

AN ANALYSIS OF THE AYDER PLATEAU VISITORS' NEGATIVE ONLINE REVIEWS

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Abstract: Türkiye has a different beauty in every season with a very rich tourism potential in terms of nature-based tourism types. This richness attracts tourist communities in search of difference in the preference of tourism destinations. Many people who want to get away from the chaos, traffic, crowds, and stress of city life start to look for ways to escape to nature. In this context, natural resources such as forests, plateaus, caves, and rivers constitute the main touristic attraction elements. When Türkiye is evaluated in terms of nature tourism, the first region that comes to mind is the Black Sea. Especially the Eastern Black Sea has the highest number of plateaus. The plateaus, which are not very different from each other in terms of the basic tourism experience, offer tourists an unpolluted nature, clean water sources, plenty of oxygenated air, and the opportunity to be alone with nature. One of the most preferred plateaus, which is basically an area of calmness, peace, and escape, is the Ayder Plateau in Rize. Located at the foot of the Kaçkar Mountains, the Ayder Plateau hosts thousands of local and foreign tourists and day-trippers every year. Technology is the most important source of information for urban people who escape from the monotony and fatigue of modern life to nature. Wherever it is, the internet is a basic need for most urban people. Strangely enough, even when people go to a natural destination, one of the first things they look at is the internet network. Today, the internet, social media, and online review sites, which are the most frequently used sources of information in the selection of touristic destinations, affect the purchasing behaviour of tourists. This study aims to evaluate the reviews on a travel site called TripAdvisor about Ayder Plateau, which is very popular in terms of tourism demand. People have an evaluation range between 1 Terrible - 5 Excellent about their tourism and travel experiences on TripAdvisor. In this study, reviews with terrible, poor, and average ratings were analysed. The reason for focusing only on negative reviews is to reveal the destruction caused by tourism and to suggest what should not be done in the plateaus. There are 826 reviews about the Ayder Plateau on TripAdvisor as of 13 April 2023 15:00. Of these reviews, 96 are terrible, 70 are poor, 126 are average, 161 are very good and 373 are excellent. The total number of negative reviews included in the study is 292. The oldest of the analysed negative reviews was made on 25 September 2012 and the most recent one was on 25 February 2023. Negative reviews were classified into 5 themes as a result of content analysis. These are Service, Fee, Expectation/Performance, Social Environment and Physical Environment. When the reviews are examined, the most frequently repeated negative elements are found to be the deterioration of the natural environment, unplanned construction/concreting, commercialisation, crowdedness and exorbitant prices.

Keywords: Plateau tourism, Ayder Plateau, negative thoughts, TripAdvisor.

INTRODUCTION

The most important source of tourism is natural resources. A tourism destination with an unspoilt natural environment will provide an advantage in competition. In this context, since the greatest impact of tourism is on the natural environment, it is important to protect the environment and to manage and plan tourism well.¹ As the pressure created by tourism development increases, the carrying capacity balance deteriorates. Consideration of carrying capacity is important in terms of sustainability.² Long-term use of natural resources is possible with an understanding of the concept of sustainability. It is very important to

¹ Avcı 2007.

² Seçilmiş, Kılıç 2018.

adopt the philosophy of sustainable tourism in order to ensure the continuity of the resources serving for tourism purposes and to transfer them to future generations.³

In destinations with high tourism development, problems related to the sustainability of resources are likely to arise. In tourism destinations with spatial and temporal tourist intensification, the balance of conservation is ignored in the use of natural resources. In these destinations, carrying capacity is not taken into consideration and economic concerns may be taken into account. Over-tourism, which occurs when the impact of tourism exceeds the carrying capacity, is defined as a situation where the impact of tourism at a particular time and place exceeds the carrying capacity.⁴

