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Review Article

Exploring responsible tourism management in tour operators

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Abstract

Tour operators play a key role in advancing sustainable tourism, particularly with the growing emphasis on responsible tourism. However, documentation on their implementation of responsible tourism practices is limited. Variations between countries due to regional disparities and tourism types underscore the necessity for comprehensive research. This study aims to conduct a systematic literature review on global responsible tourism management by tour operators.

This research establishes a connection between environmental responsibility practices or social responsibility and community engagement, and the 2022 Responsible Tourism Charter. The study identifies critical practices for urgent adoption by tour operators. Key environmental responsibility practices include resource efficiency measures, climate change mitigation and conservation efforts, and waste management and recycling. Social responsibility and community engagement practices are categorized into employee welfare and fair practices, community empowerment and collaboration, transparency and ethical practices, community development and awareness, and inclusive tourism and customer service.

Keywords: responsible tourism, sustainable tourism, tour operator, travel agent, systematic literature review

1. Introduction

Tourism has transformed into a worldwide sector of utmost significance for the economies of numerous nations. It brings about beneficial effects, including financial expansion, employment generation, and safeguarding of cultural heritage. Studies have indicated that tourism yields notable direct and indirect financial effects, fostering GDP growth and the establishment of prosperity (Sofronov, 2017). Nevertheless, tourism may result in adverse outcomes such as the deterioration of natural resources, pollution of the environment, destruction of habitats, and the commercialization of cultures, consequently devaluing indigenous traditions. Local customs and lifestyles might undergo alterations to cater to the needs of visitors,

culminating in a loss of identity and solidarity within the community (Jurdana & Agbaba, 2020).

Sustainable tourism involves visiting a destination as a tourist with the goal of creating a positive impact on the environment, society, and economy (Bogdan & Sofronov, 2017). The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2005) stated that "sustainable tourism takes full account of its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts". Differentiating between sustainable and responsible tourism can be a difficult task, as there are various contextual differences present. However, both concepts share the common goal of contributing to the development of sustainable tourism (Bramwell *et al.*, 2008). Responsible tourism, which is about "responsible tourism behavior" and actions that promote sustainable development, is reflected in sustainable tourism through the establishment of regulatory frameworks, embodying the idea of sustainability and underscoring responsible conduct in action (Mihalic, 2016).

Responsible tourism has received considerable focus in recent times as a result of the increasing

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environmental and local community impacts awareness among tourists (Caruana *et al.*, 2014). This serves as a fitting approach to address the impacts of tourism. The effectiveness of responsible tourism in rejuvenating and advancing tourism is evidenced by successful ventures in Europe and Africa (Hanafiah *et al.*, 2016).

According to the 2022 Responsible Tourism Charter Signed on Magna Carta Island on November 6th 2022 at an event supported by Therme Group (Goodwin, 2023), responsible tourism addresses global challenges through local actions, setting measurable goals to minimize adverse impacts while benefiting local economies and communities. It involves local stakeholders in decision-making, preserves natural and cultural heritage, promotes biodiversity, and ensures inclusive employment. By fostering sustainable and inclusive practices, responsible tourism not only enhances the well-being of host communities but also enriches the experiences of tourists.

Tour operators serve as mediators between travelers and their tourism encounters, enhancing convenience for tourists through curated packages, activities, and a range of services. The pivotal role of tour operators in advocating for sustainable tourism practices is underscored by their provision of ethical and environmentally friendly tourism opportunities (Bricker & Black, 2016). The contribution of tour operators to sustainable development is essential, highlighting their importance within the tourism sector (Fuza *et al.*, 2015). Xin and Chan (2013) have identified various motivations that drive responsible tour operators, including the preservation of the environment and culture, economic benefits for local communities, and meeting the demand from customers for responsible tourism experiences. Nevertheless, challenges such as limited resources, lack of government backing, and constraints in infrastructure continue to persist (Fuchs, 2023).

Although the significance of responsible tourism and the crucial role played by tour operators in advocating sustainable and ethical travel experiences is increasingly acknowledged, there remains a deficiency in the organized gathering of models or practices pertaining to responsible tourism and closely associated tour operator models. The articulation of responsible tourism practices among tour operators remains relatively scantily documented. Significantly, each country may exhibit disparities based on regional contexts or tourism modalities, underscoring the imperative for comprehensive study.

