

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AND COMMUNITY WELL-BEING: AN
EMPIRICAL STUDY OF RESIDENTS EXPERIENCES NEAR U BEIN,
MYANMAR

Research Paper

A Research Paper Submitted to the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism

By

Chan Myae July¹

Ph.D

Associate Professor (Head)

Department of Economics

Meiktila University of Economics

chanmyaejuly@gmail.com

Ei Thinzar Kyaw²

SaBa - 16

September, 2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Particular	Page
	ABSTRACT	i
	LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	ii
1	INTRODUCTION	1
2	OBJECTIVES	2
3	LITERATURE REVIEW	2
4	ANALYSIS	3
5	FINDINGS	4
6	POLICY RECOMMENDATION	6
7	CONCLUSION	7
	APPENDIX	
	REFERENCES	

ABSTRACT

Tourism has become one of the most significant social and economic practices. The global tourism industry experienced a remarkable resurgence, effectively rebounding to pre-pandemic levels in 2024. The objectives of the study are to explore residents' well-being, measured through the perception on economic, sociocultural, and environmental benefits of tourism and to analyze residents' attitudes toward sustainable tourism development. This study used descriptive and analytical method based on primary data. A survey was conducted with a total of 100 respondents from Oh Bo and Taungthaman villages, located near U Bein Bridge by using simple random sampling method through structured questionnaire. This study found that residents near U Bein Bridge perceive tourism positively for its economic and sociocultural benefits, while environmental benefits, particularly heritage and natural resource conservation, are viewed as limited. This study also found that residents' well-being, reflected in perceived economic, sociocultural, and environmental benefits, significantly shapes attitudes toward sustainable tourism, with positive effects from economic and sociocultural benefits and a negative effect from insufficient environmental gains. This study suggested that policy should emphasize equitable economic opportunities, community participation, and proactive environmental and heritage conservation to enhance community well-being and support sustainable tourism development in Mandalay.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, community well-being, economic benefits, sociocultural benefits, environmental benefits, attitudes

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SET	Social Exchange Theory
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organization

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become one of the most significant social and economic practices. The global tourism industry experienced a remarkable resurgence, effectively rebounding to pre-pandemic levels in 2024. An estimated 1.4 billion international tourists traveled worldwide, making a 99% recovery compared to 2019 and an 11% increase over 2023, with 140 million more international arrivals (UNWTO, 2025).

Tourism is often associated with providing positive emotions and enhancing wellbeing, as studied within the framework of positive perception (Seligman et al., 2000). For tourists, exploring new places, experiencing different cultures, and engaging in leisure activities are closely linked to feelings of joy, relaxation, and fulfillment (Chang et al., 2022). However, the impact of tourism extends beyond visitors; it also affects the emotional and psychological landscape of residents in host destinations. The concept of positive tourism was initially introduced to benefit both tourists and host communities (Schanzel, 2016). Despite the prevalent focus on tourists' experiences in the existing literature, there is a growing need to investigate how tourism influences the well-being of residents, as multiple aspects: economic, socio-cultural, and environment.

In an attempt to bring economic, sociocultural, and environmental effects, many countries are currently trying to develop the tourism sector since there are numerous advantages to hosting destinations. Tourism is promoted to increase economic revenue, create thousands of jobs, enhance infrastructure, and foster a sense of cultural exchange between visitors and residents. Furthermore, supporting a country's handicrafts and fine arts also contributes to the preservation of the beauty of nature and the cultural heritage of the country (UNWTO, 2019).

However, depending on the type and intensity of tourism development and the characteristics of the host community, the consequences of tourism have both positive and negative impacts. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the specific impacts of tourism development on the host community's perceptions (Kozhokulov et al., 2019). From the locals' perspective, this success depends on the residents believing that the tourism benefits outweigh the drawbacks. In this regard, understanding the perceptions of the host community on the specific impacts of tourism development can contribute to establishing policies that maximize the positive impacts and prevent the negative impacts of tourism development (Sharpley, 2014).

