

SUSTAINABLE COASTAL AND MARITIME TOURISM IN PAKISTAN: UNLOCKING THE BLUE ECONOMY POTENTIAL

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ABSTRACT

Coastal and Marine Tourism (CMT) is a crucial component for the generation of Blue Economy which mainly ambitions economic growth. CMT contributes a considerable portion to the global tourism, accounting approximately 50% of the total tourism activities around the globe. The location of Pakistan along the Arabian Sea, with a widespread coastline and rich marine resources, presents significant opportunities for the development of CMT. The Coastal Tourism industry has the potential to become a cornerstone of Pakistan's blue economy. Despite its potential, CMT in Pakistan remains underdeveloped and in need of dire attention. This paper highlights the opportunities, challenges, and policy recommendations for fostering sustainable CMT in Pakistan. Moreover, the study also examines the role of sustainable CMT in improving and promoting Pakistan's blue economy by the promotion of biodiversity conservation, reduction of poverty and supporting the sustainable use of marine resources. Key obstacles in developing CMT include a deficiency of cohesive tourism policies and monitoring systems, inadequate investment in eco-friendly facilities, limited awareness of environmental sustainability, and insufficient community engagement. To address this matter, the study recommends actionable recommendations, including the establishment of a devoted Coastal and Maritime Tourism Authority, investment in eco-friendly infrastructure.

Keywords: *Coastal and maritime tourism, Blue economy, Environment, Sustainability.*

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INTRODUCTION

The Blue Economy is referred to as the sustainable use of ocean resources. It includes sectors such as ports and shipping, ship breaking and recycling, aquaculture, mariculture and coastal and maritime tourism (CMT). It also includes new fields and industries such as marine biotechnology, deep sea mining and renewable energy (Marwan, 2024). CMT is one of the main pillars of blue economy. The marine tourism activities include beach tourism, fishing wildlife watching etc. It also includes activities on the sea. These include sailing, scuba diving and cruising etc. (Pascoe, 2019).

Globally around \$9.9 trillion was contributed by the tourism industry in the year 2023. Moreover, the sector supported around 348 million jobs. This highlighted an increase of about 13 million when compared to the year 2019 (WTTC, 2024). In the year 2024, about 1.4 billion people travelled internationally. About \$11.10 trillion was contributed, which is equal to 10% of the global GDP. These figures show a remarkable increase in revenue when compared to the year 2023 (UNWTO, 2024). Hence, the above-mentioned statistics reveal that tourism is not only one of the most important drivers of the economy, but it is also an important employment sector. CMT constitutes a significant portion of global tourism, accounting for approximately 50% of the total tourism activities worldwide (World Economic Forum, 2023). It acts as the main economic sector for the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and many other coastal regions.

The travel and tourism sector holds immense importance for Pakistan's economy. The travel and tourism sector contributed approximately 5.9% in 2022 to Pakistan's GDP. It supported around 4.2 million jobs (Afzal et al., 2023). It is extrapolated that the travel and tourism industry will produce more than \$4 billion in revenue in 2025 (Statista, 2025). However, when we talk about the coastal and maritime tourism, its contribution to Pakistan's overall tourism sector is extremely low. The country has the potential to earn \$ 4.0 to 5.0

billion annually if the coastal regions are developed properly (Saba, 2023).

Coastal and Marine Tourism as a Driver of Economic Growth

Coastal tourism has become a significant spearhead of global economic development worldwide, particularly in island nations across the regions of Southeast Asia, the Pacific, Europe, and Africa. Islands like Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Pacific islands are rich in cultural heritage, natural beauty, and unique biodiversity, which have helped them harness tourism as a strategic economic sector (IDE-JETRO, 2022). The tourism industry not only generates foreign exchange but also creates thousands of job opportunities, fosters entrepreneurship, and attracts foreign direct investment (FDI). In 2024, Thailand's tourism sector contributed approximately 12% of the GDP and over 20% of the employment, making it a critical pillar of the economy. Similarly, Bali in Indonesia has become a global hotspot, attracting tourists from all over the world and boosting local businesses in hospitality, transportation, and retail. Similarly, in 2024 the travel and tourism industry in Malaysia and Indonesia contributed about 10.1% and 4.8% respectively to the GDP. In the Philippines tourism accounted for 9.8% of GDP in 2024. Tourism helped in strengthening regional integration through collaborations like ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan, which aims to position Southeast Asia as a single tourism destination (Hob-Udom, 2025).