Ayder Plateau is one of the first destinations which comes to mind when taking into consideration plateau and plateau tourism in Türkiye. However, the transformation of the plateau into a popular tourism area and its move away from traditional plateau culture and transhumance has brought along various problems. However, Çalık et al. emphasised that in order to sustain tourism activities in the plateaus, it is necessary to offer traditional plateau activities to tourists, to create an environment of clean air, calmness and tranquillity that tourists expect from the plateaus, and to provide the basic tourism infrastructure elements needed. In addition, it is recommended to provide long-term economic and socio-cultural benefits to the local people, to ensure visitor satisfaction and tourism development that prioritises environmental protection in the sustainability of highland tourism.⁵

The level of destruction caused by over-tourism in the Ayder Plateau, which has developed far from sustainable tourism understanding, is very high. In this context, it is important to analyse visitor reviews about the use of Ayder. In this study, the negative reviews on TripAdvisor about Ayder Plateau will be analysed. As a result of this analysis, suggestions will be presented to minimise the effects of over-tourism. It is thought that this study is a guide to prevent the mistakes made in tourism development in Ayder from being made in other tourism destinations.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Ayder Plateau, which is in Rize/Çamlıhemşin district and has an altitude of 1218 metres, is the starting point of climbing the Kaçkar Mountains.⁶ Tourism activities in Ayder Plateau started with thermal tourism in 1967. With the increase in the number of tourists coming every year, the number of tourism facilities and tourism diversity has increased over time. There has been an increase in the number of tourists coming to the region for plateau tourism, health tourism and mountain tourism.⁷ Declared in 1987 as a tourism centre, the region was declared as a Culture and Tourism Protection Development Region in 2006 as it hosts touristic activities such as plateau, thermal, winter tourism types, mountaineering, photo safari and camping.⁸

It can be noticed that there is a tourism development far from sustainable tourism and carrying capacity understanding in Ayder Plateau. This situation brings along unsustainable tourism and therefore over-tourism. It is useful to briefly explain the concept of unsustainable tourism and over-tourism that have emerged as a result of intensive use of resources for tourism purposes. Unsustainable tourism emerges as a result of a tourism approach that fails to protect tourism resources, fails to ensure environmental sustainability, and does not support the life and culture of local people.⁹ Over-tourism, which occurs by exceeding the carrying capacity, negatively affects the tourism sector.¹⁰ Over-tourism describes a destination where local people or tourists feel that the area is overcrowded, and the quality of experience is in danger. Destinations where the number of tourists per inhabitant is high face the problem of over-tourism. There are physical, social, cultural, and political aspects that need to be respected in tourism development. In this context, tourism stakeholders need to find answers to the problems of how to make

³ Sarıahmetoğlu, Vatanserver Toylan 2020.

⁴ Peeters et al. 2018.

⁵ Çalık et al. 2021.

⁶ Rize Directorate of Culture and Tourism 2023a.

⁷ Somuncu 1994.

⁸ Rize Directorate of Culture and Tourism 2023b.

⁹ Burdett 2018.

¹⁰ Çam, Çelik 2022.

destinations a better place.¹¹ It is known that over-tourism affects the satisfaction obtained from the tourism experience and tourists spread this negative situation on social media.¹²

Today, the increase in consumption has reduced the environmental sensitivity of people. The understanding of sustainability, which tries to minimise the damage caused by environmentally damaging and unconscious consumption, tries to reveal to what extent the regions have developed by adhering to the principles of sustainability. However, it is seen that the number of studies on the unsustainable tourism understanding is low. Some of the most important problems brought by unsustainable tourism are as follows; over-tourism, unplanned urbanisation, waste and pollution.¹³ The concept of sustainability, which aims towards the long-term use of resources, is related to the protection of ecological balance. It is important for the sustainability of resources that travelling to nature does not cause damage.¹⁴ Sustainable tourism development requires the broad participation and consensus of all relevant stakeholders. Sustainability requires continuous monitoring of impacts and taking preventive and/or corrective measures when necessary.¹⁵

