

The Impact of Ecotourism Expansion on Biodiversity Conservation and Indigenous Cultural Heritage in Fiji

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how the ecotourism expansion in Fiji affects biodiversity conservation and Indigenous cultural heritage. The growth of ecotourism has led to major changes in the tourism sector. It significantly impacts the country's biodiversity conservation and indigenous cultural heritage. This research used a literature review approach, collecting and analyzing secondary data from various relevant sources at each stage of the research. The findings reveal a complex interconnection between economic interests and cultural dynamics, shaping Fiji's ecotourism practices and management. While ecotourism initiatives have emphasized preserving the natural environment and the promotion of indigenous cultural heritage, concern has emerged regarding the negative impacts on the fragile ecosystem and the exploitation of cultural resources for commercial gain. This research provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with ecotourism expansion in Fiji, ensuring sustainable development and the protection of biodiversity and cultural heritage.

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Introduction

As global tourism continues to expand, ecotourism has gained favorable attention as a sustainable alternative to traditional tourism. It is widely described as a responsible way of traveling to natural sites that supports environmental conservation and benefits local people (Kesavan & Polisetty, 2025; Lowman, 2004). This approach has become a significant point for developing countries such as Fiji, where communities seek to leverage their local resources while preserving their cultural heritage and biodiversity. The expansion of ecotourism in Fiji has therefore drawn growing interest because of its implications for both biodiversity conservation and Indigenous cultural practices. Because the term “ecotourism” encompasses a wide range of activities and practices, many scholars have debated how best to define it in a way that captures its environmental, cultural, and economic dimensions (Dean, 2024; Mangubhai et al., 2018). These perspectives show the complex interplay among

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conservation goals, cultural values, and economic pressures within ecotourism initiatives. Fiji is famous for its beautiful and rich culture, which has led to mass ecotourism development in recent decades. The growth of ecotourism in Fiji has not only changed the tourism landscape but also had a considerable impact on the country's biodiversity conservation and Indigenous cultural heritage. The dual implications have generated a complex interconnection between the economy and the cultural dynamics, shaping how ecotourism is practiced and managed in Fiji. The relationship between ecotourism expansion and biodiversity conservation in Fiji has many sides.

Previous research has explored various aspects of ecotourism, particularly its dual role in promoting environmental conservation and cultural heritage preservation. However, there remains limited understanding of the complex interactions between the economic benefits of ecotourism and its long-term impacts on both biodiversity and Indigenous cultures in specific context such as Fiji. For example, while McKeon & Drew (2019) emphasize the importance of ecotourism for environmental protection and cultural sustainability, they do not fully address how these impacts are managed within the socio-economic dynamics of local communities. Similarly, although Doorne (2017) highlights broad conceptualizations of ecotourism, there is limited research on how these definitions are applied within evolving tourism policies and practices in Fiji. Studies on the commercialization of Indigenous cultures for tourism purposes often focus on risks of cultural erosion but fail to examine how these risks can be minimized without hindering the economic benefits ecotourism provides to Indigenous communities. Additionally, although biodiversity conservation in tourism regions has been widely discussed, the direct correlation between ecotourism practices and species protection in Fiji has not been sufficiently studied. This gap in the literature presents an opportunity for research to analyze how ecotourism can be effectively managed to support local economic development and the long-term preservation of Fiji's biodiversity and cultural heritage.

On the other hand, the promotion of ecotourism has encouraged increased efforts to conserve and protect Fiji's ecosystems and species. Ecotourism initiatives often prioritize the preservation of natural environments and wildlife, which led to the emphasis of conservation measures aimed at safeguarding Fiji's ecological integrity. However, the growth of ecotourism has also raised concerns about potential negative impacts on fragile ecosystem and species if it is not appropriately managed. Balancing the economic benefits of ecotourism while maintaining and protecting biodiversity challenges policymakers and local communities. Similarly, the expansion of ecotourism in Fiji has been associated to preserving Indigenous culture, raising both opportunities and challenges. Indigenous communities in Fiji have rich cultural traditions, knowledge systems, and customary practices that are linked to the land and natural resources. Ecotourists often seek a unique cultural experience, creating opportunities for Indigenous communities to showcase their cultural heritage and generate income. At the same time, the Indigenous culture for tourism purposes has created a concern about the potential erosion of the traditional practices and the exploitation of cultural resources for commercial gain. In the context of understanding the impacts of ecotourism expansion in Fiji on biodiversity and cultural heritage conservation. By delving into this area, important information will be gathered regarding the challenges and opportunities linked to ecotourism, ensuring sustainable development and the protection of biodiversity and cultural heritage.

