



Natural Potential and Community Awareness as Key Components for the Development of Tourism in the Municipality of Belsh

Endrit Sallja*, Sonila Sinjari, and Sokol Axhemi

Department of Geography, University of Tirana, Albania

Abstract

The development of tourism in the municipality of Belsh presents a valuable opportunity for promoting natural assets and enhancing community awareness in support of the sustainable socio-economic growth of the area. This study aims to examine the role of two key components, natural potential and local community awareness, as determining factors for tourism development in this geographical area. Belsh's natural potential is characterized by rich natural landscapes that offer opportunities for various forms of tourism, including nature-based tourism, agritourism, and ecotourism. Meanwhile, community awareness and active participation are essential for the sustainable management of these resources, ensuring a balance between economic development and environmental protection. The study employs both qualitative and quantitative methods, including the analysis of scientific literature and structured questionnaires focused on the local community. The findings reveal that Belsh has a high level of natural potential that remains underutilized, while community awareness is still developing, with significant potential for improvement through educational campaigns and support programs. The role of the community is assessed as fundamental for the preservation and promotion of natural values, as well as for strengthening the local tourism offer. The study recommends the development of integrated policies that include training for residents, institutional support for local tourism enterprises, and the promotion of collaboration between institutions and the community for the sustainable management of natural resources, contributing to the socio-economic development of the municipality of Belsh.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, natural potential, awareness, local community, natural resource management, inclusiveness

1 Introduction

Tourism in general, and sustainable tourism in particular, has been increasingly recognized over the past decades as one of the most important tools and components for the development of rural areas. It provides opportunities for diversifying the rural economy, strengthening local identity, and preserving both natural and cultural heritage. Globally, there has been a significant increase in interest in alternative forms of tourism that do not harm the environment and contribute to improving the quality of life for local communities (UNWTO, 2017). This orientation is based on the principle of conserving natural resources, fostering social integration, and promoting local economic development, positioning the community as a key actor in planning and management processes (Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015). This type of tourism is characterized by a long-term approach that seeks to balance the needs of visitors, environmental protection, and the well-being of host communities. As such, sustainable tourism has been increasingly embraced by European countries, particularly in regions with high natural potential.

The municipality of Belsh is located in central Albania and represents a geographically rich area endowed with natural resources. This region is distinguished by its unique topographic configuration, karstic lakes, and rich biodiversity, making it a potentially attractive terrain for tourism development, especially for specific forms of tourism such as nature-based tourism, rural tourism, ecotourism, and agritourism. However, natural potential alone is not sufficient to ensure sustainable tourism development. The active involvement and awareness of the local community are equally as important as the physical characteristics of the area. Scholars emphasize that communities that are aware of the natural values of their territory and are actively involved in decision-making and tourism management processes are more likely to develop successful and sustainable tourism models (Saarinen, 2006). Furthermore, community involvement contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage and the creation of a local identity that makes the destination more authentic for visitors. This contrast between natural value and lack of community activation is a phenomenon well-documented in European literature on rural areas in transition (Dühn et al., 2008).

Successful European cases of sustainable rural tourism show that the intersection of natural potential and the commitment of the local community creates the conditions for long-term and inclusive development (Garrod et al., 2006). In the case of the municipality of Belsh, community involvement takes on particular importance due to its socio-economic structure and the strong connection that residents maintain with the natural environment. Sustainable tourism in this area cannot be developed without the active support of the local population, which is not only part of the process but also the main guardian of the very resources that make Belsh an attractive destination. Raising community awareness of the importance of tourism, its economic benefits, and its potential environmental impacts represents one of the main challenges for the long-term development of the tourism sector in the region (Sharpley & Roberts, 2004). The role of the community becomes even more crucial in contexts like Belsh, where tourism is not yet a consolidated industry and institutional structures are limited. In such settings, the influence of an informed and conscious community is greater, as local engagement can partially offset the lack of direct intervention by central policies. For this reason, capacity building, education, and training of the community on tourism management and nature conservation are necessities rather than optional alternatives (Ramkissoon, 2020). Moreover, sensitivity to natural potential must be cultivated not only among residents but also within local institutions, in order to stimulate strategic planning and sustainable interventions.

