

A Study on the Identification of Above-Water and Underwater Tourism Assets in the North Aegean–Balıkesir Region

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1. Introduction

The tourism sector stands out as a rapidly developing and diversifying field on a global scale in terms of its economic, social and cultural impacts. Coastal and marine tourism, in particular, constitute a significant portion of global tourism movements and rank among the key factors enhancing the competitive strength of destinations. Marine tourism is not limited to recreational activities conducted in coastal areas but also points to a broad tourism potential that encompasses underwater resources (Hall, 2001; Orams, 1999). In this context, the joint consideration of both surface and underwater tourist assets is of great importance for the sustainable development of destinations.

In recent years, in line with changes in tourism demand, there has been a shift towards more distinctive, experience-oriented and alternative forms of tourism. This trend is increasing the importance of sectors such as diving tourism, underwater cultural heritage tourism and nature-based coastal tourism (Garrod & Gössling, 2008). In particular, elements such as underwater ecosystems, biodiversity and shipwrecks play a significant role in creating tourist appeal and contribute to the differentiation of destinations (Dimmock & Musa, 2015). However, the conservation and sustainable

management of such resources have become one of the key priorities of tourism planning (UNWTO, 2018).

As a country surrounded by seas on three sides, Turkey possesses significant potential for coastal and marine tourism. In particular, the Northern Aegean Region stands out among destinations noted for its natural beauty, cultural heritage and underwater riches. In this context, the province of Balıkesir offers significant opportunities for both surface and underwater tourism through the Ayvalık Islands, the Sarımsaklı coastline and the surrounding underwater assets. However, findings suggest that this potential has not been sufficiently promoted and has not been evaluated through a holistic tourism approach.

The literature emphasises that individuals' perceptions, attitudes and behaviours are key determinants in the evaluation of tourist destinations (Beerli & Martín, 2004). In this context, tourists' level of knowledge, perceived attractiveness, experience preferences and attitudes towards sustainability play a critical role in the development of destinations. In particular, the sustainable tourism approach aims to preserve natural and cultural resources for future generations and encourages the participation of local communities in the process (Butler, 1999).

Within this framework, it is important to evaluate the above-water and underwater tourist assets located along the North Aegean–Balıkesir coastline from a holistic perspective. The present study aims to contribute to the literature by examining how these assets are perceived by individuals across various dimensions, and to shed light on regional tourism planning.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Definition, Scope and Characteristics of the Concept of Tourism

Tourism is a multidimensional phenomenon that refers to the travel and accommodation activities undertaken by individuals outside their usual place of residence, for a specific period of time and without engaging in a regular income-generating activity (United Nations, 2010). In this respect, tourism is not merely a travel activity; it is a complex system with economic, social, cultural and spatial dimensions. According to Leiper (1979), tourism should be considered as the totality of relationships between tourists, geographical mobility, the tourism industry and destinations. This approach demonstrates that tourism is not merely demand-driven but constitutes a systematic structure encompassing components such as supply, transport, accommodation, attractiveness and service provision.

The fundamental characteristics of the tourism phenomenon include transience, displacement, voluntariness, experience-orientation, a service-oriented structure, seasonality, multi-sectoral interaction and high susceptibility to external influences. Smith (1988) emphasises the necessity of defining tourism from a supply-side perspective, stating that tourism

should be evaluated as the totality of goods, services and experiences produced for tourists. Similarly, Tribe (1997) argues that tourism constitutes such a broad field of study that it cannot be explained by a single discipline, and that it can only be understood through the contributions of various fields such as economics, sociology, geography, business, and cultural studies.

One of the fundamental characteristics of tourism is its abstract and experiential nature. A tourist product often cannot be fully assessed before it is consumed; consequently, elements such as perception, image, expectation and satisfaction become significant. Furthermore, tourism is a labour-intensive sector that provides economic benefits such as foreign exchange earnings, job creation and regional development; however, it can also lead to negative consequences such as overcrowding, environmental pressure, cultural commodification and pressures on local life (Dwyer et al., 2004; Brunt & Courtney, 1999).

One of the most widely accepted definitions of tourism is that adopted by the United Nations Statistical Commission. According to this definition, tourism encompasses visits made by individuals to places outside their usual environment for a period of less than one year, for leisure, business or other purposes; however, during such visits, they must not engage in work at the destination that is based on generating a regular income (United Nations, 2010). This definition broadens the scope of tourism by linking it both to leisure-based travel and to movements undertaken for various purposes such as business, health, education, religious reasons and visits to relatives.

Leiper's (1979) approach provides an important framework for understanding the scope of tourism. According to this approach, the tourism system consists of three fundamental

geographical elements: the source region, the transit route, and the destination region. Thus, tourism is not merely comprised of activities taking place at the destination but is assessed as a holistic system encompassing the entire travel process.

The scope of tourism is also classified according to visitor types. Accordingly, the fundamental distinction is made between domestic tourism, inbound tourism and outbound tourism; visitors who stay overnight are classified as ‘tourists’, whilst day-trippers are regarded as ‘excursionists’ or ‘day-trippers’ (United Nations, 2010). This distinction is important for the compilation of tourism statistics and the development of tourism policies.

According to Smith (1988), a definition of tourism that is limited solely to visitor movements is incomplete. This is because tourism is an economic and social structure produced jointly by numerous sectors, including accommodation, transport, food and drink, entertainment, guiding, travel agencies and destination management. Consequently, the scope of tourism encompasses both individual mobility and the institutional framework that enables this mobility.

2.1.1. The Economic, Social and Cultural Impacts of Tourism

Tourism is a sector that stands out primarily for its economic impacts. Due to its ability to generate foreign exchange, create employment, attract investment and support regional development, it is regarded as a strategic area of development for many countries. Dwyer and colleagues (2004) note that the economic impacts of tourism are not limited to direct expenditure alone; rather, they generate a much broader economic multiplier effect through indirect and induced impacts. In this context, tourism also stimulates

sectors such as transport, agriculture, construction, retail trade and the service sector.

However, the economic impacts of tourism are not always positive. Particularly in regions overly dependent on tourism, issues such as income leakage, seasonal employment, price increases, property market pressure and economic vulnerability may arise (Sinclair, 1998). For this reason, it is important to manage tourism's economic contribution in a sustainable and balanced manner.

The social impacts of tourism, meanwhile, are shaped through mutual interaction between both the local population and visitors. Tourism can foster tolerance, intercultural communication and social vitality by bringing different cultures together. However, intense tourist activity can also lead to negative outcomes such as changes in local lifestyles, overcrowding, perceptions of crime, pressure on daily life and social alienation. Brunt and Courtney (1999) have demonstrated that the local population's perceptions of tourism are often shaped by a balance between economic benefits and social costs. Furthermore, the social dimension of the tourist experience demonstrates that visitors are not merely passive consumers of services, but rather active participants who contribute to the formation of the experience through interaction and engagement (Girgin et al., 2022).

Similarly, Andereck and colleagues (2005) note that local residents' attitudes towards tourism vary according to their assessments of perceived economic benefits, social impacts, environmental outcomes and quality of life. This demonstrates that tourism is a process experienced not only by visitors but also by the communities living in the destination.

From a cultural perspective, tourism can enhance the visibility of local culture, encourage the preservation of traditional arts and heritage elements, and strengthen

destination identity. However, it also carries risks such as the commodification of cultural elements, loss of authenticity, and the reshaping of local culture to meet tourist expectations. Cohen's (1972) approach to tourist typology demonstrates that tourists are engaged in diverse quests for authenticity, which can directly influence the forms of cultural presentation. Consequently, the cultural impacts of tourism must be assessed within a delicate balance between conservation and commercialisation.

2.1.2. Types of Tourism and Classification

Tourism is a broad field that can be classified based on a wide variety of motivations, locations and activities. The most basic classification is based on the direction of the visitor's movement. Accordingly, tourism is divided into three main groups: domestic tourism, inbound tourism and outbound tourism (United Nations, 2010). This classification is particularly functional in terms of national tourism policies, statistical production and market analysis.

In the classification based on purpose and motivation, tourism is examined in various forms, such as leisure and entertainment tourism, business tourism, cultural tourism, health tourism, faith-based tourism, sports tourism, conference tourism, gastronomic tourism, nature tourism and maritime tourism. This classification is important for understanding tourists' expectations from travel and destinations' product diversification strategies.

Tourism is also categorised according to its organisational form as mass tourism and alternative/quality tourism. Whilst mass tourism is characterised by a more standardised, high-volume and often season-focused structure, alternative tourism is based on more specific areas of interest, experiential participation and closer interaction with local resources.

Butler's (1980) destination life cycle approach demonstrates that tourist areas pass through stages such as discovery, development, maturity and decline over time, indicating that the level of pressure exerted by different types of tourism on a destination may vary.

Cohen's (1972) typology of tourists also contributes to the understanding of tourism types. By classifying tourists into institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms, Cohen demonstrates that tourist behaviour ranges from standardised package experiences to more independent and exploration-focused experiences. This approach remains functional in explaining the rise of special-interest tourism and experience-focused tourism types today.

