



Ecotourism Research Evolution in Southeast Asia: Key Trends and Future Directions

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Abstract: Publications on ecotourism in Southeast Asia over the past decade have shown significant development. This article aims to map the dynamics of those publications through a bibliometric study of 377 documents from the Scopus and Web of Science databases since 2014 to 2024. Data processing used Bibliometrix and VOSviewer software. The findings show publication dominance by Thailand through Srinakharinwirot University. International collaboration networks are led by the University of Göttingen and the University of Tartu. Publication sources on sustainable tourism are distributed across a number of globally reputable journals in various disciplines. The findings show that ecotourism studies are not limited to conservation. Based on the thematic review, research directions have shifted toward biodiversity conservation, strengthening sustainable tourism frameworks, and inclusive economic approaches for local community well-being. This study highlights the importance of integrating cross-cutting ecological and socioeconomic perspectives in ecotourism development and opens space for more contextual and applied academic exploration.

Keywords: conservation; ecotourism; Southeast Asia; study bibliometric analysis; sustainable tourism

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INTRODUCTION

Currently, the tourism sector is shifting not only in terms of recreation but also by incorporating sustainability. Conventional tourism models have long been considered exploitative and environmentally unfriendly. In this regard, ecotourism is positioned as an alternative, sustainable tourism model that promotes inclusive growth (Ciftci, 2025). This phenomenon is evident in several developing countries that have made ecotourism a catalyst for environment-based resource management, increasing local income and welfare (Aji et al., 2024; Hartati et al., 2025; Rivera & Gutierrez, 2019; Samal & Dash, 2023; Stokłosa et al., 2022). Because tourism is related to ecology, conservation is also considered to ensure both economic growth and ecosystem sustainability (Hatma et al., 2024; Kropinova et al., 2023; Zhou & Sotiriadis, 2021). Nations such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia have experienced marked increases in ecotourism, with their rich biodiversity generating job opportunities and government revenues that benefit local livelihoods (Ibrahim et al., 2022; Minikhanova et al., 2024). Indeed, the underlying philosophy of ecotourism is its intersectional concern with environmental conservation and socioeconomic advancement, reflected in global target circles, including climate change mitigation and strengthening local empowerment (Gossling, 2023; Ibrahim et al., 2019; Ibrahim, 2021; Rendy, 2024).

That ecotourism has attracted attention in theoretical and practical arenas does not mean that this field is being established. Conservation remained a primary theme in many of the earliest works, particularly those within mangroves, even if they did not influence regional sustainable development constructs (Dastgerdi et al., 2020). Publications on mangrove ecosystems as ecotourism tend to be from coastal regions of Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. However, these studies tend to be partial and fail to fully explain the social relationship between tourism activities and sustainable conservation agendas. It is here that we see a lack of synthesis, revealing key areas for future research, especially social-ecological interactions related to ecotourism development, governance mechanisms, and stakeholder power relationships necessary for successful maintenance (Pineda, 2023; Rendy, 2024).

There have been bibliometric studies on ecotourism (Hamka, 2022; Xu et al., 2023), but they have focused on ecological and economic perspectives. Social, cultural, and political perspectives remain limited (Ibrahim, 2019; Ramon-Hidalgo et al., 2017). Furthermore, the lack of studies is also reflected in community involvement in governance. This issue is interesting given that contestations over resource claims are closely linked to the socio-political context in Southeast Asia (Ciftci, 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2022). Therefore, critical analysis is important to avoid development processes biased toward elite interests. In addition, it is necessary

to support marginalized groups so that community-based ecotourism can genuinely become a medium for inclusive development.

