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ECO-BRAND OF TERRITORIES AS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN THE TOURISM MARKET

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ЕКОБРЕНД ТЕРИТОРІЙ ЯК КОНКУРЕНТНА ПЕРЕВАГА НА РИНКУ ТУРИЗМУ

In the current context of economic development and the functioning of organizations, businesses, and consumers in shaping the supply and demand for tourism products, economic actors operating in regions focused on tourism development are compelled to seek new tools to enhance their attractiveness and recognition. One such tool today is the creation of a brand that combines principles of sustainable development with the unique natural and cultural resources of a region. This process, now referred to as eco-branding, is becoming an increasingly important factor in shaping and strengthening competitive advantages in the tourism market. The aim of this article is to summarize the conditions under which an eco-brand allows tourist destinations to stand out among competitors. In this context, competitors are other tourist destinations offering similar products and seeking to attract the same consumers-tourists who prioritize nature-based, cultural, and environmentally responsible forms of recreation. The study concludes that, under certain conditions, an eco-brand enables tourist destinations to differentiate themselves in the tourism market by creating a unique value proposition for visitors and enhancing regional recognition. An eco-brand provides competitive advantages when the following conditions are met: authenticity and alignment with reality; integration of ecological values into the tourism product; support from authorities and local communities (through sustainable development strategies, local initiatives, and resources for implementing eco-projects); marketing and communication promotion. Conversely, an eco-brand fails to provide competitive advantages when: its use is merely declarative; the necessary ecological infrastructure is lacking; support from local communities and businesses is insufficient; communication and positioning do not build tourist trust; the destination lacks natural or cultural resources that could be used to develop a distinctive tourism product. It has been shown that an eco-brand becomes a true source of competitive advantage only when it is implemented comprehensively, systematically, and authentically across all aspects of a region's tourism activities.

У сучасних умовах розвитку економічних відносин та функціонування організацій, підприємств і споживачів у сфері формування попиту та пропозиції туристичних продуктів, суб'єкти господарювання, що діють на території, орієнтованій на розвиток туристичної діяльності, змушені шукати нові інструменти підвищення своєї привабливості та впізнаваності. Одним із таких інструментів на сьогодні є формування бренду, що поєднує принципи сталого розвитку та унікальні природні й культурні ресурси територій. Наразі даний процес отримав назву екобрендингу, який стає все більш важливим чинником формування та посилення конкурентних переваг територій на туристичному ринку. Відтак, мета статті полягає в узагальненні умов за яких екобренд дозволяє туристичним територіям виділитися серед конкурентів на ринку туризму. Конкурентами в цьому контексті є інші туристичні території або дестинації, що пропонують подібні туристичні продукти та праг-

нуть залучити тих самих споживачів — туристів, орієнтованих на природні, культурні та екологічно відповідальні форми відпочинку. За результатами дослідження констатовано, що екобренд за певних умов дозволяє туристичним територіям виділитися серед конкурентів, формуючи унікальну ціннісну пропозицію для туристів та підвищуючи її впізнаваність. Доведено, що екобренд створює конкурентні переваги, коли виконуються такі умови: автентичність і відповідність реальності; інтеграція екологічних цінностей у туристичний продукт; підтримка органів влади та локальної громади через стратегії сталого розвитку, локальні ініціативи й ресурси для реалізації екопроектів; маркетингове та комунікаційне просування. Натомість екобренд не забезпечує конкурентних переваг у випадках, коли: його використання має декларативний характер; відсутня необхідна екологічна інфраструктура; недостатньою є його підтримка з боку місцевих громад та бізнесу; комунікація та позиціювання екобренду не забезпечують довіри туристів; територія не має ресурсів, які можна використовувати для формування відмінного туристичного продукту. Доведено, що екобренд набуває статусу конкурентної переваги лише за умови комплексного, системного та автентичного впровадження в усі аспекти туристичної діяльності території.

Key words: tourism service offerings; demand creation; unique value proposition; tourist; competitiveness.

Ключові слова: пропозиція туристичних послуг; формування попиту; унікальна ціннісна пропозиція; турист; конкурентоспроможність.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In the current context of economic development and the functioning of organizations, businesses, and consumers in shaping the supply and demand for tourism services and products, economic actors operating in regions focused on tourism development are compelled to seek new tools to enhance their attractiveness and recognition. One such tool today is the creation of a brand that combines principles of sustainable development with the unique natural and cultural resources of a region. This process is now known as eco-branding, which is becoming an increasingly important factor in shaping and strengthening the competitive advantages of areas in the tourism market.

