Resources for Intensive Tourism Development: The Case of Dornod Aimag

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ABSTRACT

Mongolia has identified sustainable tourism as a key priority in its national development policy, aligned with the Millennium Development Goals. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the country set a target of receiving more than one million tourists annually. However, regional tourism resources remain underutilized, while the quality and accessibility of tourism products and services are still insufficient.

This study investigates the tourism potential of Dornod aimag, Mongolia, with the aim of identifying pathways for intensive and sustainable development. Data were collected from 253 domestic tourists who had either traveled to Dornod within the last five years or expressed interest in visiting. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a tourist survey (analyzed with descriptive statistics, factor analysis, and regression) with a SWOT-TOWS analysis of the Dornod aimag's socio-economic and ecological context.

The findings show that tourist satisfaction is strongly influenced by historical and cultural heritage, natural and ecological resources, economic assets, and the quality of travel services. Young people aged 18–35 demonstrated the highest level of interest in traveling. Although a tourism ecosystem has not yet been fully established in Dornod, the results highlight considerable opportunities for developing both domestic and international tourism by leveraging mining, cultural resources, natural assets, infrastructure, and the province's geographical location.

This study emphasizes the importance of positioning the eastern region as a tourism hub by developing services that showcase its unique culture and traditions to domestic and foreign visitors. It also provides practical recommendations for policymakers and tourism entrepreneurs in shaping sustainable tourism development policies and practices.

Keywords—Tourism resources, Sustainable tourism indicators, Tourist satisfaction, Dornod aimag

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is an important sector of the global economy. Today, it accounts for 10.4% of global GDP and 7% of global exports. Figure 1 illustrates the contribution of tourism to global gross domestic product (GDP) between 2019 and 2021. By 2021, tourism had generated USD 5.812 trillion, with total revenues reaching USD 1.1 trillion.

Tourism resources play a crucial role in the sector's development. Mongolia offers abundant social and cultural resources to both domestic and international tourists. For example, historical monuments, tangible and intangible cultural heritage, and the lifestyle and traditions of ethnic groups such as the Khalkh, Barga, Uzemchin, Darkhad, Buryat, and Kazakh attract strong interest from visitors.

Foreign tourists seek to experience Mongolia's history, culture, heritage, and customs, aiming for deeper cultural encounters rather than merely viewing buildings or luxury services. Each of Mongolia's 21 aimags and 330 soums has its own distinctive characteristics, which serve as attractions for both domestic and international visitors. However, the quality of tourism services remains insufficient, posing a significant challenge.

Experts emphasize that foreign tourists typically spend between USD 2,000 and USD 3,000 when traveling in Mongolia, yet this often results only in photographs and memories. Therefore, the most urgent requirement in the tourism sector is to provide high-quality, integrated services, including cultural performances, artistic shows, food, souvenirs, and transportation. At present, dissatisfaction with service quality is a major issue for both domestic and foreign tourists.

The purpose of this study is to examine the social, cultural, economic, and ecological resources of Dornod aimag and to identify opportunities for intensive tourism development. The data were collected from domestic tourists who traveled to Dornod aimag within the last five years.

Dornod aimag, located in the easternmost part of Mongolia, covers an area of approximately 124,000 km². Globally, there are many types of tourism, including domestic tourism, international tourism, inbound tourism, business tourism, adventure tourism, wildlife tourism, health tourism, wellness tourism, religious and spiritual tourism, cultural tourism, dark tourism, culinary tourism, celebrity or film tourism, educational tourism, cruise tourism, rural tourism, coastal tourism, and even space tourism.

Dornod aimag boasts natural and ecological resources, including Menengi Tal, Buir Lake, Khokh Lake, the Onon, Khalkh, and Ulz Rivers, as well as a variety of rare animals and birds. There are historical and cultural monuments such as the Khalkhin Gol War Victory Monuments, the ruins of the city of Kherlen Bars, the Great Burkhant Complex, the Ugtam Monastery, the Hun Stones, and the Tarvagan Dakhin Ovoo.

Developing Dornod into a major tourism destination is of great economic and cultural importance. The province has the potential to attract visitors with its historical monuments, arts and sports performances, food production, services, unique customs, and way of life, thereby securing a distinct position in the tourism industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since World War II, the tourism industry has expanded rapidly, with mass tourism becoming a defining global phenomenon (Britton, 1982). This expansion has carried not only economic significance but also sociocultural and anthropological implications (Chambers, 1997; Nash, 1996). Scholars have increasingly emphasized the connection between tourism and sustainable development, underscoring the need to balance economic benefits, social equity, cultural preservation, and environmental protection (Sofield, 2003). The basic principles of sustainable tourism are environmental and socio-cultural sustainability. Tourists can assess the sustainability and tourism services provided by Dornod aimag when traveling to the territory. Tourism resources are classified according to indicators proposed by scientists.

