renewal and popularization of traditional crafts, cuisine and customs of the region; agronomy, traditional farming methods, cooking holding of master classes and educational programs on other aspects of rural life; organization of fairs and festivals; organization of workshops, seminars, seminars, workshops and training programs in the field of agro-industrial complexes. This, in turn, contributes to the development of the region's economy and the preservation of its cultural and natural heritage. These results are supported by the study of Ibragimov et al. (2025), who emphasized that while tourists in Central Asia increasingly express interest in sustainable travel and local cultural experiences, actual environmentally

responsible behavior is often inconsistent and shaped by situational factors such as availability of infrastructure, signage, and cultural norms. This aligns with our finding that while there is a growing awareness of ecological responsibility, its translation into practice remains limited without systemic support. Furthermore, the responses related to agrotourism development are consistent with the research of Kanatuly et al. (2025), who advocate for the revitalization of traditional rural practices—including organic farming, craft production, and local cuisine—as core pillars of sustainable tourism in East Kazakhstan. Their findings confirm that integrating cultural heritage and ecological practices through rural tourism not only enhances the attractiveness of destinations but also supports local economies and strengthens regional identity.

Are you satisfied with the level of hotel industry development in Akmola region? according to the survey, 71% of respondents are not satisfied, 18% are satisfied. The remaining 11% of respondents chose the answer that they find it difficult to answer, because they do not know the level of development of the hotel industry. It should be taken into account that the largest number of hotel facilities in the country falls on East Kazakhstan region (15.6%), Almaty region (14.9%) and Akmola region (11.2%). According to the results of 2023, the greatest growth in the number of hotel facilities was received by Almaty city (+28.7%), the greatest growth by regions-Turkestan (+18.3%), Kyzylorda region (+15%) and Akmola region (+14.3) (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). In addition, we see positive dynamics of hotel development in Akmola region. However, the fact that 71% of respondents answered that they are dissatisfied is directly related to the higher cost of services in hotels. The reason is that hotels have high prices for rent and room service (Table 4).

Table 4. Hotels (Source: Authors research)

№	Hotel name	Guest feedback Booking.com (10)	Minimum price, euro	Hotel category
1	Hotel Kokshetau	9.1	47	4*
2	Hotel Kokshe Inn	8.2	30	-
3	Dostyq Kokshetau	7.9	45	-
4	Plaza Hotel	7.9	43	3*
5	Green Which Hotel	8.1	70	4*
6	House by the lake	9.3	120	4*
7	Hotel Burabay	7.8	75	-
8	Hotel Palladium	8.5	80	3*
9	Park Hotel Kokshetau	8.6	75	4*
10	Sultan Plaza Borovoe	8.7	82	4*
11	Park House	8.1	75	4*
12	Aisha Bibi Hotel & Spa Burabay	8.8	90	-
13	Strawberry meadow Borovoe	8.1	115	-
14	Rixos Borovoe	9.1	200	5*
15	Rufus Lodge	9.3	90	4*

These results are in line with the analysis by Vardar et al. (2025), who explored the relationship between economic policy uncertainty and capital investment in tourism firms across several regions, including Kazakhstan. Their findings emphasize that although hotel infrastructure may expand in quantitative terms, it often lacks corresponding improvements in affordability and service quality, especially in regions where tourism policy is not strongly integrated with local economic planning. In this context, the dissatisfaction expressed by respondents in our survey reflects not only price sensitivity but also the perceived mismatch between price levels and service standards.

This calls for more targeted strategies to incentivize investment in mid-range and budget accommodation facilities, which would make the Akmola region more accessible to a broader spectrum of tourists and reduce the gap between development metrics and visitor satisfaction. The survey "What suggestions do you have for improving the tourism resources of Akmola region?" 50.5% of respondents believe that it is necessary to develop infrastructure (Figure 5). Among the main tasks are road repairs, ensuring accessibility of public transportation and tourist routes.
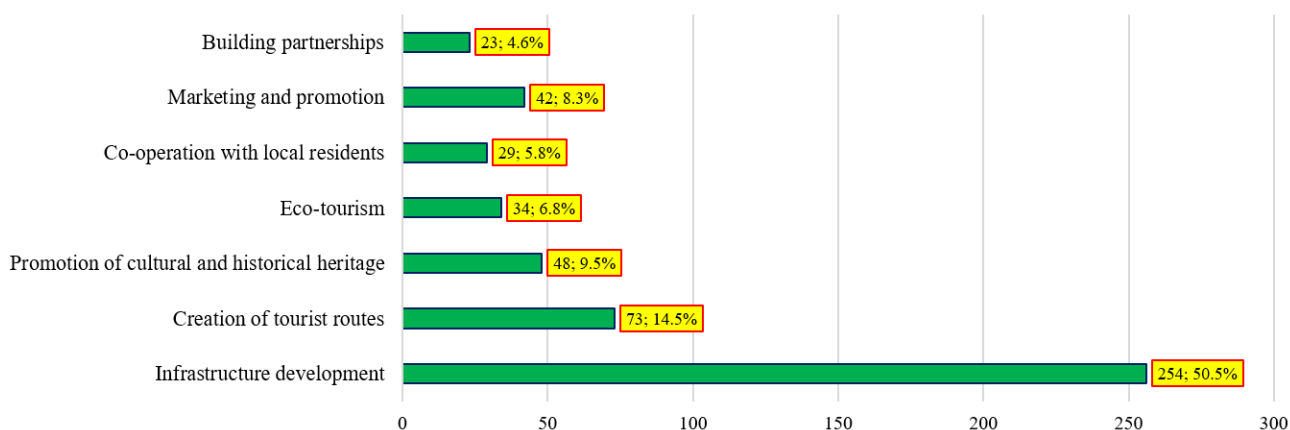