This study aims to examine in an integrated manner the impact of natural potential and community awareness on the development of tourism in the municipality of Belsh. To evaluate this, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods. In addition to a review of the existing literature, data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to residents selected from various administrative units of the Belsh municipality. The questionnaire seeks to highlight the level of awareness regarding tourism potential, attitudes toward tourism, and willingness to engage in tourism-related activities. In this way, the study aims to contribute not only to the academic literature on sustainable tourism in Albania but also to the development of effective policies and strategies for tourism management in Belsh. More broadly, this paper aims to contribute to the understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to tourism development particularly the development of sustainable tourism in Albania. As a rural area with outstanding natural features but limited development capacities, Belsh represents a natural laboratory where potentials and challenges intersect. Tourism development should not be viewed merely as an opportunity for short-term economic gains but as a tool for social inclusion, human capital enhancement, and the strengthening of local identity. In this sense, cooperation between the community, local institutions, and other development actors is the key to building a sustainable and inclusive tourism strategy for Belsh.

1.1 Literature Review and Context of the Study

Tourism in general, and sustainable tourism in particular, has become a fundamental element in contemporary approaches to rural development, especially in Europe, where the aim is to harmonize economic benefits with the preservation of natural resources and the inclusion of local communities (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). It is conceived as an inclusive process that engages multiple actors in continuous dialogue regarding the sustainable use of territory, particularly in areas rich in natural and cultural heritage. Tourism development in such areas requires sensitivity to local dynamics and planning that reflects both the environmental carrying capacity and the community's readiness for engagement. One of the key elements emphasized in the European literature is the active participation of the community in tourism-related decision-making and management processes. Community involvement is vital to the creation of policies that are acceptable, effective, and sustainable over time (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004). In this context, rural tourism development strategies must rely on the responsible management of natural resources and the active involvement of the local community. Recent models also stress the need for planning with a clear focus on sustainability, to ensure that tourism development does not undermine the ecological and cultural identity of the area (Saarinen, 2006). Moreover, the literature of recent years highlights the importance of local capacity building and the promotion of co-management models, in which the community is not merely a beneficiary, but a co-author in the development process. This approach aligns with the principles of place-based development, which have become dominant in European cohesion policies.

Recent studies have expanded this debate by emphasizing the integration of tourism with broader sustainable development objectives, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (UNWTO, 2017). In this context, a new conceptual model has been proposed that links the perceived social impacts of tourism with quality of life, highlighting that sustainable tourism should address not only ecological well-being but also social well-being (Ramkissoon, 2020). Furthermore, recent research has underlined the importance of digital and "smart" approaches in rural tourism, which enable better monitoring of carrying capacities and improved visitor management (Gretzel et al., 2015). These perspectives are particularly relevant for small municipalities such as Belsh, where the fragility of natural resources and the resilience of the

local community are equally critical for long-term tourism planning. A crucial component in the development of sustainable tourism is the active and conscious involvement of the local community. Participatory development theory suggests that in order to achieve long-term success in the tourism sector, it is essential to involve the community in all stages of planning, decision-making, and management (Tosun, 2006).

Community awareness and the building of social capital are two closely linked dimensions that determine the success of any rural tourism model. Community participation is more effective when there is a strong sense of local identity and a high level of social trust (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004). This awareness is not merely cognitive but also involves emotional sensitivity, willingness, and the motivation to act in the preservation and promotion of local resources. It requires interventions that are not only top-down but also bottom-up. Beyond the social aspect, the management of natural resources for tourism purposes is a widely explored theme in contemporary European literature. Sustainable approaches require a deep understanding of the ecological limits of a territory and the development of tourism practices that are compatible with those limits (Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

Specifically, the municipality of Belsh is characterized by a distinctive hilly-lacustrine landscape and a rich and diverse rural heritage (Sallja & Axhemi, 2023). The promotion of these values is essential for attracting visitors, generating local income, and preserving indigenous traditions. Tourism development in areas with significant natural assets, such as Belsh home to 84 karstic lakes must follow principles of smart use, product diversification, and control of tourist flows (Sallja et al., 2025). Otherwise, tourism may lead to environmental degradation and the erosion of the area's natural identity. In conclusion, it is emphasized that a clear and stable foundation is needed to support the argument that tourism development in areas like the municipality of Belsh should be built upon the harmonious integration of two pillars: natural potential and community awareness. In this regard, studying the interaction between these two elements represents an important approach to designing tourism development policies at both local and regional levels.

