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Article

A Study on the Collaborative Governance Mechanism for Sustainable Development of Desert Tourist Areas: A Case Study of the Mutetar Desert Scenic Area in Xinjiang

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Abstract: The fragility of desert ecosystems in arid regions dictates that desert tourism development must follow a sustainable path. This paper takes the Mutetar Desert Scenic Area in Jinghe County, Xinjiang, as an example. Based on field research and interview data, and employing thematic analysis, it systematically examines the constituent elements, operational logic, and performance tensions of a multi-stakeholder collaborative governance mechanism for desert tourism scenic areas. The study finds that the Mutetar Desert Scenic Area has initially formed a multi-stakeholder participation pattern of government guidance-enterprise operation-community participation-military-civilian collaboration. Collaborative governance operates through three core mechanisms: business cooperation, infrastructure support, and brand marketing. Tourist numbers and operating revenue have achieved rapid growth, but simultaneously, it faces sustainability challenges such as carrying capacity constraints, lagging refined management, and ecological pressure, demonstrating the dialectical characteristic of contradictions in development and dynamic adjustment in governance. This paper proposes an analytical framework of multi-stakeholder participation and multi-dimensional mechanism collaboration, providing a new theoretical perspective for understanding the sustainable development of desert tourism scenic areas in arid regions of China and offering valuable reference for the governance practices of similar scenic areas.

Keywords: Desert Tourism, Sustainable Development, Collaborative Governance, Stakeholders, Mutetar Desert Scenic Area

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1. Introduction

China possesses abundant desert resources. With the revitalization of tourism consumption patterns and the expansion of experiential tourism demand, as well as the rise of desert off-roading, sandboarding, camel riding, and desert health and wellness tourism, China's desert tourism is developing rapidly. However, desert ecosystems are extremely fragile, with poor soil stability, long vegetation recovery cycles, and low environmental carrying capacity. They are easily damaged but difficult to restore, making it imperative to seek a balance between resource utilization and ecological protection and to pursue a path of sustainable development [1].

The Mutetar Desert Scenic Area is located 21 kilometers northeast of Toto Town, Jinghe County, Xinjiang, at the western end of the Gurbantünggüt Desert in China. In December 2014, it was approved as a pilot project for the construction of a national desert park. In 2022, the Mutetar Desert Scenic Area Operation and Management Co., Ltd. was established to fully undertake the daily operation and service of the scenic area. In 2023, under the overall coordination of the Management Committee, the visitor center and ticket hall were completed and put into use. In the following three years, the scenic area achieved leapfrog development: in 2024, it received approximately 80,000 visitors, generating over 823,000 yuan in ticket revenue, as of October 30, 2025, the number of visitors had reached over 231,900, an increase of nearly 454.42% year-on-year, with total annual revenue exceeding 5.6 million yuan, an increase of over 580% year-on-year. The complete process of the scenic area's development from its initial stage to its rapid expansion provides valuable longitudinal tracking material for studying the governance mechanisms of desert tourism scenic areas [2].

While experiencing rapid development, desert tourist attractions still face sustainability challenges. Overdevelopment on the edges of desert areas has damaged the original desert landscape. Insufficient shuttle bus capacity, parking shortages, inefficient ticketing, inadequate supporting facilities, and a lack of distinctive business models reflect a core paradox commonly faced in the development of desert tourist attractions: the tension between development and protection, the coordination of interests among multiple stakeholders, and the balance between short-term economic benefits and long-term sustainability. Therefore, this paper primarily studies the core issue of "how to construct an effective multi-stakeholder collaborative governance mechanism for desert tourist attractions to achieve sustainable development [3]."

Sustainable tourism requires a balance between economic, social, and environmental bottom lines. Tourism governance achieves this goal through institutional arrangements and collective action involving multiple stakeholders, these two aspects represent two dimensions of the same proposition. Existing research has made significant progress in the theoretical development of governance and the identification of key variables, but research specifically addressing ecologically vulnerable areas remains insufficient [4].

