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Stakeholder Voices in Coastal and Marine Tourism: Unpacking the Drivers and Barriers to Sustainable Engagement

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Conflicts of interest

The authors report that there are not any financial and personal interests and also conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of this article.

Ethics approval statement

No ethical approval was required as this study did not involve human participants or animals. Publicly available historical data were used and exempt from ethics review.

Abstract

Coastal and marine areas are among the most popular tourist destinations, playing a vital role in sustaining local communities' livelihoods. Despite coastal and marine tourism literature often highlighting local community support driven by economic benefits, growing concerns about environmental degradation and cultural pollution remain underexplored. Addressing this gap, this paper draws on Social Exchange Theory and Social Network Theory to examine the drivers and barriers to sustainable stakeholder engagement in promoting coastal and marine tourism. Data were collected in 2024 through 17 semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion with purposively sampled participants, including local community members, tourists, and representatives from government agencies in Iran. Thematic analysis revealed four key antecedents to sustainable stakeholder engagement: economic-infrastructural, socio-cultural, environmental, and governance-institutional. Among these, the environmental dimension emerged more as a barrier than a driving force, whereas the other dimensions displayed a more balanced dynamic, functioning as both drivers and barriers. This paper contributes to the coastal and marine tourism literature by offering a nuanced perspective on the mechanisms of cooperation and resource exchange between local communities and key stakeholders, emphasizing their role in promoting coastal and marine tourism development.

Keywords: Sustainability, Stakeholder Engagement, Coastal and Marine Tourism, Drivers, Barriers

Introduction

As one of the world's most influential industries, tourism plays a vital role in shaping the economic and cultural landscapes of many nations (Nugroho and Numata 2022). Within its diverse segments, coastal and marine tourism represents one of the most rapidly expanding sectors of the global tourism industry (Duan et al. 2022). OECD projections indicate that this sector will account for the largest share (26%) of the global ocean economy and generate approximately 8.6 million jobs by 2030 (Hynes et al. 2024). Beyond its economic importance, coastal and marine tourism fosters intercultural exchange and has become a key pillar of sustainable development in both developed and developing contexts (Dimitrovski et al. 2021; Duan et al. 2022). Its influence is particularly visible in sustainable growth and improved development standards for local communities, shaped

by complex economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dynamics (Kallmuenzer et al. 2022). Positively, it can create employment, strengthen livelihoods, and enhance social security (Wilks 2023); however, it also poses risks such as biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, and cultural pollution (Mayaka, Croy and Cox 2018).

Although extensive literature documents ecological and social costs in coastal and marine tourism (e.g., Arabadzhyan et al. 2021; Lazzari et al. 2021; Ma'toufi and Tajeddini 2015), a parallel body of work continues to emphasize economic benefits, giving less sustained attention to potential challenges. For instance, Wilks (2023) found that coastal and marine tourism can enhance psychological and social empowerment by generating employment, improving infrastructure, and strengthening local economies. Mejjad, Rossi and Pavel (2022) evaluated community perceptions across economic, environmental, social, and cultural dimensions, highlighting that well-managed tourism can support sustainable livelihoods while revitalizing ecosystems and local markets. Similarly, Ardhita and Ferdiansyah (2025) proposed strategies to strengthen community participation, promote equitable employment, build social capital, and raise environmental awareness among tourists.

As outlined above, existing research has largely focused on community support driven by perceived economic benefits (Ardhita and Ferdiansyah 2025), offering limited insight into cultural degradation and climate-related challenges. Despite economic gains, not all communities view tourism positively; some express concerns about increased social vulnerability and cultural disruption, particularly where rapid tourism growth and environmental decline threaten traditional lifestyles and cultural values (Ferreira da Silva et al. 2022; Lazzari et al. 2021).

The prevailing academic discourse on coastal and marine tourism displays a critical imbalance: its strong emphasis on economic benefits often overlooks adverse socio-ecological consequences. This gap is especially evident in resource-rich nations such as Iran, a major oil exporter with the world's third-largest reserves (Mola, Shafaei and Mohamed 2012), which exemplifies the resource curse phenomenon (Tajeddini and Trueman 2016), where natural wealth correlates with institutional and environmental vulnerabilities rather than sustainable prosperity. Despite substantial potential for coastal and marine tourism, such countries face severe ecological threats—including sea-level rise, coastal erosion, ecosystem degradation, and cultural disruption

that contribute to slower economic growth than in resource-poor nations. Limited scholarly engagement with negative impacts, such as flooding, ecological imbalance, and socio-cultural fragility, fails to reflect the priorities of communities in nations endowed with abundant coastal resources, such as Iran (Mejjad, Rossi and Pavel 2022). This neglect perpetuates an incomplete narrative and undermines the development of equitable, context-sensitive policy frameworks.

Iran's diverse geography and rich coastal resources offer significant potential for community-based tourism-led development (Zarghmi 2024; Eivazinezhad, Akbari and Parishani 2022). However, insufficient scholarly attention and weak strategic planning risk exacerbating ecological degradation and economic disruption (Nugroho and Numata 2022; Abbasi, Akbari and Tajeddini 2015). In particular, weak coastal governance has enabled overexploitation of natural resources, habitat degradation, biodiversity loss, and the exclusion of local communities from decision-making. These dynamics intensify socio-ecological tensions and undermine prospects for equitable, sustainable development (Salarvand, Hasanvand and Jafari 2025; Wu 2021). This underscores the need for holistic, context-specific research that integrates community perspectives and addresses socio-cultural and environmental dimensions of sustainability.