2.2. The Concept and Definition of Maritime Tourism

In tourism literature, maritime tourism is treated as a multidimensional and interdisciplinary field encompassing tourist activities based on coastal and marine areas. This concept encompasses activities arising from the use of marine and coastal ecosystems for tourism purposes; at the same time, it forms a holistic structure together with the infrastructure, transport systems and tourism enterprises that serve these activities (Miller, 1993; Orams, 2002).

The concept of marine tourism is frequently used in the international literature alongside the terms 'marine tourism', 'coastal tourism' and 'maritime tourism'. Although these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, marine tourism is generally regarded as an overarching concept encompassing all tourist activities directly or indirectly related to the marine environment (Orams & Lück, 2014; Martínez Vázquez & Milán García, 2021). This situation makes it difficult to define

the concept's boundaries with clear-cut lines and leads to the emergence of different approaches in the literature.

Upon examining definitions of marine tourism, it is evident that the concept is generally addressed through two fundamental dimensions: spatial (marine and coastal areas) and activity-based (recreational and tourist activities). Orams (2002) defines maritime tourism as the entirety of travel to the marine environment and the recreational activities carried out within this setting; Miller (1993), however, assesses the concept as a broader system encompassing tourism activities taking place in coastal and marine areas. These approaches demonstrate that maritime tourism is not limited solely to activities carried out on the sea; rather, it must be considered as a holistic entity that also encompasses coastal areas.

In the Turkish literature, however, the concept of maritime tourism is often used interchangeably with coastal tourism and is particularly equated with 'sea-sand-sun' focused mass tourism (Dođanay & Zaman, 2001; Üzümcü, 2022). However, recent academic studies emphasise that the scope of marine tourism is broader than this traditional approach and includes various activities such as yacht tourism, cruise tourism, water sports and diving (Kozan et al., 2014; Kan, 2019).

A key feature of the concept of maritime tourism is its direct interaction with the natural environment. This stands out as one of the fundamental elements distinguishing maritime tourism from other forms of tourism. The natural appeal of coastal and marine areas, their climatic characteristics and recreational opportunities make these areas attractive in terms of tourist demand (Dođaner, 2019). However, this intense interest also brings with it environmental pressures and necessitates that marine tourism be addressed within a framework of sustainability.

Today, maritime tourism is regarded not merely as a type of tourism but also as an economic and strategic sector. In particular, a significant portion of tourism revenue in coastal regions is derived from maritime tourism. In this context, maritime tourism exhibits a multi-sectoral structure that interacts with the transport, accommodation, entertainment and service sectors (Orams & Lück, 2014). Furthermore, within the framework of the ‘blue economy’ approach, maritime tourism is viewed as a key area of activity that contributes to the sustainable use of marine resources (Kabil et al., 2021; Karani & Failler, 2020).

2.2.1. The Development and Importance of Maritime Tourism

Marine tourism has become one of the fastest-growing sectors within the tourism industry since the second half of the 20th century. In particular, following the Second World War, improvements in transport infrastructure, rising income levels and the widespread adoption of the concept of leisure time significantly increased tourist demand for coastal regions. During this period, marine and coastal areas emerged as the primary locations where tourism activity was concentrated (Miller, 1993).

From the 1970s onwards, with the development of mass tourism, maritime tourism took on a structure centred particularly on the ‘sea-sand-sun’ axis, and many coastal regions, led by the Mediterranean, became international tourism destinations. During this period, intensive development in coastal areas, the rapid expansion of tourism infrastructure and the proliferation of package tour organisations led to maritime tourism acquiring a mass-market character (Orams, 2002).

After the 1980s, however, maritime tourism diversified further and expanded to encompass not only coastal tourism

but also different sectors such as yacht tourism, cruise tourism and water sports. During the same period, globalisation, technological advancements and the expansion of transport networks accelerated the growth of maritime tourism on an international scale (Martínez Vázquez & Milán García, 2021). Today, maritime tourism is regarded as one of the most dynamic and competitive sectors within the tourism industry.

The development of maritime tourism has also significantly transformed the economic structure of coastal regions. Thanks to tourism activities, many coastal regions have moved beyond traditional economic activities such as agriculture and fishing to adopt a structure dominated by the service sector. This situation is regarded as a key factor supporting regional development, particularly in developing countries (Karani & Failler, 2020).

Today, maritime tourism accounts for a significant share of global tourism movements. Studies reveal that a substantial portion of global tourism is concentrated in coastal and maritime areas, and that these areas play a critical role in terms of tourism revenue. For example, it is stated that coastal tourism accounts for approximately 30% of global tourism activities (Kabil et al., 2021). This demonstrates that maritime tourism is not merely a popular form of tourism but also one of the fundamental components of the global tourism economy.

The importance of maritime tourism is not limited to its economic dimension. From a social and cultural perspective, maritime tourism enhances the interaction between different cultures, can improve the quality of life in coastal regions, and can contribute to the acquisition of tourist value by local identity. However, intensive tourist activities can exert pressure on local culture and lead to socio-cultural changes (Papageorgiou, 2016).

When assessed from an environmental perspective, maritime tourism presents both opportunities and risks. Whilst it can raise awareness regarding the protection of marine and coastal areas, it can also lead to problems such as overuse, pollution and habitat destruction. For this reason, the development of marine tourism is currently addressed within the framework of sustainability principles and evaluated in conjunction with environmental management approaches (Moreno & Amelung, 2009).

The Turkish literature also emphasises that marine tourism holds strategic importance for Turkey. Turkey's extensive coastline, favourable climatic conditions and natural resources are increasing the share of marine tourism within the country's overall tourism sector (Doğanay & Zaman, 2001; Kozan et al., 2014). In particular, developments in recent years in sectors such as yacht tourism and cruise tourism demonstrate that marine tourism is growing and diversifying.

2.2.2. Types of Coastal and Maritime Tourism

Coastal and maritime tourism is classified in the literature according to various criteria due to the breadth of its scope and the diversity of activities it encompasses. These classifications are generally based on the type of activity, the means of transport used, spatial characteristics, and tourist motivations. However, in widely accepted approaches, it is observed that types of maritime tourism are grouped around certain main categories (Martínez Vázquez & Milán García, 2021).

Within this framework, maritime tourism is generally considered in terms of three main categories. Firstly, cruise tourism involves journeys undertaken on large passenger ships that cover multiple destinations, constituting one of the most organised and mass-market forms of maritime tourism on an international scale. Secondly, yacht and boat

tourism is regarded as a more flexible and experience-oriented form of tourism, typically undertaken by individuals or small groups, and encompassing marina use, boat charter and sailing activities. Thirdly, coastal-based tourist activities encompass recreational events concentrated in coastal areas and establishing a direct or indirect connection with the sea. This three-part structure offers a comprehensive classification that addresses the transport, recreational and experiential dimensions of maritime tourism together (Luković, 2007; Diakomihalis, 2007).

However, the distinction between coastal and marine tourism also emerges as a significant classification approach in the literature. Whilst coastal tourism refers to activities taking place along the shoreline and based on the interaction between land and sea; marine tourism encompasses activities carried out directly in the marine environment. However, it is noted that in practice, these two areas are largely intertwined, and it is difficult to distinguish them with clear-cut boundaries (Papageorgiou, 2016). This situation necessitates that coastal and marine tourism types are often assessed together.

Types of marine tourism can also be examined in greater detail within the framework of the concept of nautical tourism. In this approach, marine tourism is analysed by dividing it into sub-sectors such as marina services, yacht management, charter activities and marine-based recreation. It is observed that such classifications are widely used in European literature to analyse the economic and sectoral structure of maritime tourism (Luković, 2012; Kizielewicz, 2012).

In the Turkish literature, however, coastal and maritime tourism types are generally addressed within a simpler framework and classified primarily on the basis of coastal tourism, yacht tourism and cruise tourism. In addition, water sports and other recreational activities are considered

complementary elements of maritime tourism (Kozan et al., 2014). This approach offers a clearer and more functional classification, particularly in applied studies.

2.3. Water-Based Tourism

Water-based tourism is a significant sector of tourism encompassing tourist activities carried out on the water's surface or in direct contact with the sea. This form of tourism is one of the most visible and widespread forms of coastal and maritime tourism and is closely linked to recreational activities and an experience-oriented approach to tourism. Water-based tourism is based on the utilisation of the natural opportunities offered by the marine environment for the purpose of creating tourist experiences (Orams, 2002).

This form of tourism largely involves activities taking place on the sea surface and is generally associated with watercraft, coastal areas and recreational uses centred on the water surface. In the literature, marine tourism is addressed within a broad-spectrum encompassing activities such as beach use, swimming, boat trips, yachting and various water sports (Jennings, 2007; Lück, 2015). In this respect, marine tourism exhibits a multifaceted structure that encompasses both passive (rest and sunbathing) and active (sports and adventure) tourism activities.

One of the most distinctive features of maritime tourism is its high level of accessibility and mass appeal. The ease of access to coastal areas and the development of infrastructure facilities ensure that this form of tourism appeals to a wide range of tourists. This situation leads to high tourist traffic, particularly in coastal tourism destinations, and makes coastal tourism one of the fundamental components of mass tourism (Orams & Lück, 2014).