This theoretical foundation is highly relevant for regional tourism development in Mongolia, particularly in Dornod aimag.

Cultural and Ethnic Heritage Resources

Mongolia's cultural diversity represents a vital foundation for tourism development. Ethnic groups such as the Buryat, Barga, and Uzemchin maintain distinctive traditions and livelihoods that go beyond ethnographic interest and constitute valuable tourism resources. Their traditional practices—herding, bread baking, dairy processing, and handicrafts—together with their intangible heritage of songs, dances, legends, and rituals, hold strong appeal for cultural tourists. Within the framework of sustainable tourism, these elements represent not only heritage preservation but also opportunities for experience-based cultural engagement that contributes to long-term tourism development.

Historical and Natural Monuments

Tourism literature highlights monuments and natural landscapes as anchor resources for cultural and heritage tourism (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). Dornod aimag's "Nine Wonders" — including Buir Lake, Soyolz Mountain, the Menen Steppe, Khukh Lake, Onon River Heart Island, Kherlen Bars City, the Genghis Khan Road, the Great

Burkhant Complex, and the Victory Statue — exemplify the region's rich cultural and natural heritage. However, as emphasized by international studies, such monuments require effective management, interpretation, and integration into broader tourism systems if they are to generate sustained economic and cultural benefits (UNWTO, 2017).

Language and Tourism Services

Language plays a critical role in shaping both service quality and visitor satisfaction (Cohen & Cooper, 1986). In Mongolia, English is widely used, yet visitors from Russia, China, and Korea often face communication barriers and require additional language support. Thus, communication is not merely a service issue but also a determinant of sustainable tourism development, as it directly influences accessibility, inclusivity, and intercultural exchange.

Socio-Economic Context, Infrastructure, and the Tourism Ecosystem

Tourism development is strongly tied to the socio-economic base and infrastructure of a destination (Inskeep, 1991). Dornod aimag ranks first among Mongolia's 21 provinces in terms of the Human Development Index, with a diverse economy based on animal husbandry, agriculture, and mining. Choibalsan, the provincial capital, functions as the Eastern Regional Development Support Center and hosts key facilities such as an international airport, railway connections, and border ports linking Mongolia with Russia and China. While such resources provide strategic advantages, sustainable tourism literature stresses that resource endowment alone is insufficient. Destinations must cultivate integrated tourism ecosystems that combine infrastructure, governance, service quality, and stakeholder collaboration (Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

Research Gaps and Conceptual Framework

Although Mongolia's ethnic diversity, historical monuments, and natural landscapes have been described in previous studies, few have systematically connected these resources to tourist satisfaction within a sustainable tourism framework. This study seeks to address that gap by examining how Dornod's cultural, natural, and economic resources, along with the quality of tourism services, influence travel satisfaction.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the research methods, instruments, and analytical techniques used in the study. The questionnaire was developed based on established sustainable tourism indicators (Table 1).