The relevance of eco-branding for regions is driven by several factors, including:

— Growing environmental awareness among consumers, reflected in tourists' preference for eco-friendly tourism products, the development of ecotourism, "green" hotels, and destinations that implement sustainable resource management practices.

— Intense competition between tourist destinations amid limited demand for tourism services—a situation in Ukraine that has been further exacerbated by the Russian military invasion, which negatively affected tourist mobility, investment activity, and overall tourism market dynamics.

— Challenges in ensuring long-term socio-economic development of regions, manifested in job losses in the tourism sector, reduced local budget revenues, and the need to explore new models for community recovery and development based on sustainability principles.

ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS

Currently, there is a significant body of research focused on the formation of effective eco-brands for regions. In particular, scholars such as Terletska O., Smirnov I., Liubitseva O., and Veleschuk S. S. have shown that eco-branding not only enhances the tourism appeal of regions but also strengthens their positive image, attracts investment, stimulates local entrepreneurship, and helps preserve natural and cultural heritage.

The works of Melnychenko S., Mykhaylichenko H., Zabaldina Y., Kravtsov S., and Skakovska S. also emphasize that eco-branding is increasingly being used as a strategic tool for creating competitive advantages in the tourism market and ensuring the sustainable development of tourist destinations.

Therefore, this study draws on the findings of these scholarly works to analyze the use of eco-branding as a source of competitive advantage in the tourism market.

FORMULATION OF THE ARTICLE'S OBJECTIVES

The aim of this article is to summarize the conditions under which an eco-brand enables tourist destinations to stand out among competitors in the tourism market.

THE PAPER MAIN BODY

Contemporary development practices in Ukrainian tourist regions, particularly in Lviv, Zakarpattia, and Ivano-Frankivsk oblasts, as well as in several national nature parks, have shown that their eco-brand is increasingly viewed as a competitive advantage in the tourism market. It is worth noting that numerous projects are being implemented in these regions, aimed at:

- the development of sustainable tourism;
- the establishment of ecological and cultural-educational infrastructure;
- the promotion of local natural and cultural resources.

In Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast, under international grant initiatives, inclusive ecological-educational trails have been established in the Verkhovyna National Nature Park, and recreational zones for rest and rehabilitation have been created in the village of Vorokhta, which serves as the administrative center of the Vorokhta settlement community in Nadvirna Raion. Within the tourist regions of Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast, several projects are also being implemented to promote eco-tourism and local heritage.

Additionally, according to the Bukovel Sustainable Development Office, hotels and restaurants in the region have introduced certification under the international Green Key standards as part of preparations for the international certification of the Bukovel tourist destination under

the Green Destinations standards [5]. This includes measures such as air quality monitoring, the installation of electric vehicle charging stations, and the adoption of environmentally friendly waste management practices, all aimed at improving the quality of the tourist product and strengthening the region's eco-brand [5].

In Lviv Oblast, cultural and tourism projects are being supported, such as the creation of the "New World of Halych California" trail, which incorporates elements of environmental education and integrates natural and historical attractions. This initiative allows the region to combine its ecological and cultural potential to attract tourists.

These initiatives not only boost the attractiveness and reputation of the regions but also play a key role in shaping their eco-brand in the tourism market. The "eco-" prefix in the term "brand" reflects a set of distinctive features that set it apart from traditional branding, including (see Figure 1):

- a commitment to sustainable development;
- the integration of natural and cultural resources into tourism offerings;
- the creation of a unique visitor experience;
- active engagement of local communities and businesses in environmental conservation.

In essence, the characteristics of an eco-brand indicate that a region positions itself as one that implements the principles of sustainable tourism in all aspects of its operations. Accordingly, an eco-brand is ideally aimed at tourists who prioritize responsible environmental practices, the preservation of natural and cultural heritage, and safe, eco-friendly travel experiences.

In this context, eco-branding is steadily gaining popularity. Survey results from research on domestic tourism in Ukraine under martial law indicate a growing interest among Ukrainian

Feature: Focus on Sustainable Development

Characteristics: implementation of economic, social, and environmental practices that ensure the long-term stability of tourism activities while minimizing negative impacts on the environment.