To address this gap in the literature, this paper integrates Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Social Network Theory (SNT) to examine the barriers and drivers of coastal and marine tourism development in Iran as understood by local communities and stakeholders. SET explains how social interactions evolve, highlighting cooperation, reciprocity, and positive resident perceptions toward tourists (Park, Lee and Lee 2017). Although SET alone cannot capture dynamics involving local businesses, travel agencies, hotels, and government institutions, SNT is therefore incorporated to illuminate the exchange of benefits and the sharing of resources, information, and support within networks (Chang 2021). SNT demonstrates how social networks enhance adaptability and resilience in social-ecological systems by managing shared resources (Hu and Chen 2024) and enabling mutual benefits that facilitate collaboration among key stakeholders (Chang 2021; Costa et al. 2023). Thus, SET and SNT provide a holistic understanding of relationships among local residents, tourists, and stakeholders.

Drawing on these theories, this study advances three objectives: (1) identifying transformations associated with the expansion of coastal and marine tourism in Iran, as perceived

by communities and stakeholders; (2) analyzing the driving forces shaping relational dynamics between communities and other stakeholders; and (3) elucidating the restraining forces that hinder tourism development from both perspectives.

The findings contribute to both theoretical and practical understandings of coastal and marine tourism development. Theoretically, the paper uses SET and SNT to clarify mechanisms of cooperation and resource exchange between communities and stakeholders, emphasizing their roles in fostering resilient, sustainable tourism ecosystems. Practically, it illustrates how well-managed coastal and marine tourism can catalyze sustainable economic development, enhance regional prosperity, strengthen national GDP, and mitigate fiscal liquidity constraints. The following sections review the literature, outline the methodology, present the findings, and conclude with theoretical implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

Literature Review

Community-based Sustainable Tourism Development

Tourism, recognized as a vital economic and social sector (Nugroho and Numata 2022), fosters cultural interchange (Dimitrovski et al. 2021), drives economic growth (Pafi, Flannery and Murtagh 2020), and creates employment opportunities (Wilks 2023). Within this context, community-based tourism (CBT) has emerged as an approach emphasizing active local participation in tourism services (Stoddart et al. 2020). CBT positions communities as agents rather than passive beneficiaries (Costa et al. 2023), prioritizing collaboration and community well-being in sustainable tourism. For instance, Blapp and Mitas (2020) describe CBT in Bali as a respectful partnership integrating economic, cultural, environmental, and social dimensions to deepen appreciation for heritage and nature.

It is worth noting that active community involvement in planning and decision-making extends outcomes beyond economics; misunderstandings between hosts and tourists are reduced (Vignieri 2019), collaboration is strengthened (Raymond and Hall 2008), and resources and power are more equitably shared (Costa et al. 2023). This participatory framework prevents centralization and aligns initiatives with local priorities (Lee et al. 2022). Consequently, CBT generates social, environmental, and economic benefits (Zielinski et al. 2020). For instance, Zapata and Hall (2012)

underscored the advantages of employment, stability, and cohesion, contingent on integration with broader initiatives.

As CBT expands with rising visitor numbers, communities face both benefits and challenges (Zielinski et al. 2020). Coastal and marine tourism exemplifies this duality, generating local income (Pafi, Flannery and Murtagh 2020), creates jobs (Mason and Cheyne 2000), improving infrastructure (Costa et al. 2023), strengthens cultural ties (Unhasuta, Sasaki and Kim 2021), and acts as a catalyst for economic development (Alrwajfah et al. 2021). Active community engagement enhances living standards and fosters alternative livelihoods (Vargas-Sanchez, Porras-Bueno and de los Ángeles Plaza-Mejía 2011). However, risks such as environmental degradation and cultural commodification threaten ecological resilience and community well-being (Costa et al. 2023).

From the perspectives of SET and SNT, aligned with CBT, communities support tourism when perceived benefits outweigh costs (Chang 2021). Conversely, they withdraw support when anticipating losses. Understanding factors that facilitate or hinder sustainable stakeholder engagement is therefore essential, and SET and SNT offer a framework for conceptualizing multi-stakeholder interactions shaped by cost–benefit evaluations.

Social Exchange Theory and Coastal and Marine Tourism

SET, widely recognized as a robust theoretical framework, offers valuable insights into communities' perceptions of tourism (Alrwajfah et al. 2021). It posits that individuals evaluate exchanges by weighing perceived benefits against costs (Rajâa and Mekkaoui 2025). In coastal and marine tourism, SET provides a structured lens for examining how communities perceive and respond to development (Vargas-Sanchez, Porras-Bueno and de los Ángeles Plaza-Mejía 2011).

According to SET, insufficient community participation may erode social and economic capital (Strzelecka, Boley and Strzelecka 2017). Conversely, residents who actively engage with tourists often develop more favorable perceptions, fostering social cohesion and economic benefits (Mejjad, Rossi and Pavel 2022). Yet empirical findings remain inconsistent (Jani 2018), some studies report positive correlations (Chang 2021), while others find no significant association, suggesting that contextual or methodological factors may mediate outcomes (Maruyama, Woosnam and Boley 2018).