In the Pacific, island such as Fiji, Samoa, and Vanuatu is heavily dependent on tourism due to their limited industrial bases. Tourism helps earn foreign income, reduce poverty, and stimulates infrastructure development, including airports, roads, and communication systems. Ecotourism and cultural tourism have also grown, attracting environmentally conscious travellers and providing incentives for conservation efforts. Fiji is a standout example, with tourism accounting for nearly 40% of GDP and supporting 150,000 jobs as of 2023 (Export Finance Australia, 2022). While Tonga's tourism sector represents 11% of GDP and 9% of

employment, recovering 93% of pre-pandemic arrivals in 2024 (Tonga Ministry of Tourism, 2022).

In 2022 maritime tourism continued to remain the largest sector of Blue Economy in Europe encompassing about 53% of blue economy employment (European Commission, 2025). European Union, the travel and tourism sector contributed 10% to the economy in 2024. The tourism industry in 2024 in France contributed about 9.1% while in Italy it contributed 10.8 % to GDP. In Greece, the tourism sector added €30.2 billion to the GDP in 2024. The United Kingdom's tourism industry, which includes the CMT, contributed about £286 billion market in the year 2024, which represents 10% of its GDP (Condor Ferries, 2025). With proper planning and sustainable practices, tourism sector can continue to serve as a powerful tool for economic growth, cultural preservation, and poverty alleviation, fuelling billions in revenue, millions of jobs, and stronger FDI flows. Tourism must be guided by sustainable and resilient policies to ensure long-term benefits for both people and the planet. However, the sector also faces some challenges, including environmental degradation, over-tourism, and vulnerability to climate change (Omar et al., 2024). Thus, a shift toward sustainable tourism practices is important for long-term benefits.

Sustainable Coastal and Marine Tourism

Environmental degradation and cultural disruptions may result as a result of conventional tourism. Hence to meet the "Agenda 2030 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN-SDGs), shift from conventional to sustainable tourism is taking place globally. The primary aim of sustainable CMT is to reduce environmental degradation and improve the social and economic condition of the local communities in the coastal areas (Mertha et al., 2017). When talking about the SDGs, many of them align with sustainable growth of CMT. This is because sustainable CMT advocates and impacts cultural and environmental conservation, economic growth and positive development of the community. The sustainable CMT almost aligns with all the SDGs, but the key ones are displayed in the table 1.

Table 1: Key UN-SDGs that align with Sustainable Coastal and marine tourism.

SDG	Explanation
SDG 8	Decent Work and Economic Growth
SDG 12	Responsible Consumption and Production
SDG 13	Climate Action
SDG 14	Life Below Water
SDG 15	Life of Land
SDG 17	Partnerships for the Goals

The decade 2021-2030 has been declared by the United Nations as the “Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development”. The coastal and marine areas are facing problems such as climate change, pollution, coral bleaching and over-tourism. Hence, the CMT needs to shift towards sustainable practices that encourage environmental health, low carbon technologies, cultural preservation and local community participation (Table 2). The international standards for sustainable tourism have been developed by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC). GSTC guides for responsible tourism planning including waste and water management, biodiversity conservation and cultural preservation (Anis et al., 2023).

Table 2: Key principles and practices of sustainable tourism.

