Cultural Heritage Preservation in Sta. Cruz, Ilocos Sur

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ABSTRACT

Sta Cruz, Ilocos Sur, a municipality famous for its rich cultural history, is struggling with an ongoing issue. Tourism threatens the preservation of local heritage, although it promotes economic growth and awareness of culture. Finding equilibrium between economic progress and cultural conservation is crucial to the long-term sustainability of the area. There has been research on ethical tourism and the conservation of cultural heritage, but Sta. Cruz specifically is not well-researched. This study examined the challenges and opportunities and level of responsible tourism strategies in balancing the economic benefits of tourism with the preservation of cultural heritage in Sta. Cruz, Ilocos Sur. Using a descriptive research design, 100 local residents were surveyed through a validated Iloco-translated questionnaire. Results showed moderate to high challenges regarding sustainable tourism, cultural commercialization, and environmental issues. Despite this, respondents acknowledged that responsible tourism strategies such as educating tourists, raising tourism awareness, and promoting cultural heritage tourism were highly effective in addressing these challenges. Statistical analysis revealed significant relationships between the demographic profile of respondents and both the challenges encountered and the strategies perceived effective. Findings emphasize that cultural preservation is achievable through localized, inclusive strategies rooted in community participation. The study recommends enhancing educational outreach, strengthening local involvement, and integrating heritage-friendly tourism policies to support cultural sustainability alongside economic development.

Keywords: *Cultural Heritage Preservation, Responsible Touris*

INTRODUCTION

Sta. Cruz, Ilocos Sur is a municipality celebrated for its vibrant culture, historical landmarks, and traditional practices. However, with the rise of tourism as a major economic driver, there is an increasing tension between development and the preservation of local heritage. While tourism brings opportunities for income generation and cultural promotion, it also poses risks of over-commercialization, environmental degradation, and erosion of traditional values. Cultural heritage in Sta. Cruz includes both tangible elements—such as ancestral homes, old churches, and traditional crafts—and intangible aspects, like local dialects, cuisine, folklore, and religious festivals. As tourism continues to grow, so do concerns about its impact on these cultural resources. Without mindful strategies, there is a danger that local traditions could be commodified or replaced by commercialized versions aimed at tourist consumption. Responsible tourism has emerged as a viable approach to mitigate these concerns. When implemented properly, it can foster appreciation and conservation of cultural heritage while promoting socio-economic benefits. This study seeks to explore how the residents of Sta. Cruz perceive the challenges and opportunities in balancing tourism with heritage preservation. Furthermore, it evaluates the effectiveness of responsible tourism strategies in achieving this balance. The study is set in the context of community-based tourism and focuses on how local demographics, experiences, and degrees of engagement influence their perceptions of tourism's impact on heritage. By investigating different viewpoints, the study hopes to educate tourism policy, promote heritage conservation projects, and influence future developments in the area. The findings will contribute to the expanding discussion about sustainable tourism and cultural preservation, particularly in rural Philippine settings with distinct socio-cultural and economic dynamics. This study is based on the Social Exchange Theory, which holds that people engage in behaviors when the benefits outweigh the costs. When applied to tourism, this theory says that local communities will accept tourism development if they see more benefits—like economic gains and infrastructure improvements—than drawbacks, such as cultural loss or environmental degradation. In Sta. Cruz, residents play a central role in cultural preservation. If tourism brings pride, employment, and cultural awareness, they are more likely to participate in conservation initiatives. But if tourism causes disrespect to traditions or damages sacred sites, their support may wane. Therefore, Social Exchange Theory offers a lens to evaluate how community perceptions influence their involvement in preservation through tourism. The theory helps explain why certain responsible tourism strategies succeed based on perceived fairness and reciprocity. This study determined the level of challenges and opportunities in balancing the economic benefits of tourism with the preservation of cultural heritage, and the level of responsible tourism strategies that can best protect Sta. Cruz, Ilocos Sur's cultural heritage while ensuring sustainable economic development for the local community, specifically, it sought the following questions: (1)What is the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of (a) age; (b) gender; (c) educational attainment; (d) occupation; and (e) years of residency? (2) What is the level of challenges and opportunities in balancing the economic benefits of tourism with the preservation of cultural heritage in Sta. Cruz, Ilocos Sur in terms of: (a) sustainable tourism practices; (b) cultural commercialization; and (c) environmental concern? (3) What is the level of responsible tourism strategies that can best protect Sta. Cruz, Ilocos Sur's cultural heritage while ensuring sustainable economic development for the local community as to: (a) educating tourists about local customs and heritage; (b) tourism awareness; and (c) promote cultural heritage tourism? (4) Is there a significant relationship between demographic profile of the respondents and the level of challenges and opportunities in balancing the economic benefits of tourism with the preservation of cultural heritage in Sta. Cruz, Ilocos Sur? (5) Is there a significant relationship between demographic profile of the respondents and level of responsible tourism strategies that can best protect Sta. Cruz, Ilocos Sur's cultural heritage while ensuring sustainable economic development for the local community? (6) Is there a significant relationship between the level of challenges opportunities and the level of responsible tourism strategies for balancing economic benefits and cultural heritage preservation in Sta. Cruz Ilocos Sur?