METHODOLOGY

Today, the level of benefitting from technology in planning and organization of tourism and travel is increasing. People resort to the Internet both for purchasing holidays, making reservations and other transactions and for destination selection. The fact that the internet has become an important reference also plays a role in changing consumption habits. Now travellers have become more independent. They make their own decisions by researching about destinations and services without the need for travel intermediaries.¹⁶ TripAdvisor travel platform serves as one of the most preferred travel websites in the world. This travel website, where information about hotels, restaurants, trips, and tours can be obtained, offers its users not only information but also access to real-time visitor/user reviews. Millions of travellers can browse various opinions and reviews and decide on tourism activities accordingly.¹⁷ Opinions and reviews on TripAdvisor have been analysed in many studies in the field of tourism.¹⁸

The aim of this study is to evaluate the negative reviews about Ayder Plateau. In this context, the reviews on the TripAdvisor travel website were analysed by content analysis method through MAXQDA 2018 program. Content analysis is a method of systematically examining the contents of some texts to categorise and interpret them and making some inferences as a result of deciphering the texts by coding.¹⁹ In content analysis, data analysis takes place in four stages: coding the data, organising codes and themes, defining, and interpreting the findings.²⁰ Users who review on TripAdvisor have an evaluation range of 1 Terrible - 5 Excellent about their tourism and travel experiences. There are 826 reviews about Ayder Plateau on TripAdvisor as of 13th April 2023 15:00. In this study, reviews rated as terrible, poor, and average were analysed by purposive sampling method. Terrible, poor and average reviews were rated negatively. The total number of negative reviews included in the study is 292. These reviews were made between 25th September 2012 and 25th February 2023. These reviews were gathered from TripAdvisor.²¹ The impacts of tourism are categorised as economic, social, and environmental.²² Negative reviews were classified into 5 themes as a result of content analysis. These are Service, Fee, Expectation/Performance, Social Environment and Physical Environment.

¹¹ Singh 2018.

¹² Aylan, Aylan 2020.

¹³ Barakazı 2023.

¹⁴ Güçer, Kement, 2015.

¹⁵ The United Nations World Tourism Organization, UNWTO 2023.

¹⁶ Ayeh, Au, Law 2013.

¹⁷ TripAdvisor 2023a.

¹⁸ Miguéns, Baggio, Costa 2008; Ongun, Kervankıran, Çuhadar 2021; Rinaldi 2023; Kocaman 2023.

¹⁹ Bilgin 2014 as cited in Mancı, Tengilimoğlu 2021.

²⁰ Yıldırım, Şimşek 2008 as cited in Karataş 2015.

²¹ TripAdvisor 2023b.

²² Kozak, Kozak, Kozak 2015.

FINDINGS

The distribution of the reviews made on TripAdvisor about Ayder Plateau is given in Table 1. According to this, 96 of the reviews are terrible, 70 are poor, 126 are average, 161 are very good and 373 are excellent. Within the scope of this study, 292 reviews are in the range of terrible, poor, and average.

Table 1. Reviews About Ayder Plateau

Traveller Rating	F	%
Excellent	373	45.16
Very good	161	19.50
Average	126	15.25
Poor	70	8.47
Terrible	96	11.62
Total	826	100

Resource: TripAdvisor 2023b.

The main theme of 292 reviews about Ayder Plateau was determined as negative thoughts. Figure 1 shows the theme and code map obtained as a result of content analysis of negative reviews about the plateau. In the main theme of negative opinions, 925 codes were coded and 5 themes were identified. These are *service, fee, expectation/performance, social environment, and physical environment*.

Firstly, 94 codes were made under the *Service* theme offered in Ayder Plateau. There are two sub-themes related to this theme: *service quality* and *parking*. Under the service theme, firstly, the quality of the services provided by tourism enterprises was evaluated. For example, in the reviews, it was mentioned that the attitude of the staff in restaurants, the flavour of the food, or the services offered in accommodation businesses were poor. Another issue evaluated in this section is the lack of car parking. Many reviews were presented about the lack of car parking. This situation reflects negatively on total service quality.

Secondly, the *Fee* theme was evaluated. There are a total of 78 codes in this theme. The two sub-themes related to this theme are *entrance fee* and *exorbitant price*. In the *Entrance fee* sub-theme, it was observed that many reviews complained about the entrance fee. *Exorbitant price* sub-theme was also mentioned in many reviews. There are 68 codes that the prices are excessively high and exaggerated. Visitors think that they were ripped off, that high prices were asked for poor quality products and that the prices were excessively expensive.