Sustainable Tourism Practices	How to Travel Sustainably
1. Eco-Friendly infrastructure and Cruise lines	1. Choose eco-friendly accommodation
2. Community Involvement	2. Support local businesses and artisans
3. Environmental Conservation	3. Respect wildlife and avoid littering
4. Education and Awareness	4. Participate in community-driven tourism activities
5. Controlled Tourism Activities	5. Following guidelines for conserving natural areas.
6. Cultural Preservation	
7. Monitoring and Regulation	
8. Marketing and Promotion	
9. Green Certification e.g Green Global	
10. Partnerships and Collaboration	

Sustainable tourism facilities such as coastal resorts and cruise lines services to minimize the negative impacts on marine and coastal ecosystems. They play an important role in the reduction of carbon footprints. The main aim of introducing these new practices is to offer high-quality tourist experiences while preserving the natural and cultural heritage of coastal regions for future generations. Sustainable resorts practice green building by using eco-friendly materials, waste and water management systems, and the use of renewable energy resources such as solar, wind, or tidal energy. Additionally, local sourcing of materials and community engagement further aid in achieving the goal (Ebrahimi & gholamzadeh, 2024). Cruise lines including the Norwegian company “Hurtigruten” and “Viking Cruises” have adopted greener technologies, such as Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) propulsion, hybrid-electric engines, and waste treatment facilities onboard. Due to the heavy pollution caused by cruise ships, particularly in sensitive environments like the Arctic and Caribbean, these regions need to be protected from the significant carbon and waste footprint these hybrid ships are known for.

Coastal countries such as Australia and the Philippines, and many Mediterranean countries have adopted the Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) approach, which is more all-embracing concerning tourism development whilst preserving the ecosystems, fisheries, and urban sprawl. It brings government authorities, private investors, and local communities on board so that together they design and implement integrated sustainable development strategies for the beaches, marine parks and coastal cities. This strategy assists in the integrated management of coastal and marine tourism (Shi & Xu, 2019).

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) play a crucial role in the sustainable management of marine tourism. These areas help eco-tourists and marine biologists ensure the long-term existence of important marine eco-systems and species such as coral reefs and sea turtles. Countries such as Australia (specifically the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park), Belize, and Palau have Zoning and Regulatory Areas where tourism

is controlled and regulated which is vital for the preservation of marine ecosystems. In these places, tourist quotas are enforced, motorized entry is banned and educational briefings are compulsory so that tourists understand the importance of marine conservation.

Coastal states like Costa Rica, Thailand, and Indonesia have invested in community-based tourism where locals manage eco-tourism activities like guided snorkelling, turtle conservation, and mangrove walks. Revenues go directly to the local community and are then utilised in promoting conservation, cultural exchange, and poverty reduction. Through this approach, the local communities benefit directly from tourism in the states.

Tourism operators also promote “leave no trace” campaigns for visitors to keep marine ecosystems clean, so that no negative impacts are made on the marine life, and no traces of pollution are left behind. Smart tourism management systems like visitor tracking, digital permits, and reef health monitoring apps are commonly used in regions like the Great Barrier Reef, Galápagos, and Hawaii. These systems help in controlling tourist numbers, inform management decisions, and enhance visitor education (Qin & Pan, 2023).

Maritime Tourism Governance in Pakistan

The Federal Government have managed the tourism department since 1947. After years of waiting, a separate Tourism Department was created at ministerial level in 1972. It was part of the Ministry of Minorities and Religious Affairs. Later, in 1976, the Tourism Division became part of the Commerce Ministry. A new institute Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation (PTDC) was created in 1970, primarily to promote and develop the tourism industry in Pakistan.

In 1977, the Ministry of Culture, Archaeology, Sports and Tourism was established. Then, in 1987, it was reshaped as the “Ministry of Culture and Tourism”. Also in the same year, the Punjab Government set up its own Tourism Development Cooperation. Later, the other provinces of Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa also established their own tourism corporations. Then in March 1989, a separate ministry

for tourism was set up as “Ministry of Tourism Division”. This was joined with the Sports Ministry, which was modified to “The Ministry of Culture” in 1993 and then renamed in 1997 as “The Ministry of Sports, Tourism and Youth Affairs”.

