

Recreational and active tourism in the Urals: potential for longevity and sustainable development

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Abstract. The tourism industry has a direct impact on social and economic development, quality of life and longevity. Recently, the sustainable development of the industry has been actively supported by the government of the Russian Federation through national projects and initiatives. As the Ural region offers highly favourable location and a variety of places for recreational and active tourism, it is of utmost importance to consider the ways to promote the region as a tourist destination that provides unique opportunities for healthier lifestyles and active aging. This paper considers the existing issues that have to be resolved in order to promote sustainable tourism development in the Urals, as well as shows evidence of the benefits for further development of the territory as a sustainable tourist destination.

1 Introduction

The government of the Russian Federation has always encouraged longer life expectancy, with an increase from 73 to 78 years expected in 2024. The demand for greater longevity is linked to the Pension Reform, which came into effect on January 1, 2019, and provides for a gradual increase in the retirement age, i.e. to 65 years for men and 60 years for women. In this context, it seems relevant to research longevity and life expectancy in different world regions, with emphasis on factors contributing to active aging. Although there is evidence of an interrelationship between a healthy lifestyle, life expectancy, and sustainable development, existing research does not adequately address the benefits of recreational and active tourism in the Ural region, therefore, it allows us to turn to a broader and more detailed study of this issue.

2 Materials and Methods

A mixed methods approach with a comparative analysis of documents, trends and relationships, interviews, observations, as well as dialectical and probabilistic research was applied to study processes and identify statistical patterns. As the study was aimed at exploring relationships and patterns for the rise in life expectancy in countries around the

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world, the data were collected from Federal State Statistics Service of the Russian Federation and other sources, summarised, grouped for the following mathematical processing and generalisation[1-2]. The examination of statistical data, legislative documents, existing research on longevity and active aging by Russian and international scientists, as well as research on challenges and opportunities for the development of recreational and active tourism in the Urals enabled us to identify the impact of tourism on life expectancy, spatial planning, and sustainable development.

3 Results and Discussion

According to the report on the economic impact of tourism prepared by World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), the tourism industry accounted for 7.6% (\$7682.5 billion) of the global GDP, as of 2022 [3]. Forecasts estimate that the tourism industry will increase up to \$9472.5 billion and constitute 11.6% of the global GDP in 2023. The share of the tourism industry in the GDP of the Russian Federation in 2022 amounted to 2.6% [1-2].

Recently, the tourism industry in Russia, which is still recovering from the losses inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic with its lockdowns and hygiene behaviours, has faced a new challenge caused by the changes in the political environment and the economic sanctions imposed by the European Union, the USA and the UK in order to degrade Russia's military capability in the special military operation of the Russian Federation in Ukraine.

In 2020, the border restrictions and suspended local travel resulted in a 42% decrease in the number of package tours in Russia, and a 39% decrease in package tours in the Urals, when compared to 2018. Some businesses in the sector had to close, and the number of travel agencies declined by 9%. The national project 'Tourism and Hospitality Industry', which was launched in 2021, expected the sector to demonstrate resilience and forecasted a rise in domestic tourism, with the total number of annual trips reaching 140 million by 2030. Meanwhile, a 1.5 fold increase in the number of hotel rooms was expected, with a total of 909 thousand hotel rooms. Moreover, the tourism industry was expected to double the number of new jobs [2, 4].

However, the economic sanctions imposed on Russia emphasised the importance of domestic tourism and led to a significant increase in trips within Russia. In 2022, for instance, bookings reached 83% and 153.9 million trips were taken. Recently, domestic and international researchers have explored different approaches to developing sustainability assessment in order to measure performance and ensure the balance between sustainable environmental management, long-term economic growth and social wealth [5-7]. Sustainable tourism development is recognised as a paradigm for minimising negative consequences and fast recovery, while the Sustainable Tourism Index (SusTour-Index) measures commitment to encourage sustainable practices and includes economic, environmental and social responsibilities as three main interrelated aspects of tourism sustainability.

In the current unstable situation, the government of the Russian Federation has been instrumental in supporting the tourism industry and has taken a range of initiatives to create conditions for sustainable development of the sector. Among the initiatives, there are strategies on shifting from international to domestic tourism, frameworks on managing risk factors and instability, extended support of economic sectors closely connected to tourism, as well as the digital transformation of the sector in order to reignite domestic tourism and facilitate sustainability [8-9].

The main objectives of the action plan 'Strategy for the development of tourism in the Russian Federation until 2035' are to make positive social impact, increase affordability of domestic trips, enhance tourism service experience, as well as provide all residents of the

Russian Federation with the opportunity to maintain or improve overall health. The total industry volume is planned to be increased from 3158 billion rubles up to 16306 billion rubles by 2035 [9].