Mandalay, the second-largest city in Myanmar, is a prominent tourist destination with attractions like Kuthodaw Pagoda, U Bein Bridge, Mandalay Hill, and the Mahamuni Buddha Temple. U Bein Bridge, an iconic site the Mandalay Region, demonstrates how tourism can significantly impact local livelihoods by supporting farmers, vendors, and tourism-based businesses. However, the partial collapse of the bridge on October 29, 2023, caused by overcrowding, resulting in injuries to 23 people (Global New Light of Myanmar, 2023), highlights the potential negative consequences of tourism on heritage sites. This event indicates the need for a systematic assessment of tourism's benefits on local communities, particularly in relation to economic, sociocultural and environmental aspects.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze sustainable tourism and community well-being based on the residents' experiences, focusing on economic, sociocultural, and environmental benefits, as well as attitudes toward sustainable tourism development.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are to explore residents' well-being, measured through the perception on economic, sociocultural, and environmental benefits of tourism and to analyze residents' attitudes toward sustainable tourism development.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY

Social Exchange Theory (SET) has been a major theoretical perspective in social psychology since the early works of Homans (1961), Blau (1964) and Emerson (1962, 1972). This theoretical orientation is based on earlier philosophical and psychological orientations deriving from utilitarianism on the one hand and behaviorism on the other. Homans (1961) defined social exchange as the exchange of tangible or intangible resources between at least two actors, with costs considered in terms of foregone alternatives. Emerson (1972) expanded this by emphasizing power and dependency relationships within exchanges.

In tourism research, SET has been widely applied to understand residents' perceptions of tourism development (Long et al., 1990, AP, 1992). The core concept of this theory is that residents evaluate tourism based on the perceived balance of benefits and costs. When benefits outweigh costs, residents are likely to adopt supportive attitudes toward tourism; conversely, if costs exceed benefits, residents may resist or disengage from tourism activities (Ap, 1992; Gursoy et al., 2002).

SET also provides a framework for examining how exchanges influence community well-being. Residents engage with tourism to derive benefits—economic, sociocultural, and environmental—which are central to their perceived quality of life and satisfaction with local development (Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003).

Perceived Benefits and Residents' Well-Being

Residents' well-being can be conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing economic stability, social cohesion, cultural preservation, and environmental quality. Tourism development can enhance these dimensions through perceived benefits. Economic benefits are widely accepted as increased income and employment opportunities for local residents, which contribute to improved livelihoods and regional development (Sharpley, 2014). Sociocultural benefits include enhanced social interaction between tourists and host communities, promotion of cultural awareness, and support for the preservation of local traditions and heritage (Cooper et al., 2008). Additionally, tourism can produce environmental benefits by promoting conservation efforts and encouraging the protection and sustainable management of heritage sites and historical buildings (Weaver & Lawton, 2007).

These benefits function as indicators of residents' well-being, as they directly influence

material conditions, social relations, cultural identity, and environmental quality. Positive perceptions of these benefits are therefore likely to strengthen support for sustainable tourism initiatives.

Perceived Cost of Tourism Development

Tourism is also associated with perceived costs, which may reduce residents' well-being and hinder community support if not properly managed. Economic costs can include rising prices and unequal distribution of tourism-related benefits, leading to economic disparities within host communities (Doxey, 1975). Sociocultural costs often shown as cultural disruption, social conflicts, and the erosion of traditional norms and values (Cooper et al., 2008). Environmental costs have been widely documented and include physical damage to heritage sites and buildings, overcrowding, pollution, and degradation of the surrounding natural environment (Yan, 2013).

SET suggests that residents continuously evaluate these costs against benefits. If costs are perceived as higher than benefits, residents may withdraw support or oppose further tourism development (Ap, 1992; Andriotis, 2005).

Residents' Attitudes toward Sustainable Tourism Development

According to SET, residents evaluate tourism initiatives based on a perceived balance between benefits and costs; positive evaluations tend to foster supportive attitudes, whereas negative evaluations may result in opposition or disengagement (Ap, 1992; Gursoy et al., 2002).

Residents' attitudes toward sustainable tourism development are influenced by the perceived trade-offs between benefits (well-being) and costs. Positive perception of benefits in economic, sociocultural, and environmental domains are linked to increased engagement in tourism activities, support for conservation efforts, and advocacy for sustainable development. Conversely, negative perceptions of costs can hinder tourism growth and threaten the sustainability of heritage sites and local ecosystems. These attitudes are therefore essential for policymakers and planners seeking to implement tourism initiatives that enhance residents' well-being while remaining economically viable, socially acceptable, and environmentally sustainable (Ap, 1992; Gursoy et al., 2002).

4. ANALYSIS

Methodology

A survey was conducted with a total of 100 respondents from Oh Bo and Taungthaman villages, located near U Bein Bridge by using simple random sampling method through structured questionnaire. These villages were selected based on their location at the intersection of tourism development, local livelihoods, cultural heritage, and sustainability challenges.