In 2004, more focus was allocated in the tourism sector, and a “Ministry of Tourism” was created with the goal to promote, develop and encourage tourism in Pakistan. In the year 1990, the First Tourism Policy in Pakistan was introduced. With the collaboration of United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and World Tourism Organization (WTO) the “Tourism Master Plan” drafted in the year 2000. Then it was in the year 2011 that the Second Tourism Policy was formed.

In 2011, the Ministry of Tourism was dissolved with the enforcement of 18th Amendment to the Constitution passed in the National Assembly. Hence, tourism became more of a provincial subject (Ullah, 2024). The departments including Tourism Corporation Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (TCKP), Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Culture, Tourism Authority (KPCTA), Tourism Development Corporation Punjab (TDCP), Directorate of Tourism Baluchistan and Sindh Tourism Development Corporation (STDC) took control over tourism in the respective provinces. In 2015 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was the first province to form its Tourism Policy followed by Punjab in 2019. However, the Sindh and Baluchistan Provinces have not launched their respective formal tourism policies yet. In 2020, the National Coordination Committee on Tourism (NCCT) was launched to coordinate tourism development efforts across the country and help Pakistan grow as a tourist destination. However, still there is no specific maritime tourism authority and coastal & marine tourism policy to coordinate all stakeholders under one system.

Unlocking Pakistan's Coastal Tourism Wealth

Pakistan along the Arabian Sea has a coastline of about 1,001 km out of which 366.5 km belongs to Sindh and 734.5 km belongs to the Balochistan province. (Wasim & Abbas, 2024). The coastline presents

exceptional opportunities for CMT. The opportunities provided by Pakistan's CMT includes pristine beaches, ecotourism and marine protected areas and diverse cultural & heritage sites. It also provides prospects for cruise line tourism.

Figure 1: Key marine and coastal tourism sites along Pakistan's coastline.



Pakistan's coastline is home to some of the most breathtaking coastal beaches located in the provinces of Sindh and Baluchistan some of which include Gwadar, which is now the strategic and scenic core of Pakistan with its deep-sea port. Ormara, Pasni, Kund Malir, which is settled along the Makran Coastal Highway, offers primeval golden sands and turquoise waters, making it a hidden gem for eco-tourism and adventure seekers. Sonmiani, Daran, Hawks Bay, Sandspit, Clifton and Manora Island, just off Karachi's coast, blends colonial heritage with marine beauty, presenting a unique mix of history, culture, and coastal recreation. All these coastal locations offer immense potential for sustainable CMT (Shahzad, 2020).

The Makran coast's Hingol National Park is known for its rich biodiversity. However, it hosts amazing natural wonders like the Princess of Hope, Sphinx of Baluchistan (Lion of Baluchistan), and Chandragup mud volcanoes. Princess of Hope is formed by wind and water erosion that transformed rock into a human shaped figure. The sphinx of Baluchistan is about a 60-foot structure made of limestone that looks like the ancient Egyptian Sphinx. Historical and cultural sites such as Hinglaj Mata Mandar, Old Jamia Masjid and Makli Necropolis, Bhanbore, and Shah Jahan Mosque, Balakot, Rato

Kot Fort, Chau Khandi Tombs etc. are also present along the coast, which signifies Pakistan's rich maritime heritage (Rehman et al., 2020).

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) such as Astola and Churna Island, which were declared as MPAs in 2019 and 2024 respectively, also provide spectacular tourism sites. Miani Hor Mangroves, Balochistan have been declared as the third MPA in July 2025. Ramsar sites include Jiwani Coastal Wetland, Miani Hor Mangroves and Ormara Turtle Beaches. Keenjhar Lake, located in Thatta, is one of Pakistan's largest freshwater lakes is a vital Ramsar site declared in 1976. It accommodates diverse migratory bird species. Jubho Lagoon, is a coastal brackish wetland located in the Sujawal District, is also a Ramsar site which also hosts large populations of migratory waterbirds. It was declared Ramsar site in 2011.