The third theme is *Expectation/Performance*, which includes 59 codes about the level of fulfilment of tourist expectations. In the reviews made in this section, it was stated that visitors to the region were disappointed and encountered a place below their expectations. Disappointed visitors are not satisfied with the region.

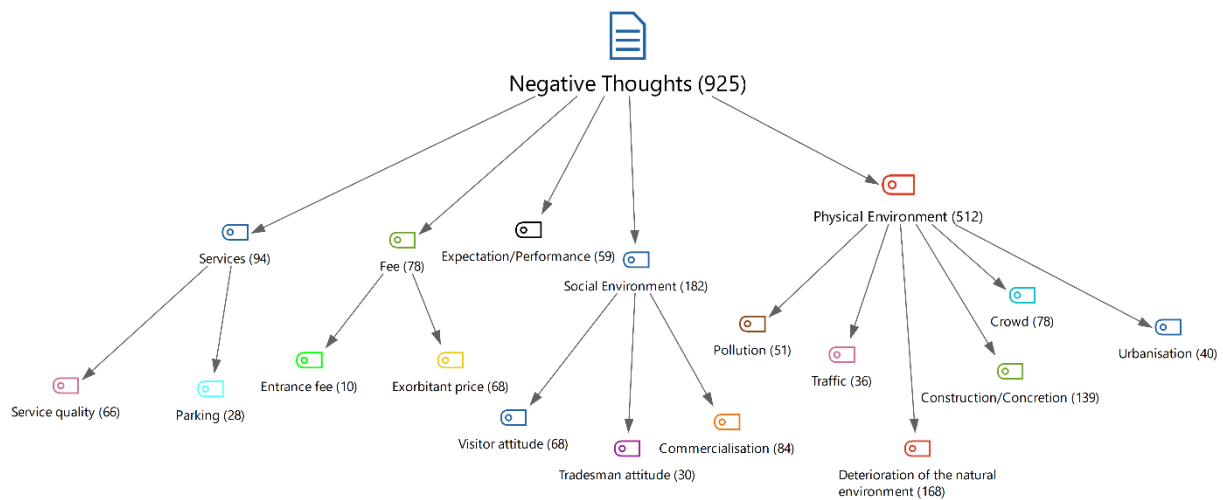


Fig. 1. Negative Thoughts on Ayder Plateau.

The fourth theme is *Social Environment*, which contains 182 codes about the social environment. There are three sub-themes under this theme: *visitor attitude*, *tradesman attitude*, and *commercialisation*. The first of these is the discomfort of visitors from other visitors, which is repeated 68 times frequently. In this section called *visitor attitude*, especially negative reviews were presented about Arab visitors. The number of reviews emphasising that there are Arab visitors everywhere, that everything is arranged according to them, and that there are Arabic signs everywhere is quite high. There are 30 codes containing the sub-theme of the *Tradesman attitude*. There are reviews about the negative behaviour of the tradesmen towards the visitors. The most frequently mentioned sub-theme of the social environment theme is *commercialisation*. It was determined that there is excessive commercialisation in the reviews, everything is converted into money, and it is a very serious situation due to economic anxiety.