Methodology

The method used in this research is a literature review. The research procedure involved collecting and analyzing secondary data from various relevant sources at each stage of the research. Data were collected by utilizing secondary sources available from the

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university's digital library and platforms such as Google Scholar, which provide a large amount of data in the form of original work by other researchers (Martins & Martins, 2018). The search themes used to obtain information included Indigenous communities, biodiversity, conservation, and tourism, while the identification process considered geography, environment, economics, and tourism. Data analysis focused solely on journals and articles published within these platforms. This approach helped save time and allowed the collection of data relevant to the research topic. However, several limitations were encountered during this research. Few articles were available on the central topic, which limited the depth of the findings. Most of the data was outdated, and no longer relevant to the current time; not all relevant papers have been captured despite the analysis that has taken place.

Result and Discussion

Ecotourism and Biodiversity conservation

Ecotourism in Fiji plays a vital role in the conservation of biodiversity and the protection of natural resources. It benefits the environment by focusing on sustainable practices and supports the local communities and their cultural heritage. While Fiji is well known for its unique plants, species, and diverse marine life, ecotourism initiatives help promote the preservation of these ecosystems, ensuring their survival for future generations. Fiji's approach towards marine conservation and sustainable fishing has established Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), crucial for preserving the aquatic ecosystems that are the backbone of the island's natural allure (Schafer, 2024).

The real question is, does eco-tourism provide effective incentives? According to Kiss (2004), these incentives can take several forms. Direct leakage occurs when tourism earnings are so high that people deliberately protect biodiversity to protect their income. However, earnings from ecotourism do not necessarily lead to biodiversity conservation or support an action. In some cases, people invest these earnings in activities such as expanding agriculture thereby increasing the threat to biodiversity (Kiss 2004). Kiss (2004) also notes another type of linkage is when an interested party helps a community group develop ecotourism, in exchange for their formal or informal agreement to support biodiversity conservation. The expectation is that ecotourism will eventually generate enough income to create direct incentives for conservation, but many projects often wind up front-loading and enhancing the benefits that the funding community needs themselves rather than waiting for the income to maintain community interest and cooperation.

While those mentioned above remain a problem, Fiji's steps for biodiversity conservation are the creation of MPAs, a proactive step towards ensuring the sustainability of Fiji's marine resource for future generations (Schafer, 2024). By promoting sustainable fishing practices, Fiji ensures that the marine ecosystem remains original and productive for future generations. For example, the Namena Marine Reserve, established in 1997, has become a model of marine conservation. Local dive operators and the Kubulau community have partnered to protect this area, demonstrating how ecotourism can support conservation. The income generated from diving permits to reinvest into the local education and community projects, creating a cycle of sustainability (Green et al. 2009)

This strategy promotes biodiversity conservation and raises the visitor experience standard overall, as shown in Figures 1 and 2, establishing Fiji as a model nation for ethical tourism practices that balance environmental preservation and economic growth. Travelers who care about the environment are drawn to Fiji because of its dedication to improving biodiversity (Schafer, 2024). The tourism industry is transforming due to the increasing demand for eco-friendly travel experiences. Travelers seek activities that benefit local communities and reduce their environmental impact (Schafer, 2024).

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The financial and ecological advantages of eco-friendly travel businesses in the tourism industry can achieve a greater number of smaller footprints at lower costs by focusing on energy efficiency, waste reduction, and sustainable resource management. Adopting eco-friendly practices is not only good for the environment but also has a greater impact on operational costs. For instance, reducing energy consumption has benefits for the economy in addition to the environment. With a deep understanding that nature is its most valuable resource and the basis for economic opportunities, Fiji is deeply committed to sustainability. Measurement and mitigation of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in Fiji, primarily in the tourism sector, are ongoing, with annual targets aiming for a 5% to 10% reduction over the next five years (Schafer, 2024). The sustainability fund is one of the incentives that supports the implementation of these reduction actions, and it helps finance conservation projects and leverage community expertise to reach sustainability goals.