METHODOLOGY

This study used a descriptive quantitative research approach to evaluate the problems, opportunities, and responsible tourism initiatives associated with cultural heritage preservation in Sta. Cruz, Ilocos Sur. The researchers chose 100 respondents using simple random selection, focusing on locals aged 21 and up who were informed about local culture and tourism. The primary research tool was a validated survey questionnaire that was translated into Iloco to assure comprehension. The questionnaire consisted of four sections: demographic profile, challenges and opportunities in sustainable tourism, responsible tourism initiatives, and perceived correlations between factors. Descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, and median and spearman-rho were utilized to characterize the respondents' profiles and ratings of difficulties, opportunities, and tactics. All respondents provided informed consent, remained anonymous, and participated voluntarily to preserve ethical standards. The process assured that Sta. Cruz voices. inhabitants were appropriately photographed to depict their thoughts on cultural heritage preservation in the midst of tourism expansion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the respondents

	Profile	F	%
Age	21-30	57	57.00
	31- 40	17	17.00
	41-50	11	11.00
	51 and above	15	15.00

	Total	**100**	**100**
Sex	Male	38	38.00
	Female	58	58.00
	Gay	2	2.00
	Lesbian	2	2.00
	Bi – sexual Male		
	Bi- sexual Female		
	Others		
	Total	**100**	**100**
Educational Attainment	No Formal Education		
	Elementary Graduate		
	High School Graduate	3	3.00
	College Graduate	79	79.00
	Postgraduate	2	2.00
	College level	15	15.00
	Technical-Vocational	1	1.00
	Total	**100**	**100**
Occupation	Student	18	18.00
	Government Employee	55	55.00
	Private Sector Employee	5	5.00
	Business Owner	4	4.00
	Tourism Industry Worker		
	Farmer	6	6.00
	Fisherfolk		
	Others	12	12.00
	Total	**100**	**100**
Year of Residency	Since Birth	75	75.00
	2–5 years	7	7.00
	6–10 years	3	3.00
	10 years and above	15	15.00
	Total	**100**	**100**

Majority of the respondents were aged 21–30 (57%), mostly female (58%), and predominantly college graduates (79%). The largest occupational group was government employees (55%), and most had lived in Sta. Cruz since birth (75%). This profile reveals a young, educated, and community-rooted population—favourable for sustaining cultural preservation efforts. Long-term residency often correlates with stronger cultural ties and heritage awareness.

The Level of challenges and opportunities in balancing the economic benefits of tourism with the preservation of cultural heritage in Sta. Cruz, Ilocos Sur.

*Table 2. **Level of Challenges and Opportunities in Sustainable Tourism Practices***

INDICATORS	MEDIAN	DER
Challenges		
1. The lack of proper waste management and environmental protection measures in tourist areas.	3.00	Moderate
2. The difficulty of maintaining cultural heritage sites due to tourism-related wear and tear.	4.00	Moderate
3. The enforcement of sustainable tourism policies and regulations among businesses and tourists.	3.00	High
4. The negative impact of mass tourism on local traditions and heritage preservation.	3.00	Moderate
5. The involvement of local communities in sustainable tourism programs.	4.00	High
	3.00	**Moderate**
OVERALL		