Figure 5. Recommendations of respondents to improve tourism resources of Akmola region (Source: Authors research)

The importance of infrastructural development as a precondition for regional tourism growth has also been highlighted by Tashpulatova & Suyunova (2025), who emphasized that inadequate transport connectivity and poor accessibility remain some of the most persistent barriers in Kazakhstan's tourism landscape. Their findings echo our survey results, pointing out that road quality and lack of public transportation options significantly limit both the mobility of tourists and the spatial distribution of tourism flows. In addition, Karshalova et al. (2025) underline that infrastructure investment must go beyond basic physical access and include digital infrastructure, signage, and visitor facilities in order to support a truly integrated and inclusive tourism system. Taken together, these findings reinforce the view that infrastructure development is not only a technical requirement, but a strategic tool for unlocking the broader tourism potential of regions such as Akmola.

Besides, to improve the tourist resources of Akmola region 14.5% of respondents consider it necessary to create tourist routes. The region is very suitable for ecotourism, cultural and historical excursions and development of outdoor routes (bicycle, hiking routes). Also, to promote cultural and historical heritage, 9.5% of respondents believe that it is necessary to organize festivals, fairs and other events that attract tourists and familiarize them with the culture of the region. While on marketing and advertising, respondents (8.3%) consider it useful to develop information materials and advertising campaigns to attract tourists from regions and countries. In this regard, the active use of social networks and online platforms will be beneficial for the promotion of tourism resources (Table 5).

Table 5. Means of advertising distribution (Source: Authors research)

Methods	Types of advertising	Price	Entering the target audience
1	2	3	4
Information tools	Television	High (-)	Low (-)
	Radio		
Internet network	News Sides	Low (+)	High (+)
	Facebook		
	YouTube		
	Instagram		
	Tik-Tok		
	Others		
Outdoor and indoor advertising constructions	Billboards	Average (±)	Low (-)
	Video screens		
	Roller Displays		
	Electronic signage		
	Poster stands		
PR-events	Presentation	Average (±)	Average (±)
	Conference		
	Briefing		

These suggestions are aligned with the conclusions of Gulnur & Kamshat (2025), who underscore the need for destination-specific thematic products such as cultural festivals, historical trails, and local fairs as effective tools to reinforce regional identity and stimulate sustainable tourism in underdeveloped areas of Kazakhstan. Their research confirms that integrating cultural programming into tourism development not only diversifies the offer but also strengthens community engagement and economic inclusion. Additionally, the emphasis on digital promotion in our survey corresponds with the findings of Nadeem et al. (2025), who highlight the transformative role of social media and sentiment analysis in shaping tourist preferences and destination image. According to their analysis, regions that invest in targeted, data-informed digital campaigns are significantly more likely to attract visitors from both domestic and international markets. Therefore, the responses in our study reinforce the necessity of combining physical development of tourist routes with modern digital outreach strategies in order to maximize the visibility and competitiveness of the Akmola region.

Thus, Akmola region is characterized by natural and climatic features, historical and cultural heritage, recreational potential. This region has a number of resources that create favorable conditions for the development of various types of tourism (Yushina & Yegemberdiyeva, 2019). Effective use of tourism and recreational resources not only positively affects the economy of the region, but also contributes to its socio-cultural development. In the study of tourism and recreational resources of Akmola region, first of all, natural resources are highly appreciated (Yegemberdiyeva et al., 2020). The geographical location, climatic features of the region, forest-steppe and forest zones, lakes and rivers provide great opportunities for ecological and nature tourism. Lakes in the region (e.g. Shalkar and Imantau lakes) are becoming more and more attractive for organizing beach recreation, fishing and water sports. Natural reserves and national parks create a full opportunity for the development of ecotourism (Mukanov et al., 2023; Dziekański et al., 2024). Moderate continental climate, warm weather in summer and snowy weather in winter allow organizing various seasonal recreation activities. Winter in the area is ideal for winter sports such as skiing and ice skating (Rogerson et al., 2024). In addition, the spring and fall seasons allow tourists to engage in outdoor activities such as bird watching and hiking.