This study uses a descriptive method to explore residents' perception on economic, sociocultural, and environmental benefits and an analytical method to analyze the attitudes toward sustainable tourism development.

The conceptual framework for this study, based on Social Exchange Theory (SET). It

illustrates how residents' perceptions of economic, sociocultural, and environmental benefits — considered as dimensions of community well-being — influence the residents' attitudes toward sustainable tourism development near U Bein, Myanmar (See Figure 1).

Analytical Model

Multiple regression analysis is used to examine the influence of residents' well-being on the attitudes toward sustainable tourism development. In this study, residents' well-being is measured through the perceptions of economic, sociocultural, and environmental benefits of tourism. The model is specified as follows:

$$\text{Attitudes} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Economic Benefit} + \beta_2 \text{Sociocultural Benefit} + \beta_3 \text{Environmental Benefit} + \varepsilon_i$$

Where:

Attitudes = Residents' Attitudes towards Sustainable Tourism Development

Economic Benefit = Residents' Perception on Economic Benefits

Sociocultural Benefit = Residents' Perception on Sociocultural Benefits

Environmental Benefit = Residents' Perception on Environmental Benefits

ε_i = Error term

5. Findings

Residents' Perceptions on Tourism Benefits

Regarding the Economic Benefit of tourism development, the results indicate that tourism is perceived positively by residents. The highest mean was for the statement "tourism has contributed to higher household income" (Mean = 4.52), followed by the second-highest mean, "local businesses have experienced growth due to the arrival of tourists" (Mean = 4.45). These findings suggest that residents recognize tourism primarily as a driver of income generation and local business development. The lowest mean was for the statement "residents benefit fairly from the economic opportunities generated by tourism" (Mean = 3.42), suggesting that despite the generally positive economic impact, not all residents perceive these benefits as fairly shared. The overall mean score of 4.12 indicates that residents hold positive perception of the economic benefits of tourism in the study area.

Regarding the sociocultural benefits of tourism, the results indicate that residents perceive tourism positively, with an overall mean score of 4.08. The highest mean was for the statement "Tourism has strengthened social cohesion within the community" (Mean = 4.56), suggesting that tourism significantly enhances relationships and collaboration among residents. The second-highest mean was "interaction between residents and visitors" (Mean = 3.98), followed closely by "preservation and promotion of traditional cultural practices" (Mean = 3.97), "opportunities to showcase local heritage" (Mean = 3.95), and "increased awareness and appreciation of community culture" (Mean = 3.94). These findings indicate that tourism is perceived as a facilitator of cultural exchange, heritage preservation, and community awareness in the study area.

Regarding the environmental benefits of tourism, residents hold a positive perception, with an overall mean score of 3.54. The highest mean was for the statement “the presence of tourists has raised awareness about environmental preservation” (Mean = 3.95), followed closely by “tourism has supported the conservation of natural resources” (Mean = 3.93). These findings suggest that tourism contributes to raising environmental awareness and supporting conservation efforts.

The lower mean value were for the statements “heritage sites and historical buildings are better maintained due to tourism” (Mean = 3.17), “tourism contributes to the protection and restoration of cultural and natural heritage” (Mean = 3.30), and “tourism development encourages sustainable practices that protect the local environment” (Mean = 3.37). These lower mean values indicate that while some environmental benefits are acknowledged, residents perceive the environmental benefits of tourism as limited in the study area.

Influence of Residents' Well-Being on Attitudes toward Sustainable Tourism Development

The multiple regression analysis assessed the influence of residents' well-being, measured through economic, sociocultural, and environmental benefits, on their attitudes toward sustainable tourism development (See Table 3).

The regression analysis indicates that the model is statistically significant at the 1% level and explains approximately 15.7% of the variance in residents' attitudes toward sustainable tourism development. The results are theoretically meaningful, as they demonstrate how different dimensions of perceived well-being—economic, socio-cultural, and environmental benefits—shape community attitudes.

The results show that economic benefits have a positive and significant effect on residents' attitudes significant at the 5% level. This implies that when tourism contributes to employment creation, higher household income, and the growth of local businesses, residents perceive these as valuable rewards, thereby fostering supportive attitudes toward sustainable tourism development. Similarly, socio-cultural benefits also exert a positive and significant influence significant at the 5% level. This suggests that tourism's role in cultural preservation, heritage promotion, and community cohesion enhances non-material aspects of well-being, reinforcing favorable perceptions.