However, coastal tourism is not limited solely to mass tourism. In recent years, the growing pursuit of experiences, along with trends in adventure tourism and sports tourism, has contributed to the diversification of activities in this sector. In particular, water sports, sailing, surfing and similar activities are among the experiential tourism types in which tourists participate more actively (Jennings, 2007). This development enhances marine tourism's capacity to provide both entertainment and experiences.

Marine tourism also plays a significant role in terms of destination appeal. Coastal landscapes, sea water quality, climatic conditions and natural beauty are among the factors that directly influence the development of this form of tourism. For tourists, the sea is not merely a physical environment; it is also an attraction offering opportunities for relaxation, enjoyment and unique experiences (Davenport & Davenport, 2006).

On the other hand, coastal tourism is also susceptible to environmental pressures due to intensive use. Issues such as overcrowding in coastal areas, water pollution, noise, and damage to natural habitats necessitate the careful management of this form of tourism from a sustainability perspective (Papageorgiou, 2016). Consequently, marine tourism is currently assessed in conjunction with concepts such as environmental impacts and carrying capacity.

2.3.1. Water-based Tourism Activities

Marine tourism activities encompass recreational and tourist activities carried out on the sea surface or in direct interaction with the coast. These activities are based on transforming the natural opportunities offered by marine and coastal areas into a tourist experience and cater to tourist

groups with varying levels of interest (Orams, 2002; Kozan et al., 2014).

The literature generally classifies marine tourism activities into those requiring passive and active participation. Passive activities include beach tourism, swimming, sunbathing and coastal recreation; such activities constitute one of the most widespread forms of mass tourism. It is stated that coastal tourism in Turkey has largely taken shape around these activities and that the 'sea-sand-sun' focused approach to tourism still retains its significance (Doğanay & Zaman, 2001; Doğaner, 2019).

In contrast, water-based activities requiring active participation encompass events that enable tourists to engage more intensively with the sea and are classified under experience-based tourism. Within this scope, yacht and boat trips, sailing, water sports and various activities involving watercraft stand out. Jennings (2007) notes that water-based tourism activities have diversified, particularly through integration with sports and adventure tourism, thereby increasing tourists' active participation. Similarly, the Turkish literature emphasises that water sports and yacht tourism are among the key components of maritime tourism (Kozan et al., 2014).

Water-based tourism activities can also be classified into motorised and non-motorised activities. Motorised activities include jet skiing, water skiing and the use of motorboats, whilst non-motorised activities encompass sailing, surfing and canoeing, which are based more on individual experience (Lück, 2015). This distinction is particularly significant in terms of environmental impacts and sustainability. Indeed, it is noted that motorised activities increase environmental pressure, whereas non-motorised activities are more compatible with sustainable tourism practices.

In recent years, there has been a significant process of diversification and specialisation in water-based tourism activities. With the development of the experience economy, tourists are turning not only to activities aimed at relaxation but also to those where they can actively participate and experience something different. This trend is increasing the share of water sports and marine-based recreational activities within tourism products (Martínez Vázquez & Milán García, 2021).

When assessed specifically in the context of Turkey, it is observed that marine tourism activities are particularly concentrated along the Aegean and Mediterranean coasts and constitute a significant portion of the tourism supply in these regions. The natural characteristics of coastal areas, climatic advantages and developed tourism infrastructure are key factors in the proliferation of these activities (Doğaner, 2019). However, water-based tourism activities can also lead to environmental issues due to intensive use. Effects such as overcrowding in coastal areas, water pollution and damage to natural habitats necessitate the planning of these activities within a framework of sustainability (Davenport & Davenport, 2006). For this reason, environmental sensitivity and planning are of great importance in the management of water-based tourism activities.

2.3.2. The Contribution of Marine Tourism to Destinations

Marine tourism is one of the tourism sectors playing a significant role in the economic, social, cultural and spatial development of destinations. These activities, which are particularly concentrated in coastal regions, enhance the tourist appeal of destinations and are among the key elements supporting regional development. In this context, marine tourism is regarded not merely as a recreational sector but

also as a strategic sector shaping destination development (Karani & Failler, 2020).

From an economic perspective, marine tourism makes both direct and indirect contributions to destinations. Tourist spending stimulates the local economy by driving activity across numerous sectors, including accommodation, food and drink, transport and entertainment. Furthermore, tourism activities increase employment opportunities and create alternative sources of income, particularly in coastal regions (Nugraha & Flora, 2022). At the same time, maritime tourism generates broader economic activity within local economies through its multiplier effect.

Another significant contribution of maritime tourism is its role in encouraging the development of infrastructure and superstructure in destinations. As tourist demand increases, infrastructure investments—such as transport networks, ports, marinas and accommodation facilities—gain momentum, thereby raising the level of regional development. This process also brings about spatial transformation, particularly in developing coastal regions (Papageorgiou, 2016).

From a social perspective, maritime tourism creates new employment opportunities for the local population and contributes to raising living standards. Tourism activities support the more active participation of local communities in the economic system, whilst also encouraging specialisation within the service sector (Voyer et al., 2017). However, an increase in tourism intensity can lead to changes in the social structure and result in transformations in local lifestyles.

From a cultural perspective, maritime tourism enhances the visibility of local culture by contributing to the promotion of destinations. Interaction between tourists and the local population encourages cultural exchange and helps to strengthen the destination's identity. However, in some cases,

negative effects such as the commercialisation of cultural elements and a decline in authenticity may also arise (Baihaqi & Annida, 2024).

Marine tourism is also a key factor in enhancing the competitiveness of destinations. The variety of activities and marine-based experiences offered in coastal regions, enables destinations to compete with other tourism regions. In particular, activities such as water sports, yacht tourism and beach tourism play a decisive role in the choice of destinations (Martínez Vázquez & Milán García, 2021).

From an environmental perspective, coastal tourism offers both positive and negative impacts. Whilst it can raise awareness regarding the conservation of natural areas, it can also lead to issues such as overuse, pollution and pressure on ecosystems. Smith et al. (2023) emphasise that the environmental impacts of coastal tourism must be carefully addressed from a destination management perspective. Consequently, it is of great importance that marine tourism is supported by sustainable planning and management approaches.

The Turkish literature also states that maritime tourism plays a decisive role in the development of coastal destinations in Turkey. In particular, it is noted that tourism activities along the Aegean and Mediterranean coasts support regional development, create employment, and enhance the international recognition of destinations (Dođaner, 2019; Kervankıran, 2014). This situation highlights the strategic importance of maritime tourism for Turkish tourism.

2.3.3. Attractiveness Factors in Maritime Tourism

The key factors determining the choice of destinations in maritime tourism are largely shaped by natural environmental characteristics, the quality of services provided, and the perceived value of the experience by tourists. In this context,

attractiveness is not limited to physical elements alone but exhibits a multifaceted structure that also encompasses perceptual and experiential dimensions (Das et al., 2007).

Natural environmental elements constitute the most fundamental component of coastal tourism's appeal. Factors such as sea water quality, the width and cleanliness of beaches, climatic conditions, and coastal landscapes have a direct influence on tourists' destination choices. In particular, clear water, suitable temperature levels and long hours of sunshine are among the primary elements that enhance the appeal of coastal destinations (Klein & Osleeb, 2010; Onofri & Nunes, 2013). The favourable climatic conditions and natural beach features observed along Turkey's Mediterranean and Aegean coasts ensure that these regions stand out in terms of international tourism demand (Kervankiran, 2014). However, the infrastructure and service quality of the destination are also important components of its appeal. The standards of accommodation facilities, transport options, marina and port services, security levels and environmental arrangements directly influence tourists' overall satisfaction. It has been observed that in destinations where service quality is high, tourists' tendency to revisit increases and destination loyalty is strengthened (Karim et al., 2024).

Another key factor enhancing the appeal of maritime tourism is the variety of activities on offer. Water sports, boat tours, sailing and similar activities enhance the experiential value by increasing tourists' interaction with the destination. The availability of activities catering to diverse interests and expectations enables destinations to reach a broader range of tourists (Solis-Radilla & Carvache-Franco, 2021). This development aligns with the contemporary understanding of tourism, where the experience economy takes centre stage.

On a perceptual level, destination image and tourists' mental evaluations are among the key determinants of attractiveness. A positive image of a destination increases tourists' intention to visit and directly influences their level of satisfaction. Furthermore, perceptions formed about a destination also influence word-of-mouth communication and repeat visit behaviour (Hasan et al., 2020; Anjos & Pereira, 2017).

Environmental quality and sustainability factors are also becoming increasingly decisive in the appeal of coastal tourism. A clean environment, low pollution levels and protected natural areas play a significant role in tourists' choice of destination. Conversely, environmental degradation, overcrowding and the destruction of coastal areas can negatively affect the appeal of destinations (Lukoseviciute & Panagopoulos, 2021).

2.4. Underwater Tourism

Underwater tourism is a tourism sector that encompasses tourist activities conducted in the underwater environment of seas and oceans and has gained increasing importance in recent years. This form of tourism is developing primarily through activities such as diving, underwater observation and experiences of marine ecosystems. Underwater tourism differs from other forms of tourism in that it requires direct interaction with the marine environment and exhibits a structure based on specialised interests (Garrod & Gössling, 2008).