Table 1. Sustainable Tourism Indicator

| Source/Author	Indicator	Dimensions
UN Commission on Sustainable Development (2007)	Sustainable Development Indicators	Social, economic, ecological
Weaver & Oppermann (2000)	Determinants of Sustainable Tourism Development	Social, economic, cultural, environmental, environmental management
Doris Padmini (2000)	Determinants of Sustainable Tourism in Malaysia	Rural/urban environment, natural and historical heritage, cultural traditions
Choi & Sirakaya (2006)	Group Tourism Organization Indicators	Economic, social, cultural, ecological, political, technological
Asnarulkhadi (2003)	Sustainable Ethnic Tourism Indicators	Economic, social, ecological
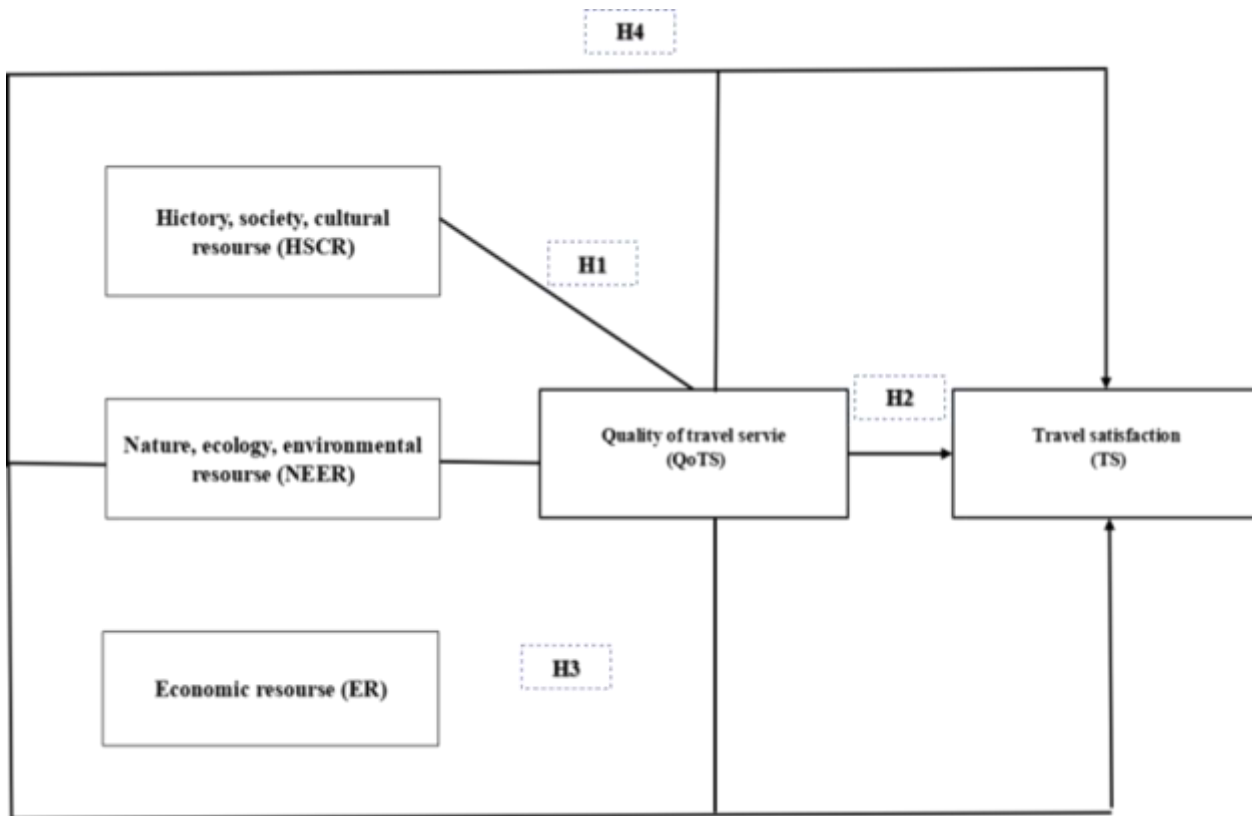
Fig. 1. Research framework

The research framework was built upon these sustainable tourism indicators and is illustrated in Figure 1.

A total of 253 respondents participated in the study:

- 41 domestic travelers who had visited Dornod aimag in the last five years, and

- 212 respondents who had not yet traveled but expressed future interest.

The main statistical analyses were conducted using the data from the 41 actual travelers. However, this is a very small and non-representative sample, which severely limits the reliability and generalizability of the findings. Accordingly, this study must be considered a pilot or exploratory investigation, generating preliminary insights rather than conclusive results. The dataset of 212 interested respondents was analyzed separately to provide additional insight into travel intentions and latent demand, which are highly relevant for future tourism development in Dornod.

This study formulated the following four hypotheses:

Based on the theoretical framework, the following hypotheses were formulated (Table 2):

Table 2. Research Hypotheses

Hypotheses	Statement
H1	Travel satisfaction (TS) is positively related to the quality of travel services (QoTS) and historical, social, and cultural resources (HSCR).
H2	Travel satisfaction (TS) is positively related to the quality of travel services (QoTS) and natural and ecological resources (NEER).
H3	Travel satisfaction (TS) is positively related to the quality of travel services (QoTS) and economic resources (ER).

Hypotheses	Statement
H1	Travel satisfaction (TS) is positively related to the quality of travel services (QoTS) and historical, social, and cultural resources (HSCR).
H4	Travel satisfaction (TS) is jointly determined by HSCR, QoTS, NEER, and ER.