The growth of ecotourism in Fiji has driven significant changes in the hospitality industry. More lodging and tour companies are implementing sustainable practices, lessening their environmental impact and improving the visitor experience by fostering a stronger bond with the local environment and culture. This strategy is a response to the increasing number of tourists who select companies that share their values of sustainability and conservation. A shift toward more ethical tourism is taking place, which is good for the community and the environment. These approaches make Fiji one of the best examples of balancing economic growth with environmental protection. By focusing on sustainable accommodation and tours, Fiji is setting another global target for positive change in travel (Schafer, 2024).

Local Conservation Initiatives Fiji's commitment to eco-tourism extends beyond the country's beautiful views, while maintaining the balance between tourism and the environment. These initiatives involve partnerships between the government, non-profit organizations, and communities, ensuring that conservation efforts are improved and more effective. For example, community-based disaster risk reduction programs, capacity-building workshops, empowerment projects, and grassroots conservation projects can all be funded. Another initiative, the Kiwa Project, uses Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) to support biodiversity protection and adaptation to climate change across 19 Pacific Island Countries and Territories through grants. In Fiji, the Kiwa Project promotes training, policy integration, and the identification of sustainable finance mechanisms for NBS (Republic of Fiji, 2024). By investing in projects that empower communities with skills and resource, Fiji is making a sustainable model of tourism that benefits both the environment and the population. This type of practices fosters culture of responsibility among tourists, residents, and native people of Fiji (Schafer, 2024).

The rich biodiversity of Fiji is a major attraction for environmentally conscious tourists who come to see the animals. Visitors can anticipate many species, including humpback whales that migrate through Fijian waters, vibrant coral reefs, and Fiji's crested iguanas, which are only found in the country's dry forests. Through responsible wildlife tourism, Fiji attempts to demonstrate its commitment to global biodiversity conservation. Fiji is combining the preservation of biodiversity with tourism as a means of safeguarding natural resources while pursuing economic expansion. As a results, travelers who look for lodging and tour companies that use sustainable practices are moving toward more responsible tourism experiences. While Fiji has made some significant changes, the road towards fully sustainable tourism is ongoing. It is essential to know that not all stakeholders are fully engaged, and plastic waste remains one of the most significant problems (Schafer, 2024).

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Table 1. Indicative Budget (US\$ million)

Type	CIF	IDA	GEF	ORCA-TF	ADB	Private	DF14	Total Component
Component 1, policy, institutional, and framework for NBS	4.5	0.8	1.5	-	-			6.8
Component 2. Mainstreaming NBS to integrated management with a mountain-to-ocean approach	13.5	2.8	0.5	1.7	-			18.5
Component 3. Resilient community livelihoods.	7	0.8	0.5	-	3.5	10	10.5	32.3
Component 4. Project management	2	0.6	0.5	-	-			3.1
Total by source	27.0	5	3	1.7	3.5	10	10.5	60.7

Source: Republic of Fiji (2024)

Table 2. Climate Investment Funds (CIF) Funding (US \$ million)

Type	MDB	PPG	Loan	Grant	Total
Preparation	World Bank	0.5			0.5
Component 1	World Bank			4.5	4.5
Component 2	World Bank			11	11
Component 2	ADB			2.5	2.5
Component 3	World Bank			2	3
Component 3	ADB			2	5
Component 4	World Bank		3	2	2
Total	27.0	0.5	3	24	27.5

Source: Republic of Fiji (2024)

The total budget allocated for the next five years is US \$60.7 million, with an estimated cofinancing amount of US \$33.7 million, as outlined in Table 1. A detailed structure of Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) projects is presented in Table 3. In addition to co-financing, parallel projects and interventions are expected to reach approximately US \$240 million. The source of parallel financing identified included Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Fiji Development Bank (FDB), Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI), Revitalizing Informal Settlements and their Environments (RISE), the Waitt Institute, and national and regional World Bank projects.

