

The Logic, Problems, and Pathways of High-Quality Development of Ecotourism in Qinghai Province

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Abstract: As a major carrier of ecological civilization and a strategic fulcrum for transforming lucid waters and lush mountains into invaluable assets, ecotourism occupies a pivotal position in China's new era of high-quality development. Qinghai Province, situated at the source of the Yangtze, Yellow, and Lancang rivers and renowned as "China's Water Tower," has been entrusted by the central government with the historic mission of building an international ecotourism destination. Four bodies of thought guide the analysis: Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization, the "Two Mountains" theory, and the new development philosophy built on innovation, coordination, greenness, openness, and sharing. Together they anchor a "logic-problems-pathways" framework for reading Qinghai's ecotourism transition. The logic section sets out five dimensions—ecological priority, value transformation, livelihood improvement, cultural empowerment, and opening-up. Five dilemmas follow, located in ecological constraints, product supply, facilities and services, standards and branding, and factor support. Five pathways answer them: safeguarding the ecological bottom line, deepening product supply reform, closing infrastructure gaps, building a standards and certification system, and strengthening factor support. Beyond the Qinghai case, the framework offers a provincial-level account of how ecotourism and high-quality development can be theorized together, and what such an account implies for destinations in ecologically fragile regions.

Keywords: Qinghai Province; Ecotourism; High-quality development; Internal logic; Realistic dilemmas; Practical pathways

Online publication: September 30, 2026

1. Introduction

Ecotourism began as a niche idea and now ranks among the most dynamic segments of the world tourism economy. The Mexican conservationist Héctor Ceballos-Lascuráin advanced the term in the 1980s. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) later gave it institutional form, defining ecotourism as responsible travel that conserves the natural environment and sustains the well-being of local people ^[1]. That definition

has proved durable because the idea speaks to a real tension: ecotourism promises to reconcile ecological conservation with economic and social development, and on that promise it has secured a central place in the global sustainable tourism agenda. The scale of the sector is now considerable. Ecotourism generates roughly eight billion visits each year, spans 17.5 percent of the world's land area and 8.45 percent of marine areas, and is expected to reach a market value of 945 billion U.S. dollars by 2034, growing at a compound annual rate of 13.9 percent ^[2]. Demand-side sentiment points the same way. About 93 percent of travelers say they prefer sustainable options, a figure that shows how far environmental responsibility has traveled into mainstream consumer values.

Growth of this kind has not come without friction. Reviews of the field report decidedly mixed outcomes, and they reach an uncomfortable verdict: ecotourism is both a “panacea” and a “predicament.” Success stories are plentiful, and they show that tourism revenue can fund conservation and put money in community hands. Failures are just as numerous. Where monitoring, evaluation, and management are weak, ecotourism can intensify environmental degradation and social conflict ^[3]. Bibliometric work has since mapped the field's center of gravity. Four clusters dominate—ecological preservation, residents' interests, the carbon footprint, and tourist behavior ^[4]. Local benefit creation, ecotourism intentions, and community empowerment rank among the most studied topics ^[4,5]. More recent work has expanded the conceptual apparatus to encompass the transformative economic, social, and environmental impacts of ecotourism ^[6], the multi-stage structure of the ecotourism experience from pre-visit to post-visit ^[7], and the role of emerging Industry 4.0 technologies in accelerating sustainable ecotourism ^[8].

Within China, ecotourism has been elevated to the level of national strategy. The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China established high-quality development as the foremost task in building a modern socialist country in all respects, and tourism—particularly ecotourism—has been positioned as an emerging strategic pillar industry and a livelihood and happiness industry with distinctive characteristics of the times ^[9,10]. Quality, not volume, sits at the center of that agenda. Tourism development has to embody the new development philosophy of innovation, coordination, greenness, openness, and sharing, and it has to shift toward efficiency and sustainability rather than raw expansion ^[10]. Ecotourism fits this orientation closely. Its green and ecological character makes it a practical instrument for building ecological civilization and for realizing the value of ecological products ^[11].

Qinghai holds a position in this agenda that no other province can occupy. The province lies on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, where the Yangtze, Yellow, and Lancang rivers rise; hence “China's Water Tower,” and hence its standing as a critical ecological security barrier for Asia. Two national parks—Sanjiangyuan (Three-River-Source) and Qilian Mountains—fall within its borders, as does the Hoh Xil World Natural Heritage site. Qinghai Lake and Kumbum Monastery complete a portfolio of world-class natural and cultural resources. In March 2021 and June 2024, the central leadership entrusted Qinghai with the major mission of “building an international ecotourism destination,” a positioning that has since been embedded in the province's five-year planning and operationalized through a “1+N+X” framework of master plans, specialized plans, and supporting measures. Although Qinghai has made notable progress—including the establishment of a “three-certificate” management mechanism covering ecological impact assessment, project approval, and scenic-area operation, together with positive-and-negative lists and the promulgation of provincial standards for ecotourism product design and interpretation services—its ecotourism sector still trails international benchmarks in product diversity, infrastructure, standardization, and global competitiveness.