This study aims to compile research on the diverse global landscape of responsible tourism management within tour operators. Its objective is to synthesize a comprehensive understanding for potential application and further scholarly inquiry. This initiative has the potential to facilitate the provision of support and the proposal of solutions to governments and other pertinent stakeholders for the achievement of their responsible tourism objectives.

2. Materials and Methods

A systematic literature review is a research methodology designed to minimize biases and ensure a rigorous selection process (Pati & Lorusso, 2018), thereby facilitating an objective examination of the subject matter (Prayag *et al.,* 2019). This technique is valuable for identifying existing research gaps that necessitate further exploration (Bichler, 2021). The implementation of efficient research procedures is crucial for the thorough and comprehensive execution of systematic reviews. This segment will explicate the methodologies employed in the identification and selection of pertinent studies to ensure the incorporation of high-quality research that contributes to the analysis of the multifaceted aspects of responsible tourism management by tour operators. It will present intricate information on search strategies, inclusion criteria, and exclusion criteria in accordance with systematic review protocols. The analysis focused on articles published between 2014 and 2024.

In conducting the search, researchers explored studies related to responsible tourism management, sustainable tourism, and similar tourism business models. The details are as follows:

- Keywords: "Responsible Tourism," "Sustainable Tourism," "Tour Operator," "Travel Agent," "Travel Company," "Tour Business."

- Electronic database search: Scopus, Web of Science and ScienceDirect. (Sarkozy, Slyman & Wu (2015).

- Upon retrieving research data from various databases, all research articles were filtered for duplicate studies using Microsoft Excel software (Godino, 2023).

- Inclusion/Exclusion criteria were defined for selecting research studies related to responsible tourism management of tour operators. The selection of research studies proceeded based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria using the PICo tool for research (Caresearch.com.au, 2023) as outlined in Table 1.

The details of the research selection process are as follows:

- Exclusion of articles published before the year 2014.

- Exclusion of articles that are not accessible in full-text or are limited to abstract only.

- Exclusion of articles in languages other than English.

The researchers extracted data, verified the accuracy, and completeness of the data. Once the research selection process was completed, the researchers evaluated the quality of the research by having three experts review the accuracy of the content as well as the completeness of the data (Nawal *et al.,* 2021).

Table 1.   PICo tool for research

PICo	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Population	Tour operator	Not Tour operator
Intervention	Management approaches to responsible tourism, sustainable tourism, social responsibility, and environmental responsibility within organizations, and other similar concepts.	Management approaches to tourism that are not related to responsibility, sustainability, and similar characteristics.
Context	The context of tour operators in Thailand and abroad.	-

3. Results and Discussion

In this systematic literature review, the PRISMA diagram was utilized to present the selection process of high-quality works (Liberati *et al.,* 2009). The PRISMA diagram is a well-defined format that has been internationally recognized, as illustrated in Figure 1.
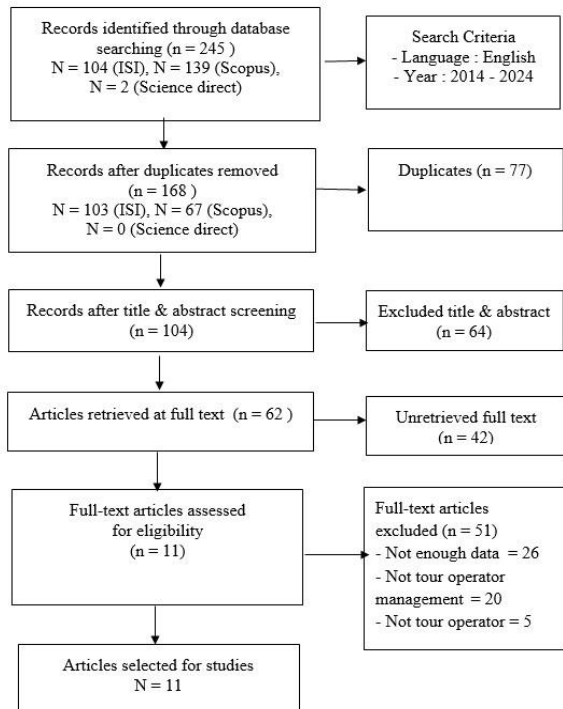

Figure 1.　PRISMA flow diagram for this research

The researchers conducted a search for research articles and English language documents related to responsible tourism management, sustainable tourism, and similar tourism management models of tour businesses. Using the keywords "Responsible Tourism," "Sustainable Tourism," "Tour Operator," "Travel Agent," "Travel Company," and "Tour Business," we searched for articles published between 2014 and 2024 in the Scopus, Web of Science, and ScienceDirect databases. A total of 139 research articles were found in Scopus, 104 in Web of Science, and 2 in ScienceDirect, making a combined total of 245 articles. These articles were then filtered using Microsoft Excel, resulting in 77 duplicate articles being removed.