In addressing gaps in previous studies, this article uses a bibliometric study to map the development of ecotourism research in Southeast Asia published between 2014 and 2024 in the Scopus and Web of Science databases. The analysis includes author networks, citations, keyword linkages, and relevant patterns and themes. Network analysis and clustering serve to identify the structure and direction of this ecotourism research. This article contributes by mapping the spatial and temporal production of knowledge in ecotourism studies. That identification enables the recognition of high-quality works, influential authors, and dominant research trends. Thus, the article reveals several thematic gaps that have not been studied in depth. Therefore, cross-disciplinary studies, such as ecology, socio-economics, and governance, become important areas of focus for the next steps. Although we are making theoretical strides in addressing individual issues such as ecological conservation, alternative livelihoods, and sustainable governance, there is a conspicuous absence of integrated models that address these concerns holistically, with a focus on local stakeholders' involvement and the use of adaptive governance architecture (Ayaviri-Nina et al., 2024).

Consistent with the *Journal of Innovation in Educational and Cultural Research*, which was presented to another class and to other community members, and with its emphasis on innovation and revitalization, this study extends scholarly debate on incorporating social, ecological, and economic sustainability into ecotourism activities. Previously, a distinction was added to the established idea of ecotourism education, treating local wisdom as its starting point (Hartati et al., 2025). Several bibliometric articles (Sununianti et al., 2025) have, however, explicitly stressed the necessity of governance policies and participatory activities for an equitable distribution of benefits from ecotourism as well as for preserving the marshes' unique ecological system. The paper guides ecotourism research by aligning with calls to pursue interdisciplinary approaches and to prioritize work focused on social justice and sustainable forms of governance.

To conclude, this paper addresses existing gaps in ecotourism research by providing a systematic bibliometric review and highlighting the socio-ecological dimensions (Ciftci, 2025) that are driving (or preventing) the development of ecotourism in Southeast Asia. Whether by looking at trends in research, communicating with stakeholders, or making theoretical advances, the study argues for new directions in scholarship and policy. In this light, the authors' findings are a rather unorthodox addition to the literature, which, on the whole, is concerned with recording how sustainability, whether economic, social, or ecological, develops. In particular, this study provides practical implications for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners in steering the difficult socio-ecological process of successful ecotourism development and sustainability. This study is a major contribution to the wider scientific understanding of how ecotourism can grow and address sustainable development issues in Southeast Asia and beyond.

METHODS

In this paper, the evolution and innovations in the field of ecotourism will be researched through bibliometric analysis, with attention to how it has developed and to current trends over the last decade. As an approach, bibliometrics also offers a strong conceptual basis for studies of literature analysis to explore trends in research output, citation behavior, author productivity, and cooperation networks (Ramon-Hidalgo et al., 2017). A descriptive-retrospective approach (De Sanctis, 2022) was used to combine quantitative and qualitative analyses while simultaneously addressing their limitations. Quantitative analysis is useful for identifying bibliometric indicators such as publication trends, citations, and institutional productivity. Qualitative analysis enables an understanding of the development of study themes and regions. Both analyses support a comprehensive understanding of the position and development of sustainable ecotourism.

A structured analytical framework is employed to map the development of this study. These features comprise publication and citation profiles, as well as attributes of scholarly output, such as prominent authors and institutional collaborations (Robinson-Garcia et al., 2019). Information regarding the bibliometric analysis used in this study was retrieved from two databases: Scopus and Web of Science. These databases were chosen because they are the best in terms of their coverage of peer-reviewed, high-quality literature, strict indexing criteria, and citation-tracking features. This data collection is aimed at the publications on Southeast Asia, which has emerged as a focus of ecotourism studies. By employing these databases, the study also aims to guarantee that the data gathered are dependable and truly representative of the trends and newer dimensions within a decade of ecotourism research (2014–2024).

