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The Impacts of Ecotourism Discourse on Cultural Landscape: An Evaluation in the Context of Ambar Valley

* ¹ Dilan Kakdaş Ateş

¹ Department of Architecture Faculty, Eren University, Bitlis, Turkey

¹ E-mail: dilankakdas91@gmail.com

¹ ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5984-3462>

Abstract

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The term ecotourism is associated with concepts such as harmony with the environment and integration with nature. The concept of ecotourism is open to generating new tensions in the field of cultural landscape, in addition to the preservation of cultural heritage. This study discusses the effects of ecotourism on the cultural landscape through the example of the Ambar Valley in Diyarbakir. Throughout its history, the valley has been an area of agricultural production and human interaction. Shaped by the Ambar River, the valley was designated an ecotourism area in 2017. The valley occupies a contextual status between landscape, tourism, and conservation. Historically, agricultural influence, the living landscape, and productivity have been prominent. However, current conservation and planning approaches focus more on aesthetic values. This study aims to critically evaluate the impact of ecotourism on the cultural landscape. A qualitative research framework is used in the study. This study, conducted within the context of the Ambar Valley, aims to contribute to a form of conservation that considers the area, rather than ignoring its historical continuity and the relationship it establishes with daily usage practices.

Keywords: Ecotourism; Ambar Valley; Diyarbakir; Cultural Landscape.

1. Introduction

Tourism is a multidimensional activity that enables people to experience different natural and cultural landscapes, interact with diverse communities, and become familiar with various cultural values beyond their everyday environments. In addition to its economic significance, tourism promotes cultural exchange among societies and contributes to the recognition of different lifestyles, traditions, and natural heritage resources by wider audiences (Baloch et al., 2023). However, the rapid expansion of mass tourism throughout the second half of the twentieth century has increased pressure on natural resources, accelerated environmental degradation, and generated a range of social and economic impacts on local communities. These concerns have encouraged the development of alternative tourism approaches that place greater emphasis on the conservation of natural and cultural resources.

The relationship between conservation and tourism is not a recent phenomenon. Since the early twentieth century, conservation policies and tourism development have evolved in parallel, particularly through the establishment of national parks and protected areas that were designed both to safeguard natural resources and to provide opportunities for recreation and visitor use (Sellars, 2009). Within this context, ecotourism emerged as one of the most prominent alternative tourism approaches.

Ecotourism is generally defined as a sustainable form of tourism that seeks to protect natural environments while simultaneously supporting the economic development of local communities. Growing environmental concerns and increasing public interest in nature-based experiences have further enhanced the importance of ecotourism. This form of tourism is based on the exploration of natural areas, appreciation of cultural values, and environmentally responsible travel practices. It also aims to increase environmental awareness among visitors while improving the quality of life of local populations. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines ecotourism as environmentally responsible travel to relatively undisturbed natural areas that promotes conservation, minimizes visitor impacts, and provides beneficial socio-economic involvement for local communities (Fennell & Eagles, 1990). Initially developed in countries such as Costa Rica, Indonesia, and the Galápagos Islands, ecotourism has subsequently become an important component of sustainable development strategies in developed countries including Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Canada (De Groot, 1983; Rahemtulla & Wellstead, 2001).

Although numerous definitions of ecotourism exist in the literature, most converge around several core principles, including environmental conservation, sustainability, environmental education, and the improvement of local community welfare. Accordingly, ecotourism is increasingly understood not merely as a form of nature-based tourism but as a holistic approach that seeks to reshape the environmental and social impacts of tourism activities (Cheia, 2013). Similarly, Fennell (2008) emphasizes that ecotourism aims to safeguard both ecological systems and human well-being while creating

economic opportunities for individuals and communities. Thus, ecotourism extends beyond recreational experiences in natural settings and incorporates broader objectives related to conservation, environmental awareness, and sustainable development (Fennell, 2008).

Ecotourism also seeks to reduce the environmental and social pressures generated by tourism activities and to minimize negative impacts on natural resources. In this respect, it not only prioritizes environmental conservation but also promotes the sustainability of local cultures, social structures, and community well-being (Cobbinah, 2015). When implemented through appropriate planning and management strategies, ecotourism can establish a mutually beneficial relationship between environmental protection and economic development. Particularly in sensitive ecosystems, ecotourism encourages the creation of conservation-based revenue models rather than economic systems dependent on resource exploitation. By directly linking the economic value of natural areas with conservation efforts, ecotourism supports environmental sustainability and contributes to the protection of endangered species and fragile ecosystems. Consequently, the conservation of natural environments is increasingly viewed not only as an ecological necessity but also as an economically viable and sustainable investment capable of generating long-term benefits for both local communities and conservation initiatives (Yan, 2025).