This issue is particularly critical in developing regions, where infrastructure and social structures strongly shape results (Costa et al. 2023). For instance, Blapp and Mitas (2020) showed that although coastal tourism in Bali supports economic growth, it also endangers ecosystems, underscoring the need for sustainable management. In Vietnam, limited participation, shaped by economic constraints and manipulative gatekeepers, led to inequitable benefit-sharing and discouraged community involvement (Tien et al. 2021), underscoring the need for context-specific strategies.

Understanding community dynamics in coastal and marine tourism requires an approach that accounts for socio-economic conditions, governance, and community capacity for engagement (Budur et al. 2025; Dimitrovski et al. 2021). Such an approach is essential for sustainable practices that support livelihoods and conservation. Given these complexities, relying solely on SET may be insufficient (Jani 2018). Integrating SET with SNT better captures the multifaceted impacts of tourism, revealing strengths and weaknesses in current interactions and offering deeper insight into how evolving relationships shape community outcomes.

Social Network Theory and Coastal and Marine Tourism

SNT provides a valuable framework for examining evolving relationships and cooperation patterns within social structures composed of actors, dyadic ties, and broader interaction networks (Stoddart et al. 2020). It defines social structures through nodes (actors), ties (relationships), and the overall network. Nodes represent individuals or organizations, while ties reflect interactions such as social connections or resource exchanges, collectively shaping relationships (Valeri and Baggio 2021). Networks are commonly analyzed using density, which refers to the number of connections, and centrality, which indicates the concentration of power or resources (Ahuja, Soda and Zaheer 2012). Although dense networks enhance trust and information flow (Timur and Getz 2008), Brett (2003) argues that decentralized structures can also disseminate information effectively by reducing redundancy. Thus, network type should align with intended functions and contextual characteristics.

Social network analysis has gained prominence in tourism research because the industry depends on cooperation among diverse stakeholders (Hynes et al. 2024). Key actors include tourists, local communities, government agencies, and private-sector representatives, whose relationships are defined by the strength, nature, and frequency of interactions—forming complex

networks that influence tourism outcomes. These linkages shape decision-making, resource allocation, and trust-building, making SNT a robust framework for understanding stakeholder engagement and for identifying patterns of influence, conflict, and cooperation (Chang 2021).

Although local community perceptions of coastal and marine tourism remain underexplored, understanding how evolving networks and external influences affect community development is essential. This study addresses this gap by integrating SET's broad theoretical perspective with SNT's micro-level analytical insights to examine drivers and barriers to sustainable stakeholder engagement in realizing the potential of coastal and marine tourism.

Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of this study and its focus on capturing participants' lived experiences and subjective perceptions, it is grounded in interpretivism. This philosophical paradigm views reality as socially constructed and subjectively interpreted by individuals. This approach is particularly well-suited to examining the complex, context-dependent dynamics of stakeholder interactions in coastal and marine tourism.

In alignment with the interpretivist paradigm, this study draws on SET and SNT to elucidate the relationships between local communities and other stakeholders. These theories offer a structured analytical lens for examining stakeholder dynamics and guided the formulation of interview questions, ensuring both theoretical grounding and methodological coherence (Graham, Ali and Tajeddini 2020). Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Hanafiah et al. 2021) was employed as the primary analytical method, chosen for its suitability to qualitative data and its capacity to reveal emergent themes that capture the lived experiences of local communities and stakeholders. A reflexive approach was adopted within this framework to explicitly acknowledge the researcher's active role in the interpretive process. This reflexivity ensured that the themes constructed were nuanced and contextually grounded, thereby enhancing the credibility and depth of the analysis (Tajeddini, Ratten and Denisa 2017).

Data Collection Procedure

This study employed a qualitative approach, collecting cross-sectional data between September and November 2024 through semi-structured interviews with three key stakeholder groups in Iran: local residents, domestic tourists, and policymakers. Iran was chosen as the study site due to its

distinctive geographical context—featuring both northern and southern coastlines—and the pressing need to harness coastal and marine tourism to mitigate socio-economic challenges, particularly economic instability (Salarvand, Hasanvand and Jafari 2025; Zarghmi 2024). Purposive sampling guided the initial selection of participants based on specific criteria; local residents were included if they were directly engaged in coastal and marine tourism services or possessed relevant experience, public policymakers were selected for their responsibility in shaping tourism policies and their comprehensive knowledge of the sector, and domestic tourists qualified if they have visited coastal destinations at least once in the preceding six months, reflecting Iran's political and social context. To complement this, snowball sampling was later employed to identify additional participants, given the challenges of accessing eligible individuals. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached after 17 interviews, after which three were subsequently excluded due to redundancy (Table 1).

Semi-structured interviews, conducted in Persian to ensure linguistic accessibility, served as the primary method of data collection. The protocol began with collecting demographic information (e.g., age, gender, education, employment) to contextualize participants' responses, followed by open-ended questions exploring perceptions of coastal and marine tourism, including perceived benefits, challenges, and stakeholder interactions. Key statements were translated from Persian into English using a back-translation process, carried out independently by two professionals to ensure accuracy and consistency.