The indicative budget in table 1 gives a fair view on how much funds are being allocated to specific organizations or institutions such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Climate Investment Funds (CIF), Global Environment Facility (GEF), and the International Development Association (IDA). These institutions will start giving certain amount of funds to the less developed and developing countries, including Fiji, so that it can begin working on the targeted projects, especially those related to NBS, as shown in table 3.

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Table 3. Potential Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) opportunities identified in Fiji

<i>NBS opportunity</i>	<i>Potential</i>	<i>Scale</i>
<i>Reforestation of native forest to provide connectivity, habitat, water, filtration, and carbon capture and storage</i>	<i>Extensive areas can be restored at low coast across the country</i>	<i>Moderate opportunities in coordination with the ERP</i>
<i>Restoration of riparian vegetation to reduce sediment runoff, filter agricultural runoff, improve water quality, and enhance river ecosystems</i>	<i>Large strips of land are available for restoration and may present cost-effective opportunities.</i>	<i>Significant opportunities across the country. Removal of riparian vegetation is an extended practice.</i>
<i>Built wetlands for wastewater treatment</i>	<i>The solution is particularly relevant in vulnerable but large populated rural and or semi-urban areas.</i>	<i>Limited to high density rural and peri urban settlements.</i>
<i>Mangrove conservation and restoration for coastal protection and other benefits.</i>	<i>Internationally recognized solution for coastal protection, extensive benefits potential.</i>	<i>Opportunities nationwide. Priority areas with highest cost benefit were prioritized</i>
<i>Coral reef protection and restoration for coastal protection and other benefits</i>	<i>Protection is more cost-efficient, but restoration may be needed depending on the location</i>	<i>Fiji hosts 10,020 square kilometers of coral reefs, most of which can be considered for this NBS. Priority coral reefs will be targeted.</i>
<i>Agroforestry and restorative agriculture are used to reduce environmental impacts while creating added value.</i>	<i>Ample interest from communities, smallholders, and the government to expand these practices.</i>	<i>Extensive smallholder and communal agricultural land is concentrated in some areas (e.g., Nadi Province).</i>

Source: Republic of Fiji (2024)

Some of the key areas Fiji focuses on include the preservation of coral reefs through the earnings from eco-tourism, since it is one of the most vital marine biodiversity. Emphasis on ecotourism strategies is therefore significant. For example, responsible diving and snorkeling practices are promoted to minimize physical damage to these sensitive ecosystems, along with educational initiatives that highlight the importance of reef conservation. Many ecotourism programs also engage in coral restoration projects to rehabilitate the damaged reefs and ensure their long-term health (Farrelly, 2009). Sustainable resource management is another important component of Fiji's list for conserving biodiversity. Fiji promotes sustainable resource management through responsible water usage, waste management, and energy conservation efforts to mitigate environmental impact and contribute to a greener future (Farrelly, 2009).

The Fijian government is committed to conserving biological diversity (CBD), creating MPAs in 30 percent of the Fijian Ocean by 2030, and designating these areas as no-take fishing zones. Despite this commitment, only 31,915 sq km have been properly regulated as marine reserve areas, representing about 0.0081 percent of Fiji's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Some informal sites, known as Tabu areas, are also maintained by Indigenous communities to protect and manage customary fishing grounds (qoliqoli), where fishing is prohibited. Moreover, chiefs provide the Tabu sites, and the tourism operators make agreements. The government is also planning to develop a data-gathering framework to track and monitor the level of catch and fish stock from coastal and inshore fisheries, which can help track the progress of the MPAs over time (Republic of Fiji, 2024).

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The environmental richness of Fiji, including biodiversity and natural resources, drives up to half of the country's economic growth. However, despite the benefits provided by these ecosystems, their distribution remains unequal. The country's largest sector relies on the unique culture and tropical rainforest, sandy beaches, coral reefs, marine life, clean environment, and clear blue waters. Investment Plan activities are designed to address development gaps, particularly in poor rural areas already in danger of climate change, natural hazards, and external shocks. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, and other high-risk events (Republic of Fiji, 2024).