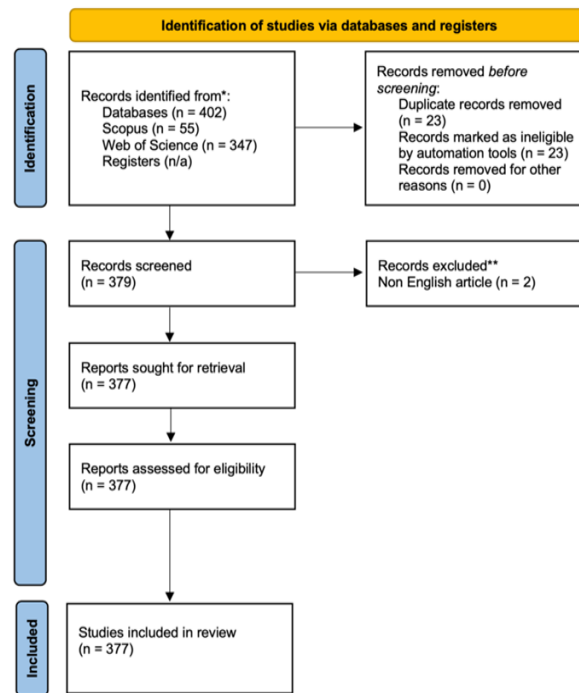


Figure 1. Retrieval Process

A preliminary systematic search of the Scopus and Web of Science databases was conducted to initiate bibliography research. These two databases were selected because their articles are of higher quality due to peer review (Zhu & Liu, 2020). The initial search yielded 402 documents on "ecotourism in Southeast Asia" published between 2014 and 2024. The next stage involved verification and duplication identification, during which 23 documents were eliminated, leaving 379 articles. Further elimination included publications not in English. The final dataset consisted of 377 articles for this bibliometric study. The search and document selection process is presented in Figure 1. Data processing and visualization were performed using Bibliometrix and VOSviewer. Data analysis involved identifying publication patterns, citations, author networks, keywords, and thematic structures of ecotourism studies. Findings were visualized in network maps and thematic clusters to demonstrate emerging research areas and limited opportunities for further study. The analysis also included author contributions, institutional productivity, citations, and collaborative networks focused on ecotourism studies in Southeast Asia. Next, the process of interpreting findings, analysis, and formulating research implications.

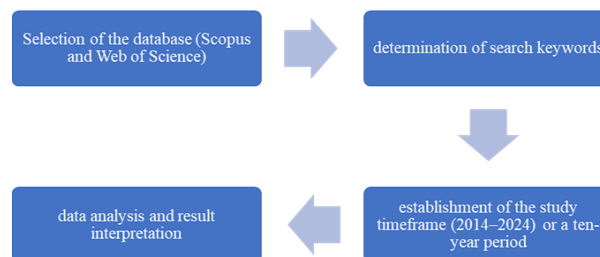


Figure 2. Flow Steps

This study comprehensively reveals the dynamics of ecotourism development by integrating statistics and network analysis. The main techniques used were citation analysis (number of citations as an indicator of academic impact), co-authorship analysis (identification of collaborative research networks), and co-citation and bibliographic coupling (treatment of relationships between articles based on common references). Moreover, keyword co-occurrence analysis was used to identify hot topics in the ecotourism field, which offer indications of emergent themes and trends in ecotourism research. Through using these state-of-the-art bibliometric methods, the paper provides a strong and unbiased perspective on the progress of ecotourism research that can help researchers to have a complete overview (both existing and new) of its development, as well as clarify knowledge gaps in this area.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

By deploying this methodological approach, a combination of bibliometric mapping and temporal analysis, research clusters can be clearly identified, as well as how scholars influence each other's collaborative

patterns, shaping the knowledge ecological system. At present, there is a critical gap in the existing literature: how does regional scholarship in Southeast Asia interact with debates on global sustainability, socio-environmental justice, and community empowerment? This article attempts to reposition the definition of ecotourism in a social perspective by identifying regional contexts and global discourses.