Subsequently, the researchers assessed the remaining articles' abstracts and identified 64 articles unrelated to the present research. Next, we sought full-text documents for further study, finding 62 accessible articles. Upon reading the full articles, we discovered 26 articles with insufficient data, 5 unrelated to tour operators, and 20 unrelated to tour operators. Thus, 11 articles were selected for analysis and synthesis to identify patterns in responsible tourism management of tour operators and other relevant issues.

Table 2 presents the 11 selected research articles for this literature review. The analysis revealed that articles were published in various years, with 2 articles in 2016, 2 in 2017, 2 in 2019, 3 in 2020, and 2 in 2021. These articles were sourced from 10 different journals.

Moreover, the selected research articles originated from diverse countries or regions, including Switzerland, Malaysia, Tanzania, Thailand, Romania, South Africa, Caribbean Community territories (Antigua, Barbados, Grenada, Jamaica, and St. Lucia), Latin America, and Pakistan, with each country or region contributing 1 article except Malaysia, which contributed 3 articles. Thus, the preliminary analysis indicated that 2020 was the year with the highest number of published articles on responsible tourism management by tour operators, with Malaysia being the most prominent region of publication, particularly in the Sustainability journal.

Upon systematic literature review of 11 research articles, it was found that the patterns of responsible tourism management or sustainable tourism practices vary across countries according to contextual factors. Several significant issues with similar approaches were identified across multiple countries. For instance, the engagement in reducing, recycling, and reusing materials within offices and during tourism activities, was a practice adopted by three countries, namely Malaysia, Romania, and South Africa. Additionally, the employment of local staff both at managerial and non-managerial levels was observed in two countries, Malaysia and South Africa. Moreover, the focus on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives targeting education for underprivileged children, health promotion, environmental protection including forests and wildlife, and cultural activities was noted in four countries: Romania, Thailand, South Africa, and Malaysia.

Table 2.　Final selected research article details

Year	Place	Journal
2016	Switzerland	Journal of Sustainable Tourism
	Sabah, Malaysia	International Journal of Culture Tourism and Hospitality research
2017	Tanzania	Tourism Planning & Development
	Thailand	International Conference on Economics and Management Innovations
	Romania	Amfiteatru Economic
2019	South Africa	African Journal of Business and Economic Research
2020	Malaysia	Anatolia-International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research
	Lower Kinabatangan, Malaysia	Journal of Sustainability Science and Management
	Caribbean Community Territories	Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes
2021	Latin America	Sustainability
	Pakistan	

In this research, responsible tourism management of tour operators is divided into two categories to enhance the understanding of their functioning within the tourism industry. One category focuses on minimizing environmental harm and preserving natural resources. The other category prioritizes the well-being of communities and stakeholders involved in tourism. This division aligns with the pillars of sustainable tourism, covering environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects. The approach ensures that tourism contributes positively to environmental conservation, socio-cultural preservation, and economic prosperity, promoting a sustainable and resilient tourism industry.

3.1 Environmental responsibility practices

These practices directly contribute to the environmental pillar of sustainable tourism by minimizing environmental harm, conserving natural resources, and mitigating climate change. Initiatives such as energy-saving measures, waste management, and biodiversity conservation align with the goal of preserving ecosystems and minimizing negative impacts on the environment.

3.1.1 Resource efficiency measures

- Energy-saving measures, reduction in electricity and water consumption, and minimization of office supplies usage have been implemented. Based on a study conducted in Malaysia, tour operators were found to gain an additional business advantage through the adoption of these sustainable tourism practices (Hamid, Isa & Kiumarsi, 2020). Presently, there is a global initiative promoting collaborative efforts across all sectors to enhance energy and water conservation, aiming to mitigate the increasing likelihood of future shortages.

