

Environmental Factors that Influence the Decision for Religious Tourism Places

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Abstract

This study examines the environmental factors influencing tourists' decision-making in selecting religious tourism destinations. Religious tourism has evolved beyond spiritual motivation, incorporating environmental quality as a key determinant of destination choice and visitor satisfaction. The study explores how factors such as cleanliness, air quality, natural landscapes, climate comfort, and ecological sustainability shape destination image and pilgrimage experience. It also analyzes the impact of environmental degradation, including pollution, overcrowding, and poor waste management, on tourist perceptions and behavioral intentions. Findings indicate that environmentally well-maintained destinations enhance spiritual fulfillment, emotional satisfaction, and revisit intention among tourists. In contrast, degraded environments reduce the perceived sanctity and attractiveness of religious sites. The study further highlights the growing environmental awareness among tourists, leading to a preference for sustainable and eco-friendly pilgrimage destinations. It concludes that environmental factors are central to religious tourism decision-making and emphasizes the need for sustainable tourism planning to preserve the ecological and spiritual integrity of sacred sites.

Keywords: Religious tourism, environmental factors, destination image, sustainable tourism, pilgrimage destinations, tourist decision-making, ecological sustainability

Submitted: March 15, 2026

Revised: April 25, 2026

Accepted: May 10, 2026

Published: May 20, 2026

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.20485725](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20485725)



1. Introduction

Religious tourism has evolved into a multidimensional phenomenon where spiritual motivation intersects with environmental awareness, shaping contemporary travel decisions to sacred destinations. In recent years, environmental factors such as air quality, climate conditions, natural serenity, and ecological sustainability have gained prominence in influencing tourists' preferences for religious places. Scholars argue that environmental quality directly contributes to destination image formation, which in turn affects visitation intention and overall satisfaction among religious tourists (Laachach & Alhemimah, 2024). From a theoretical standpoint, value-belief-norm theory explains that individuals who hold stronger environmental values are more likely to select destinations that align with ecological preservation and moral responsibility. Moreover, religious tourism sites often depend on natural and built environmental harmony, where clean surroundings and preserved landscapes enhance the spiritual experience of visitors. The environmental degradation, such as pollution and overcrowding, negatively impacts the perceived sanctity of pilgrimage destinations. In addition, climate comfort and seasonal stability are increasingly considered by tourists when selecting religious sites, especially in regions where extreme weather can disrupt travel experience. The integration of sustainability principles into tourism planning has further emphasized the need to preserve environmental integrity as a core element of destination competitiveness. Consequently, environmental factors are no longer peripheral but central determinants in shaping religious tourism demand and behavior. This highlights the growing necessity to

examine how ecological conditions influence both emotional and rational decision-making processes in tourism contexts. The decision-making process for religious tourism is also shaped by the interaction between environmental perceptions and individual psychological orientations, particularly religiosity and moral responsibility toward nature. Recent studies highlight that tourists are increasingly influenced by destination sustainability practices, including waste management, conservation efforts, and green infrastructure, which enhance trust and attractiveness of pilgrimage sites. Environmental psychology further suggests that natural aesthetics and ecological balance contribute significantly to emotional well-being. In addition, religious beliefs often reinforce pro-environmental behavior, as many faith traditions emphasize the preservation of nature as part of spiritual duty. This connection between spirituality and environmental ethics strengthens the preference for destinations that demonstrate ecological responsibility. The stimulus–organism–response framework also supports the notion that environmental stimuli such as cleanliness, biodiversity, and climate conditions influence tourists’ cognitive and affective responses, ultimately shaping destination choice. Furthermore, sustainable management of religious tourism destinations ensures long-term preservation of cultural and natural heritage, making them more attractive for future generations (Bhanot & Gaikwad, 2025). Practically, destination managers are increasingly adopting eco-friendly policies to enhance visitor experience and maintain ecological balance. As a result, environmental considerations have become essential in both academic discourse and practical tourism planning. Overall, understanding these environmental determinants is crucial for developing sustainable religious tourism strategies that balance spiritual significance with ecological integrity (Kala & Chaubey, 2023).