Hence, the coastline of Pakistan can provide numerous opportunities for water sports adventure, cruise line, eco-friendly resorts along beaches and ecotourism activities. However, the required infrastructure needs to be built efficiently to attract local and international tourists. Also the Pakistan's coastal area is rich in Cuisine and Culture (Table 3).

Table 3: Coastal culinary traditions and handicrafts of Pakistan

Pakistan's Coastal Cuisine	Pakistan's Coastal Handicrafts
1. Machi (Fish) Karachi	1. Shell Crafts
2. Prawn Masala	2. Wooden Boat Models
3. Grilled Fish	3. Handwoven Mats and Baskets
4. Sindhi Biryani with Seafood	4. Embroidered Textiles
5. Balochi Fish	5. Pottery
6. Sindi Mutton and Fish Curry	6. Fishing nets and Accessories
7. Makrani Cuisine	
8. Coastal Snacks and Street Food	
9. Coastal Breads	

Current Status of Maritime Tourism and its Challenges

Pakistan has a great potential to boost its Blue Economy sector through sustainable CMT but unfortunately there has been no substantial development in this sector. Pakistan faces several challenges when it comes to the development of CMT. The most prominent issues include the non-availability of a clear national maritime policy and strategies, lack of suitable infrastructure development and utmost importantly the security issues. After the 18th Amendment in the Constitution, the devolution of power to the provinces took place, which has created confusion over the CMT between the provinces instead of solving the issues. There is a huge absence of clarity when it comes to the domains of the federal and the provincial governments. Moreover, there is a lack of coordination between the various ministries, institutes and other relevant stakeholders. They may be working on the same tourism project proposal and are mostly unaware of each other initiatives (Fatima & Akhtar, 2020). Moreover, it is difficult to attract foreign tourists due to security concerns.

Unfortunately, when we talk about beaches of Pakistan, they are mostly underdeveloped. They lack the basic infrastructure to support tourists. Many of them are inaccessible due to the lack of proper road infrastructure. As there are limited facilities for the local tourists then how can they attract the foreigners. The proper services for water sports are also not available and there are no proper rules and regulations for it. The foreigners were not allowed to leave the harbour. The water sports equipment was held by the Maritime Security Agency. The National Institute of Maritime Affairs in 2021 framed the "Coastal Leisure Tourism and Recreational Water Sports Guidelines". It discussed in detail the SOPs for snorkelling, scuba diving, Jet Ski para sailing, kite boarding, kayaking, rafting, surfing and other water supports. The water sports policy was shared with the Committee that was made under the supervision of Chief Secretary Sindh. The committee put forward to assembly for approval. The approval is still pending.

Environmental degradation has also emerged as a huge problem. The beaches in Karachi such as Clifton beach have become very polluted. The marine pollution is a great threat to the biodiversity and the fragile marine ecosystem. The economic conditions of the coastal communities are largely affected by marine pollution. Moreover, the local coastal communities are not involved in the tourism sector. Most importantly there is no projection and promotion of the coastal and marine tourism sit in Pakistan. This objective is largely neglected in the national tourism strategies (Ur Rehman et al., 2022). Moreover, climate change is posing a significant threat to Pakistan's coastal tourism by rising temperatures, shoreline erosion, degrading marine ecosystems such as mangroves and coral reefs and increasing the risk of extreme weather events. This can cause disruption to tourism infrastructure and diminish the ecological appeal of the coastal sites (Salik et al., 2015).