At the theoretical level, Bramwell explored the role of the state in regulating the economic and political system and the impact of path dependence on governance intervention. Hall revealed that sustainable tourism presents a policy failure paradox: successful concept dissemination but absolute growth in environmental impact. First- and second-order changes that merely adjust policy tools are insufficient to shake the growth-first paradigm, and the prospects for a third-order paradigm shift remain unclear. Erkus-Öztürk and Eraydin's research on Antalya shows that despite the increasing importance of collaborative networks, environmental motivations lag far behind economic considerations in network practice. Farmaki's analysis of Cyprus further points out that regional tourism organizations represent a weak form of governance, whose effectiveness is constrained by dependence on external operators, the complexity of planning due to reciprocal systems, and an emphasis on economic interests. Farsari systematically assessed the limitations and advantages of the concepts of governance, resilience, and complexity, promoting the application of complexity approaches in destination governance [5].

At the level of key variables, Nunkoo proposed a typology emphasizing the positive aspects of social capital and its governance challenges. Siakwah et al. critically pointed out that the African sustainable tourism governance framework fails to fully incorporate elements such as trust, justice, power, and participation, and that achieving sustainable development goals requires collaboration based on just, inclusive, and equitable power relations. Mihalic et al. confirmed that the political environment is a necessary enabling condition for implementing sustainable tourism, and that an underdeveloped political environment leads to relatively weak destination governance. Robina-Ramírez et al.

criticized the unsustainability of neoliberal governance models and proposed a recovery model that prioritizes quality objectives rather than quantitative indicators. Nitivattananon and Srinonil showed that tourism urbanization is incompatible with coastal environmental and climate change patterns, and the cumulative impact risks have not yet been fully identified [6].

Existing research lacks sufficient theoretical integration and a systematic framework for the collaborative mechanisms under the triple tension of "ecological vulnerability, industrial expansion, and community participation." There is an imbalance in contextual coverage, with insufficient attention paid to the unique field of desert scenic areas in China's arid regions, and a lack of longitudinal tracking based on continuous operational archives. Furthermore, the explanation of the mechanisms is relatively weak, lacking in-depth analysis of the dynamic processes of "how stakeholders interact and how the mechanisms operate." To address these gaps, this paper takes the Mutetar Desert Scenic Area in Xinjiang as an example, focusing on how, in ecologically extremely vulnerable arid desert scenic areas, multiple stakeholders can achieve sustainable industrial development and improved community well-being through institutionalized collaborative mechanisms while protecting the authentic desert landscape. This research aims to provide a reference for the sustainable development of similar scenic areas in arid regions of Xinjiang and even nationwide [7].

2. Materials and Method

This paper employs a single-case study method to conduct an in-depth investigation into the multi-faceted collaborative governance mechanism in the sustainable development of the Mutetar Desert Scenic Area. The Mutetar Desert Scenic Area is a representative desert tourism destination in the arid region of Xinjiang. Its development trajectory presents a complete process from initial development to rapid expansion, covering the key stages of the desert tourism scenic area's life cycle. In July 2026, I personally visited the scenic area for on-site research and interviews, obtaining abundant data, especially a systematic understanding of the scenic area's operation and management over three consecutive years, forming a data foundation for longitudinal tracking that supports process analysis. The scenic area has signed business cooperation agreements with multiple tourism enterprises, demonstrating good government-enterprise cooperation. It has jointly organized festival activities with the 91st Regiment of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, achieving linkage between the Corps and the local government. It has also introduced the Tuotuo Town Camel Breeding Cooperative to operate a camel riding project, with good cooperative participation. These findings present various governance elements, providing rich material for analyzing multi-faceted collaborative governance.

The data mainly comes from on-site surveys and interviews, combined with reports from authoritative media such as the Jinghe County People's Government website, the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Culture and Tourism Department website, China News Network, and CNR.cn on the scenic area's festival activities and development. The two sources cross-verify and complement each other, providing a comprehensive understanding of the scenic area's business layout, infrastructure, visitor volume, operating income, employment impact, and reflections on problems.