By Contrast, environmental benefits show a significant negative association with residents' attitudes at the 1% level. Although this dimension was measured through indicators such as conservation, heritage protection, sustainable practices, and environmental awareness, residents perceive these benefits as insufficient compared to the ecological costs of tourism. From the perspective of Social Exchange Theory, the lack of visible and tangible environmental gains leads residents to view this dimension as a burden rather than a reward, thereby weakening overall support for sustainable tourism development.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of this study, several policy recommendations are proposed to enhance the positive impacts of tourism while mitigating its negative consequences, thereby promoting sustainable tourism development and community well-being in Mandalay.

The study indicates that residents recognize the economic advantages of tourism, particularly in terms of income generation and local business growth. However, disparities in perceived benefit distribution suggest the need for policies that ensure more equitable economic outcomes. Local authorities and tourism planners should develop mechanisms to distribute tourism-generated income fairly among community members. Initiatives may include supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, promoting local entrepreneurship, implementing community-based tourism projects, and facilitating training programs to enhance residents' skills and employability in tourism-related activities.

Sociocultural benefits were positively perceived, highlighting tourism's role in enhancing social cohesion, cultural exchange, and heritage promotion. To strengthen these outcomes, policymakers should encourage community participation in tourism planning and decision-making. Programs that involve residents in cultural festivals, heritage site management, and tourism-related educational initiatives can reinforce cultural pride and social interaction. Additionally, safeguarding intangible cultural heritage and providing platforms for locals to showcase traditional arts and practices can foster long-term community engagement.

Although some environmental benefits are acknowledged, residents perceive these gains as limited, which negatively affects attitudes toward sustainable tourism. Policymakers should prioritize environmental and heritage site conservation, especially for key landmarks such as U Bein Bridge. Strategies may include implementing visitor management systems to prevent overcrowding, establishing regular maintenance and restoration programs, and promoting eco-friendly practices among businesses and tourists. Awareness campaigns targeting both residents and visitors can emphasize the importance of preserving cultural and natural assets. Incentives for local stakeholders to participate in heritage conservation—such as funding for restoration projects or training in heritage management—can enhance the visibility and effectiveness of environmental and heritage benefits.

To achieve a balanced approach to tourism development, authorities should adopt comprehensive sustainable tourism frameworks that integrate economic, sociocultural, and environmental considerations. Regular monitoring and evaluation of tourism impacts, informed by community feedback, can guide adaptive policies that maximize benefits while minimizing costs. Collaboration among government agencies, local communities, and tourism operators is essential to align tourism development with residents' well-being and the preservation of Mandalay's cultural and natural heritage.

Residents' support for sustainable tourism is influenced by their perception of tangible benefits. Policies should focus on transparent communication regarding tourism projects, highlighting anticipated advantages and the measures in place to address potential costs. Creating platforms for community dialogue, participatory planning, and co-management of

tourism resources can foster ownership, reduce conflicts, and improve residents' positive engagement with tourism initiatives.