Findings from 377 documents indexed by Scopus and Web of Science over the past decade indicate an upward trend in ecotourism publications (see Figure 3). The increase in publications in Web of Science began in 2017, followed by a significant increase from 2018 to 2020. Meanwhile, publications in Scopus experienced fluctuating increases in 2018 and 2023. These two databases show that publications in the Web of Science tend to be more numerous, more variable, and more consistent than those in Scopus. This increase in publications is assumed to be a response to global and regional agendas related to sustainable tourism development. Furthermore, the influence of post-Paris Agreement consolidation and growing awareness and use of nature-based studies also contributes. This reflects the increasing attention and relevance of this issue in academic sustainability discourse.

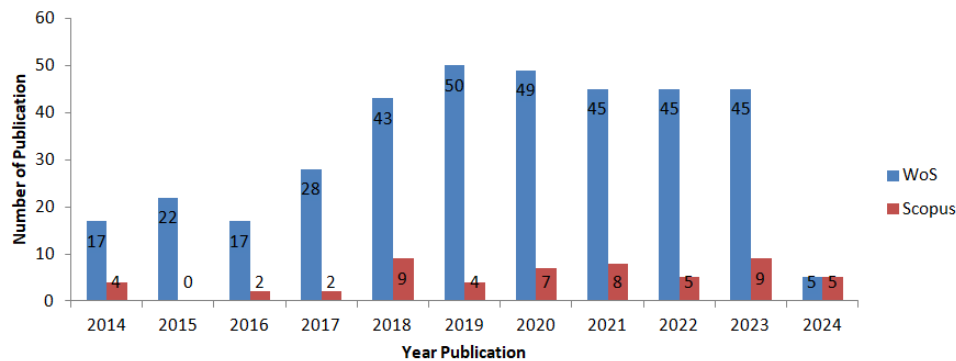


Figure 3. Publication Trend

This section highlights influential authors in the field of ecotourism studies. Table 1 presents the layered structure of the authors who influenced this study. Established and influential authors in building the conceptual foundations of this theme are Araujo G., Labaja J., and Ponzo A., who have a high H-index and citation counts. Meanwhile, high-productivity authors include Ngamniyom A., Silprasit K., and Sriyapai T. However, this high publication productivity does not correspond to a high number of citations. Interestingly, authors who have been active since 2021 have a relatively high M-index (1.25). This reflects their relatively rapid scientific contributions. Hiiesalu I. has even received 311 citations. These findings demonstrate that influential authors in this ecotourism landscape are highly varied, including established and productive authors as well as emerging authors with rapidly growing influence.

Table 1. Author Local Impact

Author	H_Index	G_Index	M_Index	TC	NP	PY_Start
Araujo G.	11	12	1	350	12	2014
Labaja J.	9	9	0.818	261	9	2014
Ponzo A.	9	9	0.818	256	9	2014
Sriyapai T.	9	13	0.818	180	14	2014
Sriyapai P.	8	11	0.8	169	11	2015
Charusiri W.	7	11	0.7	142	11	2015
Vitidsant T.	7	10	0.875	128	10	2017
Ngamniyom A.	6	8	0.545	73	16	2014
Walter P.	6	6	0.545	204	6	2014
Al-Quraishy S.	5	5	1.25	180	5	2021
Chansiri K.	5	6	0.625	124	6	2017
Davison J.	5	5	1.25	180	5	2021
Decocq G.	5	5	1.25	180	5	2021
Fabiano E.	5	5	1.25	180	5	2021
Fraser L.	5	5	1.25	180	5	2021
Hiiesalu I.	5	6	1.25	311	6	2021
Koorem K.	5	5	1.25	180	5	2021
Mucina L.	5	5	1.25	180	5	2021
Opik M.	5	5	1.25	180	5	2021
Phosri C.	5	5	1.25	180	5	2021
Sepp S.	5	5	1.25	180	5	2021

Author	H_Index	G_Index	M_Index	TC	NP	PY_Start
Silprasit K.	5	11	0.455	140	14	2014
Snow S.	5	5	0.455	148	5	2014
Thummajitsakul S.	5	9	0.556	110	9	2016
Vasar M.	5	5	1.25	180	5	2021