- There is a procurement practice of sourcing environmentally friendly products. Song, Chen, Wang, Wang, Shi, and Zhao (2017) explained that procuring environmentally friendly products is a growing concern among consumers and businesses.

In the aspect of resource efficiency measures, it will be aligned with the 2022 Responsible Tourism Charter, particularly in addressing Issue 1. This recognizes that greenhouse gas emissions, plastic waste, and biodiversity extinction are global issues requiring local action. Potable water is also an issue in many places, but not everywhere and Issue 5: to make positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, to the maintenance of the world's diversity, lived cultures and cultural monuments.

3.1.2 Climate change mitigation and conservation efforts

- Recognizing the significance of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and conserving green spaces, promoting environmentally friendly modes of transportation, and participating in carbon offsetting initiatives. Research provides evidence supporting the adoption of electric vehicles as a strategy to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and accomplish reductions in both fuel consumption and greenhouse gas emissions (Rigogiannis, Bogatsis, Kyritsis, & Papanikolaou, 2023). Furthermore, according to a study by Nakamura & Kato (2013), it was discovered that carbon offsetting initiatives have been found to stimulate the demand for voluntary individual carbon offsetting.

- Tourists are provided with information regarding the conservation of the natural biodiversity and efforts to prevent the destruction of wildlife resources. Enhancing visitors' awareness of environmentally friendly behaviors and instructing them on how to sustainably engage with such practices is imperative to ensure their enjoyment of the environment (Putri & Ansari, 2023).

This is aligned with Issue 1: to recognize that greenhouse gas emissions, plastic waste, and biodiversity extinction are global issues requiring local action. Potable water is also an issue in many places, but not everywhere. Additionally, Issue 6 addresses biodiversity loss and is nature-positive.

3.1.3 Waste management and recycling

- There is a practice of reducing, recycling, or reusing materials. Materials such as cans, plastics, paper, metals, and glass are sorted and forwarded for recycling or reuse. Food waste, such as leftovers, is repurposed by providing it to local residents for use as animal feed or compost (Tseane-Gumbi, 2019)

- Arranging for guides to receive training in waste management and cultural conservation. In order to facilitate the transmission of knowledge and regulate tourists to exhibit appropriate behavior. For example, a study by Rocha, Marley, Drakeford, Potts, & Gullan (2022) has shown that guide training workshops enhance operators' understanding of responsible tourism aspects, attitudes toward sustainable tourism, and compliance with local regulations. In a study conducted in Pakistan by Ullah *et al.* (2021), it was found that the tourism industry still lacks the development of local guides who are significant individuals responsible for imparting knowledge and ensuring responsible behavior among tourists. Hence, it is imperative to pursue further development in this aspect.

This is aligned with Issue 1: to recognize that greenhouse gas emissions, plastic waste, and biodiversity extinction are global issues requiring local action. Potable water is also an issue in many places, but not everywhere.

3.2 Social responsibility and community engagement

This category corresponds to the socio-cultural pillar of sustainable tourism by prioritizing the well-being of communities, employees, and other stakeholders. Initiatives focusing on employee welfare, community empowerment, and ethical business conduct contribute to the socio-cultural sustainability of tourism destinations by fostering inclusive development, cultural preservation, and community resilience.

3.2.1 Employee welfare and fair practices

- There is an assessment of the impact of operations and businesses on employees, communities, the environment, and customers. In studies concerning B Corporations in Latin America, it has been observed that those dedicated to tourism through responsible entrepreneurship foster a more inclusive, sustainable, and environmentally friendly economy for

societal benefit. They surpass the conventional concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and diverge from traditional business models, as B Corporations integrate social development with economic growth. Consequently, it is imperative to continuously evaluate the impact of operations and businesses on employees, communities, the environment, and customers. This ensures accurate measurement and analysis, enabling the prevention of problems and ongoing development (Acevedo-Duque *et al.*, 2021).

- There are standardized procedures outlined for sustainable business practices. Based on a study by Hamid and Isa (2020) in Malaysia, it was found that tour operators have developed written standard operating procedures for all sustainability activities within their business operations. This practice has been addressed in the Global Sustainable Tourism Standard, particularly in relation to the economic and environmental impacts of sustainable tourism.

