

Insights on the Social-Economic Implications of the Blue Economy Concept on Coastal Tourism in Tonga

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Abstract : The blue economy concept was coined by Pacific nations in recognition of the importance of sustainably managing their extensive marine territories. This is especially important for major ocean-based economic sectors of Pacific economies, such as coastal tourism. There is an absence of research, however, on the key ways in which the blue economy concept has emerged in discourse and public policy in Pacific countries, as well as how it articulates with coastal tourism. This research helps to fill such a gap with a specific focus on Tonga through the application of a post-positivist research approach to conduct a desktop study of relevant national documents and qualitative interviews with relevant government staff, civil society organizations, and tourism operators. The findings of the research reflect the importance of institutional integration and partnerships for a successful blue economy transition and are presented in the form of two case studies corresponding to two sub-sectors of Tonga's coastal tourism sector: (i) the whale-watching and swimming industry, and (ii) beach resorts and restaurants. A thematic analysis applied to the interview data of both cases then enabled the identification of key areas and issues for socio-economic policy intervention and recommendations in support of blue economy transitions in Tonga's coastal tourism sector. Examples of the relevant areas and issues that emerged included the importance of foreign direct investment, local market access, community-based special management areas, as well as the need to address the anthropogenic impacts of tropical cyclones, whale tourism, plastic litter on coastal assets, and ecosystems. Policy and practical interventions in support of addressing such issues include a proposed restructuring of the whale-watching and swimming licensing system; integration of climate resilience, adaptation, and capacity building as priorities of local blue economy interventions; as well as strengthening of the economic sustainability dimension of blue economy policies. Finally, this research also revealed the need for further specificity and research on the influence and value of local Tongan culture and traditional knowledge, particularly within existing customary marine tenure systems, on Tonga's national and sectoral blue economy policies and transitions.

Keywords : blue economy, coastal tourism, integrated ocean management, ecosystem resilience

Conference Title : ICITC 2023 : International Conference on Indigenous Tourism and Conservation

Conference Location : Melbourne, Australia

Conference Dates : February 06-07, 2023