2 Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in order to achieve a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the research topic. The qualitative component is employed to construct the theoretical framework and conduct a contextual analysis of European literature on sustainable rural tourism and the role of local communities as a key component in tourism development. Meanwhile, the quantitative component serves to collect and analyze data obtained through a structured questionnaire administered within the local community of the municipality of Belsh. This methodological combination is particularly suitable for capturing not only the objective potential of the area but also the subjective perceptions, attitudes, and awareness levels of local residents. The primary data collection instrument was the development of a structured questionnaire comprising 11 (eleven) questions, focusing on the assessment of the area's natural potential, the community's level of awareness regarding tourism development, and their expectations for the future of tourism in the region. The sample consisted of 75 individuals selected through a simple random sampling method, ensuring balanced representation in terms of gender, age, and education level. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and semi-open-ended questions and incorporated a five-point Likert scale to measure respondents attitudes and levels of agreement. The data collection process was

conducted across five administrative units within the municipality of Belsh: Belsh, Seferan, Rrasë, Grekan, and Fierzë.

3 Results

The findings of this study, collected through field research in the municipality of Belsh, present a structured and in-depth overview of local community perceptions, attitudes, and levels of awareness regarding natural potential and the challenges associated with sustainable tourism development. This section aims to systematically analyze the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire, focusing on several key dimensions: the perception of natural resources as a developmental asset, the willingness to actively engage in tourism-related activities, the level of awareness concerning territorial preservation, and the challenges perceived by the community in implementing a sustainable tourism development model. The analysis sheds light on the dynamic interaction between natural resources and the area's social capital, highlighting both the opportunities and the challenges that emerge.

3.1 The Profile of the Respondents

Within the framework of this study, 75 questionnaires were conducted throughout the territory of the municipality of Belsh, featuring a balanced gender composition of 61% male and 39% female participants. The largest age group was 18–30 years, accounting for 51% of respondents, followed by the 31–45 age group at 39%, and the 45–60 age group at 10%. Regarding educational level, the majority, 63% had completed higher education, 29% had secondary education, while only 8% had completed nine-year compulsory schooling. In terms of residence, 68% have lived in the municipality of Belsh for more than 20 years, while 32% have resided there between 11 and 20 years. These indicators provide a reliable and comprehensive basis for assessing the community's perceptions and attitudes toward tourism development and the natural potential of this area.

3.2 The Importance of Natural Assets for Tourism Development

The data reveal a high and consolidated level of awareness among the local community regarding the significance of natural resources for the sustainable development of tourism in the municipality of Belsh.

Table 1: Community perception of the importance of natural assets in the context of tourism development

Statement	Percentage (%)
Very important	88 %
Important	12 %
Average	-
Slightly important	-
Not important at all	-

Source: Survey results

88% of respondents consider natural assets to be *very important*, while 12% regard them as *important*, thus highlighting that residents possess a clear perception of the potential offered by the region's natural environment. This trend reflects a strong connection between the local population and their surrounding environment, as well as a general awareness of the opportunities presented by natural landscapes, biodiversity, lakes, and other resources. Such a response structure is encouraging, as it indicates that the foundation for tourism development exists at the level of community attitudes and perceptions. Recognizing the value of natural assets is the first step toward the active engagement of the community in their preservation

and promotion. Moreover, these data suggest that the community is potentially open to new initiatives focused on sustainable tourism development, creating a favorable climate for institutional and strategic interventions in this direction. This situation offers fertile ground for implementing projects aimed at increasing civic engagement and strengthening the role of residents in managing local tourism. Beyond these positive indicators, it is important to stress that a high valuation of natural resources does not automatically imply practical engagement or concrete capacities for their management. A positive perception is not sufficient if it is not accompanied by functional awareness, professional training, and genuine participation in decision-making. In many cases, communities may exhibit high sensitivity toward nature but lack the infrastructure, institutional support, or tools needed to effectively influence tourism development. For this reason, such data should be interpreted as an untapped potential that requires orientation and support. Concrete community engagement demands continuous education, access to training and the creation of spaces for active participation in development projects. Furthermore, this positive perception must be translated into sustainable and organized initiatives that link environmental preservation with economic and social benefits for local residents. This would help not only in safeguarding natural values but also in establishing a development model in which the community is at the center of the process.

3.3 Most Attractive Natural Elements for Tourists

The following data highlight local community perceptions regarding the natural elements that are considered most appealing to tourists within the territory of the municipality of Belsh.