7. CONCLUSION

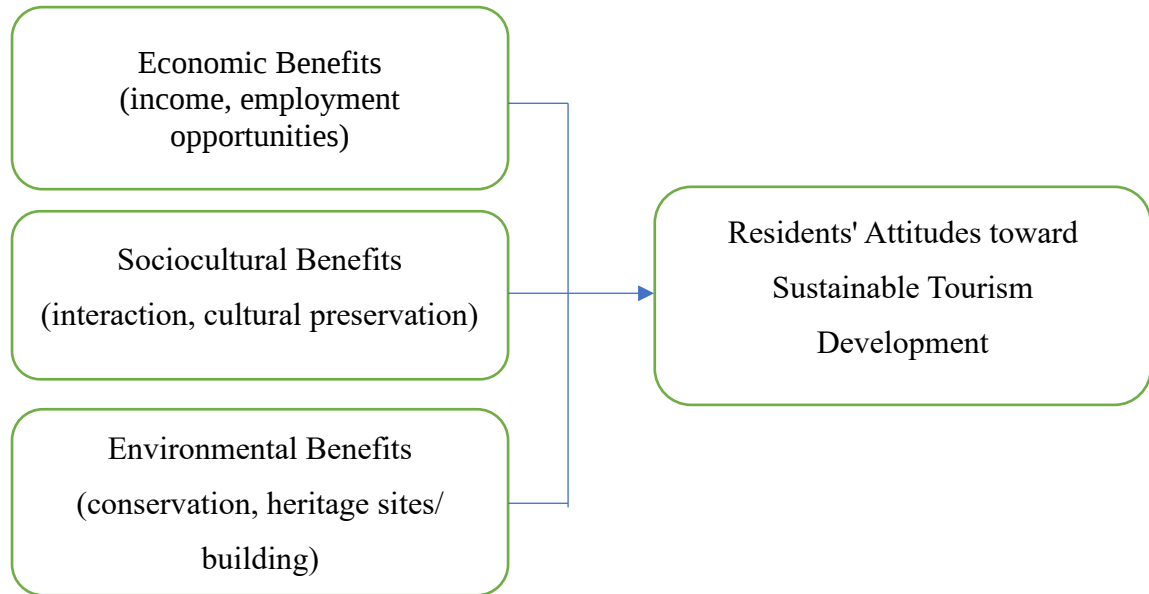
This study examined how residents near U Bein Bridge in Mandalay perceive the economic, social, and environmental benefits of tourism and how these perceptions influence their attitudes toward sustainable tourism. Using Social Exchange Theory, this study shows that residents evaluate tourism by considering both its benefits and costs, which shapes their support for sustainable tourism development.

The findings reveal that residents recognize clear economic and social benefits, such as higher household income, growth of local businesses, stronger community connections, and the promotion and preservation of cultural heritage. These positive effects encourage residents to support sustainable tourism. However, environmental benefits, including the protection of heritage sites and natural resources, are seen as limited, especially given challenges like overcrowding and structural risks at U Bein Bridge. This perception reduces overall support for sustainable tourism, highlighting the need for more visible and effective environmental and heritage protection measures.

This study indicates that sustainable tourism requires a balanced approach that considers economic, social, and environmental aspects together. Policies should focus on fair economic opportunities, community involvement, and the preservation of heritage and natural sites. Practical measures such as visitor management, regular maintenance, eco-friendly practices, and awareness campaigns can improve residents' perception of environmental benefits and strengthen support for sustainable tourism and promote the well-being of local communities.

APPENDIX

Figure (1) Conceptual Framework of Residents' Attitudes toward Sustainable Tourism Development



Source: Own Compilation (2025)

Table (1) Residents' Perception on Tourism Benefits

Sr. No.	Statements	Mean	S.D
Economic Benefits			
1	Tourism development in my village has increased employment opportunities for local residents.	4.19	0.39
2	Tourism has contributed to higher household income for community members.	4.52	0.52
3	Local businesses have experienced growth due to the arrival of tourists.	4.45	0.52
4	Tourism has improved overall economic stability in the community	4.04	0.24
5	Residents benefit fairly from the economic opportunities generated by tourism.	3.42	0.57
	Overall Mean	4.12	

Table (1) Residents' Perception on Tourism Benefits (Cont'd)

Sociocultural Benefits			
1	Tourism has encouraged greater interaction between local residents and visitors.	3.98	0.14
2	Tourism has helped preserve and promote traditional cultural practices.	3.97	0.17
3	Tourism activities provide opportunities for residents to showcase local heritage.	3.95	0.26
4	The presence of tourists has increased awareness and appreciation of our community's culture.	3.94	0.28
5	Tourism has strengthened social cohesion within the community.	4.56	0.56
	Overall Mean	4.08	
Environmental Benefits			
1	Tourism has supported the conservation of natural resources in the area.	3.93	0.29
2	Heritage sites and historical buildings are better maintained due to tourism.	3.17	0.22
3	Tourism development encourages sustainable practices that protect the local environment.	3.37	0.58
4	The presence of tourists has raised awareness about the importance of environmental preservation.	3.95	0.78
5	Tourism contributes to the protection and restoration of cultural and natural heritage in the community.	3.30	0.78
	Overall Mean	3.54	

Source: Survey Data (2024)

Table (2) Residents' Attitudes toward Sustainable Tourism Development

Sr. No.	Statements	Mean	S.D
1	I support tourism development in my community if it is managed sustainably.	4.29	0.46
2	I am willing to participate in activities that promote sustainable tourism in my village.	4.26	0.48
3	Tourism development has a positive impact on the long-term well-being of our community.	4.12	0.36
4	I believe that sustainable tourism can help preserve our cultural heritage and environment.	4.66	0.48
5	I am concerned about the negative impacts of tourism and think they should be minimized through sustainable practices.	4.62	0.49
	Overall Mean	4.39	