Furthermore, ecotourism has frequently been recognized as a tool for rural development and community empowerment. Community-based ecotourism initiatives can diversify local economies, create employment opportunities, support natural resource management, and strengthen local participation in development processes. Studies conducted in different regions have demonstrated that ecotourism may contribute to both environmental conservation and local welfare when appropriately managed (Turpie et al., 2006; Bowler et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2019). These benefits have led many governments and conservation organizations to promote ecotourism as a mechanism for achieving sustainable development goals.

Despite these potential advantages, the effectiveness and actual outcomes of ecotourism remain subjects of considerable debate. Since the late 1980s, researchers have increasingly questioned the extent to which ecotourism fulfills its promises regarding conservation and community development. Concerns have been raised about the distribution of economic benefits, the participation of local communities in decision-making processes, and the extent to which ecotourism genuinely contributes to environmental protection (Belsky, 1999). Although ecotourism emerged during the 1980s as a strategy for directing tourism revenues toward conservation and development objectives, scholars continue to debate whether it truly represents a “win-win” model capable of simultaneously benefiting nature and local communities (Stronza, Hunt, & Fitzgerald, 2019). Moreover, if sustainability principles are not effectively implemented, ecotourism may contribute to environmental degradation, habitat disturbance, wildlife pressures, pollution, and the gradual transformation of local social structures (Hadifar et al., 2026). The rapid expansion of ecotourism has also led to concerns that the concept is sometimes employed primarily as a marketing tool rather than as a genuine conservation strategy, creating inconsistencies between its theoretical principles and practical outcomes (Fennell, 2008). Consequently, ecotourism can be viewed as a double-edged phenomenon: while it offers opportunities for conservation, poverty reduction, and livelihood diversification, it may also generate environmental pressures, cultural commodification, and socio-economic inequalities if poorly managed.

Beyond environmental concerns, ecotourism should also be understood as a multidimensional process that affects cultural landscapes, local ways of life, and historical continuity. Particularly in cultural landscape settings, ecotourism can reshape traditional relationships between people and their environments, sometimes producing new spatial and social transformations. Contemporary ecotourism research therefore increasingly emphasizes not only environmental sustainability but also cultural sustainability, highlighting the importance of preserving historical human–nature relationships, maintaining local identities, and safeguarding living cultural heritage. Within this context, the Ambar Valley provides an important case study for examining the relationship between ecotourism, conservation, and cultural landscapes. Historically shaped by agricultural production, pastoral activities, and long-term human–environment interactions, the valley represents a living cultural landscape that is currently undergoing transformation through conservation policies and increasing ecotourism potential. This situation highlights the need to critically evaluate the balance between tourism development, environmental protection, and the preservation of cultural landscape values.

2. Materials and Methods

This study aims to examine the spatial and cultural transformation of the Ambar Valley in Diyarbakır within the framework of ecotourism discourse. The main hypothesis of the research is that “ecotourism discourse in the Ambar Valley leads not to the conservation of the cultural landscape, but rather to its reconstruction and transformation into a consumption-oriented spatial representation.” In this context, the study critically evaluates the relationship between cultural landscape, ecotourism, and conservation.

A qualitative research method was adopted in the study. The research materials consist of literature on cultural landscape, ecotourism, and conservation approaches, together with findings from fieldwork conducted in the Ambar Valley. Within the scope of the literature review, academic studies on the transformation of cultural landscapes, ecotourism discourse, and conservation policies were examined. During fieldwork, observational data on the current spatial use of the valley, user relations, and everyday life practices were collected.

Within the methodological framework, a literature review was first conducted, followed by an examination of the historical development and current spatial structure of the Ambar Valley. During the field study, the valley’s patterns of use, spatial interventions, and user relationships were analysed through observation. The obtained data were collectively evaluated to interpret the effects of ecotourism discourse on the living cultural landscape of the Ambar Valley. In this respect, the study aims to emphasize that the cultural landscape is not merely a physical environment to be preserved, but also a living structure shaped by production, use, and everyday life relations (Figure 1).