Table 2: Natural elements most attractive to tourists according to local community perception

Statement	Percentage (%)
Karstic lakes	91 %
Hilly relief	-
Biodiversity	-
Favorable climate	9 %

Source: Survey results

Predominantly, 91% of respondents identified the karst lakes as the most attractive tourist attraction, a clear indicator of local awareness regarding the central role these water assets play in shaping the touristic profile of the area. The karst lakes with their distinctive shapes, natural distribution, and picturesque landscape are perceived not only as natural beauties but also as significant economic and social assets for the community. Their presence is closely associated with opportunities for sustainable tourism, recreational activities, nature guiding, and the development of supportive infrastructure. Meanwhile, only 9% of participants mentioned the favorable climate, indicating that this element is seen more as a complementary, beneficial condition rather than a tourist attraction in itself. This distribution of perceptions suggests that, for the community, touristic attractiveness is more strongly rooted in visual, tangible, and perceivable landscape features rather than in abstract environmental factors.

This response pattern implies that tourism development policies should focus on the intelligent and sustainable use of the karst lakes, while respecting their natural character and carrying capacities. Moreover, the fact that other elements such as biodiversity or the hilly relief were not mentioned at all by respondents implies a certain lack of awareness or knowledge regarding the value these components may hold within the broader tourism offer. This gap highlights the need for environmental education and the promotion of a more holistic approach to nature. Biodiversity and landscape relief, if promoted as elements interlinked with the lakes, could contribute to the development of comprehensive tourism

packages that include wildlife observation, nature hiking, camping, and educational activities. For this reason, it is important that local institutions work not only on the sound management of water resources but also on raising awareness about the wider potential that the landscape and natural environment offer as a whole

3.4 Protection and Management of Natural Resources

The results presented in Table 3 offer a significant overview of the local community's perception regarding the management and protection of natural resources within the territory of the municipality of Belsh.

Table 3: Assessment of the management and protection of natural resources by the local community

Statement	Percentage (%)
Yes	65 %
No	8 %
I'm not sure	27 %

Source: Survey results

A majority of respondents 65%, believe that these resources are being properly managed and protected, indicating a satisfactory level of civic engagement and environmental awareness. This positive evaluation may be attributed to recent environmental interventions, such as improvements in sanitation infrastructure, enhanced pollution control, and the implementation of local initiatives aimed at preserving lakes and rural landscapes. However, despite this encouraging figure, it is essential to analyze it within the broader context of community attitudes in order to construct a comprehensive and realistic understanding of the situation. A considerable portion of the population, 27%, expressed uncertainty about how natural resources are being managed, while 8% held a negative view. These figures point to a lack of transparency and insufficient communication between institutions and citizens, leaving a segment of the community in a state of uncertainty or uninformed.

The relatively high level of uncertainty, compared to unequivocally positive or negative responses, suggests that many residents are either not directly involved in management processes or are not adequately exposed to information regarding ongoing activities. This underscores the need for a more inclusive approach to environmental policymaking one in which the community is not only informed but also actively engaged in the stewardship and management of natural assets. Environmental education, awareness campaigns, and the establishment of collaborative structures between citizens and institutions would be essential steps toward increasing transparency and public trust, while also strengthening the community's role in the long-term protection of Belsh's natural heritage.

3.5 Awareness on the Importance of Sustainable Tourism Development

The data presented below highlight a significant level of awareness among the local community regarding the importance of sustainable tourism, which represents a positive indicator for the future development of this tourism model in the area.

Table 4: Level of awareness regarding the importance of sustainable tourism in the local community

Statement	Percentage (%)
Very much	33 %
Sufficiently	58 %
A little	9 %
Not at all	-

Source: Survey results

Specifically, 33% of respondents stated they are highly aware of the importance of sustainable tourism, while 58% consider themselves sufficiently aware. This dominant majority exceeding 90% of the responses suggests that the concept of sustainable tourism is relatively well-known and accepted by the community, even though the depth of understanding may vary. The growing awareness in this area has been influenced not only by direct experience with the local tourism potential but also by interactions with visitors, the role of local institutions, and participation in activities related to nature and environmental preservation. However, the existence of a smaller segment (9%) who self-identify with a "low" level of awareness indicates that educational and informational efforts regarding sustainable tourism have not been equally distributed across the entire local society. This may stem from limited access to information, selective participation in tourism-related activities, or the absence of a clear platform for environmental and tourism education at the community level. The complete absence of responses in the "not at all aware" category could suggest a general tendency to avoid outright denial of the importance of the concept, or it may reflect a significant lack of knowledge that results in avoidance of extreme positions. This highlights the necessity of implementing continuous awareness-raising campaigns, through educational channels, collaborative activities, and the engagement of youth, to increase awareness across all community segments. Such efforts would help ensure that the concept of sustainable tourism is not only understood but also translated into concrete practices of local management and development.