Based on the acquired data, this paper employs thematic analysis. First, the survey and interview data are organized and analyzed to extract content related to governance subjects, governance mechanisms, and governance performance. Then, open coding is used to summarize initial concepts such as subject identification, cooperation forms, resource allocation, performance, and problem reflection. Subsequently, through axial coding, the initial concepts are grouped into three core themes: multi-subject structure,

collaborative operation mechanism, and performance and challenges. Finally, a theoretical explanation is provided around the research questions.

3. Results

Participation Pattern of Multiple Stakeholders

The governance structure of the Mutetar Desert Scenic Area exhibits a distinct multi-stakeholder characteristic, including government guidance, enterprise operation, community participation, and collaboration between the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps and local governments. The Jinghe County Party Committee and government have coordinated the development of the scenic area, undertaking roles in strategic planning, infrastructure investment, and institutional provision. In 2022, the county government invested in the construction of a distribution service center and a visitor service center [8]. After the visitor center was completed and put into operation in 2023, the scenic area management committee coordinated the standardized management of the scenic area. In 2024, the key road leading to the desert was fully opened to traffic [9].

In terms of business operations, Jinghe County Mutetar Desert Scenic Area Operation and Management Co., Ltd., established in 2022, serves as the main entity responsible for the scenic area's operation and management, undertaking all daily operational services. Through cooperation agreements, the company has introduced numerous business partners, including Bortala Vitality Off-Road Club, Bortala Jiangjianghao Tourism Development Co., Ltd., Xinjiang Aiqiyi Tourism Culture Co., Ltd., Xinjiang Tuotuo Camel Bell Off-Road Club Co., Ltd., Xinjiang Jinghewan Entertainment Co., Ltd., Xinjiang Feixiang Off-Road Club Management Co., Ltd., Xinjiang Mobei Camel Bell Tourism Consulting Co., Ltd., Urumqi Mingshantang Health Management Co., Ltd., and Jinghe County Tuotuo Shiguang Homestay Co., Ltd., adding projects such as all-terrain beach motorcycles, camel riding, desert trains, all-terrain vehicles, desert surfing vehicles, desert trekking, travel photography, desert health and wellness, and homestays. By 2025, the scenic area had incorporated more than ten entertainment businesses, forming a business cooperation network of scenic area company and professional operator [10].

In terms of community participation, the camel riding project is implemented and operated by the Tuotuo Town Camel Breeding Cooperative. The number of camels introduced to the scenic area increased from 7 in 2024 to 25 in 2025. The cooperative is responsible for breeding and operation, realizing the integration of community economic organizations and scenic area business. The total number of employees in the scenic area increased from 13 in 2024 to nearly 40 in 2025, of which 26 are local residents, accounting for more than 65%, effectively solving the employment problem of some herders and driving the development of surrounding catering, hotel and other service industries [11].

Regarding collaboration between the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps and local communities, on May 19, 2024, Toto Town and the 91st Regiment of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps jointly hosted the 7th Mutetar Desert Cultural Tourism Season, themed "Tianshan Sword Competition and Desert Military Review." The event included desert cross-country races, sand-holding competitions, desert kite flying contests, Silk Road camel bell performances, stamp collection activities, and a desert bonfire music festival. Both sides jointly presented cultural programs, specialty product exhibitions, camel barbecues, and a competitive eating contest, establishing regular cooperation in joint event organization, mutual tourist exchange, and resource sharing. This governance arrangement of military-community integration expanded the regional collaborative space for the development of the scenic area [12].

The Mutetar Desert Scenic Area presents a multi-stakeholder participation pattern of government guidance, enterprise operation, community participation, and collaboration between the military and local authorities. This pattern is not the result of a one-time institutional design, but rather has gradually evolved over three years through

the signing of cooperation agreements and the joint organization of activities, reflecting the self-organizing characteristics of collaborative governance [13].

The operational mechanism of collaborative governance

Within this multi-stakeholder framework, collaborative governance operates through three main mechanisms: business cooperation, infrastructure support, and brand marketing. The scenic area adopts a development path of introducing partners and enriching the experience matrix. By signing cooperation agreements with enterprises, professional operational tasks are outsourced to market entities, while the scenic area company focuses on basic management tasks such as ticketing, on-site order maintenance, and security patrols. This business cooperation mechanism not only effectively lowers the financial and professional barriers for the scenic area company to directly operate diverse business formats but also enhances the quality of the visitor experience due to the professional operational capabilities of its partners, becoming an institutional engine for the diversified upgrading of scenic area products [14].