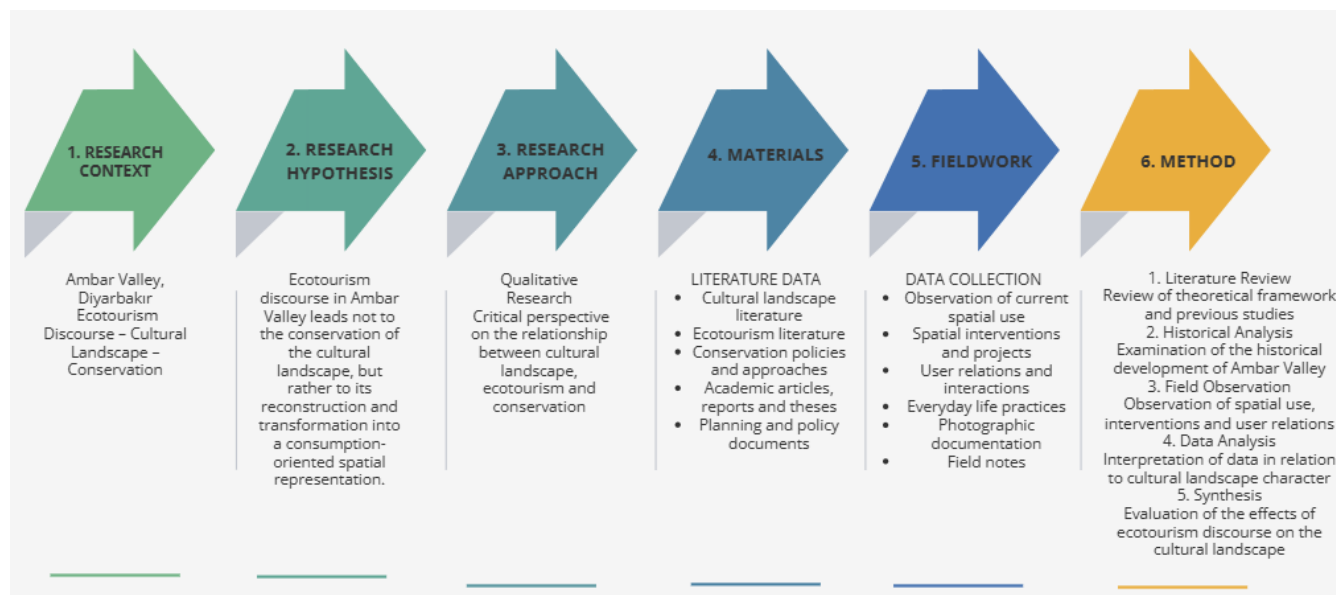


Figure 1. Schematic Framework of Material and Methodology.

3. Findings

The Ambar Valley Ecotourism Area is located between the districts of Hani and Kocaköy in Diyarbakır Province and is one of the most significant cultural landscapes in the region for its outstanding natural, archaeological, and cultural values. Shaped by the Ambar Stream, which originates on the southern slopes of the Southeastern Taurus Mountains, the valley is characterized by a remarkable karstic landscape formed over long geological timescales. Caves, rock shelters, narrow gorges, canyons, and steep limestone cliffs resulting from the dissolution of carbonate formations constitute the distinctive geomorphological features of the area (General Directorate of Forestry [GDF], 2021). These natural formations not only create a visually impressive landscape but also provide habitats for numerous plant and animal species, contributing significantly to biodiversity conservation. Due to its rich natural resources and recreational potential, Ambar Valley was designated as an “Ecotourism Area” by the General Directorate of Forestry in 2017 (GDF, 2021). Today, the valley offers a wide range of ecotourism activities, including trekking, hiking, camping, mountain biking, canyoning, rock climbing, birdwatching, paragliding, and nature photography (Diyarbakırnet, 2026; Hani Governorship, 2026; Etemadi, 2026). Its diverse topography, ecological richness, and scenic landscapes make the area one of the most promising ecotourism destinations in Southeastern Anatolia.

The ecological significance of Ambar Valley extends beyond its geological characteristics. The valley functions as a transitional zone between the steppe ecosystems of Southeastern Anatolia and the mountainous ecosystems of the Taurus range. This environmental diversity supports the coexistence of various habitat types and plant communities. Microclimatic variations observed throughout the valley have facilitated the development of oak woodlands, riparian vegetation, and rocky habitats, thereby enhancing both floral and faunal diversity (GDF, 2021). Consequently, the valley constitutes an important area for ecological and environmental research.