CONCLUSION

Pakistan does not have a separate Coastal and Marine Tourism Policy. Moreover, Pakistan's coastal areas currently lack proper tourism infrastructure. So, as we begin to promote tourism in these regions, why not take this as an opportunity to build sustainable resorts, hotels, and develop eco-friendly policies from the very start. Since tourism is still in its early stages here, it's the perfect time to ensure that growth happens responsibly and sustainably. Some policy recommendations suggested are as follows:

Develop a Sustainable National Tourism Policy, along with a separate Sustainable Coastal and Marine Tourism Policy (SCMTP) with the help of all relevant stakeholders ensuring both aligned and mutually reinforcing holistic development.

The coordination and collaboration between federal and provincial ministries, including but not limited to Maritime Affairs, Culture and Tourism, Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation (PTDC), Foreign Affairs, Commerce. Climate Change and Environmental Coordination, etc. should be facilitated under "Sustainable Blue

Tourism Board” in order to increase the effectiveness of sustainable coastal and marine tourism initiatives.

Establishment of platforms to engage the local communities, NGOs, private sectors and educational institutes so that they can actively participate in policy development. By involving the local communities, a sense of ownership shall be developed in them.

The policies should demonstrate commitment to the principles highlighted in the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (2001), International Code for the Protection of Tourists (ICPT), Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics (FCTE) and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Agenda 2023.

Use tools for management of coastal areas based on ecosystem based approaches such as Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) and Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) to ensure the involvement of government and planning authorities.

It is important to devise and implement strategies designed to reduce the carbon footprints associated with the tourism industry.

There should be rigorous promotion of eco-certificates and green standards for hotels, tour operators and cruise services such as Earth Check, Blue Flag, Biosphere Responsible Tourism, Ecotourism Australia etc. which will help the businesses to align with the demands of environmentally conscious travelers by gaining recognition for their sustainability efforts.

It is important to educate tourists and travelers to support eco-friendly initiatives.

To mitigate environmental degradation, the use of non-recyclable materials and single use plastics should be strictly prohibited to align with best global practices.

In order to encourage sustainable practices within the tourism industry, tax incentives and subsidies should be provided to the

tourism businesses that are committed to adopting Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles.

Standardization of certification systems for the resorts and hotels at regional levels should be developed and implemented.

For the coastal resorts and hotels, green building standards should be paramount. This includes the introduction of renewable energy, the installation of rainwater harvesting units, and the establishment of waste management facilities.

The hotels should prioritize the use of locally sourced material for the construction to reduce the carbon footprint associated with transportation of materials. Moreover, environmentally friendly construction material should be used.

It is important to upgrade the ports for Green Certifications Green Marine, Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED), Green Port Certificate etc. to accommodate environmentally friendly marine vessels.

For cleaner marine operations such as cruise ships and ferries should be deployed that use clean energy fuels such as liquefied natural gas (LNG) or hybrid electric system instead of traditional heavy oils.

To protect the marine ecosystem tourism vessels should have strict regulations governing solid waste and sewage disposal and grey water treatment.

The routes of the cruise ships should be designed so that the ecological sensitive zones such as MPAs should not be disturbed.

For the promotion of sustainable tourism practices increasing public awareness regarding the impact of human intervention is important.

The carrying capacities of the various locations should be calculated to know of the acceptable limits in a locality to prevent over-ecotourism.

The locals especially women should be trained and educated to equip

them with the necessary skills and knowledge for becoming an ecotourism guide.

There should be support the branding of Pakistan as a sustainable coastal and marine destination spot.

There should be promotion of projects with ecosystem restoration initiatives such as mangrove conservation and coral reef restoration.

Dialogue and technical cooperation between marine regions are vital.

Latest technologies such as big data analysis, remote sensing and artificial intelligence-based should be used to assess environmental impacts and monitor tourist behavior. This will help to provide valuable insights that can lead to operational improvements in the tourism sector.

To attract tourists, issues like security must be dealt with strong determination.

Rules and safety regulations for water sports should be formulated and approved by the relevant authorities to ensure safe and sustainable recreational activities.

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