Guided by SET and SNT, the interview structure explored the region's competitive advantages, tangible benefits, and unintended consequences of tourism development. It further examined communication networks among stakeholders, including local communities, government institutions, private investors, and tourists, to identify key mediating actors. The final component addressed the role of local communities in tourism management, focusing on barriers to engagement, conflicts with government institutions, and strategies for repositioning government bodies from directive authorities to effective facilitators. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes, and after the process was completed, participants verified it for accuracy. Data were analyzed using MAXQDA to ensure a systematic and rigorous thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

Interview data were systematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflective thematic analysis (RTA). A four-step coding procedure, adapted from Hanafiah et al. (2021), guided the process: (1) identifying significant semantic units, (2) transforming these units into codes, (3) clustering codes into candidate themes, and (4) interpreting and refining the themes. This procedure operationalizes RTA while remaining faithful to its original framework. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed by three researchers who immersed themselves in the data through repeated readings, analytical memos, and intertextual adjustments. A reflective stance was maintained throughout, with researcher bias acknowledged and managed through mechanisms such as reflection notebooks, audit trails, and peer review sessions. These strategies enhanced transparency, documented theme development, and facilitated the exploration of alternative interpretations.

Rigor and Transparency

The study adhered to four key qualitative research criteria—validity, reliability, confirmability, and transferability. Validity was ensured through purposive sampling of diverse participants, data saturation, and the researchers' year-long immersion in the coastal tourism field through a government project, which fostered deep contextual understanding. A 90-minute focus group with stakeholders (tourists, government representatives, and local community members) further enhanced validity by examining the drivers and barriers of community development in coastal tourism. Reliability was strengthened through independent coding by three researchers, with a high degree of thematic overlap confirmed; minor discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus. Additional methodological oversight by external experts further reinforced reliability. Confirmability was achieved through transparent documentation of analytical steps, audit trails, and participant validation. Final themes were shared with three interviewees (one from each stakeholder group) to confirm alignment with participants' perspectives. Transferability was supported by rich contextual descriptions and purposive sampling across three distinct communities, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to similar contexts. Collectively, these measures provide a robust foundation for interpreting and applying the study's results.

Results and Findings

In this section, the key drivers and barriers shaped by coastal-marine tourism, along with its effects on local communities, will be reviewed. Based on Table 2 and Table 3, these factors are examined across four domains, economic, socio-cultural, environmental, and governance-institutional, to highlight the multifaceted dimensions of this phenomenon.

Theme1: Economic-Infrastructural

From an economic perspective, assessing local community participation is vital for sustainable coastal and marine tourism. SET highlights fairness and cost-benefit balance, while SNT emphasizes how ties shape trust, information, and collective action (Rajâa and Mekkaoui 2025; Nugroho and Numata 2022). Combining these frameworks enables analysis of distributional and network mechanisms. Qualitative data reveal that expatriate dominance in construction has distorted perceptions of fairness and weakened community ties and resident roles. The following interview examples illustrate this situation:

- *"As a local resident, I've seen more than eleven villa units built by outsiders in the past year. The hotel owner brought in an external group for all construction, leaving no real role for the local community, even though the village has many skilled builders and carpenters." (C4)*
- *"As a result of the continuation of this construction pattern, more than thirty Afghan migrant workers are employed in work periods of approximately four months; a situation that effectively limits employment opportunities and economic benefits for local residents." (C3)*

Interview evidence points to two intertwined outcomes. From the SET lens, when residents are excluded from meaningful participation and benefits are shared unequally, tourism exchanges feel unfair or exploitative, eroding trust and weakening willingness to cooperate. Interviewees describe how contractors tied to hotels—sometimes backed by state privileges and specific officials—capture most of the gains while cutting costs by using cheap, non-local labor (e.g., Afghan workers), leaving locals outside construction work and economic rewards for local households. From the SNT lens, outsourcing decisions and labor to external actors weakens local network nodes and disrupts flows of information and mutual support. The result is fragmented governance, unjustified price increases, unregulated development, and gradual damage to the socio-economic fabric. Taken together, attention to stakeholder network structure and relationship quality strengthens a combined SET–SNT analysis (Hu and Chen 2024) by underscoring local actors' central role in information exchange, mutual support, and participatory decision-making (Chang 2021; Vignieri 2019). Therefore, sustainability policy should institutionalize participation, ensure fair benefit sharing, and reinforce local–extra-local linkages.

- *"With the growth of tourists to the sea shores and the use of tourist activities such as boating, the prices of this type of service have faced a double or more growth, which has made it difficult for local communities to use these facilities" (C7)*
- *"Generally, hotels and agencies are partnered with external companies to supply food and other services for tourists and do not allow local people to engage with tourist services" (C6)*

The first quote (C7) shows how the growth of coastal and marine tourism has sharply increased demand for services such as boating, with prices rising two to three times and becoming inaccessible to local residents. International sanctions and economic pressures have intensified this trend, as coastal tourism has become a substitute source of income. Wealthier domestic tourists can afford these services, but lower-income local communities are excluded from activities they once enjoyed. Within SET, this reflects a "negative exchange," where locals bear high costs, rising prices, overcrowding, and environmental stress while receiving few benefits.

The second quote (C6) highlights how monopolistic practices weaken local economic integration, central to SNT. Under sanctions, government facilities are directed to hoteliers and agencies, yet weak oversight channels revenues to proxy companies, excluding local entrepreneurs. This undermines trust, cooperation, and knowledge flows. Findings of the present study suggest that fair access to supply opportunities strengthens "perceived value" in SET and "relational inclusion" in SNT, with micro-entrepreneurship and direct engagement—such as offering local products—helping bridge this gap.