3.6 Participation in Activities and Initiatives Related to Tourism

The data from Table 5 reflect a relatively high level of participation by the local community in activities and initiatives related to tourism development in this area.

Table 5: Local community participation in tourism activities and initiatives in their area

Statement	Percentage (%)
Yes	72 %
No	28 %

Source: Survey results

Specifically, 72% of respondents reported having engaged in various forms of tourism involvement in the area. This result reinforces the idea that the community is not merely a spectator of tourism developments but an active actor contributing directly to the creation, maintenance, and promotion of the local tourism offer. Participation takes many forms, including providing local products, guiding visitors, taking part in cultural activities, organizing events, and engaging in the maintenance of the natural environment. This high participation rate also reflects an awareness of the economic and social benefits that tourism can bring, as well as a sense of belonging and responsibility toward the natural and cultural heritage of the area. On the other hand, the 28% of respondents who have not engaged in any tourism activities represent a significant indicator of the presence of various barriers preventing broader community involvement.

These barriers may relate to a lack of information, concrete opportunities for engagement, or a low perception of the benefits tourism might generate. Additionally, social or economic

factors may limit the participation of certain individuals or groups, particularly youth, women, or residents in more peripheral areas of the administrative units. This situation underscores the necessity of designing strategies to actively include the entire community, through promoting local tourism entrepreneurship, providing professional training, and institutional support for initiatives originating from the residents themselves. Only through wide and organized participation can a sustainable tourism model be built one grounded in social cohesion and the preservation of natural resources as collective assets.

3.7 The Role of the Community in Tourism Development

The data presented below reflect a clear recognition and a high level of awareness among the local community regarding their role in tourism development within the geographical area of the municipality of Belsh.

Table 6: Local community assessment of the importance of their role in tourism development

Statement	Percentage (%)
Very important	72 %
Important	19 %
Average	-
Slightly important	9 %
Not important at all	-

Source: Survey results

Based on data, 72% of respondents consider their participation very important, and 19% consider it as important, which indicates that the vast majority of the community perceives itself as a key actor in tourism-related processes. This high level of awareness about the community's role is a positive indicator for the potential development of sustainable tourism models based on active involvement and social responsibility.

It implies that residents are willing to contribute in various ways, influencing the preservation of natural resources, the promotion of cultural traditions, and the development of tourism offers that reflect local identity. A community that sees itself as a key factor is more likely to build effective cooperation with institutions and take initiative in local projects. However, 9% of participants consider their role to be of little importance, which reveals a gap in perception and social inclusion. Although small, this percentage is significant enough to indicate challenges related to motivation, capacities, or the flow of information reaching some parts of the community. This gap may be linked to various factors, including lack of resources, experience, or feelings of powerlessness to influence tourism developments. Therefore, it is important that development strategies include measures to build capacities and strengthen the role of all community members. Creating participation platforms, continuous training, and clear communication about the importance of their contribution are key elements that will help reduce this gap and reinforce collective identity and responsibility for tourism development in the municipality of Belsh.

3.8 Initiatives that Could Improve Community Swareness

Table 7 present the perceptions of the local community regarding the tools and initiatives that could enhance their awareness and involvement in tourism development.

Table 7: Community perception of initiatives that could enhance local awareness

Statement	Percentage (%)
Trainings and seminars	22 %
Awareness campaigns	-
Involvement in natural resource management	29 %
Financial support for local enterprises	49 %

Source: Survey results

The majority of respondents, 49%, consider financial support for local enterprises as one of the key factors that can stimulate engagement and tourism development. This reflects a deep understanding within the community that, beyond awareness, practical and economic aspects hold significant weight for the success of tourism initiatives. Financial backing can facilitate the start-up and consolidation of small tourism businesses, including agritourism, tourist guiding, or the production and sale of local products, thereby increasing community participation in this sector. This addresses a gap that often hinders residents' involvement due to a lack of capital and other resources. On the other hand, 29% of participants emphasize the importance of active involvement in natural resource management as an effective way to boost local awareness and responsibility. This indicates an awareness of the need for cooperation and direct participation in decision-making and environmental conservation, which are fundamental to tourism sustainability. While trainings and seminars improve knowledge and skills, they were mentioned by 22% of respondents, reflecting a moderate interest in formal education and professionalization in the tourism field. Overall, these data highlight the need for an integrated approach that combines financial support, education, and engagement in environmental management to foster sustainable and inclusive tourism development within the local community.