Ambar Valley is notable not only for its natural attributes but also for its long-term cultural continuity extending from prehistoric times to the present day. Situated within the Diyarbakır Basin, the valley historically served as one of the principal natural corridors connecting Northern Mesopotamia with the Taurus Mountains. Owing to this strategic location, the area was utilized by hunter-gatherer groups, early agricultural communities, nomadic pastoralists, and sedentary societies throughout different periods of history (Ökse, 2020). The availability of water resources, fertile lands, and natural transportation routes contributed to the long-term occupation of the valley.

Archaeological investigations conducted in and around the Ambar Valley have revealed substantial evidence of its historical significance. Surveys and excavations at Gre Filla, Kendale Hecala, and Ambar Höyük uncovered rock-cut tombs, architectural remains, water channels, mill structures, ceramic fragments, and various stone tools (Gürbüz, 2020; Kakdaş Ateş, 2025). These findings indicate that the valley functioned not only as a settlement area but also as a center of production, agriculture, and trade (Kakdaş Ateş, 2025). In particular, the presence of water channels and milling facilities demonstrates the importance of water management and agricultural production in the local economy.

Archaeological evidence suggests that human occupation in the valley dates to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period. Findings from Ambar Höyük, Gre Filla, and Kendale Hecala indicate continuous or intermittent settlement from the Neolithic period through the Medieval era (Ökse, 2020; Gürbüz, 2020). Ceramics, chipped stone tools, and architectural remains from different periods demonstrate that the valley served as a center of settlement, production, and cultural interaction for thousands of years. This continuity highlights the importance of the Ambar Valley within the broader cultural development of the Upper Tigris Basin and Northern Mesopotamia. One of the most significant historical functions of the valley was its role within regional transportation and communication networks. The Ambar Stream Valley formed a natural route connecting the fertile plains of Northern Mesopotamia with the highland pastures of the Taurus Mountains. Throughout history, trade caravans, nomadic communities, and pastoral groups have used this corridor to traverse the

region (Ökse, 2020). As a result, the valley became an important zone for the exchange of goods, knowledge, technologies, and cultural practices between different regions and societies.

Traces of this historical role remain visible today. Nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoral communities continue to use the Ambar Valley route during seasonal migrations associated with transhumance activities (Ökse, 2020). Consequently, the valley represents not only an archaeological landscape containing material remains of past civilizations but also a living cultural landscape that preserves elements of intangible cultural heritage. Traditional pastoral practices, local ecological knowledge, and seasonal migration routes constitute important components of this cultural continuity. In recent years, growing interest in ecotourism, cultural heritage management, and sustainable rural development has increased awareness of the valley's potential. Ambar Valley represents an integrated destination where natural landscapes, archaeological resources, and cultural heritage coexist within a single geographic setting (GDF, 2021; Etemadi, 2019). This combination offers significant opportunities for the development of ecotourism, the protection of cultural heritage, the strengthening of local economies, and the promotion of regional development. However, the sustainable use of these resources requires protecting natural environments, conserving archaeological sites, and actively involving local communities in management and planning processes. Ambar Valley is one of the most important natural and cultural heritage areas of Diyarbakır due to its unique geological formations, rich biodiversity, long settlement history extending from prehistoric times to the present, cultural continuity, and considerable ecotourism potential. As a distinctive cultural landscape reflecting thousands of years of interaction between humans and nature, the valley represents a valuable resource for future archaeological, environmental, and tourism-oriented research and conservation initiatives (Gürbüz, 2020; Kakdaş Ateş, 2025; Ökse, 2020). (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Ambar Valley (<http://www.hani.gov.tr/ambar-cayi-kanyonu>).

One of the most important characteristics of the valley is its microclimatic conditions and ecological diversity. The stream system, mountain meadows, and forested areas create a rich ecological environment for flora and fauna. With infrastructure improvements implemented in 2021, walking trails, signboards, and observation points were established to promote controlled, sustainable tourism practices (General Directorate of Forestry, 2021) (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Ambar Valley (Author' s Archive).

Today, the Ambar Valley is considered a living cultural landscape shaped by the interaction of nature, history, culture, and human activity. While the area possesses significant potential for sustainable tourism and conservation policies, it also carries the risk of being aesthetically and tourism-orientedly re-represented through ecotourism discourse. In this respect, the Ambar Valley constitutes an important case for discussing the relationship between conservation, cultural landscape, and ecotourism. International approaches to heritage conservation also emphasize that cultural landscapes

should be evaluated not only by their physical characteristics but also by their social and historical continuity (ICOMOS Türkiye, 2013).