Against this background, the present study addresses a significant gap in the literature. International research on ecotourism has extensively examined its impacts, experiences, and thematic evolution, while Chinese scholarship has clarified the inherent requirements, era value, and practical logic of the high-quality development of tourism in general. The evolution of Chinese ecotourism research over the past forty years has been marked by a sequence of substantive shifts: from resource exploitation toward ecological value transformation, from tourist preference toward ecological responsibility, from environmental impact assessment toward social–ecological coupling, from community participation toward multi-stakeholder collaborative governance, and from individual case studies toward regional comparison and model distillation ^[12]. Parallel reviews have extended this synthesis to specific contexts such as urban ecotourism ^[13]. Nevertheless, relatively few studies have systematically integrated the concepts of ecotourism and high-quality development at the provincial level, and still fewer have focused on Qinghai as a distinctive case of an ecologically fragile plateau region pursuing internationalization. The present paper seeks to close this gap.

2. The internal logic of high-quality development of ecotourism in Qinghai

Ecotourism in Qinghai did not arrive as an arbitrary policy choice. Its high-quality development rests on the province’s ecological endowment, on the strategic role assigned to Qinghai within the national system, and on the theoretical logic of ecological civilization. Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization supplies the governing framework. Three of its propositions bear directly on the argument. Lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets. A good ecological environment is the most inclusive public well-being. Humanity and nature form a community of life ^[11,14]. The “Two Mountains” theory sits inside this framework and works through a three-step dialectic—“both mountains,” the bottom line of “preferring mountains,” and the transformation of “mountains into assets”—which explains how ecological value becomes economic and social value ^[15]. Five dimensions of internal logic follow from these foundations. Together they answer two questions: why Qinghai must pursue high-quality ecotourism development, and how it can.

Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization comprises eight core components: the comprehensive leadership of the Party over ecological civilization construction; the proposition that lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets; the principle that a good ecological environment is the most inclusive public well-being; the recognition of green development as a profound revolution in the philosophy of development; the systematic governance of mountains, waters, forests, fields, lakes, grasses, and sands; the strictest institutions and rule of law for ecological protection; the Beautiful China initiative; and joint efforts to build a global ecological civilization. These components do double duty. Normatively, they set out what ecological civilization requires; analytically, they supply the concepts needed to specify ecotourism’s place within it. Read together, they position ecotourism as an ecological product, as an economic instrument that internalizes externalities through market mechanisms, and as a carrier of social responsibility spanning the environmental duties of producers, consumers, and regulators ^[11]. The five dimensions below follow from this foundation.

A second correspondence links the five dimensions to the new development philosophy that governs high-quality development in China—innovation, coordination, greenness, openness, and sharing. Greenness appears in ecological priority and in value transformation. Sharing is what livelihood improvement delivers. Cultural empowerment carries the coordinated development of material and spiritual civilization, and opening-up answers two demands at once: domestic innovation and international integration. Ecotourism in Qinghai

is therefore not a marginal application of these general principles but a concentrated expression of them, a sector in which the abstract commitments of the new development philosophy acquire concrete, place-specific meaning. It is this convergence of ecological imperative, developmental logic, and national strategy that makes the high-quality development of ecotourism in Qinghai both a distinctive case and a revealing microcosm of China's broader developmental trajectory.

2.1. Ecological priority: Safeguarding the ecological security baseline

The first and most fundamental dimension is the logic of ecological priority. As the source of three great rivers that sustain a vast portion of the Asian population, Qinghai's ecological security is not merely a provincial concern but a national and even continental imperative. The province's glaciers, wetlands, and grasslands perform indispensable regulatory functions in water conservation, climate stabilization, and biodiversity maintenance, functions whose value far exceeds any local economic calculation. For a region so ecologically sensitive, ecological conservation constitutes the non-negotiable precondition for any tourism activity. "Protective development" is the phrase that captures this logic. Conventional mass tourism treats protection and development as opposites; ecotourism couples them, so that protection becomes the foundation on which development stands ^[11].

Governance in Qinghai must therefore work differently from governance elsewhere. Three instruments—ecological red lines, environmental carrying capacity, and conservation zoning—have to come before development decisions and govern them, not follow as constraints to be bargained over later. The central leadership framed the principle plainly: "pristine ecology is the capital of tourism, and tourism development must not come at the expense of the ecological environment." Applied on the ground, the principle yields a distinctive model. High-value, low-volume ecotourism takes precedence over mass tourism. National park core zones stay strictly protected, and commercial tourism is confined to designated areas. Visitor experience is calibrated against what the ecosystem can absorb, not against how many people can be admitted.