Publications by country also provide insight into the knowledge production of ecotourism. Figure 4 shows that Thailand produces the most publications. Furthermore, these publications tend to be based on cross-border collaborations (MCPs), making it a hub for the development of ecotourism research in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, China demonstrates a balance between domestic (SCP) and collaborative (MCP) publications. The Philippines and Vietnam also contribute significantly, particularly through international networking. What about Indonesia and Malaysia? Although these two countries are located in regions with significant ecotourism potential, their publications are relatively low, as are their international collaborative networks. This represents an underutilized opportunity to establish international research connections. These findings indicate a structural dependence on global academic networks.

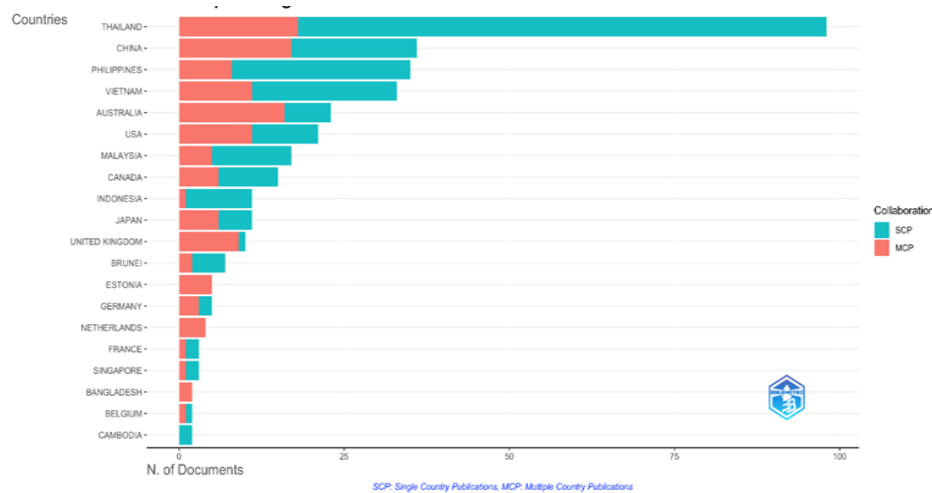


Figure 4. Corresponding Author's Country

This section aims to highlight the pattern of institutional concentration in ecotourism knowledge production in Southeast Asia. Srinakharinwirot University (Thailand) produced the most publications (174 documents), followed by Kasetsart University (Thailand; 35 documents), Mahidol University (Thailand; 29 documents), and Chulalongkorn University (Thailand; 27 documents). Thailand's position further emphasizes its superiority in the production and distribution of ecotourism knowledge. It is worth noting that institutions in the Global North have also influenced the development of ecotourism studies in Southeast Asia, namely the University of Göttingen (Germany) and the University of Tartu (Estonia). Most notably, institutions in Southeast Asia remain the most important players on this landscape, with IPB University (Indonesia) and the University of the Philippines Los Baños each contributing 16 articles. The wide range of institutions involved illustrates the interdisciplinary and international nature of Ecotourism research, and also shows, in practical terms, that sustainable tourism practices can only be achieved through collaboration.

Table 2. Institutional Productivity by Institution

Institution	Articles
Srinakharinwirot Univ - Thailand	174
Kasetsart Univ - Thailand	35
Mahidol Univ - Thailand	29
Chulalongkorn Univ - Thailand	27
Prince Songkla Univ - Thailand	21
Univ Göttingen - Germany	21
Univ Tartu - Estonia	20
Chiang Mai Univ - Thailand	17
IPB Univ - Indonesia	16
Univ Philippines Los Baños - Philippines	16
King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi - Thailand	15
Univ British Columbia - Canada	14