- *"With the growth of coastal tourism, this has caused each of the local communities to fill their surplus land with a variety of local products, each of which earns income in some way (local pastured eggs, local honey, Yogurt and local buttermilk and other items)" (C6)*

This statement illustrates how SET and SNT reinforce each other. In SET, using surplus land to sell local products creates fair exchange: communities provide value, gain income, and strengthen reciprocity and justice. In SNT, the same practice strengthens resident–tourist bonds, increases indigenous roles in the value chain, and builds trust and cooperation (Stoddart et al. 2020). Furthermore, income diversification—especially in villages with structural constraints—has a synergistic effect: it reduces livelihood risk and increases network resilience. As a result, stakeholder support continues, and the sustainability of benefits within the community is enhanced. However, it is important to note that another aspect of the discourse on economic and infrastructural issues is the intensification of conflicts and tensions between the local population and tourists, which is attributed to the inadequacy of essential infrastructure.

- *"During busy periods, water pressure drops in villages have become a problem due to the full occupancy of guesthouses and hotels, and as a result, many households do not have access to drinking water. " (C3)*
- *"In the second half of the year, with the arrival of beach tourists, gas pressure drops in villages intensify. However, it is important to note that the number of tourists decreases during this period." (C2)*

These quotes highlight the economic–infrastructural consequences of coastal tourism for local social infrastructure and access to vital resources. SET argues that community support relies on a perceived balance of benefits and costs (Chang 2021). In quote (C3), water use by guesthouses in peak seasons reduces availability for residents. Both the sea, as a source of livelihood, and piped water are understood as scarce and highly valued resources due to historical deprivation, so forced returns to well water raise health concerns and constitute a negative social exchange, thereby imposing high costs without providing benefits to locals. Similarly, quote (C2) also notes gas shortages, while tourist inflows generate waste and leachate that contaminate wells and groundwater, fueling conflict. Such imbalances breed dissatisfaction and weaken support.

From the SNT perspective, unequal access to resources reflects power asymmetries in local networks. Tourism businesses, with stronger external ties, secure preferential access to water and energy, while weaker local networks are marginalized. Fragmented networks limit participation and erode trust. Together, SET and SNT show how unequal benefit distribution, resource pressure, and social fragmentation undermine welfare and highlight the need for fair, inclusive tourism models. Thus, sustainable interaction can build strong networks that support trust, innovation, and knowledge exchange

Theme 2: Socio-cultural

Within SET, limited participation of indigenous residents in coastal-marine tourism creates perceptions of inequality and exclusion, threatening socio-cultural cohesion. When actors feel that exchange costs outweigh benefits—especially without recognition, participation, or fair compensation—dissatisfaction and resentment grow. In coastal communities, this perceived marginalization often leads to tensions and confrontations with tourists, as illustrated in the following field statements.

- *"Twice, when leaving the village, I used navigation to take a side road, but it was blocked with rocks and trees and I wasn't allowed to pass. The police avoided intervening because local headmen and councils supported those blocking the road. This seems especially common in the northern regions." (T2)*
- *"In many rural areas, locals seem hostile toward tourists. If they see a non-local license plate, they may cause trouble. In the north, some treat the sea and surrounding areas as their own, reacting as if visitors are trespassing and trying to push non-locals out." (C5)*

Interview findings reveal that some community members express discontent through blocking routes or confrontational behaviors, reflecting resistance and vulnerability to socio-cultural injustices. SNT, emphasizing inclusive, trust-based relationships and the flow of communication and resources, offers a nuanced explanation (Valeri and Baggio 2021). Exclusion from tourism networks and decision-making weakens local actors' structural positions, limits cooperation, and heightens alienation, mistrust, and conflict, making collaboration more difficult.

Societal responses to coastal and marine tourism also appear in the redefinition of gender roles in family businesses, rental-based livelihood strategies, and bargaining over coverage. These dynamics create both empowerment opportunities and cultural tensions, requiring context-sensitive policymaking. Interview excerpts illustrate how exclusion and infrastructural pressures disrupt social balance, underscoring the need for inclusive approaches to sustainable tourism development.

- *"Many long-running family businesses in coastal and marine tourism are now hiring more women, which helps even things out between men and women when it comes to work. It's also a smart move to ease pushback from local communities, especially when people feel their culture is being overwhelmed by tourism" (P3)*
- *"Because many rural coastal areas are economically struggling, most families rent their homes during the holidays and send their relatives to stay with others. This way, they can make a decent amount of money" (C5)*
- *"Due to the region's climatic conditions and the attractiveness of coastal tourism, people feel freer and more comfortable in their choice of clothing—including the degree of observance of the hijab; however, this is met with opposition from a section of society." (C4)*

These quotations illustrate how coastal and marine tourism communities navigate economic opportunities and cultural challenges through reciprocal interactions, reflecting SET principles. Economic pressures, intensified by sanctions and domestic constraints, disproportionately affect low-income groups. With limited government support for affordable eco-lodges, many families rent their coastal homes during peak seasons as a survival strategy. Within SET, this represents a conscious exchange: it generates income but imposes social costs, such as the temporary displacement of relatives. Likewise, the growing participation of women in family businesses reflects efforts to promote gender equality and strengthen local acceptance, functioning as both economic and symbolic practices that respect community norms and mitigate resistance to tourism's cultural impacts.