Institutionally, this logic has begun to take shape in Qinghai's regulatory architecture. The positive-and-negative lists governing tourism development, the "three-certificate" mechanism requiring ecological impact assessment before project approval, and the zoning of national parks into strictly protected core zones and limited-use general control zones all instantiate the principle that conservation precedes development. These instruments distinguish Qinghai's approach from a conventional growth-driven model in which environmental assessment functions as a post hoc formality. Their further refinement toward a dynamic, data-driven system that adjusts visitor quotas in response to real-time ecological indicators represents the concrete operationalization of ecological priority, and it is the institutional expression of the province's commitment to treating its water-tower function as a binding constraint on all economic activity, tourism included.

2.2. Value transformation: Realizing the value of ecological products

Value transformation is the second dimension, and the "Two Mountains" theory is its source. Lucid waters and lush mountains are themselves invaluable assets; that much the theory asserts at the outset. From there it moves through three ascending propositions. Economic growth and environmental protection should be pursued together. When the two conflict, ecological integrity comes first. At the highest level, ecological advantages can and must be converted into economic and social advantages ^[15]. The third proposition matters most for Qinghai, whose principal endowment is ecological rather than industrial. Conventional industrialization is not a road this

province can take. Its development has to be built on precisely those ecological assets that other regions do not have.

Ecotourism is the converter that performs this work. Ecological product value realization provides the mechanism: through it, the positive externalities of ecosystem services are internalized, and resources that historically carried no market price—pristine landscapes, clean water, fresh air, biodiversity—begin to generate economic returns. The arrangement connects ecotourism to the national effort to establish mechanisms for realizing the value of ecological products, and to a wider principle now stated routinely in Chinese policy: protecting the ecology is protecting productivity, and improving the ecology is improving productivity. What stringent conservation appears to cost, ecotourism can partly repay. The “ecological debt” turns into an “ecological dividend,” and Qinghai’s tightest constraint becomes the source of its most distinctive value. High-quality ecotourism products sell at a premium, and that premium is the measurable form the transformation takes.

Accounting and pricing practices for ecosystem services increasingly underwrite this logic. Gross ecosystem product (GEP) accounting assigns monetary value to the provisioning, regulating, and cultural services of ecosystems, and it gives Qinghai a quantitative basis for asking what its ecology is worth beyond direct market output. Tourism is one of the main channels through which that latent worth is monetized; carbon-sink trading and certification of ecological agricultural products are others. Linking pristine landscapes to willingness to pay through tourism lets the province capture ecosystem-service value that would otherwise go uncompensated, and then reinvest it in the conservation it depends on. The circular relationship between ecological protection and economic return is thus not incidental but constitutive of the province’s development model.

2.3. Livelihood improvement: Promoting common prosperity

The third dimension is the logic of livelihood improvement and common prosperity. Ecotourism is distinctive among tourism forms precisely because it is expected to deliver tangible benefits to local communities, particularly in remote and underdeveloped areas. A substantial body of research demonstrates that community-based ecotourism can promote the transfer of advanced production factors to rural areas, generate employment, and alleviate poverty when it is properly governed^[16]. Rural tourism, of which ecotourism is a principal variant, has been shown to contribute to common prosperity through mechanisms of employment creation, income diversification, and the reduction of regional and urban–rural disparities^[17].

In Qinghai, this logic is inseparable from the socialist principle that development should be shared. Large expanses of the province’s population are pastoral, and herding communities coexist spatially with national parks and protected areas. For these communities, ecotourism opens a route out of a passive role. Conservation has often cast pastoral households as observers of protected areas, and in some cases as reluctant bearers of its costs. Ecotourism gives them a chance to become participants and beneficiaries instead. Homestays, guiding work, transport, and the sale of local products put income in the hands of herders and rural families, and that income advances common prosperity while it sharpens the incentive to look after the land. Residents who gain from conservation tend to defend it more strongly. Livelihood and ecology then reinforce one another rather than pull in opposite directions.

Qinghai’s national-park governance shows this logic operating in practice. In Sanjiangyuan National Park, herders have become ecological rangers and tourism service providers—a shift from carrying conservation’s

costs to sharing its returns. Co-management arrangements, benefit-sharing agreements, and deliberate direction of tourism income toward local households reset the incentive structure. Ecological protection turns into a source of livelihood instead of an obstacle to it. This is the practical meaning of the proposition that a good ecological environment is the most inclusive public well-being: it is not an abstract slogan but a design principle according to which the benefits of conservation are distributed to the very communities whose restraint makes conservation possible.

2.4. Cultural empowerment: Fusing plateau ecology with ethnic culture

Cultural empowerment is the fourth dimension. Qinghai's ethnic fabric is unusually dense—Tibetan, Hui, Tu, Salar, and Mongolian communities whose languages, religious traditions, festivals, and intangible heritage are woven into the plateau environment itself. Natural scenery alone cannot carry high-quality ecotourism. Cultural depth is what animates it. A destination's identity, the quality that sets it apart from competitors, comes from culture; tourism in turn gives culture a stage on which to be transmitted, revived, and appreciated by audiences well beyond the province. The Regong arts, Tibetan medicine, and grassland herding traditions show both the wealth of that inheritance and how tightly it is bound to the land.

