

Third Caucasus Mountain Forum

Transdisciplinarity
for Sustainable
Tourism Development:
Role of Caucasus Scientists
4 - 6 July, 2023, Kutaisi, Georgia

Resolution

Together with other mountainous areas, the Caucasus ecoregion is abundant in both biological and cultural diversity, attracting visitors from all over the world. Over the past decades, tourism has become an important economic activity and income source in the region while also fostering the growth of other sectors along the value chain. However, mountain ecosystems and mountain communities in the region continue to be negatively affected by vulnerability and exposure to a variety of factors such as climate change, natural hazards, anthropogenic impacts, political tensions, and regional conflicts, which threaten the tourism sector's development. On the other hand, tourism itself may have an adverse influence on both natural and cultural environment. Hence the need for a thorough evaluation of various factors that would pave the way for sustainable and resilient practices for the tourism sector that incorporate interlinkages with other key sectors and social-ecological components of the region.

Thus,

- *Recognizing* the importance of the tourism sector as a major source of economic development as a means for promoting and highlighting the natural and cultural values of the region;
- *Noting* the significance of ensuring sustainable tourism development and planning, especially in terms of mountain tourism, and its popularization in the region with the involvement of scientists, practitioners, as well as local stakeholders, while taking into consideration its various socio-economic and environmental dimensions and impacts;
- *Recognizing* the vulnerability of the region's ecosystems and communities to climate change and its adverse effects on the provision of various ecosystem services;
- *Considering* the region's high exposure to natural hazards and the adverse effects on the environment, the well-being of the local population and various economic sectors, including tourism;



- *Encouraging* local, national, regional, and global stakeholders to invest in climate-resilient tourism development in the Caucasus and to foster climate proofing of relevant tourism infrastructure, such as paths, roads, buildings, recreation sites, and other tourism areas, according to the latest available science-based and climate scenarios;
- *Noting* the rapid shift in land use land cover (LULC) patterns as well as environmental and socio-economic effects of landscape transformation;
- *Emphasizing* the significance of the Caucasus ecoregion as an important biodiversity hotspot, its potential for ecotourism, while recognizing the increasing adverse anthropogenic impacts on mountain ecosystems and landscapes;
- *Acknowledging* the Caucasus mountains region as a water tower and the importance of sustainable water management as well as anthropogenic, e.g., recreational, pressures on water resources and emphasizing the importance of protecting freshwater sources;
- *Stressing* the significance of sustainable forest resource management for the socio-economic development of mountain regions in light of the intensifying impacts of climate change and anthropogenic pressure;
- *Noting* the negative environmental impacts of plastic pollution, including that related to tourism activities, in the Caucasus region and elsewhere, encouraging the adoption of circular economy and plastic-free approaches, and supporting the ongoing negotiations for a strong international legally binding agreement to eliminate plastic pollution, including in mountainous areas;
- *Highlighting* the role of protected areas and showcasing their significance in fostering the growth of ecotourism potential and its effects on the socioeconomic development of mountain communities;
- *Recognizing* the tourism sector, in particular aviation-based international tourism, as a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, and the limited options for significant mitigation measures on the destination level;
- *Recognizing* the role of higher education and the significance of integrating transdisciplinary research approaches to foster sustainable tourism development and planning in the mountains;
- *Considering* the importance of maintaining and reviving traditional agricultural practices where applicable and its role in preserving cultural identity as a basis for tourism development and planning while also recognizing the general growing trend in rural mountain areas of transitioning from traditional agricultural to tourism activities;
- *Considering* the critical role of public administration at all scales and levels in supporting sustainable tourism and the need for cooperation between academia, relevant sectors, and decision-makers;





- *Recognizing* the importance of the Caucasus Spatial Data Infrastructure (SDI, <https://www.caucasus-mt.net/Caucasus-SDI>) and dedicated regional SDI team and other international partners and networks who collectively contribute to relevant regional data (including in situ data), its exchange and uptake in different aspects of sustainable development (e.g. tourism);
- *Emphasizing* the region's historical, and cultural potential for promoting tourism development;
- *Recognizing* that regional collaboration and transboundary governance, supported by multi-scale knowledge networks and monitoring programmes, enable integrated and climate-resilient mountain development, especially where risks transcend boundaries and jurisdiction;
- *Recalling* key global, i.e., United Nations conventions such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) as well as the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (World Heritage Convention) adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO and the respective outcomes of their meetings such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the outcomes of the 3rd World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) Euro-Asian Mountain Resorts Conference, held in Tbilisi, Georgia on 4–7 April 2017;
- *Recalling* further global initiatives, reports, declarations and development frameworks such as the European Green Deal, New Bauhaus Initiative and other relevant policies adopted by the European Commission, the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2030 Agenda for Mountains Framework for Action, the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report “Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability”, The United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021–2030), The Mountain Partnership Aspen Declaration “A New Momentum for Mountains”, the resolution A/77/172 on sustainable mountain development adopted by United Nations General Assembly on 14 December 2022 proclaiming the period 2023–2027 as Five Years of Action for the Development of Mountain Regions;
- *Further stressing* the role and importance of the Scientific Network for the Caucasus Mountain Region (SNC-mt) and its coordination unit, the Caucasus Network for Sustainable Development of Mountain Regions (Sustainable Caucasus) in promoting disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary research on the Caucasus region and strengthening national and international collaboration to support scientifically sound and evidence-informed decision-making;
- *Also acknowledging* the role of the Mountain Partnership and its members in tackling mountain regions' challenges by encouraging and advocating initiatives aimed at improving quality of life and preserving healthy environments in the world's mountain regions by drawing on the diversity of knowledge and expertise of its global membership;