The most important element underpinning underwater tourism is the natural and cultural value offered by the underwater environment. Coral reefs, shipwrecks, marine life and the underwater landscape constitute the primary attractions of this form of tourism. In particular, regions with high biological diversity are becoming significant destinations

for diving tourism (Musa & Dimmock, 2013). In this context, underwater tourism stands out as a field classified within nature-based tourism types and highly dependent on environmental resources.

Underwater tourism is also closely linked to an experience-oriented approach to tourism. Tourists' desire to explore the underwater world, observe different ecosystems and engage in direct interaction is driving demand for this form of tourism. Diving activities contribute to enriching the tourist experience by offering individuals both an adventure and a learning experience (PADI, 2017). In this respect, underwater tourism is regarded as a more specialised form of tourism with limited participation, rather than mass tourism.

The development of underwater tourism is also closely linked to technological advancements and increased educational opportunities. Advances in diving equipment, higher safety standards and the widespread adoption of international certification systems have made it possible for a wider audience to participate in these activities (Musa & Dimmock, 2013). This situation is among the key factors supporting the global growth of underwater tourism.

However, underwater tourism is a form of tourism that must be handled with care from an environmental perspective. Underwater ecosystems are highly vulnerable to human activities, and uninformed tourism activities can damage coral reefs and negatively impact the habitats of marine life (Garrod & Gössling, 2008). For this reason, underwater tourism must be planned and managed in accordance with the principles of sustainability.

From Turkey's perspective, underwater tourism holds significant potential, particularly along the Aegean and Mediterranean coasts. Its rich underwater biodiversity, historical shipwrecks and favourable diving conditions

position Turkey amongst attractive destinations for diving tourism (Özdemir, 2015). The effective utilisation of this potential is important both for increasing tourism diversity and for the development of alternative forms of tourism.

It is a frequently emphasised point in the literature that the development of underwater tourism must be addressed in conjunction with the principles of natural resource conservation and sustainable use. In particular, raising environmental awareness, promoting diving education and implementing conservation policies are of critical importance for the long-term sustainability of this form of tourism (Musa & Dimmock, 2013; Garrod & Gössling, 2008).

2.4.1. Definition and Scope of Underwater Tourism

Underwater tourism is defined as a form of tourism encompassing tourist activities conducted in the underwater environment that enable individuals to directly experience marine ecosystems. Within this scope, diving activities, underwater observation events, and activities aimed at studying marine life constitute the core components of underwater tourism (Musa & Dimmock, 2013).

Although underwater tourism is often equated with diving tourism, its scope is not limited solely to scuba diving activities. Different forms of experience, such as free diving, snorkelling and semi-submersible systems, are also included within this form of tourism. In this respect, underwater tourism exhibits a multi-layered structure that caters to tourists with varying levels of knowledge and skill (Garrod & Gössling, 2008).

In terms of scope, underwater tourism encompasses both natural and cultural elements. Natural elements include coral reefs, marine life and underwater ecosystems, whilst cultural elements consist of shipwrecks, underwater archaeological remains and elements of historical heritage. This makes

underwater tourism a hybrid form of tourism that can be classified under both nature-based tourism and cultural tourism (Dimmock & Musa, 2015).

The scope of underwater tourism also varies depending on the spatial characteristics of the locations where activities are carried out. There are significant differences in both technical requirements and experience levels between activities carried out in shallow waters near the coast and dives conducted in the open sea and deep waters. These differences are among the factors that must be taken into account in the planning and management of underwater tourism (Barker & Roberts, 2004).

As this form of tourism involves participants engaging in activities that require a certain level of training and the use of equipment, it has a more controlled and regulated structure compared to other forms of tourism. International diving certification systems and safety standards play a decisive role in the development of underwater tourism (PADI, 2017). This is important both for ensuring tourist safety and for ensuring that activities are conducted within specific standards.

When assessed within the Turkish context, the scope of underwater tourism is shaped particularly around diving tourism and underwater archaeology. The shipwrecks, caves and rich marine life found along the Aegean and Mediterranean coasts facilitate the diversification of these activities (Özdemir, 2015; Özdoğan, 2017). These elements demonstrate that Turkey possesses significant potential in terms of underwater tourism.

Environmental sustainability and conservation approaches also play a significant role in defining the scope of underwater tourism. The delicate structure of underwater ecosystems necessitates that these activities be carried out within specific rules and limitations. In this context, underwater tourism

is regarded not merely as a tourist activity but also as an area linked to conservation and awareness-raising processes (Garrod & Gössling, 2008).

2.4.2. Diving Tourism and Its Types

Diving tourism is one of the most widespread and developed sub-sectors of underwater tourism, based on diving activities undertaken by individuals to explore the underwater environment. This form of tourism encompasses activities that can be carried out for both recreational and educational or research purposes and requires participants to possess specific technical knowledge and use appropriate equipment (Musa & Dimmock, 2013).

Diving tourism is categorised into different types based on criteria such as participants' experience level, the equipment used, and the purpose of the dive. Within this scope, the most common type of diving is scuba diving. Scuba diving enables divers to remain underwater for longer periods with the aid of specialised equipment and is therefore recognised as the most preferred form of diving within tourist activities (Garrod & Gössling, 2008). Furthermore, free diving constitutes another significant type of diving tourism. This form of diving is carried out without the use of any breathing apparatus, relying solely on breath-holding techniques. Free diving is regarded as an activity focused on individual experience and physical performance and has been growing in popularity in recent years (PADI, 2017).

Another activity classified under diving tourism is known as snorkelling. This activity offers an experience carried out in areas close to the water's surface using simple equipment, appealing to a wide range of tourists. Due to its low technical requirements, snorkelling is regarded as an entry-level activity within underwater tourism (Musa & Dimmock, 2013).

Diving tourism is also classified according to the environmental setting in which it takes place and the purpose of the dive. In this context, different types such as reef diving, wreck diving, cave diving and deep diving stand out. In particular, wreck diving serves as a significant tourist attraction by enabling the experience of underwater cultural heritage, whilst reef diving stands out for the observation of biological diversity (Garrod & Gössling, 2008).

Diving tourism attracts attention not only as a recreational activity but also for its educational and environmental awareness dimensions. Diving training programmes provide participants with information about underwater ecosystems and contribute to the development of environmental awareness. This demonstrates that diving tourism is directly linked to the concept of sustainable tourism (Dimmock & Musa, 2015).

In Turkey, diving tourism is concentrated particularly along the Aegean and Mediterranean coasts, with destinations such as Kaş, Bodrum, Fethiye and Ayvalık standing out in this field. The rich biological diversity, underwater caves and historical shipwrecks found in these regions are among the key factors supporting the development of diving tourism (Özdemir, 2015; Köşker, 2019).

The development of diving tourism brings with it certain environmental and management requirements. In particular, it is noted that intensive diving activities may exert pressure on coral reefs and sensitive marine ecosystems. For this reason, it is of great importance that diving activities are carried out within a specific regulatory framework and that environmental protection measures are implemented (Barker & Roberts, 2004).

2.4.3. Underwater Cultural Heritage and Tourism

Underwater cultural heritage refers to archaeological, historical and cultural remains found beneath the sea, lakes or other bodies of water that bear traces of human history. Shipwrecks, port structures, ancient settlements and underwater remains form the core elements of this heritage. These assets hold significant potential for both scientific research and tourism activities (UNESCO, 2001).

Within the scope of underwater tourism, underwater cultural heritage is directly linked to diving tourism in particular. Wreck diving offers tourists a unique and distinctive experience by providing the opportunity to observe the remains of past civilisations in situ. Such experiences enhance the diversity of tourist products and strengthen the appeal of destinations (Garrod & Gösling, 2008).

Underwater cultural heritage is also classified as an alternative form of tourism and exhibits a tourism structure that is more limited and based on specialised interest compared to mass tourism. This situation offers advantages both in terms of the preservation of cultural values and sustainable tourism practices (Dromgoole, 2013). In particular, controlled diving areas and protected shipwreck sites enable the balanced use of this heritage through tourism. These heritage elements play a significant role in helping destinations establish their identity and highlight their cultural values. Underwater archaeological sites not only serve as tourist attractions but also contribute to fostering historical awareness and cultural consciousness (Özdođan, 2017). In this context, underwater cultural heritage is regarded as a field that bridges the gap between tourism and cultural conservation.

Turkey ranks among the countries with rich underwater cultural heritage resources. Numerous shipwrecks along the Mediterranean and Aegean coasts shed light on ancient trade

routes and maritime history. Institutions such as the Bodrum Underwater Archaeology Museum play a significant role in the conservation and promotion of this heritage (Bass, 2011; Özdemir, 2015). This highlights Turkey's potential to integrate its underwater cultural heritage with tourism.

However, the use of underwater cultural heritage within the scope of tourism activities also brings with it various risks. Unregulated diving activities can lead to damage to shipwrecks, the destruction of artefacts, and the loss of cultural values. For this reason, various conservation principles and legal regulations have been developed at the international level. The 'Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage', adopted by UNESCO (2001), stands out as one of the most significant regulations in this field.

Achieving a balance between conservation and use is of great importance for the sustainable integration of underwater cultural heritage into tourism. In this context, it is recommended that diving areas be restricted, guided diving practices be promoted, and visitor management strategies be developed (Dromgoole, 2013). Furthermore, education and awareness-raising activities play an effective role in enhancing public awareness regarding the protection of this heritage.