3.9 Participation in Activities or Initiatives for Nature Conservation and Tourism Development

The following data reflect an exceptionally high willingness among the local community to participate in activities related to nature conservation and tourism development in the municipality of Belsh.

Table 8: Community willingness to participate in activities for nature conservation and tourism development

Statement	Percentage (%)
Yes	91 %
No	-
I'm not sure	9 %

Source: Survey results

According to data 91% of respondents expressed a positive attitude towards involvement in such initiatives, reflecting strong engagement and deep awareness of the importance of protecting natural resources as a foundation for sustainable tourism development. This willingness is a crucial factor for the success of policies and programs aiming for active collaboration between the community and institutions in environmental protection. Community participation in these activities may include volunteer actions, educational projects, organizing cultural and ecological events, as well as supporting tourism infrastructure that respects nature. 9% of participants are uncertain about their willingness, indicating that doubts or lack of information still exist regarding the nature of these activities and their potential benefits. This uncertainty could result from insufficient effective and continuous communication with the community, as well as a lack of direct experience with such initiatives in the area.

Therefore, beyond encouraging participation, attention should also focus on clarifying and informing the community about the forms, objectives, and concrete benefits of involvement in nature conservation and tourism development activities. This will help increase trust and improve the comprehensive inclusion of the community in achieving the goals of sustainable development in the municipality of Belsh.

3.10 Assessment of the Current Tourism Development

The data from Table 9 highlight that a considerable portion of the local community holds a positive perception of the current tourism development in the municipality of Belsh.

Table 9: Community assessment of the current tourism development in Belsh municipality

Statement	Percentage (%)
Very good	32 %
Good	51 %
Average	17 %
Poor	-
Not developed at all	-

Source: Survey results

The local community generally rates the current level of tourism development positively, with 32% considering it very good and 51% rating it as good. This reflects overall satisfaction with the efforts and achievements made so far in this field, as well as confidence in tourism's potential to contribute to the economic and social development of the community. The positive evaluation may indicate improvements in infrastructure, an increase in tourist visits, or locally implemented projects that have yielded concrete results. It also suggests that the community perceives tourism as a sector with significant growth potential, despite existing challenges.

On the other hand, 17% of respondents rate tourism development as average, indicating a mixed perception that may stem from unresolved challenges or the need for further improvements. This percentage reflects a degree of skepticism or dissatisfaction regarding the effectiveness of measures taken so far and underscores the need for greater institutional commitment and more active community involvement. The absence of responses in the categories "poor" or "not developed at all" is a positive sign but also emphasizes that there are expectations and demands for advancements that must be addressed to ensure sustainable and inclusive tourism development in the municipality of Belsh.

3.11 Benefits From Tourism Development

The data presented below reflect the local community's perceptions regarding the main benefits that tourism brings to the territory of the municipality of Belsh.

Table 10: Benefits of tourism according to local community perception

Statement	Percentage (%)
Employment	12 %
Increase in income	42 %
Promotion of the area	46 %
Improvement of infrastructure	-

Source: Survey results

One of the most emphasized benefits is the promotion of the area, selected by 46% of respondents. This indicates that the community views tourism as an important tool for increasing recognition and visibility of the territory at both regional and national levels. Greater recognition can attract more visitors, investments, and economic development

opportunities. Besides promotion, 42% of respondent's mention income growth as one of the key benefits, indicating that tourism has the potential to positively impact the economic well-being of residents and diversify income sources, especially in an area with agricultural traditions and limited economic capacities.

Only 12% of participants cited employment as the main benefit, suggesting that the current impact of tourism on job creation is limited or not yet clearly perceived by the community. This may be related to the fact that the tourism sector in the municipality of Belsh is still in its early development stages or that many tourism activities are organized informally and do not yet generate sustainable employment. The absence of mentions regarding infrastructure improvement in the community's responses suggests that this aspect may be minimal or not perceived as a direct result of tourism so far. This underscores the need for stronger policies and strategic investments in tourism infrastructure, which would support sustainable development and further enhance the benefits for the local community.