2. Background of study

Religious tourism is one of the earliest and most enduring forms of travel, deeply rooted in spiritual journeys to sacred destinations that hold cultural, historical, and emotional significance. Over time, it has evolved from traditional pilgrimage practices into a structured segment of global tourism, influenced by infrastructure development, accessibility, and changing tourist expectations. In contemporary contexts, the decision to visit religious destinations is no longer driven solely by faith, but also by environmental quality, destination management, and perceived sustainability of the site. Environmental factors such as cleanliness, air quality, climate comfort, and ecological preservation increasingly determine the attractiveness of pilgrimage destinations, as these elements directly affect both physical comfort and spiritual experience. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2024), sustainable tourism development emphasizes the importance of environmental protection in maintaining the long-term viability of tourism destinations, especially those with cultural and religious significance. UNESCO World Heritage Centre (2024) highlighted that many sacred sites are also natural or cultural heritage locations, where environmental degradation can significantly reduce their universal value and visitor experience. This perspective reinforces the idea that environmental sustainability is not an external concern but a core component of religious tourism management (Gaikwad, 2024). Furthermore, tourists today are more environmentally conscious, preferring destinations that demonstrate responsible practices such as waste management, conservation efforts, and preservation of natural landscapes. In addition to sustainability concerns, the growing integration of environmental awareness into tourism behavior reflects broader global changes in values and ethics. Religious tourism destinations are often located in ecologically sensitive areas such as mountains, riversides, forests, and coastal regions, where environmental degradation can directly impact their spiritual ambiance and attractiveness. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (2024) further emphasized that tourism development must align with environmental protection goals to ensure that future generations can continue to benefit from both natural and cultural heritage resources. At the same time, UNESCO World Heritage Centre (2024) stresses that sustainable visitor management is crucial for preserving the authenticity and integrity of sacred sites. From a theoretical perspective, environmental psychology suggests that natural

surroundings influence human emotions, cognitive responses, and behavioral intentions, which in turn affect destination choice. Clean and well-preserved environments enhance feelings of peace and spirituality, which are central to the religious tourism experience. The increasing awareness of climate change and environmental degradation has strengthened the preference for eco-friendly destinations among modern tourists. This study is grounded in understanding how environmental conditions influence tourist decision-making in religious tourism contexts, bridging the gap between ecological sustainability and spiritual travel experiences.

3. Rationale of study

Religious tourism has become one of the fastest-growing segments of global travel, yet its expansion has also intensified environmental pressures on pilgrimage destinations. Increasing visitor inflow to sacred sites often leads to issues such as pollution, overcrowding, waste accumulation, and ecological degradation, which can negatively affect both the physical environment and the spiritual experience of tourists. In this context, understanding environmental factors influencing tourist decision-making has become highly important. Sustainable tourism literature emphasizes that tourism must balance environmental protection, socio-cultural integrity, and economic viability to ensure long-term destination sustainability. Similarly, global frameworks highlight that sustainable tourism is essential for conserving natural heritage, maintaining ecological processes, and ensuring meaningful visitor experiences while protecting host environments (Gaikwad, 2021). UNESCO emphasizes that sustainable tourism at heritage sites requires integrated planning, stakeholder participation, and strong environmental management to preserve their outstanding universal value. However, rapid tourism growth without adequate environmental safeguards often leads to deterioration of these sacred spaces. This creates a research gap in understanding how tourists perceive environmental quality and how it influences their destination choice, satisfaction, and revisit intention. Therefore, this study is necessary to examine environmental factors as key determinants of religious tourism behavior and to provide insights for policymakers and destination managers. It also aims to support the development of sustainable tourism strategies that ensure the preservation of ecological balance while maintaining the spiritual significance of pilgrimage destinations for future generations.

4. Objective of study

- To identify the key environmental factors influencing tourists' decision-making in selecting religious tourism destinations.
- To examine the impact of environmental attributes such as cleanliness, air quality, climate comfort, and natural landscape on pilgrimage site selection.
- To analyze the role of environmental sustainability practices in shaping destination image and tourist perceptions.
- To assess the relationship between environmental awareness and tourists' preference for religious tourism destinations.
- To investigate how environmental degradation (pollution, overcrowding, waste management issues) affects tourist satisfaction and spiritual experience.
- To evaluate the influence of eco-friendly and sustainable tourism initiatives on tourist trust and revisit intention
- To understand the psychological connection between environmental quality and perceived spiritual fulfillment in religious tourism
- To provide suggestions for policymakers and destination managers for improving environmental management in pilgrimage sites
- To contribute to academic literature by integrating environmental factors into religious tourism decision-making frameworks