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS software. The following methods were applied:

1. Descriptive statistics to summarize respondent characteristics.

2. Reliability testing (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.916$) to confirm strong internal consistency of the survey instrument.

3. Factor analysis (KMO = 0.812) to assess sampling adequacy and variable structure.

4. Linear regression analysis to examine the influence of service quality, cultural resources, natural resources, and economic factors on travel satisfaction.

Nevertheless, given the tiny sample size (n=41), the regression coefficients ($\beta = 0.716$–1.050) and p-values should not be interpreted as robust evidence. Instead, they are treated as exploratory indicators of potential relationships that warrant testing in future large-scale studies.

The overall purpose of the study was to investigate the social, cultural, economic, and ecological resources of Dornod aimag and identify opportunities for intensive tourism development. To achieve this, a SWOT–TOWS analysis was conducted, from which short-term, medium-term, and long-term strategies were derived.

RESULT

Descriptive Statistical Results

A total of 253 respondents participated in the survey. Among them, 41 had traveled to Dornod aimag in the last five years, while 212 had never visited but expressed interest in traveling in the future. Of the total sample, 70.7% were female and 29.3% male. In terms of age distribution, 36.6% were between 41–50 years old, and 31.7% were between 31–40 years old.

Travelers (n = 41):

- Natural and ecological resources (NEER) and historical and cultural heritage (HSCR) received the highest satisfaction ratings.
- Transportation, travel information, and tour guide services (QoTS) were rated the lowest.
- Food, souvenirs, and local products (TS) received moderately positive ratings but were not consistently high.

Interested respondents (n = 212):

The majority of those interested in traveling to Dornod were young people aged 18–25, suggesting that future demand will likely be driven by younger generations. Their strongest interests were in cultural heritage and natural attractions.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics Results for Tourism Resources (n = 41, multiple responses)

Tourism Resources	SD	D	N	S	SS
Buryat, Barga, and Uzemchin's home and life (HSCR)	0	3	10	10	18
Aimag and soum museums (HSCR)	1	1	15	6	18
Entrance fees to historical monuments and natural complexes (ER)	4	1	16	6	14

Tourism Resources	SD	D	N	S	SS
Buryat, Barga, and Uzemchin's home and life (HSCR)	0	3	10	10	18
Song and dance performances, artistic performances, festivals, and entertainment (HSCR)	4	1	14	9	13
Culture, customs, clothing, and utensils of the people of Dornod (HSCR)	2	3	11	11	14
Food, local brands of Dornod (TS)	2	1	10	7	21
Souvenirs from Dornod (TS)	1	6	10	5	19
Quality of tour guide service (QoTS)	4	2	16	7	12
Travel transportation (QoTS)	2	2	16	5	16
Travel information (QoTS)	1	3	16	5	16
Natural beauties (NEER)	0	1	3	10	27
Total trip price (ER)	1	4	12	12	12
Satisfaction with Dornod travel (TS)	0	2	11	10	18
Total	22	30	160	103	218

Table 4. Survey results from respondents interested in traveling to Dornod aimag (n = 212)

There were 212 people interested in traveling to the Dornod, despite never having visited the Dornod aimag.		
Respondents's age	18 to 25	26 to 35
Intend to travel	150[a]	50
Have passed through Dornod	2	10
	152	60
Total	212	

Research results show that young people aged 18-25 are highly interested in traveling

Reliability and Factor Analysis

The reliability of the survey was confirmed with Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.916$, exceeding the accepted threshold of 0.6 and demonstrating strong internal consistency. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.812, which met the recommended threshold (>0.7), indicating that factor analysis was appropriate.

Results of linear regression analysis

All four hypotheses were statistically supported. The regression analysis revealed significant positive correlations between travel satisfaction (TS) and:

- Historical, social, and cultural resources (HSCR),

- Natural and ecological resources (NEER),

- Economic resources (ER),

- Quality of travel services (QoTS).

The regression coefficients ranged from $\beta = 0.716$ to $\beta = 1.050$, with significance levels of $p < 0.05$. However, due to the very small sample size of actual travelers (n = 41), these results cannot be regarded as statistically

robust. Instead, they should be interpreted as exploratory indicators of potential relationships, providing directions for future large-scale research.

SWOT–TOWS Analysis

The SWOT–TOWS analysis highlighted the following strategic context for tourism development in Dornod (Table 6):

1. Strengths (S): Highest Human Development Index among provinces, diverse ethnic cultures (Khalkh, Buryat, Barga, Uzemchin), location as the Eastern regional center, third in per capita GDP, and the closest gateway to Northeast Asia.