2.4.4. Underwater Ecosystems and Biodiversity

One of the fundamental pillars of underwater tourism is the biological diversity and natural richness of marine ecosystems. Underwater ecosystems consist of diverse structures such as coral reefs, seagrass beds, rocky areas and deep-sea habitats, and are home to a vast number of species. These ecosystems hold significant value both in terms of ecological balance and tourism activities (Roberts et al., 2002).

Biodiversity is one of the key factors directly influencing the appeal of underwater tourism. Areas with rich species

diversity are preferred for diving and underwater observation activities, thereby increasing tourism demand. In particular, coral reefs rank among the most important attractions of underwater tourism due to their colourful and diverse living structures (Spalding et al., 2001). In this context, biological diversity is regarded not only as an ecological value but also as an economic tourism resource.

Underwater ecosystems are also significant for the ecosystem services they provide. Functions such as coastal protection, carbon sequestration, nutrient cycling and fisheries play a critical role in the sustainability of these ecosystems. At the same time, these services indirectly support the continuity of tourism activities (Barbier et al., 2011). Consequently, there is a reciprocal relationship between underwater tourism and ecosystem health. However, underwater tourism activities can have adverse effects on ecosystems if they are uncontrolled and intensive. These impacts include contact with corals during diving activities, disturbance of marine life, and damage to underwater habitats. Studies have shown that ecosystem degradation is observed, particularly in areas with high diving activity (Barker & Roberts, 2004).

The protection of underwater ecosystems is a crucial issue that must be addressed within the framework of sustainable tourism. In this context, measures such as the establishment of protected areas, the restriction of diving activities, and the implementation of visitor management plans contribute to the conservation of ecosystems (Hawkins et al., 1999). Furthermore, environmental education and awareness-raising activities encourage tourists to adopt nature-sensitive behaviours.

Turkey possesses significant biodiversity in terms of underwater ecosystems. Seagrass beds (*Posidonia oceanica*), rocky habitats and various fish species found in the

Mediterranean and Aegean Seas offer significant potential for underwater tourism. The conservation of these ecosystems is of great importance both for the sustainability of biological diversity and for the continuity of tourism activities (Öztürk & Öztürk, 1996).

The relationship between underwater tourism and biodiversity is bidirectional. On the one hand, rich ecosystems increase tourism demand, whilst on the other hand, tourism activities can exert pressure on these ecosystems. Therefore, ecological sensitivities must be considered in the planning of underwater tourism, and a balance between conservation and use must be ensured (Roberts et al., 2002).

2.4.5. The Sustainability of Underwater Tourism

As an activity directly dependent on natural resources, underwater tourism is a sensitive area that must be addressed within the framework of sustainability principles. The fragile nature of underwater ecosystems means that unplanned and uncontrolled development of this form of tourism can lead to serious environmental problems. Consequently, the sustainability of underwater tourism is of critical importance both for environmental protection and for the continuity of tourism activities (Garrod & Gössling, 2008).

The sustainability of underwater tourism depends primarily on the protection of ecosystems. Coral reefs, seagrass beds and other sensitive habitats can be directly affected by tourist activities. In particular, uninformed diving practices, physical contact and intensive use can cause damage to these ecosystems that is difficult to reverse (Barker & Roberts, 2004). For this reason, diving activities must be carried out within a specific regulatory framework and conservation measures must be implemented.

Within the scope of sustainable underwater tourism, the establishment of marine protected areas stands out as a key management tool. Restricting and monitoring tourism activities in protected areas contributes to the conservation of biodiversity. At the same time, these areas enable a balance between conservation and use through controlled tourism practices (Hawkins et al., 1999).

Education and awareness are among the key elements playing a significant role in the sustainability of underwater tourism. Diving training programmes and environmental awareness activities help tourists develop nature-sensitive behaviours. This makes it possible to reduce the negative impacts arising from tourism activities (Musa & Dimmock, 2013).

The sustainability of underwater tourism also requires cooperation between local authorities, tourism businesses and other stakeholders. The adoption of multi-stakeholder approaches in planning and management processes contributes to ensuring both environmental and economic sustainability. In this context, the development and implementation of sustainable tourism policies are of great importance (Dimmock & Musa, 2015).

The sustainability of underwater tourism in Turkey is directly linked to environmental protection and planning practices, particularly in diving areas. The enforcement of specific regulations and the monitoring of dive sites in key diving destinations such as Kaş, Fethiye and Bodrum contribute to the protection of ecosystems (Köşker, 2019). Such measures are crucial for the implementation of sustainable tourism principles at a local level.

From an economic perspective, sustainability requires the protection of natural resources whilst ensuring the continuity of tourism revenues. Although underwater tourism has high

revenue potential, it is noted that this potential may diminish in the event of overexploitation of resources. For this reason, sustainability is recognised as one of the fundamental elements of long-term tourism planning (Garrod & Gössling, 2008).

The sustainability of underwater tourism is assessed within a holistic framework that requires the simultaneous consideration of environmental, economic and social dimensions. This approach aims to safeguard the continuity of tourism activities whilst ensuring the conservation of natural resources (Musa & Dimmock, 2013).

2.5. The Concept and Definition of Tourist Attraction

Tourist attractiveness is a central concept in tourism literature, recognised as one of the key factors that determines a destination's appeal to tourists. This concept is associated with the interest, appreciation and desire to visit that a place's natural, cultural and man-made features evoke in tourists. Tourist attractiveness is also regarded as one of the key factors determining the direction of tourism flows and shaping the competitive strength of destinations (Lew, 1987).

The concept of tourist attractiveness is approached not merely as a structure based on tangible resources, but as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by tourists' perceptions and evaluations. In this context, attractiveness is directly linked not only to the resources a destination possesses, but also to how these resources are presented and perceived by tourists. Hu and Ritchie (1993) define destination attractiveness as the totality of perceptual evaluations that determine tourists' desire to visit a destination.

In the literature, tourist attractiveness is generally considered as a combination of components such as natural resources, cultural values, infrastructure facilities and tourist services.

These components constitute the destination's appeal and play a decisive role in tourists' decision-making process. Formica and Uysal (2006) emphasise that destination attractiveness must be assessed in terms of both supply (resources and facilities) and demand (tourist perceptions and expectations).

The concept of tourist attractiveness has evolved over time from a perspective based solely on physical resources towards a more holistic structure. Today, attractiveness is considered alongside elements such as experience, satisfaction and perceived value. This approach demonstrates that tourists focus not merely on seeing a place, but on the experience, they have at that destination (Vengesai et al., 2009).

In the formation of tourist attractiveness, supporting factors such as accessibility, safety, price levels and service quality play a significant role alongside the resources possessed by the destination. These elements enhance the destination's competitive strength and directly influence tourists' preferences (Krešić & Prebežac, 2011). Furthermore, destination image and promotional activities are among the key factors that reinforce the perceptual dimension of attractiveness.

The concept of tourist attractiveness is similarly addressed in the Turkish literature and is generally assessed as the capacity of a destination's natural and cultural assets to generate tourist demand. In this context, attractiveness is recognised as a fundamental element in terms of the effective use of tourism resources and destination planning (Kervankıran, 2014; Kozak, Kozak & Kozak, 2014).

Tourist attractiveness also exhibits a dynamic structure. Changes in tourist expectations over time, technological advancements and global tourism trends are transforming the elements of a destination's attractiveness. Consequently, for destinations to maintain their competitiveness, they

must continuously develop and renew these elements of attractiveness (Das et al., 2007).

Although the definition and scope of tourist attractiveness are addressed within different frameworks, it is generally regarded as a multidimensional concept that expresses a destination's capacity to attract tourists. This capacity is shaped both by the existence of tangible resources and these resources are perceived (Hu & Ritchie, 1993; Formica & Uysal, 2006).

2.5.1. Elements of Natural and Cultural Attractiveness

Natural and cultural elements stand out among the fundamental components of tourist attractiveness, and these two elements are recognised as the primary sources determining a destination's tourism potential. In tourism literature, it is observed that attractiveness elements are predominantly classified as natural (based on the physical environment) and cultural (resulting from human activities) resources (Jovičić & Brankov, 2009).

Natural attraction elements encompass tourism resources that have formed without human intervention and are based directly on environmental characteristics. Mountains, coastlines, beaches, forests, lakes and climatic features are among the primary elements assessed within this scope. Such resources play a decisive role, particularly in the development of nature-based tourism activities, and highlight the uniqueness of destinations (Deng et al., 2002). The aesthetic value of the natural environment, its biological diversity and level of conservation are among the factors that directly influence tourists' choice of destination (Tang & Xu, 2023).

Natural attractions are also of critical importance in terms of the sustainability of tourism. The conservation of natural resources not only maintains ecological balance but also

supports the long-term sustainability of tourism activities. For this reason, natural attraction elements are regarded not merely as factors generating tourist demand, but also as fundamental components of tourism planning (Deng et al., 2002).

Cultural attractions, on the other hand, encompass values that emerge because of human activities and reflect the historical, social and artistic heritage of societies. Historical structures, archaeological sites, museums, traditions, festivals and ways of life are among the primary elements assessed within this scope. Cultural attractions shape the identity of destinations, offering tourists unique experiences and ensuring tourism differentiation (Richards, 2002).