Despite all the steps taken by Fiji toward biodiversity conservation, the real question lies in why many initiatives are failing. Brodie et al., (2013) argue that several challenges hinder the growth of conservation progress in the Pacific Islands. One major issue is the fragility of island ecosystems; even small changes can have significant impacts and introduce new threats. For example, in the Solomon Islands, the introduction of the cane toad has negatively affected the native goanna population, reducing the population in the coastal forest on the main islands. In Fiji, although the overall population is relatively small and growing slowly, internal migration from rural to urban areas has intensified. This shift has contributed to substantial demand for the commercial production of food and unsustainable land use practices, which has led to land degradation. Brodie et al. (2013) further note that corruption, institutional responsibility, youth education, and cultural values and beliefs of the Pacific people all play critical roles in biodiversity conservation, and in some cases these factors can hinder rather than support conservation efforts.

Even though Fiji's total investment in biodiversity conservation could not be found throughout the years, Table 1, 2, and 3 indicate that significant resources are being allocated from 2024 to 2030 across various initiatives. These programs will likely involve millions of dollars in funding and support for such activities. Finding a balance between conservation efforts and tourism development is a greater challenge for Fiji. However, effective planning and management are essential to prevent the adverse effects related to tourism and biodiversity conservation. Fragile ecosystems are prone to overcrowding and habitat degradation, making measures such as carrying-capacity assessments and visitor monitoring crucial for maintaining the ecological side of Fiji's natural environment (Farrelly, 2009).

Ecotourism and indigenous cultural heritage

Ecotourism also supports local communities by bringing a positive sense of stewardship and appreciation for the environment. Engaging the local population in conservation ensures that the traditional knowledge is also integrated into biodiversity protection practices. This type of community-based management does not only help in achieving conservation targets but also creates economic opportunities for local population (Schafer, 2024). By encouraging sustainable tourism practices, ecotourism empowers Indigenous communities, helping them preserve their cultural heritage while promoting environmental conservation.

Zaei and Zaei (2013) explain that tourism may have many different effects on a region's cultural and religious strengths. The interaction between tourists and host communities can be an important factor in shaping these effects, as tourists may not be sensitive to local customs, traditions, and standards. As a result, these interactions can generate both positive and negative outcomes. For instance, bringing people from diverse backgrounds and lifestyles may lead to local development. This development can have improvements in the quality of life, an increase in cultural and social events such as exhibitions of local arts and crafts, and, importantly, renewed efforts to conserve local cultural heritage, including traditional crafts, architectural styles, and ancestral heritage.

In Fiji, intertwining indigenous cultural heritage, economic aspirations, and sustainable tourism practices demands a delicate balance that requires expertise and collaboration

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(Lockington, 2023a). Land is very important to the iTaukei people, but it also brings complex challenges. Land holds immense cultural significance, and land leasing for tourism demands careful consideration to preserve traditional values while embracing modern opportunities. While those poses challenge the role of the Native Land, it comes into play where lease provides the legal foundation while hotels, resorts, and other tourism-related ventures are established. The collaboration between the Native Land Trust Board (TLTB) and the landowners is vital for the success of any distribution policy. Effective collaboration can also encourage landowners to diversify their income sources; instead of relying solely on lease income, landowners could explore other opportunities, such as agro-tourism, cultural experience, or handicrafts production (Lockington, 2023b).

Community involvement in indigenous communities is often involved in planning and managing eco-tourism projects. This involvement ensures that tourism activities respect and integrate cultural values and traditions. Community-led tourism initiatives provide a platform for indigenous voices to be heard and for their cultural heritage to be celebrated. For instance, the local communities manage the Bouma National Heritage Park on Taveuni island. The Park includes several ecotourism attractions, such as the Bouma Falls and coastal trails. The income generated from entrance fees and guided tours is reinvested into the community development projects, including education, healthcare, and infrastructure improvements

Table 4. Estimated Budget from 2023- 2024 for Culture, Heritage and Arts

<i>Expense Type</i>	<i>Total cost \$</i>
<i>Personal, FNPF and Allowance</i>	<i>\$593,337.00</i>
<i>Travel, Subsistence and Telecommunication</i>	<i>\$9,500.00</i>
<i>Fuel, oil, office supplies, power supply, and maintenance of culture database</i>	<i>\$47,000.00</i>
<i>Books and periodicals and publications</i>	<i>\$7,000.00</i>
<i>Culture mapping verifications, review of i Volavosa Dictionary, cultural</i>	<i>\$439,135.00</i>
<i>Revitalisation programme, cultural awareness, enhancement programme, E-library equipment and traditional knowledge and Expression of culture</i>	
<i>Legislation</i>	