2. Weaknesses (W): Weak tourism service infrastructure, insufficient foreign language skills, high domestic airfare, underdeveloped business training and support services.

3. Opportunities (O): Development of niche and special-interest tourism, attraction of foreign investment, expansion of international cooperation, tourism product exports, joint projects with neighboring regions.

4. Threats (T): Environmental degradation, unstable travel costs, weak service quality, and a lack of a fully functioning tourism ecosystem.

Strategic objectives derived from the SWOT–TOWS matrix:

1. Short-term (SO): Develop tourism products based on local resources, increase domestic and international visitor numbers, promote university–industry collaboration in product development.

2. Medium-term (ST/WO): Establish expert and researcher teams for Eastern regional tourism, strengthen partnerships with Inner Mongolia and Northeast Asia, host large-scale cultural and business events.

3. Long-term (WT): Build a sustainable tourism ecosystem through collaborative governance involving government, private sector, and civil society.

Tourism Ecosystem in Dornod Aimag

The findings reveal that Dornod lacks a clear tourism vision, integrated strategy, and effective platforms for stakeholder collaboration. Environmental and cultural management, monitoring, and funding remain underdeveloped. Local resources are insufficient to provide long-term financial support. Nevertheless, tourism entrepreneurs are making efforts to generate employment, stimulate the local economy, and enhance regional competitiveness.

Table 5. Result of Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Relationship	β coefficient	p-value	Result
H1	QoTS + HSCR → TS	$p>000$ 0.849	Travel satisfaction (TS) is directly related to the quality of travel services (QoTS) and historical, social, and cultural resources (HSCR).	Accepted
H2	QoTS + NEER → TS	$p>000$ 0.738	Travel satisfaction (TS) is directly related to the quality of travel services (QoTS) and natural and ecological resources (NEER).	Accepted

Hypothesis	Relationship	β coefficient	p-value		Result
H1	QoTS + HSCR → TS	p>000 0.849	Travel satisfaction (TS) is directly related to the quality of travel services (QoTS) and historical, social, and cultural resources (HSCR).		Accepted
H3	QoTS + ER → TS	p>000 0.716	Travel satisfaction (TS) is directly related to travel service quality (TSQ) and economic resources (ER).		Accepted
H4	QoTS + HSCR + NEER + ER → TS	p>000 1.050	The TS is directly dependent on the HSCR, QoTS, NEEF, and ER		Accepted

Note. TS = Travel Satisfaction; QoTS = Quality of Travel Services; HSCR = Historical, Social, and Cultural Resources; NEER = Natural and Ecological Resources; ER = Economic Resources. Results are based on a very small sample size (n = 41) and should be interpreted as exploratory, hypothesis-generating evidence rather than robust statistical confirmation.

Results of SWOT-TOWS Analysis

Table 6. Result of SWOT-TOWS Analysis

SWOT Elements	SO Strategies (short-term)	ST Strategies (medium-term)	WO Strategies (medium-term)	WT Strategies (long-term)
Strengths (S): - 3rd largest province by area - Population growth in last 3 years - 4 ethnic groups (Khalkh, Buryat, Barga, Uzemchin) - Eastern regional development center - 1st in Human Development Index - 3rd in GDP per capita - Closest gateway to Northeast Asia	- Develop tourism products based on local resources - Increase domestic and foreign tourists - Collaborate with universities for research and product development - Establish professional tourism department	- Organize international business trips via gateway advantage - Attract tourists through large-scale forums, conferences, and cultural festivals - Launch innovation and technology projects in tourism		
Weaknesses (W): - Weak service infrastructure - Insufficient language skills - High domestic			- Build capacity of tourism workforce - Improve language training and professional education	- Address environmental degradation - Reduce cost barriers (e.g., airfare)

			- Support SMEs and tourism start-ups	- Establish sustainable ecosystem with government–private–civil society collaboration
airfares - Underdeveloped training and mentoring for businesses				
Opportunities (O): - Development of ethnic and niche tourism - Attraction of foreign investment - Growth of special interest tourism - Tourism product exports - Regional and cross-border projects				

Results of a study testing the tourism ecosystem model The tourism sector in Dornod aimag currently lacks a clear vision, strategy, and effective platforms for public–private collaboration. Key areas such as environmental and cultural management, planning, monitoring, evaluation, civil society engagement, and government regulation remain underdeveloped. Challenges include fragmented responsibilities for training, education, legal regulation, licensing, standards, safety, infrastructure, investment, and financing.