- There is an analysis of physical safety risks and the implementation of safety measures for both employees and customers. (Marin-Pantelescu, Tăchiciu, Căpuşneanu & Topor, 2019)

- There is a proposal of salaries exceeding the minimum wage set by the government. (Hamid, Isa, & Kiumarsi, 2020)

- Creating a conducive work environment and atmosphere for employees, such as organizing annual meetings to present achievements, improve operations, and providing recreational activities for employees, among others (Milwood, 2020).

This is aligned with Issue 2, to set goals, measures and report efforts to minimize negative economic, environmental, and social impacts, including crowding and overtourism, and Issue 3, to generate greater economic benefits for local people and enhance the well-being of host communities by providing better employment conditions, develop shared value with local businesses to create more and better livelihoods, and address the economic needs of the economically poor and marginalized.

3.2.2 Community empowerment and collaboration

- There is employment of staff at both managerial and non-managerial levels within the local area. This practice can yield several advantages for organizations. Local managers, being more entrenched within their communities, exhibit a reduced likelihood of laying off employees during industry upheavals compared to their non-local counterparts (Chen, Hou, Tian, & Wang, 2022).

- There is an initiative to provide opportunities and enhance the capabilities of women in the workforce, including promoting their entry into managerial positions. Melubo and Lovelock (2017) conducted research in Tanzania and found that some participating companies have initiatives focused specifically on empowering women. One such initiative targets Maasai women in the Makuyuni village. The project mentors women until they become established entrepreneurs in crafting and selling intricate jewelry.

- There is procurement of goods and services from suppliers or individuals within the local community, as well as assistance in managing community tourism services. According to research findings, businesses that prioritize the procurement of local goods and services can attain numerous advantages. Such prioritization has the potential to diminish product lead times and mitigate delivery delays, thereby enhancing operational efficiency and bolstering customer satisfaction. (Maya, Suda, & Subrata, 2020). According to Tseane-Gumbi's study (2019) in South Africa, it was noted that there were few initiatives targeting economic activities, such as the utilization of locally sourced products and job creation. However, these are avenues that should be strongly promoted to foster community economic development.

- There is a promotion of collaboration with government organizations to support local communities (Milwood, 2020).

- Communities and stakeholders are involved in tourism management. Studies within the Caribbean Community countries have revealed that tour operators engage in socially responsible decision-making and practices, considering both business interests and stakeholder concerns (Milwood, 2020). This has been recognized as a crucial factor in creating more participatory communities (Laksmi, Arjawa, & Pulawan, 2023).

This is aligned with Issue 7, to provide inclusive employment for the differently abled and people of diverse ethnicities, gender and sexual orientations, and Issue 3, to generate greater economic benefits for local people and enhance the well-being of host communities by providing better employment conditions, developing shared value with local businesses to create more and better livelihoods and addressing the economic needs of the economically poor and marginalized; and Issue 4, to involve local people in decisions that affect their communities, their lives and life chances.

3.2.3 Transparency and ethical practices

The researcher has identified this issue as a fundamental aspect of the responsibility of tour operators, including the following.

- There is transparency in financial operations, including salary payments, tax payments, fees, and all other contributions, in accordance with the law. Betta and Boronina (2018) emphasize that transparency is a requisite condition and an instrumental tool for managing relationships among project stakeholders.

- Tour packages are clearly defined in terms of content, reflecting reality, ensuring transparent pricing, and providing detailed information. According to Burman, Albinsson, & Hyatt (2016) enhanced price transparency results in heightened perceptions of price fairness, subsequently leading to increased levels of satisfaction and intentions for repurchasing and recommending the product or service

- Partnerships are selected based on ethical considerations. The study conducted in Switzerland emphasizes ethical practices in the sales process to a great extent. If partners and tour agents are not ethical and transparent, it can have detrimental effects on tourism. Mossaz and Coghlan (2016) suggested the necessity of unpacking conservation information, addressing the false consensus bias, and overcoming agents' reluctance to engage in ethical discussions during the sales process.

- There is a system in place to raise awareness about responsible tourism and to manage tourist complaints, ensuring compensation is provided to tourists when warranted.

Awareness of the importance of responsible tourism serves as the starting point for responsible tourism practices. According to Chan and Xin's (2016) study in Malaysia, responsible tourism practices undertaken by tour operators in Kinabalu Park included raising awareness, complying with rules and regulations, developing local capacity, adopting cleaner production methods, and managing the supply chain.