The Scientific Committee of the Third Caucasus Mountain Forum 2023 recommends and calls for:

- Fostering the development and planning of sustainable and climate-resilient tourism in the Caucasus region by taking into account its impacts on natural and cultural resources and ensuring the balancing of its negative impacts with positive ones by taking into account environmental as well as socio-economic factors such as biodiversity and ecosystem conservation and restoration, disaster risk management, climate change adaptation, sustainable water and forest resource management, and natural and cultural landscape preservation, all with the wider involvement of scientists, practitioners, local stakeholders and communities;
- Assessing the vulnerability of the tourism sector to climate change and enhancing its resilience to natural hazards and disasters, especially in mountainous areas, with thorough consideration of environmental and socio-economic dimensions including appropriate adaptation solutions to be tested, implemented, and monitored for effectiveness, while ensuring compatibility and complementarity with mitigation measures;
- Estimating the carrying capacity of tourism according to the local context and its ecological sensitivities in order to achieve climate-resilient sustainable development in the region;
- Evaluating the potential for widely promoting and involving various forms of tourism, such as ecotourism, agrotourism, cultural tourism etc. to ensure the diversification and sustainability of the sector;
- Evaluating the potential of traditional agricultural practices that have been formed over time as a solution for production, attracting tourists, protecting cultural heritage, improving economic prosperity, and increasing the resilience of the agricultural sector to climate change while paying attention to small-scale production by local farmers;
- Diversifying management of protected areas including forest management and tourism activities, with the focus on strengthening local ownership;
- Addressing the impact of human activities such as mining and overgrazing on high mountain ecosystems and its biodiversity to increase the attractiveness of mountain areas and protect diverse endemic fauna and flora;
- Encouraging sustainable water resource management practices by developing sound transboundary water resources management policies based on an ecosystem approach, acknowledging the significance of holistic evaluation methods for surface and groundwater assessments while also promoting efficient wastewater management practices, e.g., for the agricultural sector to address the local drinking-water shortages;
- Promoting circular economy and plastic-free tourism businesses, as well as the procurement of local goods, products and services, and reducing the environmental impact and resource consumption of tourism activities;



- Expanding the geographical scope of applying transdisciplinary approaches in the Caucasus region and ensuring the further promotion of transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary research approaches at the local and regional levels, with adequate training and capacity-development opportunities in higher education to address challenges in sustainable tourism development in mountainous areas;
- Promoting regional tourism-related research for the enhancement of the sustainable and balanced development of the sector;
- Ensuring clear distinction/definition of responsibilities and roles between tourism businesses, operators, and other stakeholders as well as strengthening partnerships and knowledge sharing between large and small operators and destination management boards;
- Addressing the tourism-related GHG emissions by considering the emissions when potential target groups for tourism marketing are identified, encouraging the development of lower-emission tourism offers and promoting longer stays and combined visits to more than one Caucasus country to minimize the number of flights;
- Linking the mountain tourism sector to climate action and policy by creating an affordable and user-friendly tourism platform, showing tangible successful examples and inspiring good climate-resilient practices through peer-to-peer approach, designing campaigns for stakeholders to shift to low-carbon climate-resilient tourism and encouraging customers to make sustainable travel choices; and
- Improving and ensuring further exchange of knowledge and best practices with other mountainous regions, in particular with the existing global and respective regional scientific networks, platforms, and initiatives; as well as actively engaging in relevant initiatives and activities in support of the Five Years of Action for the Development of Mountain Regions.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the abovementioned, the Scientific Committee calls upon all relevant actors, stakeholders and partners, in particular, the Scientific Network for the Caucasus Mountain Region (SNC-mt) and its coordination unit, the Caucasus Network for Sustainable Development of Mountain Regions (Sustainable Caucasus), along with its partners (the University of Geneva, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Mountain Research Initiative (MRI), GRID-Arendal, UNEP/GRID-Geneva, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations World Tourism Organization, Euromontana, institutional partners (Network for European Mountain Research (NEMOR), Science for Carpathians (S4C), the Mountain Partnership), donors such as the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and key stakeholders and actors such as the European Union, the United States, national governments, NGOs, and business associations to promote and encourage interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research approaches, particularly to address barriers to sustainable tourism development in mountain areas and to assist decision-makers to facilitate the implementation of sound policies, strategies and initiatives across the Caucasus region.



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