Institution	Articles
Murdoch Univ - Australia	13
Univ Brunei Darussalam - Brunei	13
Cebu Technol Univ - Philippines	12
Griffith Univ - Australia	12
Foreign Trade Univ - Vietnam	11
Large Marine Vertebrates Res Inst Philippines - Philippines	11
Ton Duc Thang Univ - Vietnam	10
Univ Oxford - United Kingdom	10
Univ Philippines - Philippines	10

However, ecotourism has flourished across various academic environments and has become increasingly interdisciplinary. Popular ecotourism journals include the *Journal of Ecotourism* and *Sustainability*, which has published 11 articles. This was followed by the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* (9 articles) and the *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research* (8 articles). The publication channels for ecotourism studies, as presented in Table 3, include a diverse range of sources, including highly reputable journals. Ecotourism studies have expanded with an interdisciplinary approach. For example, studies extend beyond tourism to include conservation, environmental technology, resource management, and equity and empowerment. These findings illustrate that the theme of sustainable tourism and the environment has been widely published by several internationally reputable journals with a multidisciplinary scope.

Table 3. Publication Source

Sources	Articles
Journal of Ecotourism	11
Sustainability	11
Journal of Sustainable Tourism	9
Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research	8
Pertanika Journal of Tropical Agricultural Science	7
Plos One	6
Tourism Management	6
Environmental Science and Pollution Research	5
Tourism Management Perspectives	5
Current Issues in Tourism	4
Environment Development and Sustainability	4
Heliyon	4
Journal of Ecological Engineering	4
Journal of Environmental Management	4
ACS Omega	3
Biological Conservation	3
Cogent Social Sciences	3
Electronic Journal of Biotechnology	3
IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science	3
Land	3
Sustainability	3

In Figure 5, it is evident that "Ecotourism" accounts for 83 mentions out of every 100, indicating that sustainable tourism revolves around this core. Closely connected with this are terms such as "Conservation" (45) and "Biodiversity" (21), which indicate a strong ecological orientation in the research on ecotourism. Today, "Management" (41) often appears on its own as an indication of new interest in strategic aspects, including ecotourism's governance and policies to ensure long-term sustainability. "Impacts" (17) and "Perceptions" (17) indicate the growing awareness of the favorable economic and environmental results that can be achieved when applied appropriately across various groups. That is, not only should ecological preservation be balanced with socioeconomic benefits for local people, but other factors should be considered as well. If approaches mingle all kinds of goodness-combining ideas in one bag, then we satisfy global climate action requirements, too.

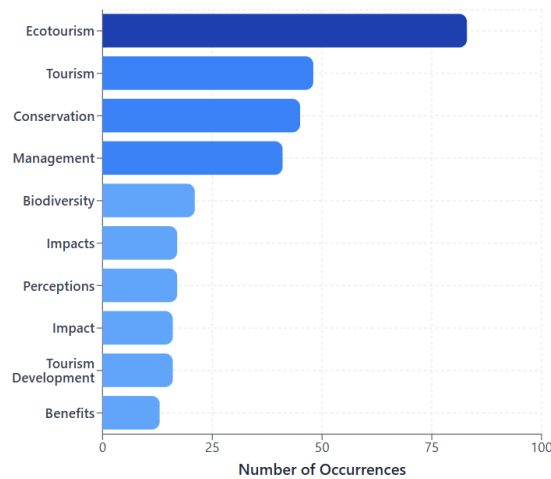


Figure 5. Most Relevant Word

As shown in Figure 6, this law was used to analyze researchers' publication output. It suggests that there are only a few highly productive authors whose work accounts for the majority of publications, while the large majority of authors together produce relatively little material. This is evident in the sharply declining curve, indicating a significant reduction in authors as the number of publications increases. The figure also shows that knowledge production is concentrated among a small number of core authors. This means that the development of ecotourism studies is highly dependent on this limited group for consistent publication and shaping of academic ecotourism discourse. Lotka's law shows that the distribution of author productivity also reflects the workings of the knowledge power structure, with a few influential actors determining the direction of development in ecotourism studies.