Sustained investment in infrastructure is the material foundation for collaborative governance. The completion and operation of facilities such as visitor centers, roads, sunshades, wooden boardwalks in the sand-sliding area, pavilions, tourist restrooms, supermarkets, cafes, canteens, and integrated commercial streets have greatly enhanced the scenic area's reception capacity. It is worth noting that the opening of the shuttle bus service between the scenic area and Sayram Lake has solved the problem of long-distance transportation connections. The infrastructure support mechanism not only directly improves the visitor experience but also provides a spatial platform for business cooperation mechanisms [15].

The scenic area has expanded its market through diverse channels such as festivals and events, new media promotion, and cooperation with travel agencies. In 2024, it held the 7th Mutetar Desert Cultural Tourism Season, and in 2025, it successively held the 8th Mutetar Desert Cultural Festival, a series of activities themed "May 19th China Tourism Day," the Mutetar Desert Folk Music Concert, the "Baomeile Cup" Off-Road Rally, and the "12-Second Sand Challenge," among other branded events. It has released over 50 promotional videos and articles on platforms such as WeChat official accounts, video accounts, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu, achieving a total exposure of over 110,000 times, demonstrating significant effectiveness in new media promotion. Furthermore, the scenic area participated in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Winter Expo and Spring Expo, conducted tourism resource promotion in Wuhan, invited travel agencies from both inside and outside Xinjiang to conduct site visits, and has signed cooperation agreements with over 300 travel agencies. It has also deepened its cooperation with Sayram Lake Scenic Area by launching discounted ticket packages, achieving resource sharing and mutual tourist exchange, resulting in positive market cooperation. The brand marketing mechanism transforms the products and facilities created by the first two mechanisms into market appeal, forming a positive cycle of customer flow - revenue - reinvestment.

There is a clear complementary relationship among the three mechanisms: the business cooperation mechanism addresses the question of "what to do," the infrastructure guarantee mechanism addresses the question of "how to do it," and the brand marketing mechanism addresses the question of "who will come to play." The three are interconnected and jointly support the strategic path of the scenic area's transformation from simple sightseeing to immersive and diversified experiences.

Governance Performance and Sustainability Challenges

The collaborative governance mechanism has yielded significant governance performance. Visitor numbers to the scenic area increased from approximately 80,000 in 2024 to over 231,900 in 2025 (as of October 30), a year-on-year increase of nearly 454.42%, primarily driven by tourists from outside Xinjiang. Operating revenue rose from over 823,000 yuan in ticket revenue in 2024 to over 5.6 million yuan in total revenue in 2025,

including over 3.12 million yuan in ticket revenue, over 2.07 million yuan in shuttle bus revenue, and over 390,000 yuan in other revenue such as business management fees, representing a year-on-year increase of over 580%, and a diversified revenue structure has begun to take shape. In terms of employment, the number of employees increased from 13 to nearly 40, with over 65% being local residents. The collaborative governance of the scenic area has effectively activated the market potential of the desert scenic area, achieving a simultaneous increase in both visitor numbers and revenue.

4. Discussion

While collaborative governance has driven rapid development, it has also exposed deep-seated sustainability challenges. The existing problems in the scenic area mainly fall into four categories. First, carrying capacity constraints: insufficient shuttle buses lead to long waiting times during peak periods, parking spaces cannot meet demand, and service centers are too small to accommodate large numbers of tourists. Second, lagging management refinement: ticketing relies on manual labor, resulting in inefficient practices, vehicle and passenger counts lack accuracy, staffing is inadequate, with some individuals performing multiple roles, leading to excessive working hours and staff fatigue. Third, structural defects in the product offerings: while there are many business projects, they lack distinctive features, and supporting facilities such as restaurants and lounges are lacking, as well as service details such as pet storage and luggage storage. Fourth, ecological pressure: over-development on the edges of the desert scenic area has damaged the original desert landscape, affecting tourists' experience of appreciating the natural desert scenery.