3.12 Challenges of Tourism Development

The following analysis of the data from Table 11 focuses on the main challenges identified by the local community as obstacles to the sustainable development of tourism in the municipality of Belsh.

Table 11: Community perception of the main challenges to tourism development in their area

Statement	Percentage (%)
Lack of infrastructure	49 %
Lack of promotion	29 %
Community dissatisfaction or lack of involvement	11 %
Negative environmental impact	-
Massive emigration from the area	11 %

Source: Survey results

The community perceives the lack of infrastructure as the greatest challenge for tourism development in Belsh, with 49% of respondents identifying this issue. This high percentage highlights that despite the natural potential and interest in tourism, poor infrastructure including roads, basic services, and tourist facilities remains a key barrier limiting sector growth. Without sustainable investment in infrastructure, tourism development remains constrained, directly impacting the area's ability to attract and retain visitors. The infrastructure problem affects not only the physical aspect but also the organizational and managerial side, where capacities to provide quality services and manage tourist flows sustainably are lacking. Additionally, 29% of the community identify the lack of promotion as another critical challenge. This points to the need for more effective communication and marketing strategies to increase destination awareness and attract more visitors. The lack of community involvement and their dissatisfaction represent another challenge, noted by 11% of respondents, emphasizing the importance of active participation and continuous cooperation among local stakeholders to achieve sustainable development. Furthermore, mass emigration, mentioned by 11% of participants, is a social issue negatively affecting the tourism development potential, as it reduces the human capital and disrupts ties to the cultural and natural heritage of the area. These challenges require coordinated and integrated interventions addressing not only the material aspects but also the social and institutional dimensions of tourism development in the Municipality of Belsh.

4 Discussion

The development of tourism in the municipality of Belsh emerges as a process with great potential, grounded in the interplay between abundant natural resources and the active role of the local community. The data analysis reveals that the rich and diverse natural environment, especially the karst lakes and the hilly-lake landscapes constitutes the main assets capable of attracting various types of tourists, ranging from nature enthusiasts to rural and agrotourism lovers. However, effectively harnessing these potentials requires not only their physical existence but also the awareness and active participation of the community, which proves to be a key factor for sustainable management and promotion of the territory. The study shows that the vast majority of residents understand the importance of their role in this process, forming a strong foundation for future development initiatives.

This awareness and willingness to participate represent a valuable asset that needs to be supported and strengthened through appropriate policies and inclusion mechanisms. At the same time, the results raise concerns about some existing limitations and challenges that may hinder tourism development in Belsh. The lack of infrastructure emerges as the biggest problem, limiting tourists' access and the quality of services offered. This is a fundamental obstacle requiring significant investments from local and central institutions, as well as the involvement of private partners. Insufficient promotion of the area's potential indicates an urgent need for designing tourism marketing strategies that will increase the region's visibility both nationally and internationally. Additionally, social challenges such as emigration and incomplete community involvement suggest that development processes are not yet fully integrated and call for greater efforts in building local capacities and encouraging inclusive participation.

Another important dimension is the role played by financial support and education for enhancing local capacities in the tourism sector. The high percentages reflect the community's special emphasis on financial backing for local businesses and involvement in natural resource management. These elements underline the fact that sustainable tourism development cannot be achieved without an integrated and durable approach that includes technical and economic assistance. The practical implications of the findings of this study highlight the need for an integrated and comprehensive approach to rural tourism development in Belsh. Financial support for local entrepreneurs and community projects functions not only as a stimulus for sustainable initiatives but also as a mechanism for strengthening the local economy through the creation of new employment opportunities. Active community involvement is equally critical, as it ensures that tourism policies and projects reflect the needs, values, and priorities of residents, fostering a sense of ownership and long-term commitment.

Capacity-building programs and training in natural resource management and tourism services equip the community with the skills necessary to manage the area's natural potential effectively while maintaining the quality of visitor experiences. The integration of these elements into a clear and coordinated strategy among stakeholders can significantly enhance the effectiveness of tourism development and ensure that economic, social, and environmental benefits are maximized in accordance with the principles of sustainable development. This is particularly vital for areas like Belsh, where the rural economy still largely depends on agriculture and where tourism offers significant opportunities for diversification but requires concrete incentives. Awareness-raising trainings are essential tools to strengthen community knowledge and skills, making them more capable of managing their resources effectively and sustainably while providing quality services to visitors. In summary, the study shows that tourism development in Belsh relies on a delicate balance

between the natural potential of the area and the active engagement and awareness of the community.