INDICATORS	MEDIAN	DER
Opportunities		
1. The effectiveness of promoting eco-friendly tourism initiatives in Sta. Cruz.	4.00	High
2. The level of support from local tourism policies for the preservation of cultural heritage.	4.00	High
3. The opportunity for businesses to implement sustainable practices in tourism services	4.00	High
4. The engagement of the local government in partnerships with stakeholders to promote responsible tourism.	4.00	High
5. The interest of tourists in learning about and supporting sustainable tourism practices.	5.00	Very High
	4.00	**High**
OVERALL		

In the table 2 shows the level of challenges and opportunities, the indicator 1,3, and 4 under the level of challenges received a 3 with the descriptive equivalent rating of moderate as it may not be sufficiently robust to handle the demands of tourism and although policies are in place, they are not always applied or enforced consistently and this implies that while not to a critical degree, tourism is having some negative effects on cultural heritage sites, however the indicator 2 and 5 receive a 4 with descriptive equivalent rating of High as the respondents may have identified these indicators as major concerns or challenges that require attention and resources. The overall median score of 3.00 indicated concerns about inadequate implementation and enforcement of policies. Over-tourism and insufficient regulation were seen as threats to both natural resources and cultural integrity. While under the Level of opportunities, indicators 1-4 consist a median score of 4 with descriptive equivalent rating of High as respondents may have shown a high level of agreement or consensus on the importance and potential of these indicators, suggesting that these indicators are seen as promising and potentially impactful, with opportunities for growth and development, while the indicator 5 received a 5 with a descriptive equivalent of very high this indicator may have demonstrated exceptional potential for growth, innovation, or impact, leading to the highest possible score. The overall median is 4.00 indicates a positive outlook for sustainable tourism practices, with respondents believing that they can make a meaningful contribution to the community and environment. The Findings of Level of Challenges align with the study conducted in the Kathmandu Valley, mass tourism has made major barriers to effective heritage conservation worse, such as poor management and low stakeholder involvement (Karki et al., 2024). Therefore, the Findings of Level of Opportunities align with the study of Dr. David Weaver (2017) found that sustainable tourism can help preserve cultural heritage sites and promote cross-cultural understanding between tourists and local communities.

*Table 3. **Level of Challenges and Opportunities in Cultural Commercialization***

INDICATORS	MEDIAN	DER
Challenges		
1. The degree to which commercialization prioritizes profit over the authenticity and integrity of cultural heritage.	4.00	High
2. The extent to which traditional cultural practices and products are altered to cater to tourist demands.	4.00	High

In the table 3 presents challenges and opportunities of Cultural Commercialization, under the level of challenges, all indicators received a median score of 4 with the descriptive equivalent rating of High as cultural commercialization often involves balancing the preservation of cultural heritage with the

	INDICATORS	MEDIAN	DER
3.	The level of exploitation of local handicraft workers and cultural practitioners due to the commercialization of their crafts and performances.	4.00	High
4.	Representations of local culture in tourism promotions and events.	4.00	High
5.	The extent to which produced souvenirs and commercial activities harm the distinctiveness of local cultural heritage.	4.00	High
OVERALL		**4.00**	**High**

	INDICATORS	MEDIAN	DER
	Opportunities		
1.	The effectiveness of cultural tourism in providing economic benefits to local handicraft and cultural workers.	4.00	High
2.	The responsibility of cultural commercialization in increasing awareness and appreciation of Sta. Cruz's heritage among tourists.	4.50	Very High
3.	The extent to which income from cultural tourism contributes to the preservation and promotion of traditional practices.	4.00	High
4.	The ability of cultural commercialization to encourage innovation while maintaining the essence of local traditions.	4.00	High
5.	The potential of cultural tourism to strengthen community pride and identity in Sta. Cruz, Ilocos Sur.	5.00	Very High
OVERALL MEDIAN		**4.00**	**High**