Extensive encouragement of active tourism along with improved service can help promote healthier lifestyles and together with better medical care can increase life expectancy and make a positive impact on longevity. Today, Russia demonstrates the negative population growth trend. On the one hand, the population decline is attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic. On the other hand, there has been a decline in birth rates over the past few years. Therefore, to bring focus to the population decline, the government of the Russian Federation established a priority goal of achieving a positive population rate. For that reason, along with the national project 'Tourism and Hospitality Industry', the authorities invested 3.5 trillion rubles into the national project 'Demography', which was designed to support families with children, enhance the standard of living, as well as promote healthier lifestyles and active aging. Forecasts of Federal State Statistics Service of the Russian Federation estimate that in 2035 the total population of the Russian Federation will amount to 157 million people and the life expectancy will increase to 82 years. The government expects approximately 55% of the total population to take regular exercise and maintain a healthy lifestyle [10 - 12].

The unfavourable impact of the negative population growth is evident in economic and social life. In 2021, the average lifespan in Russia amounted to 71 years, in 2022, it reached 73.6 years. Today, the demographic situation in the Ural Federal district is as difficult as those in many regions of the Russian Federation [13-14]. The rate of natural increase amounted to -3.7% in 2005, - 0.8% in 2019, and -3.3% in 2020. Kurgan oblast accounted for the highest negative rate of natural increase and amounted to -7.4% in 2005, - 6% in 2019, and -8.4% in 2020. As of 1 January 2023, the population decline in Sverdlovsk oblast amounted to 10 167 people. However, Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous area demonstrated a positive rate of natural increase with 7.9% in 2005, 7.9% in 2019, and 6.9% in 2020 [10, 12].

Meanwhile, the average human lifespan is gradually increasing. The number of Russian people aged 90 has increased from 333,800 people in 1998 to 374,800 people in 2000. The number of centenarians has also demonstrated a positive trend and rose from 8,070 people in 1998 to 15,577 people in 2000. In 2017, Russia was ranked 125 in the report on life expectancy published by the United Nations. Comparing the life expectancy rates at birth, it is clear that Russia, Moldova and Ukraine have the lowest rates of 70-71 years, while the average life expectancy rate at birth for other European countries amounts to 77.2 years. There is even a wider gap in life expectancy at birth between countries in Africa and developed countries. People born in most countries of Africa are expected to live up to 55 years, while in countries like Japan, Switzerland, China, Australia, Spain, Italy, and Iceland the average life expectancy is over 80 years. [15-18].

The longevity regions of China with their proportion of centenarians being significantly greater than in other countries attract particular attention. For example, the number of centenarians in Bama, a village in China, is five times the global average [19].

The number of centenarians in France has steadily increased from 1960 and is estimated to reach 60,300 people in 2050 (Table 1). Meanwhile, the International Database on Longevity, which collects data on people over 110 years old from countries with trustworthy civil registry, claimed a limit to human lifespan at 115 years [20-21].

Table 1. Number of centenarians in France from 1900 to 2050.

	1900	1950	1960	1980	1990	2030	2040	2050
Number of centenarians in France	100	200	977	1545	3760	30000	35000	60300

Source: INED France

In academic research, the Human Development Index (HDI) is applied to measure progress in human development, i.e. health, education, and standard of living. In 2021, Russia's HDI score measured at 0.822. The lowest HDI score was recorded in Africa and Norway, Iceland, Canada achieved the highest HDI score [22].

Promotion of active aging and healthy lifestyles is an important factor of sustainable tourism development. Other factors include preservation of natural wildlife, culture, as well as bringing economic and social benefits for residents. In view of natural wildlife, the development of regional recreational tourism is highly relevant. The Ural Federal District, which includes Sverdlovsk oblast, Chelyabinsk oblast, Tyumen oblast, and Kurgan oblast, has a unique location occupying 10.62% of the total territory of the Russian Federation. The topography of the Urals is diverse and includes the high mountain peaks of the Southern and Northern Urals, broad, steep, or forested valleys, as well as mighty rivers and numerous mountain, boating, deep, and shallow lakes. There are approximately 500 naturally formed caves of karst, which are very popular with tourists. Taking into account the favourable location and economic factors, the territory is highly beneficial for tourism.

In 2022, Sverdlovsk oblast ranked 8 in the top ten most popular tourist destinations in Russia and was visited by over 1.5 million tourists. It should be highlighted that the region has enormous potential for various types of tourism. For example, the annual attendance of 11 ski resorts amounts to approximately 800,000 people. For tourists interested in hiking, camping and guided walks, the region offers 1 national park, 4 nature parks, 19 forest parks with marked paths, and 36 landscape reserves with various recreational opportunities for tourists of different ages. There are more than 425 natural monuments only in Sverdlovsk oblast.