The last theme is the *Physical Environment*. It is the most frequently negatively evaluated theme with 512 codes. Sub-themes related to this theme are *pollution*, *traffic*, *deterioration of the natural environment*, *construction/concretion*, *crowd*, and *urbanisation*. Firstly, there are 51 codes on the *pollution* theme, which refers to noise, visual and environmental pollution. In these reviews, it was emphasised that there is loud music, swings, picnic tables and images that are not suitable for the plateau. The second issue is the theme of *traffic*. There are 36 codes about traffic density and crowded vehicles. The most frequently emphasised negativity under this heading is the *deterioration of the natural environment*. There are 168 codes on deterioration of the natural appearance, environmental destruction, and loss of plateau characteristic. The theme with the second highest frequency is *construction/concretion*. Excessive building construction, buildings of tourism enterprises that are incompatible with the region and concretion were mentioned in this section. Another of the most frequently repeated themes in Ayder plateau is *crowd*. Excessive human density and crowding were emphasised 78 times in the reviews. The last sub-theme is *urbanisation*. In this section, it is emphasised that the plateau has turned into a city.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Over-tourism causes environmental, economic, and social impacts in a region. In terms of environmental impacts, overcrowding, environmental destruction, and pollution of all kinds, as well as investments in tourism damage investments in the needs of local people and lead to the migration of residents due to increased regional inflation. On the economic side, problems with commercial infrastructure, poor destination image, and overdependence on tourism reduced accessibility to services. Social impacts include marginalisation of the local population, commercialisation, increased crime rates, xenophobia, and damage to the sociocultural structure.²³ In the absence of sustainability principles, resources will be used in an unruly manner, which will increase the damage to the region due to increasing tourism intensification.

It is possible to talk about a tourism development that is not compatible with the environment in Ayder Plateau. Many natural and social environmental resources have come to the point of depletion with an unsustainable approach and over-tourism due to the intensity of demand. Five themes were formed under the theme of negative thoughts evaluated within the scope of the study. The first of these themes, service, is important for a tourism destination. Under this theme, negativities related to service quality and insufficient car parking were emphasised. It is expected that customer satisfaction will increase as the perceived service quality increases. It is very important to carry out studies to improve service quality.

Thanks to the income-generating effect of tourism, it is seen that tourism is encouraged in countries or regions with low economic income and limited growth prospects.²⁴ However, while realising this, all stakeholders have a duty to act responsibly and sustainably. It is seen in visitor reviews that there are excessive economic expectations and concerns in Ayder Plateau. This result coincides with the results of the study conducted by Mancı & Tengilimoğlu on Göbeklitepe visitors. In the relevant study, negative reviews arising from the fee policy, entrance fees and high prices were expressed.²⁵

It is seen that there is a utilisation far above the carrying capacity in Ayder Plateau. It is understood from the reviews presented that the situation is getting worse day by day. It is very difficult to ensure the

²³ Peeters et al. 2018.

²⁴ Lerpold, Sjöberg 2021.

²⁵ Mancı, Tengilimoğlu 2021.

sustainability of resources in an environment where everything is seen as an opportunity to make money. The continuity of tourism cannot be ensured in a region that is overly commercialised, where tradesmen treat visitors inconsiderately, and where visitors are disturbed by each other. The development of tourism in regions that have lost their original function and where environmental damage is at a high level should be intervened. O'Reilly²⁶ stated that not only physical and environmental aspects, but also social, cultural, and economic systems are affected as a result of excessive tourist arrivals to destinations with fragile economies and cultures that are easily perishable. For example, a park that is a nature reserve should have a lower density than a park used as an amusement park. The carrying capacity should not be exceeded for tourists to have a good time. In addition, Temizkan & Yıldırım indicated that visitor management should be carried out within the scope of sustainable tourism, not the number of visitors, in order to protect natural areas and minimise damages.²⁷

Halaç, Ulaş Sarıaydın & Karaçor draw attention to the importance of visitor satisfaction in ensuring tourism sustainability and emphasise that the negative aspects of tourism destinations should be eliminated, and positive aspects should be developed.²⁸ However, the most important point that should not be forgotten here is that the protection of tourism destinations is an important condition that increases the intention of tourists to visit again. This is one of the triggers of sustainable tourism. Promoting the implementation of ecological norms and protecting the ecosystem is very important for the successful and responsible use of natural resources. In addition, the promotion of business and employment of local people plays a role in the stability and long-term development of the tourist destination.²⁹

In terms of the results of the study, it is seen that it coincides with many studies in the literature and that the situation has worsened in Ayder-specific studies. According to the study conducted by Somuncu it was seen that multi-storey and reinforced concrete buildings were built in Ayder Plateau, far from traditional architecture, and there were problems in the use of space.³⁰ Mutlu draws attention to the excessive tourism in Ayder Plateau and indicates that daily life has disappeared, the natural structure has deteriorated, construction has increased, there are problems such as traffic and car parking, the rural area has completely disappeared and turned into an ordinary settlement.³¹ Bhushan argues that tourism creates problems such as pollution, destruction of resources and degradation. He underlines that over-tourism in the Himalayan region contributes to pollution, water scarcity, unplanned urbanisation, traffic, and the destruction of local culture.³²