SNT complements this view by emphasizing the role of social ties in resource distribution and cohesion. Kinship networks activated during tourist influx redistribute housing responsibilities and

reinforce support systems. Yet generational divides and traditional attitudes toward hijab and dress codes—aligned with national laws—limit cooperation between stakeholders and communities. Here, the state can play a mediating role; for instance, designated spaces for women to enjoy coastal services with greater freedom could expand employment opportunities and strengthen community–stakeholder bonds. Such linkages act as social safety nets, enabling communities to benefit from tourism while maintaining solidarity.

From another perspective, two propositions highlight the social tensions inherent in coastal tourism: economic pressures that compel families to rent their homes as a survival mechanism, and generational divides over norms of modesty and dress. These issues underscore external costs and normative inequalities, providing fertile ground for analysis through SET and SNT.

- *"As someone who has been visiting this area for ten years, I find it interesting that older people are usually the ones who cause conflict; some of this behavior is attributed to the hijab and the "public shame" it causes, while younger people generally have no problem with it. " (C5)*
- *"In two cases where conflict occurred, it was very interesting to me: one of the parties was a tax expert and a PhD student at the University of Guilan, and he said, "You have disrupted the ecosystem of Guilan and nothing is in its place." (C3)*

Findings show that attitudes toward coastal and marine tourism differ across local groups. A key axis is the generational gap around dress norms: older residents view modesty concerns as a normative cost and report more conflict, while younger people are more tolerant. A second axis is heightened environmental sensitivity among the educated, who see the expansion of tourism as disrupting Guilan's ecological order. Within SET, when perceived normative or environmental costs exceed benefits, dissatisfaction and conflict rise. SNT adds that excluding locals from dialogue and decision-making erodes trust and intensifies confrontation. Effective policymaking must therefore address governance sensitive to local norms and ecological protection. When equitable access to opportunities and networks is ensured, and normative sensitivities are respected, trust and reciprocity grow, tensions over coverage and ecological disruption decline, and more benefits remain within the community. Co-constructed rules of conduct, participatory mechanisms, and fair benefit distribution thus become essential social pillars supporting sustainable tourism.

Theme 3: Environmental

From an environmental perspective and based on the SET and SNT theoretical frameworks, the impacts of coastal and marine tourism development are often perceived as predominantly negative. The following statements, extracted from participant interviews, illustrate these perceptions and highlight key environmental concerns associated with tourism activities.

- *"There are no limits on beach access by car, so vehicles can drive right up to the water, and tourists can enter wearing any clothing. This has reduced water quality, with fuel, oil, and micropollutants creating visible oily layers in places. For locals, the sea is not just a resource but a way of life, so this degradation deeply disturbs them." (T4)*
- *"The beach has become one of the dirtiest parts of the village due to leased construction and pavilions, even when legally permitted. This disrupts privacy, damages habitats, lowers water quality, and harms aquatic life. Seeing this makes locals resent tourists, as the sea is viewed not merely as an economic asset but as something sacred." (C5)*

Statement (T4) highlights the high social and environmental costs imposed by the lack of beach regulation. Within SET, unrestricted car access and gasoline-spill pollution create unequal exchanges in which local communities and ecosystems bear the brunt of damage while tourists benefit. From an SNT perspective, this reflects weak institutional structures and poor coordination, where the absence of cooperation and shared rules undermines trust and sustainable coastal management, leading to declining water quality, threats to aquatic life, and weakened ecological foundations.

Quote (C5) shows that even legal activities, without effective management, accelerate degradation. Rental constructions and licensed pavilions that ignore natural boundaries distort coastal lines and destroy sensitive habitats. From an SNT perspective, this signals governance weaknesses and inadequate coordination, in which legal mechanisms become destructive rather than protective. Addressing these issues requires participatory networks, inclusive monitoring, and the integration of local interests into decision-making. Together, the quotes show how mismanagement stems from unbalanced trade-offs (SET) and weak networks (SNT), underscoring the need for transparent policies that balance tourist access with environmental protection.

- *" I visit this beach every year, and each time construction creeps closer to the shore, spreading along the coastline. It feels as though nature is losing its essence. A few actors have taken over the sea, disrupting the ecosystem and leaving locals with the sense that nothing truly belongs to them anymore." (T5)*
- *"As a member of this town, I am unable to go fishing because I need a permit, which is usually not granted to people like me. Additionally, non-natives are also included in this restriction." (C7)*

These quotes highlight key environmental and social challenges in coastal and marine tourism, interpreted through SET and SNT. From a SET perspective, the first quote (T5) shows an

imbalance in the cost-benefit trade-off between tourism development and environmental conservation. Construction along the coastline is perceived as a form of degradation that reduces the coast's natural value, creating unfair exchanges in which communities bear environmental costs while tourism reaps benefits.

The second quote (C7) illustrates how limited access and exclusive practices affect local stakeholders. From SET, denying fishing permits restricts traditional livelihoods, eroding reciprocity and trust. In addition, from the perspective of SNT, restrictive permits weaken networks by isolating residents from economic and cultural activities tied to the marine environment, reducing opportunities for cooperation essential to sustainable resource management. Taken together, these quotes demonstrate how environmental degradation and governance barriers erode equitable exchanges (SET) and disrupt networks (SNT), ultimately undermining inclusive and sustainable coastal tourism.

Theme 4: Institutional-Governance

Within SET and SNT, government and governance structures shape environmental, economic, and socio-cultural outcomes in coastal tourism. When authorities fail to enforce policies—such as landfill regulations—communities perceive unfair exchanges, leading to resentment, mistrust, and disengagement. From SNT, weak governance disrupts stakeholder networks and cooperation. Interview evidence shows that the absence of a coherent landfill policy has become a major environmental challenge, damaging perceived fairness in government–society relations (SET) and weakening the resilience and functionality of local networks (SNT).