Cultural empowerment, on this reading, is no decorative addition. It drives product differentiation and sustains competitiveness. Where cultural depth is present, a visit stops being a superficial encounter with scenery and becomes an exchange with a place, its people, and their heritage; the product gains value and the visitor gains satisfaction. Qinghai's combination of plateau landscapes and ethnic culture is a resource no competitor can copy. The logic also carries an ethical condition. Cultural resources have to be developed in ways that respect their authenticity, and that means guarding against the "staging" and commercialization that hollow out meaning and alienate the very communities that keep a culture alive.

Contemporary high-end tourism prizes exactly the cultural forms Qinghai has in abundance. The Regong arts, recognized as intangible cultural heritage, carry centuries of Tibetan Buddhist artistic practice. Tibetan medicine offers knowledge systems shaped by the plateau environment. Festivals and herding practices among the province's ethnic groups remain living traditions, not curated performances. Heritage-based interpretation, authentic cultural homestays, and participatory experiences can fold such resources into ecotourism products, and the authenticity they confer cannot be imitated. Culture and nature are inseparable companions here, not a supplement and a base. Governance arrangements must therefore protect cultural authenticity while permitting its sustainable commercialization.

2.5. Opening-up: Meeting international standards through certification

The fifth dimension is opening-up and international alignment. If Qinghai is to build an international ecotourism destination, its products must satisfy global benchmarks for sustainability and quality, not only domestic expectations. Several international frameworks provide reference points for destination management, product standards, and third-party certification: the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) criteria, the ISO 18060 series on sustainable tourism, the Australian ECO certification program, and Green Globe 21^[1]. All four rest on a shared architecture—sustainable management, socio-economic impact, cultural impact, and environmental impact.

Two gains follow from alignment. Abroad, it strengthens the credibility and international recognition of the province's ecotourism brand, which matters in a market where consumers ask for verifiable sustainability

certification and where corporate environmental, social, and governance procurement increasingly favors certified operators. At home, it pushes management practice upward, forcing destinations and firms to adopt standards of environmental performance that are rigorous, measurable, and continually revised. Standardization and certification thus serve both as discipline and as a competitive lever. For a province whose international brand awareness remains limited, pursuing recognition through credible standards is a strategic requirement, not an optional refinement.

Urgency on this front has grown as global standards move from process compliance to performance outcomes. ISO 18060:2026, proposed jointly by China and Brazil, marks that shift. It asks what organizations have achieved rather than what they have done, and it establishes a common indicator system for measuring environmental, social, and economic performance across the tourism value chain. Engaging with such standards is more than symbolic alignment for Qinghai. It means acquiring the institutional vocabulary and the measurement discipline required to compete internationally. Certification then functions as a learning mechanism as much as a market signal, pushing the province to build the data, governance, and evaluation capacity on which genuinely sustainable performance rests.

3. Realistic dilemmas of high-quality ecotourism development in Qinghai

Compelling logic notwithstanding, five structural dilemmas stand between Qinghai's ecological endowment and durable competitiveness. They are not separate defects but constraints that hold each other in place, and they can be diagnosed at five levels: ecological constraints, product supply, facilities and services, standards and branding, and factor support.

The five form a tightly coupled system, and each constraint feeds the next. Ecological fragility caps the scale and intensity of development, which caps the market size needed to sustain diversified products and strong enterprises. A narrow product base pushes revenue down, and low revenue limits what can be spent on infrastructure and talent. Weak standards and certification then suppress the brand premium that would otherwise finance the whole cycle. Because the problems are interdependent, they cannot be solved one at a time. That is why the pathways proposed below form an integrated set rather than a menu.

3.1. Ecological constraints: Protection and development in tension

The foremost dilemma is the persistent tension between ecological protection and tourism development. Qinghai's ecosystems are simultaneously its greatest asset and its most severe constraint. The plateau's high-altitude grasslands, wetlands, and glacial systems are highly sensitive to disturbance, with limited carrying capacity and slow recovery rates. During peak seasons, concentrated tourist flows to flagship sites such as Qinghai Lake risk exceeding ecological thresholds, threatening vegetation degradation, water pollution, and wildlife disturbance. The international literature repeatedly underscores that, without effective conservation mechanisms, ecotourism can aggravate rather than alleviate environmental degradation^[3,6].

In Qinghai, this challenge is compounded by the spatial overlap between prime tourism resources and strictly protected zones of national parks, where the scope for commercial activity is legally restricted. The province thus faces the difficult task of reconciling the imperative of ecological integrity with the legitimate aspiration for tourism-driven development. The existing regulatory instruments—such as the positive-and-negative lists and the “three-certificate” mechanism—represent important advances, but they have not yet

matured into a fine-grained, dynamic system of carrying-capacity monitoring capable of responding in real time to seasonal and spatial variations in ecological pressure. The absence of such a system leaves the province exposed to the risk that concentrated flows will breach ecological thresholds at precisely those sites whose integrity is most vital to its destination brand.