Management institutions are tasked with preserving the environment, cultural heritage, and rural resources sustainably; however, local funding remains insufficient. Despite these constraints, tourism entrepreneurs are actively creating jobs, supporting employment, stimulating economic growth, and fostering competition.

CONCLUSION

The study assessed the tourism resources of Dornod aimag and their relationship with travel satisfaction using the framework of sustainable tourism development. The study identifies key resources and confirms that travel satisfaction is strongly dependent on cultural, natural, and economic resources and service quality. The survey of 212 potential visitors revealed strong interest—particularly among young people aged 18–25—pointing to a promising demand base for future development in this region. Dornod aimag is rich in historical, cultural, natural, and ecological resources. Although efforts were made to include many tourists in this study, only a few tourists traveled to Dornod aimag. However, it is concluded that this area will become a future tourist destination due to its high tourism potential.

However, the analysis faced a critical limitation: the very small number of actual travelers (n = 41)**.** While the regression coefficients (β = 0.716–1.050, $p < 0.001$) confirmed all four hypotheses, these results must be interpreted as exploratory and hypothesis-generating rather than conclusive**.** Larger and more representative samples are required in future research to validate these relationships and ensure statistical robustness.

Approximately 46% of Mongolia's total population resides in Ulaanbaatar, according to national statistics. That means nearly half the country is concentrated in the capital—a reflection of urbanization trends driven by infrastructure, employment opportunities, and access to education. Domestic tourists are very interested in traveling to Dornod aimag, and they talk about it with their families and friends. In other words, domestic tourists plan to travel to Dornod aimag at some point.

Despite these constraints, the study makes several contributions. First, it provides one of the earliest systematic evaluations of Dornod's tourism ecosystem. Second, it demonstrates the importance of integrating both actual

travelers and potential travelers in assessing demand. Third, the SWOT–TOWS analysis highlighted the region's strong assets—such as its cultural diversity, natural heritage, and strategic location—while also revealing major weaknesses in service infrastructure, high travel costs, and limited human resource capacity.

From a practical perspective, the results suggest that:

1. Travel companies must improve service quality, diversify tourism products, and integrate local culture and livelihoods into visitor experiences.

2. Government and civil society should collaborate to establish a coherent tourism ecosystem, ensuring environmental sustainability and long-term growth.

3. Programs such as the Digital Dornod Expo Forum and cross-border cooperation initiatives could stimulate tourism revival, create jobs, and enhance regional competitiveness.

In conclusion, Dornod aimag holds significant but underutilized tourism potential. Unlocking this potential requires coordinated efforts among stakeholders, guided by a sustainable tourism ecosystem approach. The evidence from this study highlights both demand (from younger and middle-aged groups) and structural gaps, underscoring the need for further research, targeted investments, and innovative strategies to build Dornod's position as a distinctive tourism destination in Mongolia.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this exploratory study (41 actual travelers and 212 potential respondents) and the SWOT–TOWS analysis, the following recommendations are proposed to support the revitalization of tourism in Dornod aimag.

Short-term priorities

1. Strengthen human resources in tourism by cooperating with universities and colleges specializing in society, history, culture, ecology, and economy. Training programs should be aligned with local needs, and start-ups in culture, agriculture, and eco-tourism should be supported with government and private funding.

2. Organize regular business forums, trainings, and seminars with stakeholders from Russia, China, Korea, and Japan to develop cross-border tourism partnerships.

3. Address the immediate knowledge gap among domestic travelers by creating targeted educational campaigns on Dornod's culture, history, and ecology.

Medium-term priorities

1. Organize regular business forums, trainings, and seminars with stakeholders from Russia, China, Korea, and Japan to develop cross-border tourism partnerships.

2. Integrate tourism-related topics (e.g., cultural heritage, ecological resources) into the curriculum of schools in Dornod and neighboring provinces, thereby fostering long-term awareness.

3. Develop and test virtual travel resources and pilot special-interest tourism packages, such as heritage-based, eco-tourism, and cross-border travel.

Long-term priorities

1. Organize regular business forums, trainings, and seminars with stakeholders from Russia, China, Korea, and Japan to develop cross-border tourism partnerships.

2. Establish and maintain a comprehensive tourism database (primary and secondary data) to guide evidence-based decision-making and long-term strategy.

3. Encourage integrated ecosystem-based development by building sustainable partnerships among government, private sector, and civil society.

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