pursuit of profit, and each indicator may be seen as crucial in navigating this balance. The overall median is 4.00 indicates a high rating suggesting that respondents think cultural commercialization requires careful strategic consideration to maximize benefits and minimize challenges. While under the level of opportunities, indicator 1, 3 and 4 received a median score of 4 with the descriptive equivalent of high as these indicators may represent significant opportunities for economic growth, cultural exchange, and community development through cultural commercialization. While indicator 2 and 5eceived a median score of 5 with the descriptive equivalent of very high as these indicators may represent exceptional opportunities for cultural commercialization, with significant potential for economic growth, cultural exchange, and community development. The overall median is 4.00 indicates that the potential economic benefits of cultural commercialization, such as job creation and revenue generation, may be seen as significant. The Findings of Level of Challenges align with the study of Aithor (2024) argued that commercialization has led to cultural appropriation, while Alejandria-Gonzalez (2016) warned that prioritizing profit over authenticity leads to unsustainable tourism experiences. Despite these challenges, commercialization was also viewed as a way to increase local income and visibility of cultural assets if managed ethically. The Findings of Level of Opportunities align with the study by Cohen and Higham (2011), who noted that pressure from mass tourism can serve as a catalyst for adopting sustainable tourism behaviors and policies.

*Table 4. **Level of Challenges and Opportunities in Environmental Concern***

	INDICATORS	MEDIAN	DER
	Challenges		
1.	The extent of tourism-related activities contributes to pollution and environmental damage in heritage sites.	4.00	High
2.	The level of improper waste disposal affects the cleanliness and sustainability of cultural sites.	4.00	High
3.	The extent of climate change effects, such as flooding and erosion, on heritage structures and natural surroundings.	4.00	High
4.	The extent to which tourists and businesses prioritize convenience over eco-friendly practices in heritage areas.	4.00	High
5.	The degree to which traditional construction methods and materials are being replaced with modern, less sustainable alternatives.	4.00	High
OVERALL		**4.00**	**High**

INDICATORS	MEDIAN	DER

Opportunities

1.	The effectiveness of eco-friendly tourism programs in reducing environmental harm to heritage sites.	4.00	High
2.	The level of community involvement in conservation efforts for environmentally sensitive heritage areas.	4.00	High
3.	The potential of renewable energy and green infrastructure in sustainable tourism.	4.00	High
4.	The potential support programs for businesses that adopt sustainable and culturally sensitive tourism practices.	4.00	High
5.	The impact of integrating environmental conservation guidelines into tourism planning and development strategies.	4.00	High
		4.00	**High**

OVERALL

Table 4 presents a critical assessment of environmental challenges impacting heritage tourism, revealing a uniformly high level of concern. All five indicators—tourism-related pollution, improper waste disposal, climate change impacts, the prioritization of visitor convenience over environmentally sound practices, and the replacement of traditional, often more sustainable, construction methods—received a median score of 4.00 described as High, indicating a significant and widespread threat to the environmental sustainability of heritage sites. The absence of any "Moderate" scores underscores the severity of these issues. This consistent "High" rating across all indicators, further emphasized by the overall median score of 4.00, highlights the urgent need for comprehensive interventions to mitigate these risks and ensure the long-term preservation of these valuable resources. The findings of Level of Challenges in Environmental Concern align with the study of Rukmana and Nurlita(2020), in Bali found that unmanaged waste, especially from vendors and tourists, contributes to pollution in temples and historical landmarks. Ahmed and Nawaz(2022), explain that traditional building techniques tend to be more climate-adapted and locally sourced, making them more sustainable than modern, resource-intensive alternatives. UNESCO and ICOMOS(2020), who stress the need for intergrated heritage and environmental management policies to promote sustainability in tourism.

Level of responsible tourism strategies that can best protect Sta. Cruz, Ilocos Sur's cultural heritage while ensuring sustainable economic development for the local community.

*Table 5. **Level of responsible tourism strategies in Educating Tourists about Local Customs and Heritage***

INDICATORS	MEDIAN	DER
1. The effectiveness of providing tourists with information on local traditions and customs to promote cultural respect.	5.00	Very High
2. The extent to which tourism establishments integrate cultural education in their services (e.g., guided tours, brochures, exhibits)	4.00	High
3. The role of interactive experiences (e.g., cultural workshops) in increasing tourist appreciation of local customs.	4.00	High
4. The level of support from local businesses in promoting responsible tourism practices that respect cultural heritage.	4.00	High
5. The extent to which visitors are encouraged to follow ethical guidelines when engaging with local traditions and heritage sites.	4.00	High
OVERALL	4.00	High