4. Discussion

The spatial transformation processes that have not yet fully emerged in the Ambar Valley are anticipated to show similarities with other cultural landscape cases where ecotourism-oriented conservation policies have been implemented. This situation necessitates evaluating the area not only on a local scale, but also within a broader conservation and tourism paradigm. As observed in the national and international examples examined within the scope of the study, the ecotourism discourse prioritizes visual and consumption-oriented representations of cultural landscapes rather than their living production relations. This approach demonstrates that conservation policies tend to push the intangible values of cultural landscapes, everyday life practices, and historical continuity into the background.

Table 1: Comparative Examples of Ecotourism-Based Cultural Landscape Transformations.

Area	Ecotourism / Conservation Approach	Observed Transformation	Similarity with Ambar Valley
Ambar Valley	Ecotourism-oriented conservation and recreation policies	Transformation of the living production landscape into an aesthetic and touristic representation space	Agricultural production and everyday life practices becoming less visible
Cappadocia	Cultural heritage and tourism-oriented conservation approach	Landscape production based on visual consumption and touristic experience	Local life practices becoming invisible in the face of touristic representation
Uzungöl	Nature conservation and ecotourism policies	Recreational use pressure and transformation of the landscape	Reshaping of the natural/cultural landscape under tourism-oriented use pressure
Machu Picchu	Global tourism and conservation policies	Transformation of the cultural landscape into a consumption-oriented representation space	Weakening of local use relations and the living landscape character
Pamukkale	Tourism and natural heritage conservation policies	Reconstruction of the landscape through visual image and visitor experience	Prioritization of aesthetic values within conservation approaches

Although the transformation processes currently observed in Ambar Valley have not yet reached the level of intensive, irreversible spatial change, the increasing redefinition of the area through ecotourism-oriented conservation policies reveals tendencies comparable to those observed in other cultural landscapes worldwide. In recent decades, ecotourism-based conservation approaches have been promoted as effective tools for protecting natural and cultural heritage. However, numerous studies have demonstrated that such approaches can also facilitate the commodification of landscapes by transforming them into objects of tourist consumption. Therefore, the future of Ambar Valley should be evaluated not only in a local context but also within broader national and international debates on the relationship between conservation and tourism.

From the perspective of cultural landscape theory, conservation involves more than the protection of physical environments or archaeological remains. It also requires the safeguarding of historical production systems, traditional ways of life, local knowledge networks, social memory, and the dynamic relationships between people and their environment. Nevertheless, tourism-oriented conservation policies often oversimplify these complex, multilayered relationships by emphasizing visually appealing elements that can be marketed to visitors. As a result, living cultural landscapes may gradually be transformed into representational landscapes designed primarily for tourism consumption. In such cases, the everyday practices of local communities tend to become secondary to the narratives and images promoted through tourism development.

One of the most notable examples of this process in Türkiye is found in Cappadocia. Initially, conservation policies focused on protecting the region's rock-cut settlements, valleys, and historical landscape features. Over time, however, Cappadocia became deeply integrated into global tourism networks and evolved into one of the country's most recognizable tourism destinations. The proliferation of viewing terraces, photography-oriented tourism, hot-air balloon experiences, and highly structured visitor routes transformed the region into a landscape largely consumed through visual and experiential practices. Consequently, traditional forms of rural production, local economic activities, and everyday life have increasingly been overshadowed by tourism-related functions. Although Ambar Valley has not yet experienced tourism development on a similar scale, the growing emphasis on its natural and cultural attractions suggests that comparable representational processes may already be emerging.

A similar transformation can be observed in Uzungöl in northeastern Türkiye. Tourism policies originally designed to protect the natural environment gradually resulted in increased construction pressure, intensified recreational use, and the commercialization of the landscape. As visitor numbers continued to grow, the area's carrying capacity became

increasingly strained, leading to significant changes in traditional lifestyles and local economic practices. Ironically, a process that began with the intention of protecting nature eventually contributed to the transformation of the very landscape it sought to preserve. Although Ambar Valley has not yet encountered tourism pressure at this scale, current planning initiatives and the promotion of ecotourism suggest that similar spatial pressures may emerge in the future if appropriate management strategies are not implemented.