Another important part of the tourist and recreational potential of Akmola region is its historical and cultural heritage. The region has archeological monuments of ancient times, places associated with historical events of the Kazakh people. For example, the sites of the Botai culture are important for tourists interested in learning about ancient human history. This culture is recognized as the first center of horse domestication by mankind and is an important site

for archaeological tourism (Baigunakov & Sabdenova, 2022). In addition, historical towns and villages associated with the historical periods of the Kazakh Khanate and the Russian Empire provide great opportunities for the development of cultural and cognitive tourism (Ayzhan et al., 2021). Infrastructural support plays an important role for the effective use of tourist and recreational resources of Akmola region. At present, some areas of the region have underdeveloped hotels, recreation centers, roads and transportation systems suitable for tourists. Joint efforts of the state and the private sector need to be strengthened to address this problem (Issakov et al., 2023b). It is necessary to develop programs for the development of ecological and cultural tourism in the region, involve local communities in this process and take measures to increase their profits. Further study and development of tourist and recreational resources of Akmola region will not only improve the economic situation of this region, but also preserve its environmental sustainability. By increasing the inflow of tourists, it is possible to improve the social and cultural level of the region.

CONCLUSIONS

The research on tourism development in the Akmola region has shown that, despite its significant natural and cultural wealth, the potential of this area remains insufficiently utilized. Data obtained through statistical analysis and local community surveys reveal the presence of favorable predispositions, yet also expose a range of developmental barriers that prevent the transformation of the region into a competitive and sustainable tourism destination. The findings suggest that synergy between infrastructural investment, institutional support, and local community engagement could substantially contribute to the region's socio-economic progress and enhance its relevance within the national tourism.

Theoretical and practical implications

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of tourism development in post-socialist and peripheral contexts, particularly those in Central Asia, which are often underrepresented in academic discourse. By applying a mixed-method approach, the research moves beyond dominant descriptive and normative models, offering a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between geographic space, institutional structures, and social perceptions. The research highlights the need for new conceptual frameworks that more accurately reflect spatial inequalities, institutional fragmentation, and transitional challenges. Importantly, it emphasizes not only the developmental potential of natural resources but also the critical role of local communities as active agents in destination transformation.

On a practical level, the findings of this study offer valuable insights for policymakers, planners, destination managers, and local governance actors. The identified weaknesses including inadequate infrastructure, limited destination visibility, fragmented coordination among local stakeholders, and underdeveloped institutional frameworks signal key areas for intervention in regional tourism strategies. As such, the study serves as a diagnostic tool for regional development and tourism planning. The survey data also highlight a strong readiness among the local population to engage in tourism initiatives, creating an opportunity to implement participatory tourism governance models.

The suggestions related to seasonal diversification, the development of thematic routes (eco-tourism, ethnographic tourism, cultural tourism), digital promotion, and workforce training stem directly from the needs identified in the research. These findings enable the creation of an integrated approach that encompasses spatial, human, and institutional resources in shaping a competitive and sustainable destination.

Limitations of the study and directions for future research

Despite its scope and relevance, this study is subject to certain methodological and geographic limitations. The spatial focus on the Akmola region limits the generalizability of the results to other areas of Kazakhstan or Central Asia. Methodologically, the study relies primarily on secondary statistical sources and a community-based survey, which may be affected by the quality, consistency, and availability of official data, particularly at the sectoral level. Moreover, the study's temporal framework did not allow for the observation of seasonal variations in tourism activity or the analysis of long-term trends. The use of a questionnaire, while effective for gathering perceptions from the local population, did not capture the views of other critical stakeholders such as domestic and international tourists, entrepreneurs, or public officials. This leaves an important dimension of tourism supply, demand, and inter-sectoral governance unexplored.

Future studies should expand the spatial and thematic scope of analysis. Comparative studies across different regions of Kazakhstan and Central Asia would enable a deeper understanding of various developmental pathways and institutional arrangements. It is recommended to integrate qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, case studies, and field ethnography to enrich the analytical perspective.

Furthermore, the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) could enhance spatial analysis of resources, tourist flows, and environmental pressures. Future research should also incorporate climate risk assessments, destination resilience analysis, and evaluations of the ecological footprint of tourism to strengthen sustainable planning models. Special focus should be placed on assessing the effects of digital transformation on destination management, as well as mechanisms for including local communities in decision-making processes. Multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches combining geography, economics, sociology, tourism, and public policy represent the most promising pathway for generating comprehensive solutions in complex territorial contexts such as the Akmola region.

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