To realize a sustainable model, it is crucial to develop integrated policies addressing infrastructural needs, promoting social inclusion, and ensuring financial and educational support for local stakeholders. Only through close cooperation among the community, institutions, and the private sector can a sustainable and comprehensive strategy be built one that will not only strengthen the local economy but also preserve and promote the natural and cultural heritage of the municipality of Belsh, thus contributing to sustainable rural development and the long-term well-being of the community.

5 Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the development of tourism in the municipality of Belsh strongly relies on two main pillars: the natural potential of the area and the active awareness of the local community. The results show that while natural resources, particularly the karst lakes and rich biodiversity, provide a favorable foundation for various types of tourism development, community participation and awareness are essential for the sustainable management and effective promotion of these assets. The involvement of residents in decision-making processes, as well as their willingness to contribute to conservation and development activities, represent a strategic asset that can positively influence the long-term success of local tourism.

This interplay between natural resources and social capital creates opportunities for sustainable development that balance economic benefits with the preservation of the environment and cultural heritage. On the other hand, the study has identified significant challenges that need to be addressed to ensure sustainable and inclusive tourism development in the municipality of Belsh. The lack of infrastructure and effective promotion are the main obstacles limiting further growth of the sector. Likewise, emigration and insufficient inclusion of certain community segments require specific attention and interventions aimed at building local capacities and strengthening social cohesion. To address these issues, an integrated approach is essential, involving infrastructural investments, educational programs, financial support for local businesses, and continuous community engagement in natural resource management and tourism development. In this way, the municipality of Belsh can become a positive example of sustainable rural development, where tourism contributes not only to economic improvement but also to the preservation and promotion of its unique natural and cultural values.

References

- Bramwell, B. and Lane, B. (2011). "Critical research on the governance of tourism and sustainability," *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, vol 19 (4-5), pp 412-421. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2011.580586>
- Briedenhann, J. and Wickens, E. (2004). "Tourism routes as a tool for the economic development of rural areas," *Tourism Management*, vol. 25 (1), pp 71-79. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177\(03\)00063-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177(03)00063-3)
- Dühn, A., Kroon, H. and van der Vaart, J. (2008). "Rural development and the role of regional networks: A European perspective," *European Planning Studies*, vol. 16 (4), pp 503-520.

- Garrod, B., Wornell, R. and Youell, R. (2006). "Re-conceptualising rural resources as countryside capital: The case of rural tourism," *Journal of Rural Studies*, vol. 22 (1), pp 117-128. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2005.08.001>
- Gretzel, U., Sigala, M., Xiang, Z., and Koo, C. (2015). "Smart tourism: foundations and developments," *Electronic Markets*, vol. 25 (3), pp 179-188. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12525-015-0196-8>
- Lane, B. and Kastenholtz, E. (2015). "Rural tourism: The evolution of practice and research approaches-towards a new generation concept?," *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, vol. 23 (8-9), pp 1133-1156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2015.1083997>
- Ramkissoon, H. (2020). "Perceived social impacts of tourism and quality-of-life: A new conceptual model," *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, vol. 28 (8), pp 1133-1149.
- Saarinen, J. (2006). "Traditions of sustainability in tourism studies," *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 33 (4), pp 1121-1140. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2006.06.007>
- Sallja, E. and Axhemi, S. (2023). "Impakti i kushteve fiziko-gjeografike në zhvillimin social-ekonomik të hapësirës sociogjeografike të Dumresë," *Studime Albanologjike*, vol. 2, pp 85-95.
- Sallja, E., Axhemi, S. and Hasrama, O. (2025). "Zhvillimi i qëndrueshëm në bashkinë Belsh: Roli i popullsisë në ruajtjen e potencialeve natyrore," *Studime Gjeografike*, vol. 28, pp 46-55.
- Sharpley, R. and Roberts, L. (2004). "Rural tourism - 10 years on," *International Journal of Tourism Research*, vol. 6 (3), pp 119-124. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.478>
- Tosun, C. (2000). Limits to community participation in the tourism development process in developing countries, *Tourism Management*, vol. 21 (6), pp 613-633. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177\(00\)00009-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177(00)00009-1)
- World Tourism Organization and United Nations Development Programme. (2017). *Tourism and the sustainable development goals: Journey to 2030*, UNWTO, Madrid, Spain.