The problem is amplified by the strong seasonality of Qinghai's tourism. Demand concentrates in a short summer window, when climatic conditions are most favorable, producing pronounced peaks in visitor pressure at exactly the sites most sensitive to disturbance. The coincidence of peak season and ecological vulnerability means that the province's most valuable landscapes are subject to their greatest stress during the narrow period in which they generate the most revenue. Nothing in current policy redistributes demand across time and space. Off-season product development, spatial diversification, and dynamic visitor management are all underused. The province therefore remains structurally exposed to a familiar trade-off: short-term revenue bought with long-term ecological damage, until the resource base that supports the destination brand is itself undermined.

3.2. Product supply: Homogeneous formats and shallow experience

Product supply is the second dilemma, and it concerns both structure and quality. Conventional sightseeing still dominates Qinghai's ecotourism offer, and the range of experience-based, participatory, high-value products remains narrow. Destination-building documents for the province report survey evidence showing that product homogenization ranks among visitors' most frequent complaints, and that repeat visits within and around Qinghai are correspondingly rare. The pattern is not unique to Qinghai. China's tourism product system was designed around sightseeing, and it has struggled to supply the deep, immersive, and diversified experiences that an upgrading market now demands ^[9].

The mismatch bites harder in Qinghai because the province's resources suit niche, high-depth experiences rather than mass sightseeing. Glaciers, grasslands, salt lakes, star-gazing conditions, and ethnic culture all point in that direction. Yet few of them have been converted into differentiated products. Because the sightseeing format dominates, stays are short and per-capita spending is low, and the province misses travelers who would pay well for authentic, immersive, educational experiences. A narrow portfolio also deepens seasonality: demand crowds into a brief summer window while ice, snow, and clear winter skies go largely unused.

Three gaps show how deep the product problem runs. Qinghai's star-gazing conditions rank among the best in China, thanks to high altitude, low humidity, and limited light pollution, yet they have barely been commercialized despite strong international demand for dark-sky tourism. Ice and snow remain underdeveloped relative to their potential. Ethnic festivals and intangible heritage have not been turned into bookable, marketable experiences. The consequence is a structural mismatch between the richness of Qinghai's resource base and the narrowness of its product portfolio, which in turn depresses the length of stay, the level of per-capita expenditure, and the willingness of visitors to return. Closing this gap is central to any serious strategy of high-quality development.

3.3. Facilities and services: Accessibility and internationalization gaps

Infrastructure and service deficiencies form the third dilemma. Many of Qinghai's ecologically valuable destinations sit in remote areas where transport access is poor, and the province's tourism infrastructure as a whole falls below the national average. For an international destination, the most revealing gap is air access: Xining, the provincial capital, still has no direct international flights, which sharply constrains inbound travel.

Multilingual service capacity is thin as well. Of roughly 3,800 licensed tour guides, only 210 to 260 work in foreign languages, and the hospitality sector lacks the small-language capacity that diversified international markets require.

These shortfalls matter because the ecotourism experience literature shows how much visitor satisfaction depends on interpretation, guiding, and support services ^[7]. Interpretation carries particular weight. It is what makes ecotourism educational rather than merely scenic, and it is the mechanism through which visitors come to understand ecological systems and to feel responsible for them. A service system that cannot deliver high-quality multilingual interpretation therefore breaks a defining promise of the sector. The problem extends beyond interpretation. Weak transport connectivity and underdeveloped digital platforms raise the transaction costs of travel across a dispersed and remote province, reduce the reach of its attractions, and hold down both domestic and international demand.

Digital and information infrastructure is part of the same failure. Visitors to Qinghai confront fragmented information, patchy signal coverage in remote areas, and few integrated digital services for reservation, navigation, and emergency response. These are not minor inconveniences. In a dispersed, remote destination, they are binding constraints on access. The weakness is sharper still in interpretation. Thin interpretation systems, few qualified interpreters, limited multilingual materials, and underdeveloped educational programming together mean that the learning dimension of ecotourism goes undelivered, and what visitors take away is scenic consumption. Until these deficiencies are addressed, the value of the province's ecological endowment cannot be realized.

3.4. Standards and branding: Fragmentation and weak certification

Standards and branding are the fourth dilemma. Qinghai has promulgated seven local tourism standards and, in 2024, two provincial standards covering ecotourism product design and interpretation services. A systematic, integrated, and internationally harmonized standard system for ecotourism is still missing. Without a comprehensive certification mechanism comparable to GSTC destination criteria or national ecotourism accreditation programs, the province cannot reliably distinguish genuine ecotourism products from those that simply borrow the label. Brand equity suffers as a direct result.

Research on ecotourism certification shows what credible standards do: they “authenticate” ecotourism, guide consumer choice, and protect trust from the damage done when the label is applied vaguely or opportunistically ^[1]. Qinghai illustrates the cost of their absence. The province promotes itself under the “Source of Mountains and Rivers, Beautiful Qinghai” positioning, yet international brand awareness stays limited, and inbound tourists accounted for just 0.8 percent of total visitors in 2024. Part of the explanation lies in the missing certification signals that international markets rely on. Without them, Qinghai's ecotourism brand cannot command the price premiums or the international trust its ecological quality should justify.