- Compliance with government regulations and the requirements stipulated by tourist destinations regarding tourism activities is ensured (Hamid, Isa & Kiumarsi, 2020)

3.2.4 Community development and awareness

- Activities that benefit the community, such as CSR initiatives promoting education, aiding underprivileged children, promoting health, environmental conservation, and cultural enrichment, have been implemented. This aligns with Issue 5, to make positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, to the maintenance of the world's diversity, lived cultures and cultural monuments. According to Marin-Pantelescu, Tăchiciu, Căpuşneanu, & Topor (2019), it was found that among the three prominent Romanian tour operators, there existed a consistent and genuine commitment to integrating the principles of social responsibility into the management, strategies, plans, and programs of these organizations. This resulted in Romanian tour operators emphasizing tourism for the benefit of society. Chubchuwong (2017) conducted a study on the corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities of international tour operators operating in Thailand. The study revealed that the majority of these international business groups allocated approximately half a day for their CSR initiatives. Furthermore, it was observed that most of these activities were conducted in Bangkok, with major tourist destinations such as Phuket and Chiang Mai following suit.

- Tourists are provided with entertainment and educational experiences, contributing to the stimulation of the economy and fostering appreciation for local communities. Sthapit, Piramanayayagam, & Björk (2020) provided an example demonstrating that linking memories of consuming local food with emotions led respondents to experience positive feelings of joy and love.

- Tourism management involves visiting monuments, museums, and heritage sites to familiarize oneself with local customs or participating in cultural activities, promoting the region's unique culinary characteristics. Cultural heritage is regarded as a significant factor in the formation of collective identity and holds importance for national stability and security. The preservation of both cultural and natural heritage is essential for the long-term objectives of contemporary cultural policy (Kashchenko & Polozhentseva, 2021).

This is aligned with Issue 3, to generate greater economic benefits for local people and enhance the well-being of host communities by providing better employment conditions, developing shared value with local businesses to create more and better livelihoods and addressing the economic needs of the economically poor and marginalized, and Issue 8, to provide more enjoyable experiences for all, through more meaningful connections with local people and a greater understanding of local history and culture, and social and environmental issues; and Issue 9, to offer culturally

sensitive experiences engendering respect between tourists and hosts, and building local pride and confidence.

3.2.5 Inclusive tourism and customer service

The researcher suggests that tour operators should be encouraged to implement these practices more extensively to align with the current emphasis on responsible customer care and equitable treatment across all groups, including:

- Special provisions made to ensure the availability of facilities tailored specifically for individuals with disabilities (Hamid, Isa, & Kiumarsi, 2020).

- Insurance coverage arranged for both tourists and staff members. (Hamid, Isa & Kiumarsi, 2020).

- There is an explanation provided to facilitate understanding regarding tour packages, their terms and conditions, as well as guidelines on responsible tourist behavior to prevent inappropriate actions (Marin-Pantelescu, Tăchiciu, Căpuşneanu, & Topor, 2019).

- Tourists are provided with equal treatment and service (Marin-Pantelescu, Tăchiciu, Căpuşneanu, & Topor, 2019).

4. Conclusions

A systematic literature review on responsible tourism management among the tour operators revealed findings from 11 research articles across 9 countries/groups of countries. These findings established links between Environmental responsibility practices or Social responsibility and community engagement with the 2022 Responsible Tourism Charter. Significant practices were identified, urging urgent adoption by tour operators. In terms of Environmental responsibility practices, key issues of importance include: 1) Resource efficiency measures, 2) Climate Change Mitigation and Conservation Efforts, and 3) Waste Management and Recycling. In the realm of Social responsibility and community, practices have been categorized as follows: 1) Employee Welfare and Fair Practices, 2) Community Empowerment and Collaboration, 3) Transparency and Ethical Practices, 4) Community Development and Awareness, and 5) Inclusive Tourism and Customer Service.

This research underscores the importance of implementing responsible practices, acknowledging in-depth data, serving as a basis for informed decision-making, and promoting sustainable and responsible tourism management. Future studies should apply these practices to a variety of regions to develop area-specific guidelines. Additionally, further research should focus on responsible marketing, an area that is currently garnering increasing attention.

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