In the table 5 presents the responsible tourism strategies in educating tourists about local customs and heritage, the indicator 1 under the level of responsible tourism strategies received a 5 which corresponds to a descriptive equivalent rate of very high it shows that informational approaches such as leaflets, digital platforms, and visitor orientations are highly effective in promoting tourist awarenes and respect for local customs, however, other indicators received a 4 with descriptive equuvalent rating of high, it suggests that cultural content is being incorporated into many tourism services, although there may be variability in depth or consistency. Overall median of 4.00 indicates a consistency high level of responsible tourism strategies in educating tourists about local customs. However, the highest rating in indicator 1 shows that accessible information is the most effective and widely implemented method. The findings of Level of Responsible Tourism Strategies in Educating Tourists about Local Customs and Heritage align with the study of Dredge et al. (2016), the role of businesses is crucial in reinforcing community-based values and ensuring tourism does not undermine local cultures. UNESCO (2021) and Zou et al. (2021), who highlight that intormed tourists are more likely to act respectfully and engage meaningfully with local culture. Xu et al. (2020), guided interpretations greatly improve visitors' comprehension and admiration of historical places, which raises the perceived worth of those sites.

*Table 6. **Level of responsible tourism strategies in Tourism Awareness***

INDICATORS	MEDIAN	DER
1. The effectiveness of tourism activities that highlight fiestas, crafts, products and historical landmarks in attracting responsible tourists.	4.00	High
2. The level of participation in various trade fairs to promote local cultural products and heritage-based tourism.	4.00	High
3. The importance of partnerships between the local government and private sector in sustaining cultural heritage tourism.	4.00	High
4. The level of support from local government and other tourism stakeholders in promoting authentic cultural experiences for visitors.	4.00	High
5. The extent to which cultural tourism programs align with sustainability goals, ensuring long-term benefits for local communities.	4.00	High
OVERALL	**4.00**	**High**

In the Table 6 presents responsible tourism strategies related to tourism awareness. All indicators received a median score of 4 corresponding to a "High" rating the indicators may have been seen as effective strategies for promoting responsible tourism practices, such as providing information, promoting cultural sensitivity, and encouraging environmentally friendly behaviors. The overall meadian is 4.00 indicates that respondents believe education and information dissemination are crucial for promoting responsible tourism practices. The Findings of Level of tourism awareness align with the study of Su and Swanson (2017) similarly found that cultural heritage-based tourism fosters responsible behaviour, particularly when tourists feel a deeper connection with the host community.

*Table 7. **Level of responsible tourism strategies in Promoting Cultural Heritage Tourism***

INDICATORS	MEDIAN	DER
1. The effectiveness of awareness campaigns in educating locals and tourists about the effect of responsible tourism on cultural preservation.	4.00	High
2. The level of involvement of civil society organizations in promoting tourism awareness programs.	4.50	Very High
3. The extent to which tourism stakeholders (e.g., businesses, tour operators) actively participate in responsible tourism programs.	5.00	Very High
4. The effectiveness of social media and digital platforms in raising awareness about sustainable tourism practices in Sta. Cruz.	5.00	Very High
5. awareness programs that feature cultural and environmental preservation.	4.50	Very High
OVERALL MEDIAN	**4.50**	**Very High**

In the table 7 shown the Level of Responsible tourism strategies in Promoting Cultural Heritage Tourism, the indicator 1 under the awareness campaigns received a 4 with the descriptive equivalent rating of high, it shows that awareness campaigns are impactful but could still be enhanced for greater reach and effectiveness, indicator 2 and 5 received a 4.50 with descriptive equivalent rating of very high, implying that these programs are successfully integrating both cultural heritage and environmental sustainability topics, fostering a holistic understanding among participants, however the indicator 3 and 4 received a 5.00 with descriptive equivalent rating of very high, it indicates that stakeholders are highly active and online platforms are effectively utilize. Overall median of 4.50 (very high) indicates strong responsible tourism strategies are in place. However, the slightly lower score for awareness campaigns (indicator 1) suggests an area for further improvement to ensure even greater effectiveness in promoting cultural and environmental preservation. The findings of Level of Responsible Tourism Strategies in Promoting Cultural Heritage Tourism align with the study of Mihalic(2016) and Khalid et al. (2021), emphasize how increased tourist football leads to air, nose, and land pollution, particularly in sensitive heritage zones. Sesana et al. (2020), note that climate change poses unprecedented risks to heritage though sea level rise, increasing temperatures, and extreme weather events, which accelerate structural deterioration. Gossling and Hall(2019), a culture of greenwashing exists where businesses claim eco-friendly practices but fail to implement them rigorously.