Numbers make the branding deficit concrete. Inbound visitors numbered approximately 37,000 in 2024, or 0.8 percent of total arrivals—a share hard to reconcile with the world-class quality of the province's ecological and cultural resources. Endowment is not being converted into international recognition. What is missing are the certification and quality signals that international distribution channels and high-value consumers consult when they weigh one destination against another. Without credible certification, Qinghai's ecotourism products cannot be distinguished from superficially similar offerings elsewhere, and the province cannot charge the premiums or win the loyalty its ecological quality would otherwise support. In the end, the standards and

branding dilemma is a dilemma of value that has gone unrealized.

3.5. Factor support: Talent shortage and weak market players

The fifth dilemma is the scarcity of factors of production. Tourism enterprises in Qinghai are mostly small. Leading firms are weak, and capacity for investment, innovation, and international marketing is limited. The province has roughly 260 star-rated hotels, but distinctive, scaled, branded accommodation clusters are absent along key routes, and no influential, industry-leading consumer formats of the kind that mark mature destinations have emerged. Structurally, the province is poorly placed to mobilize capital, coordinate the industry chain, or present a unified brand.

Composite talent is scarcer still—professionals who combine ecological knowledge, cultural competence, service skills, and foreign-language capability—and the shortage holds back the upgrading of the whole industry. Three conditions reinforce it: a small population base, a strongly seasonal tourism market, and a local economy of limited scale. All three weaken the incentives and the capacity to train and retain people. The high-quality development literature is clear that moving tourism from resource dependence to innovation-driven growth depends on human capital and on market entities able to turn endowment into brand assets ^[9,10]. Qinghai is weak on both, and that weakness constrains every other dimension of high-quality development.

Seasonality compounds the problem. Employment and investment returns swing widely across the year, and the short operating window discourages long-term investment in people: skilled workers face long stretches of underemployment, while capital sunk into tourism infrastructure sits idle for months. The modest size of the provincial economy further limits how deep the local market for tourism services can become and how many complementary inputs are available. Training programs alone will not close the factor-support gap. What is needed is coordinated action on three fronts—market development, product diversification that stretches the operating season, and the cultivation of anchor enterprises capable of running year-round.

4. Practical pathways for Qinghai's high-quality ecotourism development

This section sets out five practical pathways that answer the five dilemmas and, taken together, amount to a coherent strategy. The pathways are designed to be mutually reinforcing and to operate through the logic of institutional construction, product upgrading, infrastructure investment, standardization, and factor cultivation. Their common thrust is the transformation of Qinghai's ecotourism from a resource-dependent, sightseeing-oriented model into an innovation-driven, experience-oriented, and internationally competitive model.

The five pathways are sequenced by their logical priority: the safeguarding of the ecological bottom line provides the institutional precondition, product reform and infrastructure investment supply the material and experiential foundation, standardization and certification confer the external credibility that unlocks international markets, and factor cultivation provides the human and organizational capacity that sustains the whole. Although presented in sequence, the pathways are best understood as a system in which progress on any one dimension lowers the cost and raises the return of progress on the others. This systemic conception distinguishes a genuine strategy of high-quality development from a mere list of discrete measures, and it reflects the paper's central claim that Qinghai's transformation is, above all, an institutional and conceptual project.

4.1. Safeguarding the ecological bottom line: Carrying-capacity control with ecological compensation

Qinghai should institutionalize ecological carrying-capacity control as its answer to the protection–development tension. That means setting science-based thresholds for visitor numbers in sensitive areas, running reservation, zoning, and flow-diversion mechanisms, and deploying digital monitoring to watch environmental conditions as they change. The province’s existing “three-certificate” mechanism and positive-and-negative list system already supply a foundation. They can be deepened into a full-cycle environmental governance framework covering project access, construction, operation, and post-evaluation. Ecological assessment would then cease to be a one-time gate and become a continuing discipline governing the life cycle of every tourism activity.

Capacity control needs a counterpart. Qinghai should strengthen ecological compensation and benefit-sharing mechanisms that tie conservation outcomes to tourism revenue, and it should put the principle that a good ecological environment is the most inclusive public well-being into operational form: those who protect the ecology should be rewarded with tourism income, employment, and skills. Tourism-linked ecological compensation, carbon-sink trading, and community co-management of protected areas can each play a part. Together they turn communities and enterprises from passive users of ecological resources into active guardians. Aligning conservation incentives with development incentives attacks the root of the protection–development tension rather than its symptoms, and it creates the institutional preconditions on which the other four pathways rest.