Feature: Integration of Natural and Cultural Resources into Tourism Products

Characteristics: utilization of unique natural landscapes, historical sites, and cultural assets to create tourism offerings that highlight the authenticity of the region.

Specific features or characteristics that distinguish an eco-brand from a traditional brand

Feature: Creation of a Unique Tourist Experience

Characteristics: offering tourists new emotional, educational, and environmentally meaningful experiences that set the region apart from standard travel destinations.

Feature: Active Involvement of Local Communities and Businesses in Environmental Conservation

Characteristics: participation of local residents, entrepreneurs, and government authorities in the development of tourism products, environmental initiatives, and projects aimed at protecting natural and cultural heritage.

Figure 1. Common features of eco-branding in tourist destinations

Source: created by the authors based on [1—2; 4].

Table 1. Conditions under which an Eco-Brand creates competitive advantages for tourist destinations

Basic conditions for competitive advantage	How competitive advantages are created	Result of competitive advantage
Authenticity and alignment with reality	The destination implements ecological practices, supports the preservation of natural and cultural heritage, and ensures environmentally safe conditions for visitors.	Builds tourist trust, increases the attractiveness of the destination, and enhances its recognition as an authentic and responsible travel destination.
Integration of ecological values into the tourism product	Ecological values are incorporated into services, routes, infrastructure, and cultural events, demonstrating care for the environment.	Distinguishes the destination from competitors through a unique value proposition and attracts tourists interested in sustainable tourism.
Support from local authorities and communities	Presence of sustainable development strategies, financial and organizational support for local initiatives and businesses.	Facilitates the implementation of ecological projects, ensures stability of tourism infrastructure, and enhances the socio-economic effectiveness of the tourism product.
Marketing and communication promotion	Effective positioning of the eco-brand, systematic advertising campaigns, and transparent communication with tourists.	Increases destination recognition, builds a positive image, and attracts more tourists willing to pay for environmentally responsible services.

Source: created by the authors based on [1; 3].

travelers in sustainable tourism, driven by a preference for nature-oriented recreation and active forms of tourism. Specifically, an online survey conducted in late summer 2023 by the State Agency for Tourism Development of Ukraine in collaboration with UNICEF U-Report Ukraine showed that over 45% of respondents had traveled within the country for tourism purposes since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion. Among them, 54% preferred city tourism and walking trips, 16% chose active recreation, and 11% opted for ecotourism [6].

These findings highlight a significant share of travelers interested in nature-based and recreational travel, which in turn drives the demand for "green" tourism services among local businesses and strengthens their competitiveness in the tourism market.

Thus, it is evident that under certain conditions, an eco-brand allows tourist destinations to stand out among competitors in the tourism market by creating a unique value proposition for visitors and increasing regional recognition. In this context, competitors are other tourist destinations offering similar products and services and aiming to attract the same consumers—tourists who prefer nature-based, cultural, and environmentally responsible forms of recreation.

Analysis of the scholarly literature [1; 3–4] indicates that competitive advantages are achieved when an eco-brand meets the following conditions (see Table 1):

- authenticity and alignment with reality;
- integration of ecological values into the tourism product;
- support from local authorities and communities;
- marketing and communication promotion.

An eco-brand generates competitive advantages when it is authentic and accurately reflects a region's ecological, social, and economic realities. For instance, the Carpathian region's combination of pristine natural environments, local traditions, and proactive environmental policies has boosted its recognition and attracted tourists who value nature-based experiences [1]. By weaving together natural landscapes, biodiversity, and cultural heritage in its branding, the region creates unique offerings for visitors while actively involving local communities in sustainable tourism initiatives, such as eco-trails, environmental education programs, and local nature festivals [2].

Key prerequisites for effective eco-branding include the presence of unique natural resources or environmentally significant practices, the integration of ecological principles into local development strategies, support from authorities and businesses, and active engagement of local communities [1–2]. For example, in the Carpathian region, local communities and tourism enterprises have implemented projects for the sustainable use of natural resources, including the development of

eco-tourism trails, certification of eco-services, and promotion of local products. These initiatives have helped build tourist trust and strengthened the region's brand as a "green" destination. A concrete example is the nature and landscape trails of the Ukrainian Carpathians, which are marked and integrated with local community participation.