Yılmaz & Kaya emphasize that there is a construction similar to holiday regions in the plateaus, incompatible with nature and the region, and environmental and cultural deterioration is experienced. In addition, it is underlined that Ayder Plateau has moved away from traditional plateau use, development has been made in the direction of recreation and tourism, and this situation reveals environmental pollution.³³ Barakazı lists the negativities caused by unsustainable tourism in four different destinations in Türkiye as concretisation, pollution, and environmental destruction.³⁴ İnanır and Ongun express that the negative experiences of Salda Lake visitors are related to environmental, infrastructure and superstructure and service quality due to exceeding the carrying capacity.³⁵ Ongun, Kervankıran and Çuhadar state that the negative reviews about Şirince, a touristic centre, are crowded, traffic and high prices.³⁶

²⁶ O'Reilly 1986.

²⁷ Temizkan, Yıldırım 2014.

²⁸ Halaç, Ulaş Sarıaydın, Karaçor 2021.

²⁹ Panić, Koščak, Pavlaković 2018.

³⁰ Somuncu 1994.

³¹ Mutlu 2021.

³² Bhushan 2019.

³³ Yılmaz, Kaya 2021.

³⁴ Barakazı 2023.

³⁵ İnanır, Ongun 2019.

³⁶ Ongun, Kervankıran, Çuhadar 2021.

In line with the results of the study, some suggestions can be made for the sustainability of tourism and for reducing the effects of over-tourism. The literature was used in the development of these recommendations:³⁷

- Implementation of responsible and sustainable tourism approach;
- Calculation of carrying capacity;
- De-marketing applications;
- Raising prices during the period of high demand;
- Imposing new taxes on tourists and businesses;
- Limiting the number of tourists;
- Appropriate and non-destructive zoning;
- Reducing excessive consumption and waste;
- Implementation of practices to reduce environmental pollution;
- Carrying out all kinds of inspection activities frequently, with environmental priority;
- Establishment of laws and restrictive practices for tourists;
- Supporting local communities and local economies;
- Promoting alternative tourism destinations;
- Improvement of traffic, waste, and safety management;
- Reducing seasonality;
- Promoting green practices;
- Prevention of uncontrolled growth;
- Promotion of quality tourism types;
- Providing real-time information about the area (such as crowd, transport, alternative times);
- Increasing environmental awareness of tourism stakeholders.

If no measures are taken in Ayder, the situation will worsen in the coming years. In this context, it is very important for the public and private sector to fulfil corrective activities. Attention should be paid to environmental, social, and economic sensitivities in the plateaus, which are at the beginning of tourism development. Preventive approaches should be adopted especially in terms of human and vehicle crowding, zoning and urbanisation. Plateau culture and tourism development approach suitable for the region should be based on sustainability principles. Space and time should be utilised by considering the balance of protection and utilisation. Public and private sector investments should be considered in the long term. In this study, negative reviews about Ayder Plateau covering a period of more than 10 years were evaluated. It is aimed to reveal the mistakes made during the development of Ayder Plateau. The evaluation of negative reviews is important in terms of improving service quality, eliminating deficiencies, and revealing tourism-related negativities. In addition, knowing the sources of negativity will guide what should not be done in the process of tourism development in similar areas.

Like every study, this study has also some limitations. In this study, only 292 negative reviews about Ayder Plateau on TripAdvisor were analysed. In addition, the research is limited to the date and method. There may be different reviews in different sources. It is recommended to analyse the relationship between over-tourism and sustainable tourism in different destinations in future studies.

³⁷ Garrod, Fyall, 1998; Peeters et al. 2018; Bhushan 2019; Eren, Bozkurt 2020; Mutlu 2021.

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