Digital technology is indispensable here. Real-time environmental monitoring, remote sensing, and intelligent visitor-flow management generate the fine-grained, dynamic data needed to enforce carrying-capacity limits without recourse to blunt prohibitions. If ecological indicators are wired into reservation and ticketing systems, the province can adjust access as conditions require—cutting quotas when vegetation or wildlife indicators show stress, steering visitors toward alternative sites with spare capacity. Carrying-capacity management then stops being a static, paper-based exercise and becomes adaptive and data-driven. The province also gains a place at the frontier of technology-enabled ecological tourism management, in step with the wider role Industry 4.0 technologies are assuming in sustainable ecotourism.

4.2. Deepening product supply reform: A plateau-specific ecotourism product system

To break product homogenization, Qinghai should move away from sightseeing-centered supply toward a diversified, experience-based system anchored in resources the province alone possesses. Themed product lines offer one route: river-source tracing, plateau stargazing, glacier and grassland ecotourism, ethnic cultural immersion, and health and wellness experiences. Each converts ecological and cultural endowments into differentiated, high-value offerings. Segmentation and depth should guide innovation. Mass volume is the wrong target. Premium, small-group, and educational products suit Qinghai better, because they respect ecological thresholds while attracting visitors willing to pay more.

Digital technologies can enrich the experience and reduce physical pressure on fragile sites at the same time. Virtual and augmented reality, along with intelligent interpretation systems, extend access to sensitive areas without intrusion. Smart-tourism platforms match visitors to products more precisely and manage flows with greater sophistication. Supply-side reform of this kind answers a broader requirement: tourism supply must adapt to demand that is upgrading, diversifying, and personalizing ^[9]. If the competitive basis shifts from the quantity of scenery to the quality of experience, Qinghai can lengthen stays, lift per-capita spending, ease

seasonality, and turn its ecological endowment into a diversified portfolio of premium products.

Product innovation will not succeed without marketing and market segmentation. Qinghai's premium, small-group products need to reach the segments most willing to pay for authentic and educational experiences: domestic high-income travelers, international special-interest markets, and educational and research groups. Digital marketing platforms and international tourism channels can connect those segments to certified, differentiated products, and partnerships with established tour operators can supply the distribution reach and brand credibility that local enterprises lack. The aim is visitor value rather than visitor volume—matching the composition of demand to the ecological constraints and premium positioning that define the province's strategy.

4.3. Addressing infrastructure gaps: Accessibility and service internationalization

Three priorities follow for infrastructure and services: improving transport connectivity to remote ecotourism destinations, upgrading supporting facilities along key routes, and raising the internationalization of service capabilities. Without coordinated international air routes and easier inbound travel, the province's international ambition will remain out of reach. Multilingual capacity matters just as much—foreign-language guides, signage, and digital information systems all lower the barriers international visitors face. Spending of this kind is not peripheral. It is the enabling condition that turns ecological resources into consumable, high-quality tourism experiences.

Smart-tourism platforms combining reservation, navigation, interpretation, and safety functions improve service quality and make fine-grained management of tourist flows possible at the same time. In a dispersed, remote region, they reduce the information and transaction costs of travel, and they generate the data infrastructure that carrying-capacity monitoring and precision marketing require. Interpretation deserves special attention, since the educational mission of ecotourism depends on it. Money spent on high-quality multilingual interpretation is money spent on the distinctive value proposition of ecotourism itself: it converts passive sightseeing into active environmental learning and deepens both visitor satisfaction and environmental responsibility ^[7].

Safety and emergency-response capacity belong in this pathway too, though they are easily overlooked. Qinghai's remote, high-altitude destinations carry distinctive risks—altitude sickness, sudden weather changes, limited communication coverage—and they require robust safety systems: satellite communication, coordinated emergency rescue, and visitor risk education. An international destination must meet the expectations of visitors who have never encountered a highland environment. Investment in safety is therefore inseparable from investment in accessibility and service quality, because trust is the precondition for any visit at all. Without it, neither domestic nor international visitors will venture into the province's dispersed attractions.

4.4. Building standards and certification: Branding and competitiveness through certification

Standards and branding require their own pathway. Qinghai should build a systematic ecotourism standard and certification system that reconciles international benchmarks with local conditions, drawing on the GSTC destination criteria, the ISO 18060 series, and the experience of national accreditation programs such as Australia's ECO certification. A tiered framework could cover destination management, product design, interpretation, and environmental performance. Credible third-party assessment would "authenticate" genuine ecotourism offerings, guide consumer choice, and slow the dilution of the ecotourism label—a function that

matters greatly in a market where the term is often misappropriated ^[1].

Certification should be paired with brand building. Tying certification to the “Beautiful Qinghai” master brand and promoting certified products at home and abroad would let the province convert standards into brand equity and price premiums, turning certification from a compliance burden into a competitive asset. The pathway carries extra weight because it links directly to Qinghai’s mission of building an international ecotourism destination. International recognition of the province’s standards would signal credibility to global markets, draw high-value visitors, and help integrate the province into international sustainable tourism networks. Standardization, in this reading, is the institutional bridge between Qinghai’s ecological endowment and its global competitiveness.