Cultural elements have gained increasing importance alongside the strengthening of the experiential dimension in tourism. Tourists are moving away from merely viewing physical spaces towards experiencing local culture and engaging with authentic lifestyles. This situation facilitates the transformation of cultural heritage into a tourism product and enables destinations to gain a competitive advantage (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016).

Natural and cultural attractions are often not independent of one another; rather, they emerge as complementary elements. In many destinations, natural beauty and cultural values are presented together, and this integrated structure creates a stronger attraction for tourists. Particularly in coastal destinations, the combination of the sea, natural landscapes and local cultural elements is regarded as a key factor in enriching the tourist experience (Herrero-Prieto & G3mez-Vega, 2017).

The effective use of elements of tourist appeal enhances the competitive strength of destinations and shapes tourism demand. In this context, the conservation and integration of natural and cultural resources into tourism form the

foundation of sustainable tourism policies (del Río-Rama et al., 2020). Furthermore, the balanced management of these elements is crucial for ensuring that both environmental and cultural values are passed on to future generations.

Turkey possesses significant potential in terms of tourist appeal thanks to its rich natural and cultural resources. Coastal regions, natural landscape diversity and elements of historical heritage are among the key factors enhancing the country's competitive strength in tourism (Kozak et al., 2014).

2.5.2. Destination Image and Perceived Attractiveness

Destination image refers to the entirety of tourists' mental evaluations, beliefs, impressions and emotional responses regarding a destination. This image is shaped not only by individuals' direct experiences but also through the media, marketing activities and other information sources. Destination image plays a significant role in tourists' travel decision-making process and directly influences the likelihood of the destination being chosen (Beerli & Martín, 2004).

The concept of destination image is generally addressed in terms of two fundamental dimensions: cognitive and affective. The cognitive image encompasses evaluations of the destination's concrete characteristics (natural beauty, infrastructure, service quality, etc.), whilst the affective image relates to the emotions individuals feel towards the destination. The combination of these two dimensions forms the overall destination image and shapes tourist behaviour (Kim & Perdue, 2011).

Perceived attractiveness, on the other hand, is a subjective assessment of the extent to which tourists find a destination appealing. This concept is based not only on the resources the destination possesses but also on how these resources are

perceived by tourists. Consequently, the same destination may be found appealing to different levels by different tourist groups (Prebežac & Mikulić, 2008).

There is a strong relationship between destination image and perceived attractiveness. A positive destination image leads tourists to perceive that destination as more attractive and increases their intention to visit. In this context, image is regarded as one of the key factors shaping the perceptual dimension of attractiveness (Das et al., 2007). Furthermore, destination image has a decisive influence on tourist satisfaction and repeat visit behaviour (Rajesh, 2013).

Perceived attractiveness is shaped not only by the evaluation of existing tourist elements but also by tourists' expectations, past experiences and individual characteristics. Consequently, attractiveness is a relative concept formed according to tourists' perceptions rather than an objective characteristic. Tourists' age, educational level, cultural background and travel motivations influence perceived attractiveness (Beerli & Martín, 2004).

Various factors play a role in the formation of destination image. Promotional activities, media content, social media posts and word-of-mouth communication are among the key components of this process. In particular, with the rise of digitalisation, the influence of online content on the formation of destination image has become more pronounced (Ćulić et al., 2021).

Destination image and perceived attractiveness are concepts of strategic importance in tourism marketing. For destinations to enhance their competitiveness, it is not sufficient merely to possess physical attractiveness; these elements must also be perceived positively by tourists. For this reason, image creation and perception management play a significant role in destination management (Krešić & Prebežac, 2011).

In the Turkish context, destination image is shaped particularly through coastal tourism, cultural heritage and natural beauty, and the international promotion of these elements ranks among the key factors enhancing perceived attractiveness (Kozak et al., 2014).

2.5.3. Attractiveness Factors in Maritime Tourism

Marine tourism is one of the tourism types where attractiveness factors are decisive due to its structure based on the natural environment. In this context, the factors influencing the choice of marine tourism destinations are shaped both by physical environmental characteristics and by service quality and perceptual elements. The opportunities offered by marine and coastal areas rank among the primary determinants in tourists' destination selection (Orams, 2002).

Natural factors are among the most important elements determining attractiveness in marine tourism. Factors such as sea water quality, the cleanliness and width of beaches, climatic conditions and the duration of sunshine directly influence the appeal of coastal destinations. Destinations where clean and clear seas are combined with suitable climatic conditions are in a more advantageous position in terms of tourist demand (Klein & Osleeb, 2010). Turkey's Aegean and Mediterranean coasts have secured a significant place in international tourism flows thanks to these characteristics (Kervankıran, 2014).

In addition to natural elements, another key factor determining the appeal of maritime tourism is the quality of tourist infrastructure and services. The quality of accommodation facilities, transport options, marina and port services, security levels and environmental arrangements directly influence tourists' destination experience. It has been observed that tourist satisfaction and the tendency to revisit increase in destinations where service quality is high (Chen & Tsai, 2007).

In maritime tourism, attractiveness is also closely linked to the variety of activities on offer. Water sports, yacht tourism, boat tours and recreational activities enhance tourists' interaction with the destination and elevate the experiential value. Destinations with a wide variety of activities are able to appeal to different tourist segments and gain a competitive advantage (Martínez Vázquez & Milán García, 2021).

On a perceptual level, destination image and tourists' mental evaluations play a significant role. A positive image of maritime tourism destinations increases the perceived attractiveness to tourists and directly influences destination choice. Destinations that offer safe, clean and high-quality services are considered more attractive by tourists (Chen & Tsai, 2007).

Environmental quality and sustainability are also among the key factors determining attractiveness in marine tourism. The preservation of coastal areas, low levels of water pollution, and the sustainable use of natural resources are becoming increasingly important in tourists' destination choices. It is noted that environmental degradation negatively affects the attractiveness of destinations (Davenport & Davenport, 2006).

Attractiveness factors in maritime tourism also determine the competitive strength of destinations. Differentiation among destinations with similar natural resources is largely achieved through service quality, promotional activities and the variety of experiences offered. Therefore, the effective management of attractiveness factors holds strategic importance in terms of destination marketing (Krešić & Prebežac, 2011).

In maritime tourism destinations, attractiveness exhibits a multi-dimensional structure, shaped by the interaction of elements such as the natural environment, service quality, diversity of activities, destination image and environmental

sustainability. The balanced management of these elements contributes to destinations sustainably increasing tourism demand (Orams, 2002; Chen & Tsai, 2007).

2.6. The Concept of Tourist Value and Valuation Approaches

Tourism value is a multidimensional concept associated with a destination's capacity to generate tourism demand, arouse visitor interest, and influence destination choice through its natural, cultural, historical, and experiential elements. In this respect, tourism value is based not merely on the existence of a resource, but on that resource gaining meaning within a tourism context, being accessible, and being perceived as valuable by the visitor. Studies on destination value in Turkey also show that tourist value is examined in conjunction with elements of attractiveness, destination image, accessibility, infrastructure and the experiential dimension (Çelik & Sandıkçı, 2015).

One of the key determinants in the formation of tourist value is the quality of the resources a region possesses. Natural landscape features, coastlines, climate, biodiversity, historical structures, cultural heritage, local way of life and intangible cultural elements are among the primary components that constitute a destination's tourist value. However, for these resources to gain value from a tourism perspective, it is not merely their existence in isolation that matters, but rather their interpretation, conservation and presentation to visitors within a specific framework (Tunç & Yıldırım, 2024; Mercan & Üzülmmez, 2014).

The concept of tourist value is not reduced to the mere physical existence of the resources a destination possesses. From the visitors' perspective, value is shaped through processes of perception, experience, satisfaction and interpretation. For this reason, the same resource can be evaluated in different

ways by different visitor groups. Destination image, individual expectations, past experiences and information sources play a decisive role in the perception of tourism value (Çelik & Sandıkçı, 2015). This approach aligns with views discussed in the international literature regarding the multi-dimensional value structure of the tourism experience (Gallarza & Gil, 2008).

The approaches used in the evaluation of tourism value are generally classified as qualitative and quantitative methods. In qualitative approaches, methods such as expert opinion, local stakeholder assessments, observation, document review and SWOT analysis are prominent. Studies in Turkish aimed at identifying destination potential frequently utilise evaluations based on expert opinion. A study examining Bartın's destination potential using SWOT analysis and a thesis analysing Mersin's sports tourism potential within the SWOT framework are examples of this approach in practice (Genç & Yılmaz, 2025; Güdük, 2019).

In quantitative evaluation approaches, scoring systems based on specific criteria, indices, comparative scales and multi-criteria evaluation models are utilised. Such methods enable the quantification of tourism resources and facilitate comparisons across different sectors. In a study aimed at determining tourism destination value criteria for cities, it is emphasised that destination value should be assessed not only in terms of resource richness but also in conjunction with image, accessibility, infrastructure and supporting factors (Çelik & Sandıkçı, 2015). Similarly, the international literature indicates that considering both the supply and demand dimensions of tourism value yields analytically stronger results (Formica & Uysal, 2006).