Based on ecological concerns, the scenic area recognized that development activities and ecological protection must be coordinated. It plans to gradually relocate its business projects to the desert, strictly control development boundaries, and strive to balance the contradiction between the explosive growth in tourist numbers and the fragile carrying capacity of the desert ecosystem, so as to avoid irreversible ecological damage.

Collaborative governance is not a one-time, permanent institutional arrangement, but a dynamic process of continuous adjustment. In response to the aforementioned issues, the scenic area plans to implement corresponding rectification measures, including: adding 10 shuttle buses and introducing an intelligent dispatch system, constructing a 12,000-square-meter eco-friendly smart tourism parking lot, developing an online ticketing system, publicly recruiting to expand the team, exploring differentiated business formats such as desert stargazing camping, formulating a systematic employee training plan, planning and constructing a specialty restaurant and expanding the service center, setting up standardized pet and luggage storage areas, conducting ecological assessments of peripheral development areas and controlling development boundaries, and introducing an intelligent statistical system. This demonstrates the self-correcting capability of the governance mechanism. This cycle of problem identification-solution formulation-implementation and rectification is a concrete manifestation of the dynamic nature of collaborative governance.

5. Conclusion

Based on a qualitative analysis of the operation and governance of the Mutetar Desert Scenic Area, this paper finds that the scenic area has initially formed a governance model of multi-stakeholder participation and multi-dimensional mechanism collaboration. At the stakeholder level, a multi-participation pattern has been constructed, encompassing government guidance, enterprise operation, community participation, and collaboration between the military and local authorities. At the mechanism level, coordinated operation is achieved through three core mechanisms: business cooperation, infrastructure support, and brand marketing. At the performance level, a leapfrog growth has been achieved in visitor numbers, operating revenue, and employment, but the area

also faces sustainability challenges such as carrying capacity constraints, lagging refined management, and ecological pressure.

Sustainable development of desert tourism is not a static goal, but a dynamic process of continuous adjustment. The practice of the Mutetar Scenic Area shows that the effectiveness of a governance mechanism lies not in the perfection of its initial design, but in its ability to identify problems and self-correct. The effectiveness of multi-party collaborative governance depends on institutionalized cooperation mechanisms rather than temporary coordination. The cooperation between the scenic area and enterprises and cooperatives is solidified through signed agreements, and the collaboration between the military and local authorities is normalized through joint festivals. This institutionalized arrangement is key to collaborative sustainability. The depth of community participation determines the sustainability of tourism's benefits to local residents. Over 65% of the scenic area's employees are local residents, and the camel project is operated by a cooperative. This deep community embedding ensures that tourism revenue can be effectively transformed into community well-being. The tension between ecological protection and tourism development requires institutionalized constraints. The scenic area's reflection on the problem of overdevelopment at the periphery and its commitment to controlling development boundaries demonstrate that ecological constraints must be internalized as part of the governance mechanism, rather than being a post-event remedy.

This study also has certain limitations. Based on qualitative analysis using data from field surveys and in-depth interviews, it cannot present more details and effectiveness assessments of collaborative governance involving multiple stakeholders. The external generalization of a single case study is limited, and whether the experience of the Mutetar Scenic Area can be applied to other arid desert scenic areas requires comparative testing with multiple cases. Future research could appropriately conduct comparative studies with multiple cases, incorporating more quantitative data from tourist perceptions and community residents' perspectives, employing mixed-methods research, and carrying out longitudinal tracking to examine the implementation effects of rectification measures and the governance evolution of the scenic area in the next development cycle.

The experience of the Mutetar Desert Scenic Area offers valuable insights for the sustainable development of desert tourism in arid regions. For scenic areas in their initial stages, a business cooperation model of light asset operation and heavy cooperation network can rapidly enrich the product system under limited capital conditions. For scenic areas already in a period of rapid expansion, carrying capacity planning, intelligent management, and ecological boundary control must be prioritized to avoid the path dependence of "pollute first, then clean up." The sustainable development of desert tourism ultimately depends on whether ecological constraints can be transformed into a driving force for governance innovation through the collaboration of multiple stakeholders.

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