- *"In the northern region and Guilan province, one of the concerns of government institutions over the past decade has been the protests from local communities regarding garbage collection, which has become a significant challenge for the government." (C1)*

The quote highlights the absence of a clear government policy on waste management, including separation, recycling, and disposal. Although waste from residents and tourists is collected, the lack of an effective mechanism has led to neglect, worsened by the growth of coastal-marine tourism, resulting in community dissatisfaction, especially due to unpleasant odors. Within SNT, weak institutional action disrupts interests, heightens tensions, and reshapes stakeholder relationships. These findings show how inadequate waste policies create environmental and social challenges, undermine trust, and affect sustainable coastal tourism.

- *"Cultural heritage authorities issue building permits in villages too freely, and this is increasingly damaging local communities and tourism. If this continues, we risk losing what is truly ours, as village life and traditions are overshadowed and authenticity gradually erodes." (C6)*
- *"Having worked in the provincial cultural heritage sector for 11 years, I believe misguided government policies are concentrating tourism benefits in the hands of a few. Granting special advantages to select individuals ultimately generates long-term dissatisfaction among tourists." (P2)*

These quotes highlight the damaging effects of government intervention in coastal and marine tourism when viewed through the lens of SET, which stresses fairness, reciprocity, and trust. The first quote (C6) shows a lack of perceived fairness, as cultural heritage institutions issue building permits without conditions, thereby harming the physical and cultural integrity of villages and reducing the quality of tourism. From a SET perspective, such actions prioritize short-term development over long-term mutual benefits, eroding trust and diminishing the value of community participation.

The second quote (P2) points to institutional bias, where policies favor select groups and create inequitable benefit distribution. This marginalizes local communities and small entrepreneurs while undermining tourist satisfaction. Together, these quotes show how exploitation, unequal benefits, and incoherent policies foster dissatisfaction and resistance. SET suggests that transparent, equitable, and participatory government intervention is essential for sustainable coastal and marine tourism.

- *"Every weekend, approximately 500 to 600 cars from Tehran and other cities arrive at the beach in one of the villages of Hasanroud Anzali. A round-trip fee of about 20,000 tomans is charged for each car." (T3)*
- *"One notable aspect of the growth of coastal tourism is its potential to significantly generate income and assist the government through the construction, development, and prosperity of hotels and other related sectors." (C1)*

The first quote (T3) highlights the direct financial benefits of tourism, particularly access fees collected from weekend visitors. From a SET perspective, this represents a positive exchange in which tourists value the experience and stakeholders, including government agencies, gain revenue. The key issue, however, is whether these benefits are fairly distributed. If local communities—who bear costs such as traffic, environmental pressure, and infrastructure use—do not receive a fair share, dissatisfaction and non-participation may follow.

The second quote (C1) emphasizes broader development gains for the government, with tourism driving infrastructure expansion, hotel development, and service growth. From SET, this reflects a macro-level view of mutual benefits, yet reciprocity remains essential. Even

well-intentioned projects may be perceived as exploitative if communities feel excluded or inadequately rewarded.

Together, these quotes show that while coastal and marine tourism offers significant opportunities, sustainability depends on transparent and equitable benefit distribution. Trust grows when government facilitates fair exchanges; when benefits concentrate among elites, SET suggests dissatisfaction and resistance are likely. Appendix 1 provides a table summarizing key themes and frequently occurring interview codes across the four dimensions.

Conclusion and Implications

This study advances understanding of coastal and marine tourism in Iran by examining stakeholder perceptions and relational dynamics through SET and SNT. Findings show that engagement is shaped by interconnected drivers and barriers across economic–infrastructural, socio-cultural, environmental, and governance dimensions.

Economically, perceived benefits—such as family business growth, income opportunities, and improved well-being (Gamage and Tajeddini 2022)—encourage participation, consistent with SET's benefit–cost logic. However, inflation, rising living costs, unequal income distribution, infrastructure strain, exclusion from tourism value chains, and uneven energy provision in northern destinations generate perceptions of unfairness and reduce engagement. Socio-culturally, women's participation, intercultural learning, and education act as drivers of cohesive networks, aligning with SNT's emphasis on relational structure. Yet resident–tourist tensions, overcrowding, lifestyle disruption, cultural erosion, and informal power networks reflect fragmented ties and weakened cohesion. Environmentally, stakeholders value coastal biodiversity, but pollution, land degradation, weak waste management, and limited access to piped water—considered a scarce and historically sensitive resource—intensify tensions and signal coordination failures. In governance terms, tax revenues and public investment can foster cooperation, but policy inconsistency, low trust, sanctions, fiscal constraints, tourism revenue dependence, and regulatory relaxation undermine effectiveness.

Comparative research underscores the multidimensional nature of these findings. Ferreira da Silva et al. (2022) identified sea-level rise, flooding, coastal erosion, ecosystem imbalance, and cultural vulnerability as foundational challenges across Europe, mirrored in this study. Mejjad,

Rossi, and Pavel (2022) reported similar results in the Mediterranean basin, consistent with the four dimensions analyzed here. Lazzari et al. (2021) reached comparable conclusions in Spain. Cuong et al. (2024) examined local community drivers and barriers in Vietnam's coastal tourism, with outcomes aligned to this study. Hamzah et al. (2024) highlighted challenges in Indonesia, identifying limited infrastructure, poor accessibility, and inadequate promotion as barriers, again resonating with these findings.