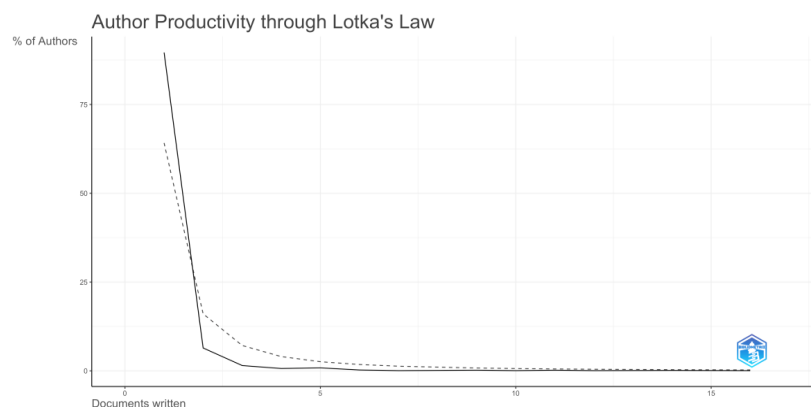


Figure 6. Author Productivity Through Lotka's Law

This study of ecotourism in Southeast Asia demonstrates the diversity of themes as the research progresses. This section presents a thematic analysis based on the dimensions of importance (centrality) and development (density) (see Figure 7). There are at least four main theme quadrants. In the upper right corner is the motor themes quadrant, representing themes with high centrality and density, including whale sharks, population, and mangrove conservation, particularly related to Indonesia. This study aims to demonstrate that ecotourism research has evolved toward human ecology, sustainability, and resource management (Hafezi et al., 2023; Kuqi & Lajci, 2025). In the lower right corner, there is the basic themes quadrant, which exhibits high centrality but relatively low density. These themes include sustainable tourism, community-based ecotourism, biodiversity, and conservation. As in the literature, this study is grounded in community-based ecotourism and community empowerment (Hafezi et al., 2023; Prihadi et al., 2024). Next, in the upper left quadrant, niche themes represent themes with a high level of development but not yet integrated into the mainstream ecotourism discourse. Finally, in the lower left quadrant are emerging or declining themes, indicating those in the early stages of development or those experiencing a decline in research. These themes include ecosystem services and willingness-to-pay.

Furthermore, studies integrating economic and sustainable development dimensions are also beginning to show progress. These ecotourism themes demonstrate the increasingly complex dynamics of research development. Various approaches are being used, particularly ecological, economic, and social. While conservation and sustainability issues tend to remain the focus of research, they are also expanding into community-based, governance, and interdisciplinary areas.