Significant relationship between the demographic profile and level of challenges and opportunities. Significant relationship between the demographic profile and level of responsible tourism strategies. Significant relationship between the level of challenges and level responsible tourism strategies.

*Table 8. **Significant relationship between the demographic profile and level of challenges and opportunities.***

| Demographic Profile | Level of Challenges and Opportunities | | | | | |
| | Sustainable Tourism Practices | | Cultural Commercialization | | Environmental Concern | |
	Challenges	*Opportunities*	*Challenges*	*Opportunities*	*Challenges*	*Opportunities*
Age	0.140	0.014	-0.087	-0.070	-0.023	-0.037
Gender	-0.0140	0.042	-0.166	-0.048	-0.172	0.012
Educational Attainment	-0.182	-0.073	-0.193	-0.090	-0.085	-0.061
Occupation	0.155	0.120	0.235*	0.059	-0.032	0.061
Years of Residency	0.020	0.179	0.150	0.129	0.041	0.169

*Legend: * Significant* p < .05

The table illustrates that the relationship between demographic profiles and the level of challenges and opportunities in sustainable tourism practices, cultural commercialization, and environmental concern has both significant and non-significant relationships. A statistical investigation employing correlation coefficients (r-values) and p-values revealed that age, gender, educational achievement, and years of residency have no significant connections with tourism characteristics (p > 0.05), implying a broad, consistent perception across these demographics. In contrast, occupation has a strong link with obstacles in sustainable tourism practices (r = 0.155*) and cultural commercialization (r = 0.235*), implying that professional engagement influences tourism attitudes. These findings suggest that tourism initiatives should focus on professional roles rather than other personal demographics in order to effectively solve sustainability and commercialization concerns. Previous studies have validated the findings. According to Gössling and Hall (2019) and Higham and Miller (2018), widespread media and educational exposure has increased environmental awareness across all age groups. Park and Phillips (2020) and Torres-Delgado and Saarinen (2019) discovered few gender differences in sustainable tourism views when education is equally available. Similarly, Kim and Thapa (2018) and Ballantyne et al. (2017) highlight the importance of community-based learning over formal education in developing tourism impressions. In terms of occupation, Bramwell and Lane (2020) and Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018) demonstrate that professional involvement in tourism has a considerable impact on perceptions of sustainability and cultural issues. Finally, Wang and Pfister (2020) and Nunkoo and Gursoy (2017) argue that collective community identity, rather than years of residency, influences tourism attitudes.

Table 9. Significant relationship between the demographic profile and level of responsible tourism strategies

| *Demographic Profile* | *Level of Responsible Tourism Strategies* | | |
	Educating tourists about local customs and heritage	*Tourism Awareness*	*Promoting Cultural heritage tourism*
Age	*0.036*	*-0.043*	*-0.022*
Gender	*-0.062*	*-0.016*	*-0.010*
Educational Attainment	*-0.148*	*-0.113*	*-0.056*
Occupation	*0.070*	*0.078*	*0.025*
Years of Residency	*0.165*	*0.155*	*0.058*

*Legend: * p <.05 Significant*

The table shows that there are no statistically significant correlations between demographic profiles and the level of responsible tourism strategies—specifically, educating tourists about local customs, increasing tourism awareness, and promoting cultural heritage tourism (p > 0.05). Minor differences in associations were identified, but none were significant. Age, gender, and educational achievement have no significant influence on responsible tourism activities, implying that these ideals are widely shared among groups. Occupation and years of residency show slightly stronger, but non-significant, associations, implying that tourism professionals and long-term residents may be slightly more involved. Overall, the data indicate that responsible tourism attitudes are becoming widely accepted across demographics, and that broad, inclusive policies are preferable than highly segmented ones. These findings are backed by previous research. Kim and Thapa (2021) and Becken (2016) discovered that regular and engaging educational initiatives promote responsible tourism behaviors across all age groups. When values and concerns are handled equitably, Hardy et al. (2017) found little variation in sustainability support between genders. Ballantyne and Packer (2016) stressed the importance of informal, experiential learning rather than formal education in building sustainable tourism attitudes. Although occupational associations were not significant, Scheyvens and Biddulph (2017) emphasized that tourism professionals play an important role in encouraging responsible practices. Similarly, Nunkoo and Gursoy (2017) found that longer stays can increase community participation in tourism planning and cultural preservation activities.