Distinctive differences in the four dimensions, shaped by dual theoretical lenses and contextualized by diverse settings, can be traced to Iran-specific factors. These include informal local power networks tied to subcultural dynamics (T2, C5, socio-cultural), debates surrounding hijab and related cultural markers (C5, C4, socio-cultural), the sacred perception of water beyond economic discourse (T4, T5, environmental), women's increased participation (P3, socio-cultural), energy imbalances in northern regions due to uneven tourism (C2, economic), and intensified sanctions, severe budget deficits, dependence on coastal tourism revenues, and regulatory relaxation (P2, C6, governance).

Overall, sustainable coastal tourism in Iran requires integrated strategies that promote equitable benefit distribution, strengthen local networks and inclusive participation, protect ecosystems, and enhance policy coherence and accountability to build resilience and long-term stakeholder support across coastal destinations.

Theoretical Implications

The findings contribute to theory in two primary ways. First, they extend coastal and marine tourism scholarship by linking socio-ecological risks, distributional inequities, and governance conflicts to community responses. While tourism may generate benefits, structural and relational barriers—limited participation, unequal distribution of benefits, and marginalization in decision-making—undermine positive perceptions and sustained engagement.

By integrating SET and SNT, the study offers a nuanced account of the socio-economic and relational dynamics shaping community involvement. SET explains how residents evaluate tourism through perceived rewards (e.g., employment, infrastructure, cultural preservation) and costs (e.g., environmental degradation, exclusion, loss of autonomy), influencing support or resistance. SNT highlights how relational structures, power asymmetries, and communication

flows shape trust, cooperation, and access to resources. Together, these frameworks move beyond narrow economic interpretations, demonstrating how reciprocity, trust, and network connectivity underpin sustainability and inclusion within tourism systems.

Second, the integrated framework bridges individual-level evaluations and broader structural dynamics. It connects perceptions of fairness and reward (SET) with the institutional and networked relationships that organize stakeholder interactions (SNT), revealing how communities, government actors, intermediaries, and tourists co-produce patterns of inclusion, resistance, and collaboration. This approach enables a multidimensional analysis across economic, socio-cultural, environmental, and governance domains, supporting more context-sensitive and inclusive tourism planning.

The study also underscores the centrality of socio-cultural empowerment. Women's participation, access to information, and higher education levels reflect strengthened social and human capital within communities. Notably, women expressed more positive attitudes toward coastal tourism than men, likely reflecting structural employment constraints and broader socio-economic conditions. Cultural context moderates exchange relationships, shaping the strength and direction of stakeholder ties.

In Iran, particularly in Guilan Province, dependence on coastal livelihoods intensifies exchange dynamics and reshapes local power structures. The sea serves not only as an economic asset but also as a sacred element of collective identity, shaping cost–benefit analyses and sparking resistance when tourism threatens cultural values. Informal ethnic and family networks operate as invisible power structures that affect benefit allocation and mobilize opposition. Cultural tensions between traditional lifestyles and consumerist development further disrupt exchange balances and weaken network cohesion. Overall, the findings highlight the need to situate exchange and relational processes within broader socio-economic and cultural contexts to support equitable and sustainable coastal tourism development.

Limitations and Further Research

Like any research, this study acknowledges several limitations and offers valuable opportunities for future research. Limitations of this study are important for interpreting the findings and for guiding further research. As a qualitative, interpretive inquiry, the results are context-dependent

and are intended to inform theory building rather than statistical generalization; this is especially relevant given diverse stakeholders and strong seasonality in coastal tourism.

First, the empirical focus on Iran's northern coasts limits transferability to other coastal settings within the country. Marked cultural, socio-economic, and climatic differences between the northern and southern provinces mean that stakeholder roles, livelihood strategies, and community–tourism relations may differ. Future studies should replicate and extend the proposed SET–SNT framework in southern destinations (e.g., Hormozgan and Bushehr) and across multiple coastal regions to enable systematic comparison.

Second, data were generated during a period when sanctions and travel restrictions constrained international arrivals; therefore, the analysis primarily reflects domestic tourists' interactions with host communities and institutions. Because foreign visitors may bring different expectations, behaviors, and resource demands, subsequent research should incorporate their perspectives when conditions allow and test whether the identified drivers and barriers shift with more international mobility.

Third, socio-cultural and normative institutions—particularly dress codes such as hijab and Islamic attire—may operate simultaneously as constraints and as markers of social order in tourism encounters. Cross-cultural comparative work across developing and Muslim-majority contexts could clarify how such institutions shape inclusion, women's participation, and perceived legitimacy of tourism practices. Relatedly, women's occupational constraints in Iran, alongside their reported support for family enterprises and tourism initiatives, warrant focused comparative studies in other Islamic settings (e.g., Malaysia, Türkiye, or Persian Gulf countries) to distinguish country-specific regulatory effects from broader cultural dynamics.

Finally, while this study mapped collaboration-enabling and collaboration-inhibiting relationships among communities, tourists, and government agencies, it did not examine how these networks respond to shocks over time. Longitudinal research using an integrated SET–SNT lens could assess network resilience and stakeholder contributions under environmental change, policy shifts, or market volatility.

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