Source: Survey Data (2024)

Table (3) Regression Analysis of Residents' Attitudes toward Sustainable Tourism Development

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	VIF
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
(Constant)	3.089	0.644		4.795	0.000	
Economic Benefit	0.232**	0.094	0.236	2.476	0.015	1.064
Sociocultural Benefit	0.318**	0.147	0.208	2.167	0.033	1.084
Environmental Benefit	-0.269***	0.078	-0.325	-3.451	0.001	1.043
R Square						0.183
Adjusted R Square						0.157
F-Value						7.163 ***

Dependent Variable: Attitudes toward Sustainable Tourism Development

***, **, *, statistically significant at (1%), (5%) level, (10%) level respectively

Source: Survey Data (2024)

REFERENCES

- Andereck, K. L., & Vogt, C. A. (2000). The relationship between residents' attitudes towards tourism and tourism development options. *Journal of Travel Research*, 39(1), 27-36.
- Andriotis, K. (2005). Community groups' perceptions of and preferences for tourism development: Evidence from Crete. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, 29(1), 67-90.
- Ap, J. (1992). Residents' perceptions on tourism impacts. *Annals of tourism Research*, 19(4), 665-690.
- Blau, P. M. (1964). Exchange and power in social life. New York: Wiley.
- C Homans, G. C. (1961). Social behavior: Its elementary forms. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Chang, L.; Moyle, B.D.; Dupre, K.; Filep, S.; Vada, S. Progress in research on seniors' well-being in tourism: A systematic review.
- Cooper, C., Fletcher, J., Fyall, A., Gilbert, D., & Wanhill, S. (2008). Tourism: principles and practice. Essex.
- Doxey, G. V. (1975). A causation theory of visitor-resident irritants: Methodology and research inferences. In *Travel and tourism research associations sixth annual conference proceedings* (Vol. 3, pp. 195-198).
- Emerson, R. M. (1962). Power-dependence relations. *American Sociological Review*, 27(1), 31-41.
- Emerson, R. M. (1972). Exchange theory, part I: A psychological basis for social exchange. In J. Berger, M. Zelditch Jr., & B. Anderson (Eds.), *Sociological theories in progress* (Vol. 2, pp. 38-57). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Global New Light of Myanmar. (2023, October 30). *Partial collapse of U Bein Bridge injures 23 due to overcrowding*. Global New Light of Myanmar.
- Gursoy, D., & Jurowski, C. (2002). Resident attitudes in relation to distance from tourist attractions. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 31(2), 296-312.
- Kozhokulov, S., Chen, X., Yang, D., Issanova, G., Samarkhanov, K., & Aliyeva, S. (2019). Assessment of tourism impact on the socio-economic spheres of the Issyk-Kul Region (Kyrgyzstan). *Sustainability*, 11(14), 3886.
- Long, P. T., Perdue, R. R., & Allen, L. (1990). Rural resident tourism perceptions and attitudes by community level of tourism. *Journal of travel research*, 28(3), 3-9.
- Schanzel, H. Positive Tourism; Filep, S., Laing, J., Csikszentmihalyi, M., Eds.; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2016.
- Seligman, M.; Csikszentmihalyi, M. Positive psychology: An introduction. *Am. Psychol.* 2000, 55, 5-14.

- Sharpely, R. (2014). Host perceptions of tourism. *Tourism Management*, 42(2014), 37-49.
- UNWTO. (2019). *Tourism and culture synergies*.
- UNWTO. (2025). *International tourism rebounds to 99% of pre-pandemic levels in 2024*.
- Weaver, D. B., & Lawton, L. J. (2007). 'Just because it's gone doesn't mean it isn't there anymore': Planning for attraction residuality. *Tourism Management*, 28(1), 108-117.
- Yan, L. (2013). Residents' Attitudes towards tourism impacts in Zhouzhuang Canal Town.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to express the profound gratitude to the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, Myanmar, for giving us the opportunity to conduct this research. Special thanks are extended to Dr. Mya Thandar, Rector, Meiktila University of Economics, Dr. Maw Maw Khin, Pro-Rector and Dr. Thida Htoo, Pro-Rector, Meiktila University of Economics, for their guidance and invaluable suggestions.