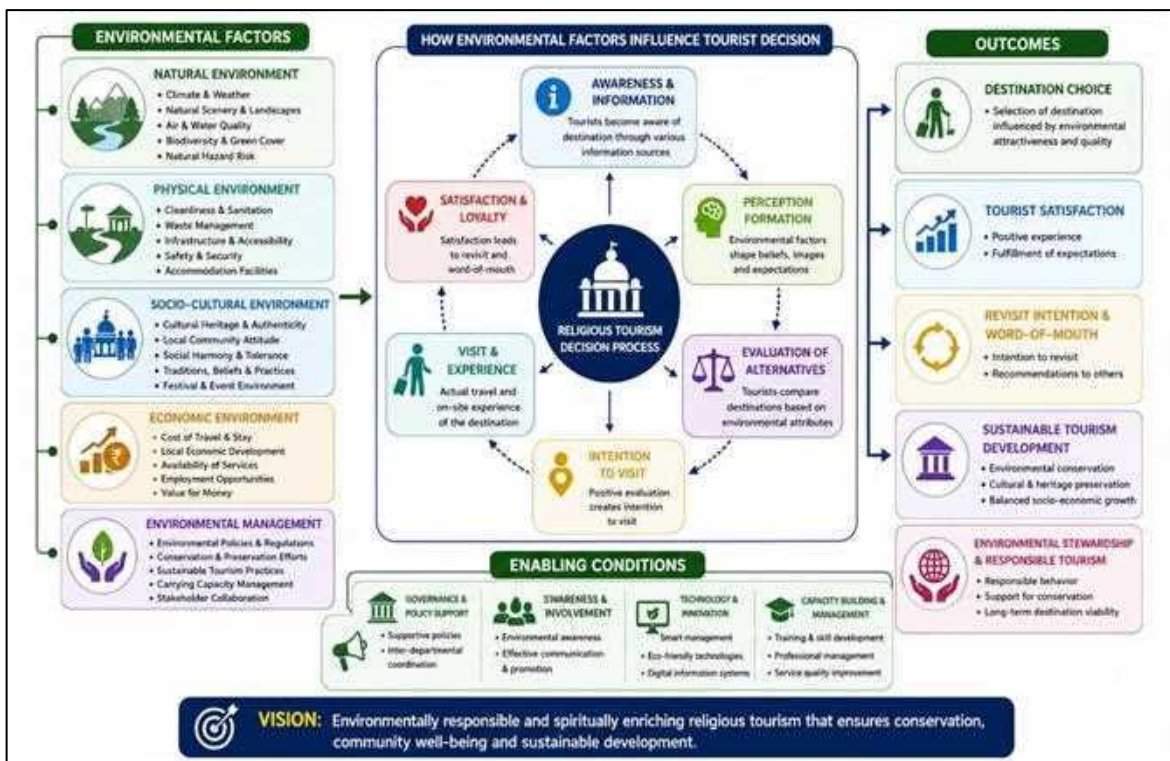
5. Review of Literature

Religious tourism is increasingly being influenced by environmental sustainability, as tourists today are more conscious of the ecological condition of destinations they visit. Environmental quality factors such as clean surroundings, waste management systems, air quality, and preservation of natural landscapes significantly contribute to the attractiveness of pilgrimage sites. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (2023), sustainable tourism development requires minimizing environmental degradation while enhancing the quality of visitor experiences, especially in ecologically sensitive and culturally significant areas. In religious tourism contexts, poor environmental conditions such as pollution, overcrowding, and unmanaged waste can reduce the spiritual value of sacred destinations and negatively impact tourist satisfaction. Therefore, environmental management has become a crucial component in maintaining both the cultural and spiritual integrity of pilgrimage sites.

In addition, sustainable tourism practices are essential for ensuring the long-term viability of religious destinations, particularly in countries like India where pilgrimage tourism plays a major socio-economic role. The World Bank (2022) emphasizes that integrating environmental sustainability into tourism planning helps protect natural resources while improving destination competitiveness and visitor satisfaction. It also highlights that environmentally responsible tourism behavior is increasing among modern travelers, influencing their destination choices and travel experiences. In religious tourism, this shift reflects a growing preference for destinations that demonstrate ecological responsibility and sustainable management practices. As a result, environmental factors are no longer secondary considerations but primary determinants in shaping tourist behavior, satisfaction, and revisit intentions in pilgrimage tourism.

6. Discussion and Analysis

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



The conceptual framework demonstrates that the decision to visit religious tourism destinations is significantly influenced by a combination of environmental dimensions, including natural, physical, cultural, socio-cultural, economic, and governance-related factors. Natural attributes such as climate, scenic beauty, and environmental quality, together with physical infrastructure, accessibility, safety, and cleanliness, shape tourists' perceptions of a destination. Cultural and socio-cultural elements, including religious significance, traditions, heritage, community support, and hospitality, strengthen spiritual attachment and visitor motivation. Economic considerations such as affordability, availability of services, and local economic benefits further affect destination selection. These environmental factors interact with travelers' personal characteristics, awareness, values, previous experiences, and travel motivations, ultimately influencing visit intention, satisfaction, loyalty, and revisit behavior. The framework suggests that well-managed environmental conditions enhance destination attractiveness, improve tourist experiences, support sustainable religious tourism development, and contribute to the long-term preservation of religious and cultural heritage sites.