Source: Republic of Fiji (2024)

The Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and the Ministry of Culture, Heritage and Arts are committed to promoting, preserving and safeguarding iTaukei culture, customs tradition, language, cultural heritage sites and indigenous rights. Table 4 shows the government's expenditure on the Indigenous culture and heritage due to the growing demand for ecotourism. Fiji's unique culture is one of the many key elements that make Fiji special. In response, the Ministry is extending its arms, implementing the Fiji National Culture Policy and enhancing commitments under the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. For the 2023-2024 fiscal year, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and the Ministry of Culture, Heritage and Arts allocated \$38.6 million to support these initiatives.

The Department of Heritage and Arts has developed a natural cultural policy, focusing more on the cultural side, where proper traditional training promotes cultural tourism that will enhance livelihood and preserve conventional knowledge assets through generations. However, the indigenous culture of Fiji is mainly threatened by commoditization in the absence of clear guidelines, management, and through engagement with the communities. Without careful oversight, traditional knowledge may not be used properly. Therefore, as these policies being made, the government needs to understand, regulate, and monitor cultural tourism in Fiji. These policies serve as proper guidelines for the cultural assets within the tourism industry (Ministry of Trade, Co-operatives, 2021).

Challenges and opportunities

One of the challenges associated with ecotourism is ensuring cultural sensitivity. It is crucial to manage tourism activities in a way that do not exploit or misrepresent the indigenous culture. This requires a balanced approach between promoting cultural heritage and protecting it from commercialization. Capacity building is another aspect of empowering indigenous communities through ecotourism. Training and education programs can equip communities with the skills needed to manage tourism sustainably and preserve their cultural heritage. For example, the Fijian Government's Tourism Development Plan includes initiatives to provide training for local tour guides. This training and knowledge offer tourists a higher quality, culturally enriching experience. Such training helps ensure that tourism's benefit is distributed equitably within the community (Ministry of Trade, Co-operatives, 2021). Sustainable practices are also essential for protecting both the environment and cultural heritage. This involves promoting eco-friendly accommodations, responsible travel behaviors, and community-based conservation efforts. Sustainable practices help ensure that tourism does not degrade natural resources or cultural sites, thereby preserving them for future generations. One example is the use of eco-lodges, which Fiji prioritizes in environmental conservation. These lodges are designed to minimize their ecological footprint by using renewable energy sources, implementing waste reduction measures, and supporting local sustainability of their destination (Becken & Hay, 2007).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research findings highlight the complex interconnection between the expansion of ecotourism in Fiji, biodiversity conservation, and Indigenous cultural heritage. While ecotourism initiatives have emphasized preserving the natural environment and promoting Indigenous cultural heritage, concerns have emerged regarding potential negative impacts on the fragile ecosystem and the exploitation of cultural resources for commercial gain. The growth of ecotourism in Fiji has led to significant changes in the tourism sector, impacting the country's economy and cultural dynamics. The relationship between ecotourism expansion and biodiversity conservation presents ongoing challenges for policymakers and local communities, requiring a balance between economic benefits and environmental protection. Similarly, while the expansion of ecotourism has provided opportunities for Indigenous communities to showcase their cultural heritage and generate income, there are concerns about the potential erosion of traditional practices and the commercial exploitation of cultural resources. Understanding the impacts of ecotourism expansion in Fiji on biodiversity and cultural heritage conservation is crucial for ensuring sustainable development and the protection of both biodiversity and Indigenous cultural heritage. This research offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities that ecotourism expansion brings in Fiji, and it hopes that the findings contribute to the development of effective strategies for sustainable ecotourism practices in the future.

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Competing Interests

The author(s) declare no competing interests.

Data Availability

The data generated and/or analyzed during this study are available as open access through official government websites of the Republic of Fiji.

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