Moreover, an eco-brand must be systematically integrated into tourism products, infrastructure, marketing communications, and service policies to ensure recognition and build trust among tourists [4]. Successful examples include regions where the eco-brand is supported through collaboration with national and local tourism agencies, joint marketing campaigns, promotional events, and digital platforms showcasing environmentally responsible routes and services. These efforts enable destinations to stand out among competitors and attract tourists who prioritize eco-friendly travel experiences.

In practice, the examples above demonstrate that an eco-brand does not always serve as a source of competitive advantage. Such advantages fail to materialize when [1; 3—4]:

- the use of the eco-brand is merely declarative;
- the necessary ecological infrastructure and support from local communities and businesses are lacking;
- communication and brand positioning do not foster trust among tourists;
- the destination lacks the resources needed to develop an eco-tourism product.

"Declarative use of an eco-brand" means that a destination or tourism operator formally claims an ecological status or highlights environmental initiatives, but in practice does not implement real measures for sustainable development, nature conservation, or cultural heritage preservation. In other words, the "eco" brand is used as a marketing tool rather than as a reflection of actual environmentally or socially responsible actions—this practice is often referred to as greenwashing. For example, some tourist complexes in the Carpathians have marketed themselves as "eco-hotels," employing green marketing strategies, but lacked waste sorting systems, energy-efficient technologies, or environmental conservation programs. As a result, their ecological claims were purely declarative and not supported by real actions.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of an eco-brand can be reduced if the necessary ecological infrastructure is lacking, such as marked eco-trails, waste sorting and disposal systems, energy-efficient hotels and tourist facilities, environmentally safe

transportation, and information points for environmental education, as well as sufficient support from local communities and businesses. Under such conditions, a destination cannot provide environmentally safe services or implement sustainable tourism practices, which undermines tourist trust and deprives the brand of real competitive advantages in the market.

Communication and positioning of an eco-brand also play a key role in creating competitive advantages. If a destination does not provide transparent and reliable information about its environmental initiatives, tourists may not trust the claimed sustainability standards, which reduces the brand's appeal and limits its influence on destination choice.

The absence of unique natural or cultural resources that can be integrated into tourism products prevents an eco-brand from creating a distinctive value proposition for tourists [2]. In such cases, the destination cannot stand out among competitors in the tourism market, and the use of "eco"-marketing becomes largely ineffective.

Thus, an eco-brand becomes a true source of competitive advantage only when it is implemented comprehensively, systematically, and authentically across all aspects of a destination's tourism activities. This ensures not only its appeal but also its long-term sustainable competitiveness.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that, under certain conditions, an eco-brand enables tourist destinations to stand out among competitors in the tourism market by creating a unique value proposition for visitors and increasing regional recognition. An eco-brand provides competitive advantages when the following conditions are met:

1. Authenticity and Alignment with Reality — The destination genuinely implements ecological practices, supports the preservation of natural and cultural heritage, and ensures environmentally safe conditions for visitors.
2. Integration of Ecological Values into the Tourism Product — The eco-brand is linked to specific services, routes, infrastructure, and cultural activities that demonstrate environmental responsibility.
3. Support from Authorities and Local Communities — Presence of sustainable development strategies, local initiatives, and financial resources to implement eco-projects.
4. Marketing and Communication Promotion — Effective presentation of the eco-brand, high recognition among target audiences, and the building of tourist trust.

Conversely, an eco-brand does not provide competitive advantages when:

1. Its use is merely declarative, serving only as a marketing tool without real changes in the destination's practices (greenwashing).

2. Necessary ecological infrastructure is lacking, or support from local communities and businesses is insufficient.

3. Communication and positioning fail to build tourist trust, or offerings do not meet stated ecological standards.

4. The destination lacks unique natural or cultural resources that could be used to develop a distinctive tourism product.

Thus, an eco-brand becomes a true source of competitive advantage only when it is implemented comprehensively, systematically, and authentically across all aspects of a destination's tourism activities. This ensures not only the destination's appeal but also its long-term sustainable competitiveness.

Future research could focus on evaluating the effectiveness of specific eco-branding strategies for different types of tourist destinations and developing methodologies to measure their impact on sustainable development and the competitive advantages of regions.

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