Key criteria that emerge in the tourism valuation process include uniqueness, level of attractiveness, state of

preservation, accessibility, suitability for use, support services and sustainability. Studies that consider natural and cultural resources together demonstrate that a destination's value is influenced not only by the elements it possesses but also by the way these elements are organised to complement one another (Tunç & Yıldırım, 2024). In this respect, tourism value should not be viewed as a single element but as a holistic system of resources and presentation.

In Turkey, tourism value is frequently discussed in relation to cultural heritage, products with geographical indications, historic environments and natural landscapes. A study examining the importance of geographical indications in regional tourism development highlights the capacity of local and unique values to generate economic and cultural significance from a tourism perspective (Merçan & Üzülmöz, 2014). Similarly, research examining the impact of destination attractiveness factors on visitor satisfaction demonstrates that a destination's tourism value is directly linked to visitor satisfaction and choice behaviour (Başarangil & Ulaş, 2018).

Economic valuation approaches also play a significant role in determining tourism value. Studies aimed at determining the use and conservation values of natural and recreational resources reveal that tourism resources can be assessed not only based on current use but also on the necessity of future conservation (Lee & Han, 2002). This approach gains particular importance in the evaluation of resources such as marine areas, coastlines, national parks and sensitive ecosystems.

In these respects, the concept of tourist value does not merely provide a theoretical framework; it also establishes an analytical foundation that determines which resources a destination stands out for, how these resources should be classified, and what methods should be used to evaluate

them. Particularly within the context of marine tourism, this concept provides a functional framework for the systematic identification and comparison of surface and underwater resources, and for demonstrating their contribution to a destination's potential.

2.7. Tourist Value in Underwater and Surface Tourism

Marine tourism is one of the tourism sectors with a high capacity to generate tourist value, thanks to the diversity of its natural and cultural resources. In this context, whilst surface and underwater tourism possess distinct characteristics, when considered together, they form the holistic tourist value structure of destinations. Coastal areas, marine ecosystems and the recreational activities carried out in these areas are among the fundamental elements that generate both economic and experiential value from a tourism perspective (Akay, 2020).

Surface tourism generates tourist value through the physical characteristics of coastal areas, climatic conditions and the diversity of recreational activities. Beaches, coastal landscapes, marina and port infrastructure, water sports facilities and the sun-sea-sand trio constitute the fundamental value components of this type of tourism. Turkey's extensive coastline, favourable climatic conditions and natural beauty enable coastal tourism to generate high tourist value (Dođaner, 2019). In this context, coastal tourism emerges not merely as an activity reliant on natural resources, but also as a value system supported by accommodation, transport and service infrastructure.

The tourism value of coastal tourism depends not only on physical environmental elements but also on the quality of services provided and the diversity of activities. Activities such as yacht tourism, cruise tourism and water sports enhance the

attractiveness of destinations and diversify tourism value. The contribution these activities make to the destination economy enhances the capacity of maritime tourism to generate added value (Kan & Kuleyin, 2017). Furthermore, it is noted that tourism activities developing in coastal areas have significant impacts on regional development and employment (Akay, 2020).

Underwater tourism, on the other hand, stands out as a type of tourism that develops primarily based on natural and cultural heritage elements and offers unique experiences. Diving tourism comprises underwater ecosystems, biological diversity and underwater archaeological values as its core components of tourist value. It is stated that Turkey possesses significant potential in terms of underwater flora and fauna richness and archaeological remains, and that this situation constitutes high value for underwater tourism (Dinç, 2021).

Underwater tourism distinguishes itself from other forms of tourism in terms of experiential value. Diving activities offer tourists direct interaction with nature and an experience of discovery, thereby strengthening the perceptual dimension of tourist value. Studies indicate that diving tourism is not merely a recreational activity but also a form of tourism that fosters environmental awareness and a consciousness of nature conservation (Yılmaz, 2026). In this respect, underwater tourism is directly linked to the concept of sustainable tourism.

When underwater and surface tourism are considered together, it is evident that these two forms of tourism form a complementary structure. Whilst coastal areas attract tourists to the destination, underwater resources enhance the destination's distinctiveness and competitive strength. This integrated structure is regarded as a key factor in enhancing a destination's tourist value (Üzümcü, 2022). Particularly in regions where diving tourism and coastal tourism develop

in tandem, tourist diversity increases, thereby strengthening the destination's appeal.

In marine tourism, tourist value is linked not only to the existence of existing resources but also to their sustainable use. Overuse of coastal areas, environmental pollution and ecosystem degradation can lead to a decline in tourist value. Therefore, the protection of marine tourism resources is of great importance for the sustainability of tourist value (Heper, 2026). In particular, the sensitive nature of underwater ecosystems necessitates sustainable management approaches.

Turkey possesses significant potential for both surface and underwater tourism, thanks to its extensive coastline, favourable climatic conditions and rich underwater resources. Coastal tourism is well-developed in many regions, particularly along the Aegean and Mediterranean coasts, and in recent years, diving tourism has also begun to integrate into this structure. This situation demonstrates that marine tourism constitutes a multi-dimensional structure of tourist value (Bozkurt et al., 2025).

The joint assessment of underwater and surface tourism enables a more accurate analysis of the tourism potential possessed by destinations. In this context, tourism value should be considered not merely in terms of the existence of resources, but within the framework of their diversity, accessibility, experiential contribution and sustainability. This approach provides an important theoretical foundation, particularly for analysing the marine tourism potential of a specific destination (e.g. Balıkesir).

2.8. Underwater and Surface Tourism and the Potential for Tourist Value in Balıkesir

With its geographical location bordering both the Sea of Marmara and the Aegean Sea, Balıkesir Province holds a

privileged position in terms of maritime tourism in Turkey. The province's coastline, exceeding approximately 290 km, encompasses various coastal types with distinct morphological characteristics, thereby facilitating the diversification of tourism activities (Balıkesir Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, 2023).

The Aegean coastline, particularly around Ayvalık and the Edremit Gulf, stands out for its indented and projecting structure, archipelago, and rich natural landscape; whilst the Marmara coastline attracts attention mainly around Erdek, Bandırma and Marmara Island for its extensive beach areas and accessibility (Kahraman & Bayraktar, 2021). This geographical diversity contributes to Balıkesir's ability to generate multifaceted tourist value in terms of both coastal and underwater tourism.

In Balıkesir, coastal tourism is concentrated in the coastal districts, particularly Ayvalık, Edremit, Burhaniye, Gömeç and Erdek. The district of Ayvalık is regarded as one of Turkey's key coastal tourism centres, particularly due to Sarımsaklı Beach. The length of Sarımsaklı Beach, its fine sand and clean sea are among the key factors enhancing the region's tourist appeal (Balıkesir Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, 2023).

The coastline of the Edremit Gulf (Altınoluk, Akçay, Güre) exhibits a multifaceted tourism structure due to the combination of natural landscapes, clean seas and thermal springs. This is regarded as a key factor in enhancing the region's tourist value (Kahraman & Bayraktar, 2021).

Erdek, the Kapıdağ Peninsula and Avşa Island, situated along the coast of the Sea of Marmara, stand out particularly during the summer season due to high demand from domestic tourists. Erdek's long coastline and proximity to Istanbul play a significant role in the region's popularity (Doğaner, 2019).

The Marmara and Avşa islands, meanwhile, enhance the economic value of maritime tourism through activities centred on the sea, sun and entertainment (Balıkesir Metropolitan Municipality, 2024).

The values of marine tourism are not limited to natural elements alone but are supported by activities such as yacht tourism, boat tours and water sports. Boat tours conducted around the Ayvalık Islands offer a recreational experience whilst also enhancing the destination's tourist appeal (Kan & Kuleyin, 2017).

Underwater tourism in Balıkesir is concentrated particularly in Ayvalık and its surroundings. Ayvalık Islands Nature Park is recognised as one of Turkey's key diving regions due to its biological diversity and underwater geomorphological structures (Dinç, 2021).

The diving sites in the region feature diverse characteristics such as reefs, caves and wrecks, offering a variety of experiences for both amateur and professional divers. It is noted that diving sites in Ayvalık, such as Deli Mehmet, Kerbela, Azhar and Ilyosta, are rich in terms of underwater biodiversity and visibility (Dinç, 2021).

One of the most significant features of the Ayvalık region is the presence of red coral (*Corallium rubrum*). This species holds significant biological value for the Mediterranean ecosystem and enhances the region's international appeal in terms of diving tourism (Öztürk & Öztürk, 1996).

Although diving activities are also carried out around Marmara Island and its surroundings, it is stated that the potential in these areas has not been developed to the same extent as in Ayvalık. This situation indicates that Balıkesir possesses a potential for underwater tourism that has not yet been fully realised (Bozkurt et al., 2025).

The infrastructure for marine tourism in Balıkesir is well-developed, particularly in the districts of Ayvalık, Edremit and Erdek. Accommodation facilities, transport options and tourism services are concentrated in these areas (Balıkesir Metropolitan Municipality, 2024). However, it is noted that issues such as seasonality, overcrowding and environmental pressures in coastal areas can affect tourism activities. Unplanned development and irregularities in coastal use pose a risk to the sustainability of tourism value (Doğaner, 2019).