Having studied the tourism statistics, we were able to identify 12 clusters, which represent functional areas, offer essential tourism infrastructure, like accommodation and transport facilities, as well as sets of additional developments (ski and snowmobile trails, horse riding rings, river cruises), and ensure an adequate use of resources. In particular, trips along the Great Ural Trail, which stretches from north to south throughout the Urals, attract numerous tourists. Group and private ecotours to protected natural areas encourage tourists to take care of the natural wealth of the region and promote rational use of natural resources [23].

In an attempt to accelerate sustainable development of tourist destinations within the national project 'Tourism and Hospitality Industry', Russia was divided into 13 macroregions, with the 'Big Ural' project being assigned to the Urals [23]. The project framework includes the development of a comprehensive plan, general infrastructure and public amenities, as well as shared navigation. In 2022, four regions, namely Sverdlovsk oblast, Chelyabinsk oblast, Perm krai, and the republic of Bashkortostan, finalised the agreement on the joint development of tourism infrastructure in order to provide for the creation of sustainable systems that can ensure economic effectiveness, environmental resilience, social approval, and culture preservation [24].

Thanks to the government support and the improved regional management of the tourism industry, there was a 20% rise in the number of tourists visiting the Urals in 2022. As a part of the federal project 'Professionalism', two educational clusters were created in the Urals. Sverdlovsk oblast and Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Area were the first to join the project, which is aimed at establishing an industry-specific model of teaching travel and tourism professionals and is supported by three parties, i.e. federal and regional authorities, educational institutions, and businesses. It should also be noted that the total number of educational institutions operating in the Ural Federal District and involved in teaching tourism and travel professionals amounts to 59.

'Tourism.RF' Corporation, which was founded in 2020 to ensure sustainable development of the industry, ascertains adequate investment and infrastructure

development. Within the support provided by the corporation, Sverdlovsk oblast and Chelyabinsk oblast are to receive subsidies from the federal budget for investment projects on building modular accommodation facilities for tourists in 2023 and in 2024 [2]. The need for accommodation is urgent as, in 2021, almost half of the total number of package tours sold in the Urals were for destinations in Sverdlovsk oblast (Table 2).

Table 2. Package tours sold in the Ural Federal District from 2005 to 2021.

	2005	2010	2015	2019	2020	2021
The Ural Federal District	169.1	255.9	291.9	361.8	141.9	273.0
Kurgan oblast	3.3	7.9	12.8	13.6	3.6	9.2
Sverdlovsk oblast	107.5	138.9	144.7	178.6	74.0	135.9
Chelyabinsk oblast	27.0	56.7	80.1	84.6	32.8	63.7
Tyumen oblast (including Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Area and Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Area)	31.3	52.4	54.3	85.0	31.5	64.2

Source: Federal State Statistics Service of the Russian Federation [1].

As can be seen from Table 2, in 2021, the tourism industry experienced the beginning of the recovery as the total number of package tours almost doubled, when compared to 2020. Therefore, the effect of the government support is evident.

3 Conclusion

Considering the feasibility of using recreational and active tourism to extend life expectancy of the population, we can draw a conclusion that travelling is a rewarding activity in both cultural and physical aspects, and it can undoubtedly contribute to solving the issue of longevity and can help increase the retirement age.

Summarising the findings, it should be noted that the development of regional tourist and recreational clusters catering for the needs and wants of tourists of all ages, on the one hand, assists in promoting more active recreation and, thus, overall health improvement. While, on the other hand, regional tourist and recreational clusters are able to use all the available resources more efficiently and minimise negative impacts on the natural environment.

The findings of the study show that government initiatives aimed at supporting and expanding domestic tourism were introduced at the right time and facilitated efficient recovery of the sector. However, there is still a need to address the gaps that remain in the sector, like infrastructure issues; so, full guidelines on sustainable development of the territories are to be designed.

Another important issue to resolve is the demand for a set of measures to ensure the safety of tourists. Any security incidents can undermine the development of the territory and damage its image. Thus, we suggest sharing good practices between regional tourist and recreational clusters, creating guidelines for tourists, and combining the resources and expertise of federal and regional authorities, as well as those of private companies.

Moreover, there is a demand for innovative ways to use the available resources and facilitate further development of regional natural parks. It is important to foster an interest in responsible, eco-friendly tourism and educate population about sustainability focusing on core sustainability values and explaining that improved quality of life, active aging and longevity rely on sustainable development.

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