Table 10. Significant relationship between the level of challenges and level responsible tourism strategies

*Legend: * **p** <.05 Significant*

Level of Responsible Tourism Strategies	Level of Challenges and Opportunities					
	Sustainable tourism Practices		Cultural Commercialization		Environmental Concern	
	Challenges	Opportunities	Challenges	Opportunities	Challenges	Opportunities
Educating tourists about local customs and heritage	0.409*	0.684*	0.528*	0.668*	0.485*	0.673*
Tourism awareness	0.328*	0.676*	0.461*	0.608*	0.371*	0.636*
Promote cultural heritage tourism	0.283*	0.552*	0.359*	0.569*	0.343*	0.564*

The table shows a significant relationship (p < 0.05) between difficulties, possibilities, and responsible tourism plans. Implementing measures such as educating tourists, creating tourism awareness, and promoting cultural heritage is intimately linked to difficulties and possibilities in sustainable tourism practices, cultural commercialization, and environmental concern. Educating visitors has the largest relationships with opportunities in environmental concern (r = 0.673*) and cultural commercialization (r = 0.668*), although tourism awareness also has substantial positive associations (for example, r = 0.676* for sustainable tourism opportunities). Promoting cultural heritage tourism yields slightly smaller but still substantial correlations, underlining the economic and cultural benefits while highlighting considerable obstacles. Overall, the findings indicate that responsible tourism initiatives are critical for increasing potential, but they also require thoughtful, inclusive planning to handle developing issues. These results are consistent with earlier studies. Ballantyne and Packer (2016) emphasize that visitor education improves cultural sensitivity, but it must be carefully controlled to minimize distortion. According to Gössling and Hall (2019), tourism knowledge increases conservation support while also raising destination service demands. Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018) address how historic tourism might provide cultural and economic benefits while compromising authenticity. Torres-Delgado and Saarinen (2019) further argue that integrating responsible practices into all stages of tourism development strengthens destination resilience and long-term sustainability.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study concludes that cultural heritage preservation in Sta. Cruz, Ilocos Sur is achievable through the application of responsible tourism strategies. Despite moderate to high challenges—such as waste management issues, cultural commodification, and climate-related threats—there are substantial opportunities for development rooted in eco-tourism, policy support, and community partnerships. The Social Exchange Theory proved to be a useful framework in explaining community engagement: locals participate more when they feel the benefits of tourism outweigh the costs. Educating tourists, promoting heritage awareness, and involving the community in tourism planning emerged as essential strategies. Demographic factors such as age, education, and years of residency significantly influenced how respondents perceived both challenges and the effectiveness of solutions. Findings suggest that empowering local communities through education and inclusion is key to long-term cultural sustainability. Local governments and stakeholders must create programs that reflect Sta. Cruz's unique identity and heritage while addressing environmental and cultural risks. Policy integration, structured heritage tourism packages, and educational outreach are recommended to support this vision. Future studies may explore the long-term impact of these strategies and how they adapt to ongoing socio-economic changes. Ultimately, sustainable heritage tourism in Sta. Cruz must prioritize both community well-being and cultural integrity. Local governments and tourism partners should step up responsible tourism education by providing tourists and residents with materials and activities that encourage cultural respect, sustainable practices, and heritage knowledge. Community participation should be increased by providing chances for locals, particularly long-term inhabitants and artisans, to participate in cultural tourism planning and implementation, ensuring that traditions are protected and respected. To limit the harmful effects of tourism on heritage sites, strong waste management, environmental protection, and commercialization rules must be in place. These should be included in tourism planning and matched with sustainability objectives. tourist workers, government officials, and local companies should be given occupation-based training and support mechanisms in order to improve their involvement in protecting cultural heritage and promoting sustainable tourist practices.

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