At the international level, Machu Picchu offers one of the most significant examples of the complex relationship between conservation and tourism. Through conservation programs and ecotourism initiatives, the site has become a globally recognized heritage destination and a symbol of cultural tourism. However, increasing visitor numbers, expanding transportation infrastructure, and the growing influence of tourism-driven economic activities have significantly altered the original use relationships within the cultural landscape. As the representational value of cultural heritage gained prominence, the everyday practices, livelihoods, and cultural traditions of local communities became increasingly marginalized. This example demonstrates how conservation policies, when closely linked to tourism development, can weaken the living character of cultural landscapes. In this respect, Machu Picchu provides an important comparative framework for understanding the potential risks that the Ambar Valley may face in the future.

When these examples are considered collectively, it becomes evident that Ambar Valley may also be susceptible to similar transformation processes. Today, the valley continues to function as a living cultural landscape characterized by agriculture, pastoralism, seasonal migration routes, local production systems, and traditional land-use practices. These activities constitute the historical and cultural foundations of the landscape and contribute significantly to its authenticity. However, as ecotourism-oriented conservation policies expand, the valley may increasingly be reconfigured through visitor infrastructure such as scenic viewpoints, hiking trails, interpretation centers, and recreational facilities. Under such circumstances, the valley risks being perceived less as a lived and productive environment and more as a space designed for tourist experiences and visual consumption. In other words, its historical relationships of production and habitation may gradually be replaced by aestheticized representations that prioritize attractiveness and marketability.

As emphasized in cultural landscape studies, conservation strategies that focus solely on protecting physical features are insufficient to ensure the long-term sustainability of heritage landscapes. The authenticity of a cultural landscape derives not only from its material remains but also from the social relations, production practices, local knowledge systems, and everyday experiences that continuously shape it. Therefore, conservation and planning policies for Ambar Valley should extend beyond the protection of natural and archaeological resources to include the preservation of its living cultural heritage. Otherwise, what is conserved may ultimately be a reconstructed representation of the landscape rather than the dynamic cultural landscape itself. On the one hand, such approaches contribute to the protection of natural and cultural heritage and create opportunities for sustainable regional development. On the other hand, they may encourage the commodification, aestheticization, and touristic consumption of cultural landscapes. Consequently, future conservation strategies for the Ambar Valley should prioritize not only environmental sustainability but also cultural continuity, the preservation of local production systems, and the maintenance of social memory. Only through such an integrated approach can the valley continue to exist as a sustainable cultural landscape that preserves both its natural and cultural values for future generations.

5. Conclusions

This study evaluated the effects of ecotourism discourse on the cultural landscape through the example of the Ambar Valley in Diyarbakir. The findings demonstrate that ecotourism-oriented conservation approaches have the potential to transform cultural landscapes not only physically, but also socially and culturally. Although the Ambar Valley has not yet undergone an intensive spatial transformation, current conservation and planning approaches indicate a tendency toward the aestheticization and tourism-oriented representation of the landscape.

Historically, the valley has functioned as a living cultural landscape shaped by agricultural production, human–nature interaction, and everyday life practices. However, the study reveals that ecotourism discourse increasingly prioritizes visual, recreational, and consumption-oriented values over the productive and living character of the landscape. In this respect, the transformation tendencies observed in the Ambar Valley are like those in other national and international examples, such as Cappadocia, Uzungöl, and Machu Picchu, where ecotourism-oriented conservation policies have been implemented. As in these examples, ecotourism discourse gradually transforms the relationship between local communities and cultural landscapes.

The study also demonstrates that current conservation approaches mainly focus on the physical and visual dimensions of the landscape, while the intangible values of cultural landscape such as local memory, production relations, and everyday life practices—remain relatively neglected. Therefore, ecotourism discourse should be considered not only as a tool for environmental protection and tourism development, but also as a process that reshapes cultural landscapes and spatial representations.

In conclusion, the study emphasizes that sustainable conservation policies for cultural landscapes should not be limited to aesthetic and tourism-oriented approaches, but should also preserve the landscape's living, productive, and socially embedded character. In this context, the Ambar Valley is an important case for critically examining the relationships among ecotourism, conservation, and cultural landscape transformation.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author(s) report no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study consist of literature sources, field observations, photographs, and field notes related to the Ambar Valley. The supporting materials are available from the author upon reasonable request.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were not required for this study, as it did not involve human participants, animals, or sensitive personal data.

CRedit Author Statement

All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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