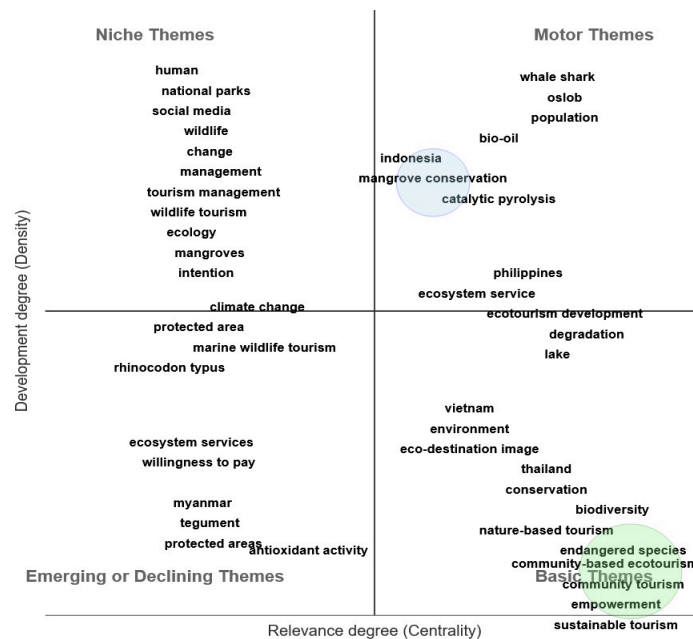


Figure 7. Main Research Streams

Based on the metadata, these findings indicate that ecotourism publications tend to appear in reputable journals such as the *Journal of Ecotourism*, *Sustainability*, and the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*. Studies on ecotourism identified through keyword mapping are not only related to tourism but also encompass social, environmental, and institutional domains. The development of this research is linked to social, political, and environmental changes at local, regional, and global levels. The themes of the publications reflect efforts to support the SDGs, address climate change (Gorbunov, 2024; Mkiramweni et al., 2016), and biodiversity (Aji et al., 2024; Ciftci, 2025; Gorbunov et al., 2024; Hartati et al., 2025; Ibrahim, 2021; Mkiramweni et al., 2016; Rabad et al., 2025; Samal & Dash, 2023; Wulansari et al., 2025). The Southeast Asian region remains a focal point of research (Assegaf et al., 2025; Baloch et al., 2022; Chan et al., 2021; Honey, 2001; Pham & Khanh, 2020; Swangjang & Kornpiphat, 2021; Wei & Lihua, 2022). However, there remains a lack of studies on governance, policy evaluation, and long-term research on resilience and community participation. Furthermore, studies examining the role of technology are also limited.

Research findings show Thailand's strong role, through Srinakharinwirot University, in producing knowledge on ecotourism. Thailand has succeeded in publishing globally on integrating ecotourism conservation concepts with the local economy. Although ecotourism narratives can boost local economies, inequality may arise if not anticipated and managed properly (Baloch et al., 2022; Ibrahim, 2021; Phelan et al., 2020; Samal & Dash, 2023). Therefore, equitable governance and involvement of local communities are essential and unavoidable. Besides issues of inequality and inclusion, technology also presents significant opportunities for follow-up. Digital technology offers the chance to understand tourist behavior and environmental pressures in real time and with greater accuracy. However, anticipating unequal access to technology and conflicts between economic, cultural, and environmental interests is also important. Multisectoral collaboration involving academics, the private sector, government, and communities should be a shared priority. It is hoped that local knowledge will be incorporated into decision-making, thereby making solutions more context-specific (Rahawarin et al., 2025). In addition, resulting policies will be more adaptive and data-driven. This is done so that future research is solution-oriented, considers long-term impacts, and includes comparative regional studies. The practical contribution of this study emphasizes the importance of conducting ecotourism research that integrates cross-sector perspectives, particularly social, economic, and environmental aspects. Policies should also be designed with attention to marginalized groups and those who depend on nature for their livelihoods (Gossling et al., 2023; Pandya et al., 2023). To sustain ecotourism studies, this study supports the need for transparent and accountable governance (Vanderheiden & Sisson, 2010). It is hoped that this study will contribute to the development of sustainable and inclusive ecotourism models and produce more comprehensive findings.

CONCLUSION

This article presents the development of ecotourism studies in Southeast Asia, as reflected in publications in the Scopus and Web of Science databases from 2014 to 2024. Based on 377 documents, Thailand, particularly Srinakharinwirot University, has successfully established itself as a major contributor to these publications through a cross-national collaborative network. The findings show that ecotourism studies

are not limited to conservation. However, thematic analysis shows that this theme has shifted across disciplines, including economics, social sciences, and environmental sciences. The focus of the studies has become more integrative, including sustainable governance, community empowerment, and ecosystem services. Technological issues, including the digitalization of ecotourism, demonstrate the development of these studies. The topics studied also support sustainable development, climate change mitigation, and locally based resource management. This study provides a structured overview by identifying influential authors and journals, study themes, and research gaps. These findings can provide a significant foundation for further research, cross-geographical comparative studies, and the formulation of fairer policies for both local communities and other living beings.

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