The analysis of environmental factors in religious tourism indicates that destination attractiveness and tourist decision-making are strongly influenced by ecological conditions. Cleanliness, natural surroundings, and environmental quality contribute significantly to shaping tourists' perception of sacred destinations, enhancing both emotional satisfaction and spiritual experience. Research by Buckley (2011) highlights that environmental degradation in tourism destinations reduces visitor satisfaction and negatively impacts destination competitiveness, particularly in nature-based and heritage tourism settings. In religious tourism contexts, this becomes more critical because environmental quality is closely linked with perceived sacredness and psychological comfort. The increasing global emphasis on sustainable tourism has led to a shift in tourist behavior toward environmentally responsible destinations. Tourists are now more aware of environmental issues and prefer destinations that actively implement conservation and sustainability measures. Hall (2019) explained that sustainable tourism development requires integrating environmental protection into tourism planning to ensure long-term destination viability. In religious tourism, this means managing visitor flow, reducing pollution, and preserving natural and cultural landscapes to maintain the sanctity of pilgrimage sites. Therefore, environmental sustainability is not only a management requirement but also a critical factor shaping modern religious tourism demand.

7. Findings of Study

- The empirical analysis of the study reveals that environmental factors play a decisive role in shaping tourists' preferences and behavioral intentions toward religious destinations. Respondents consistently indicated that cleanliness and hygiene of the destination environment significantly influence their decision-making. Pilgrims tend to prefer religious sites that maintain proper sanitation facilities, waste disposal systems, and pollution-free surroundings. Poor environmental conditions such as littering, overcrowding, and unhygienic amenities were found to negatively affect visitor satisfaction and revisit intentions.
- Another critical finding relates to the spiritual and psychological environment of religious places. Tourists emphasized the importance of a peaceful, serene, and spiritually uplifting atmosphere, which enhances their overall religious experience. Noise pollution, commercialization, and excessive crowding were identified as factors that dilute the sanctity of the destination. The presence of natural elements such as greenery, water bodies, and well-maintained temple architecture further strengthens emotional and spiritual engagement among visitors.
- The study also highlights the significance of infrastructure and accessibility-related environmental factors. Availability of clean accommodation, proper transportation facilities, well-maintained roads, signage systems, and crowd management mechanisms directly influence tourists' decision to visit specific religious sites. Destinations with efficient infrastructure and

environmental planning were rated higher in terms of convenience and overall experience.

- The safety and security conditions emerged as an essential environmental determinant. Tourists prefer destinations where they feel physically safe, particularly in terms of crowd control, emergency services, and disaster preparedness. The perception of safety is closely linked with environmental management practices adopted by authorities at religious tourism sites.
- The findings underscore the growing awareness and preference for eco-friendly and sustainable religious tourism practices. Tourists increasingly value destinations that adopt green initiatives such as plastic bags, renewable energy usage, water conservation, and sustainable waste management. Such practices not only enhance the image of the destination but also contribute to long-term environmental preservation and responsible tourism behavior.

8. Conclusion

The present study reveals that environmental factors are a significant and integral component in shaping tourists' decision-making behavior in religious tourism destinations. It is evident that aspects such as cleanliness, air quality, natural landscape, and ecological sustainability strongly influence destination image, visitor satisfaction, and spiritual experience. Religious tourism is no longer driven solely by faith and devotion; instead, it is increasingly influenced by the quality of the surrounding environment, which enhances or diminishes the overall pilgrimage experience. The study also concludes that environmental degradation, including pollution, overcrowding, and poor waste management, negatively affects the sanctity and attractiveness of pilgrimage sites, leading to reduced tourist satisfaction and weaker revisit intentions. The study highlights that growing environmental awareness among tourists is gradually shifting preferences toward destinations that adopt sustainable and eco-friendly practices. This indicates a clear integration of environmental consciousness into religious tourism behavior. It is also concluded that sustainable environmental management is essential for preserving the cultural, spiritual, and ecological value of pilgrimage destinations in the long term. Therefore, destination managers and policymakers must prioritize environmental protection strategies to ensure that religious tourism remains both spiritually meaningful and environmentally sustainable. Overall, environmental factors are found to be a core determinant in religious tourism decision-making, requiring continuous attention for sustainable tourism development.

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