Integration into international sustainable tourism networks is part of the same pathway. Qinghai could join global platforms such as the Global Sustainable Tourism Council’s recognized-standards framework, take up membership in international ecotourism associations, and pursue mutual recognition arrangements. Doing so would place the province inside the transnational governance architecture of sustainable tourism and give it access to best practices, technical assistance, and international visibility. It would also signal to global markets that the province’s standards are credible and independently verified. Paired with a certification-linked brand strategy, this engagement turns standardization from a domestic compliance exercise into a strategic instrument of global competitiveness and destination reputation.

4.5. Strengthening factor support: Market players and composite talent

Factor scarcity calls for action on two fronts: cultivating market players and cultivating composite talent. On the market side, the province should nurture leading tourism enterprises, attract strategic partners that bring brand, investment, and operating capability, and foster industry associations able to bridge government and business. A handful of strong, branded operators would give industry clusters, supply chains, and destination marketing a point of coherence, and would relieve the fragmentation that currently defines the provincial market.

On the talent side, Qinghai should train more ecotourism professionals who combine ecological literacy, cultural competence, service skills, and foreign-language ability, and it should use counterpart-assistance mechanisms and university partnerships to widen the pipeline. Community participation—skills training, benefit-sharing, co-management—enlarges the effective labor supply and, at the same time, embeds ecotourism more deeply in local society, strengthening both its sustainability and its inclusiveness ^[16,18]. These investments form the micro-foundation of the whole strategy. Most of the other pathways cannot be sustained without them, because endowment becomes competitive advantage only through people and enterprises, never through resources alone.

Community capability-building is where this pathway turns decisive. External operators cannot carry Qinghai’s ecotourism on their own. The industry depends on local communities who steward the ecological and cultural resources it uses, and that dependence requires their active involvement and their capacity. Skills training in guiding, hospitality, and cultural interpretation, delivered by universities and vocational institutions, can turn a population often read as a constraint into a distinctive asset. Co-management arrangements that vest communities with real decision-making authority and a share of benefits ensure that this capability is directed toward sustainable ends. The cultivation of community capability thus completes the factor-support pathway by rooting the province’s ecotourism in the people whose knowledge and stewardship are its ultimate source of authenticity.

5. Conclusion

This paper has developed a systematic “logic–problems–pathways” framework to analyze the high-quality development of ecotourism in Qinghai Province. Theoretically, the study contributes by integrating the concept of ecotourism with the framework of high-quality development at the provincial level, articulating five dimensions of internal logic grounded in Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization and the “Two Mountains” theory, and diagnosing five corresponding dilemmas that constrain the translation of ecological endowment into sustainable competitiveness. Practically, the study proposes five mutually reinforcing pathways—safeguarding the ecological bottom line, deepening product supply reform, addressing infrastructure gaps, building standards and certification systems, and strengthening factor support—that together chart a coherent route toward the construction of an international ecotourism destination.

The central insight of the paper is that Qinghai’s high-quality development of ecotourism is, at its core, a project of institutional and conceptual transformation rather than one of simple resource exploitation. The province’s ecological fragility is not a liability to be overcome but a defining condition that, when properly managed, becomes the source of its premium value. Five commitments give the strategy its shape: ecological priority as the baseline, value transformation as the mechanism, livelihood improvement as the purpose, cultural empowerment as the differentiator, and opening-up as the benchmark. Held together, they allow Qinghai to turn its position at the source of three great rivers into a globally recognized model of ecotourism—one that reconciles conservation, development, and cultural inheritance. Qinghai’s high-quality ecotourism development is therefore more than a regional policy objective. It is a small-scale instance of China’s wider pursuit of an ecologically civilized and internationally competitive tourism industry.

Several lines of research would extend the framework. Empirical work is needed first, to measure the ecological carrying capacity of specific destinations and to test whether certification mechanisms actually shape consumer behavior and brand equity. Comparison comes next: setting Qinghai against other ecologically fragile plateau and highland destinations would clarify the boundary conditions of the proposed pathways and show which lessons travel. A third line concerns governance—how governments, enterprises, communities, and international organizations coordinate in ecotourism development, especially where tourism is organized around national parks. Work along these lines would tighten the integration of ecotourism with high-quality development and yield more precise guidance for destinations in ecologically fragile regions.

Limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis is conceptual and discursive; it neither measures the ecological carrying capacity of specific destinations nor tests empirically whether certification mechanisms shape consumer behavior or brand equity. The framework is meant to organize and motivate such empirical work, not to stand in for it. The study also relies mainly on published literature and policy documents, so it reflects the vantage point of scholars and policymakers more than that of the communities and enterprises whose daily practices will decide where Qinghai’s ecotourism goes. Field-based, community-engaged, and quantitative investigations would complement the conceptual treatment offered here.

Funding

Qinghai Normal University 2024 University-Level Youth Scientific Research Fund Project (Grant No. 2024QSK08)

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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