Local government reports emphasise the need to develop alternative forms of tourism and diversify maritime tourism in Balıkesir. In particular, the development of diving tourism and yacht tourism is considered crucial for enhancing the province's tourism value (Balıkesir Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, 2023).

Thanks to its natural, geographical and biological features, Balıkesir possesses a high potential for both surface and underwater tourism. The convergence of the Aegean and Marmara coasts ensures that the destination is in a favourable position in terms of diversity and accessibility (Kahraman & Bayraktar, 2021).

In terms of surface tourism, beaches, climate and recreational activities take centre stage; whilst in terms of underwater tourism, biological diversity, diving sites and the underwater landscape constitute key value elements (Dinç, 2021). However, it is emphasised that environmental protection, planning and infrastructure investments are crucial for this potential to be utilised sustainably. In particular, the protection of underwater ecosystems and the controlled development of diving tourism are regarded as critical requirements for the sustainability of tourism value (Bozkurt et al., 2025).

3. Method and Methodology

3.1. Purpose and Significance of the Study

The primary aim of the study is to identify tourists' perceptions regarding underwater and surface tourism activities within the scope of marine tourism and to ensure these perceptions are analysed within specific dimensions. In this context, the study aims to measure the experiences, evaluations and perceptions of individuals participating in marine tourism in the province of Balıkesir. In the study, perceptions regarding marine tourism are examined within a multi-dimensional framework, with the aim of investigating the relationships between these dimensions.

Another objective of the study is to reveal how marine tourism activities are evaluated by tourists, thereby contributing to the identification of strengths and weaknesses in this field. In this context, it is intended that the findings should both contribute to the academic literature and serve as a guide for practitioners. In particular, the joint consideration of underwater and surface tourism allows for the identification of perceptual differences and similarities between these two types of tourism.

The significance of this research stems from the fact that perceptual assessments of marine tourism have been addressed in only a limited number of studies. Whilst the literature predominantly examines marine tourism through the prism of economic impacts, destination development or physical resources, studies focusing on tourists' perceptions and experiences are relatively scarce. This study aims to fill this gap by addressing marine tourism directly from the tourist's perspective.

Furthermore, the research is significant as it has been conducted specifically in the province of Balıkesir. Balıkesir is a destination that attracts attention due to its geographical location bordering both the Aegean and Marmara Seas, its rich natural resources, and its developing tourism potential; however, studies on the extent to which this potential is realised in line with tourist perceptions are limited. Therefore, this study contributes to the evaluation of Balıkesir's potential in terms of maritime tourism from a tourist perspective.

It is anticipated that the findings of this research will serve as a guide for destination managers, local authorities and stakeholders in the tourism sector. In particular, the study provides important data regarding the identification of tourist expectations and perceptions, the development of tourism products, the improvement of service quality and the formulation of sustainable tourism policies. In this respect, the study possesses a quality that offers contributions both theoretically and in terms of practical application.

3.2. Research Model

The research was designed to determine the level of awareness regarding underwater and surface-level tourist attractions located within the North Aegean–Balıkesir region and to examine this awareness comparatively between the

local population and tourists. Accordingly, the research was structured within a quantitative research framework, and data were collected using a survey technique.

The research model is based on a descriptive and comparative research design. The descriptive aspect stems from the aim of revealing participants' knowledge, perceptions and attitudes regarding underwater and surface-level tourist attractions. The comparative aspect, on the other hand, is based on examining whether these perceptions and attitudes differ between the local population and tourists. In this respect, the research enables a comparative analysis of the assessments of different participant groups regarding marine tourism.

The measurement tool used in the study consists of a scale that addresses awareness and perception of marine tourism within a multidimensional framework. In this context, the research model is based on four key dimensions. These dimensions are knowledge and awareness, perceived tourist attractiveness, experience and participation tendency, and attitudes towards sustainable conservation.

The knowledge and awareness dimension aims to measure participants' level of knowledge regarding underwater and surface-level tourist assets in Balıkesir, as well as their awareness of these assets. The perceived tourist attractiveness dimension reveals the extent to which these assets are considered attractive and competitive from a tourism perspective. The experience and participation tendency dimension is designed to determine individuals' willingness to participate in tourism activities based on these assets and their visit intentions. The sustainable conservation attitude dimension, meanwhile, evaluates attitudes regarding the conservation, planning and sustainable use of marine tourism resources.

Within the scope of the research model, the aim was to examine the relationships between these four dimensions and

to identify significant differences according to participant groups. In this regard, the model is not merely descriptive but also possesses a relational quality. The relationships between the dimensions and the differences according to participant groups were tested using statistical analysis methods.

3.3. The Population and Sample of the Study

The population of this study consists of individuals associated with maritime tourism activities in the province of Balıkesir. More specifically, the research population consists of residents and tourists who may possess perceptions and awareness regarding underwater and surface-level tourist attractions along the North Aegean coast of Balıkesir. In this context, the population has a heterogeneous structure, encompassing both individuals residing in the region and participants visiting the area for tourism purposes.

As it was not possible to reach the entire population due to time, cost and access constraints, a sampling approach was adopted. Accordingly, the sample for the study consists of a total of 401 individuals located in areas of Balıkesir where marine tourism activities are observed to be particularly concentrated, and who voluntarily participated in the research. The sample includes both local residents and tourists, and data has been collected in a manner that allows for a comparative analysis of these two groups.

Convenience sampling was used as the sampling method in the study. Convenience sampling is a method based on selecting a sample from individuals whom the researcher can easily access and from whom data can be collected in a practical manner. This method is widely preferred, particularly in field research, due to the time and cost advantages it offers. However, it should be noted that this method has certain limitations in terms of its representativeness of the population.

During the data collection process within the scope of the research, care was taken to include participants on a voluntary basis, and efforts were made to ensure the participation of individuals with diverse demographic characteristics in the sample. This was done with the aim of enhancing the generalisability of the findings by increasing the diversity of the sample.

In determining the sample size, the criteria for sample size commonly accepted in the social sciences were considered. It is stated that a sample size of 400 or more is sufficient for representing large populations (Yazıcıođlu & Erdođan, 2004). In this context, the data obtained from the 401 participants used in the study are assessed as being of a sufficient level for the analyses.

Consequently, the sample used in this study provides a sufficient and appropriate dataset for examining the level of awareness and perception regarding underwater and surface tourist attractions in Balıkesir. However, it should also be borne in mind that, due to the nature of the sampling method, caution is required when generalising the findings to the entire population.

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, data were collected using the questionnaire technique, one of the quantitative research methods. The questionnaire form prepared for the study consisted of statements designed to determine participants' levels of awareness, perceptions, preferences and attitudes regarding the underwater and surface tourist attractions located along the northern Aegean coast of Balıkesir. The questionnaire was structured to elicit the views of both the local population and tourists.

The questionnaire consists of two sections. The first section includes questions designed to determine participants' demographic characteristics. In this section, information regarding gender, age, educational level and the frequency of visits to Balıkesir for tourism purposes was collected. The second section contains statements aimed at measuring the study's key variables. This section is based on a scale comprising four dimensions. These dimensions are defined as: knowledge and awareness, perceived tourist appeal, experience and participation tendency, and attitude towards sustainable conservation.

The scale items used in the study were prepared using a five-point Likert-type rating scale. Participants were asked to respond to each statement using options ranging from "1=Strongly disagree" to "5=Strongly agree". This type of scaling is widely used in the social sciences to measure individuals' views, attitudes and levels of perception regarding specific issues.

The data collection process was carried out in areas of Balıkesir that are significant for maritime tourism, and participants were included in the study on a voluntary basis. As a result of the study, data was obtained from a total of 401 participants. The collected data was reviewed using, and it was determined that all forms were suitable for analysis; no forms were excluded from the evaluation due to missing or incorrect data.

The SPSS software package was utilised for the analysis of the data obtained from the study. During the analysis process, the Cronbach's Alpha internal consistency coefficient was first calculated to determine the scale's reliability. The reliability analysis revealed that the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the 'Knowledge and Awareness' dimension was 0.777, confirming that this dimension was sufficiently reliable.

Reliability assessments for the scale's other dimensions were also conducted within the same framework.

In the analysis of the data, descriptive statistics were first used to identify the participants' demographic characteristics. In this context, frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation values were calculated. Thus, the general structure of the participant profile and the average trends regarding the scale dimensions were determined.

To assess the applicability of parametric tests in the study, skewness and kurtosis values for the variables were examined. The results obtained indicated that all variables fell within acceptable limits. Accordingly, it was assumed that the data followed a normal distribution, and parametric tests were preferred for the analyses.

An independent samples t-test was applied to determine whether the responses to the scale items differed according to the participants' gender. To identify differences according to the variables of age, educational level and frequency of visits, which involved more than two groups, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used. Where the assumption of homogeneity of variances was not met, the Welch test was employed to obtain more robust results. For variables where significant differences were identified, post-hoc analyses were conducted to determine between which groups the differences arose.

Furthermore, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between the scale's sub-dimensions. This analysis determined the direction and level of the relationship between the dimensions of knowledge and awareness, perceived tourist attractiveness, experience and participation tendency, and sustainable conservation attitude. The results of the correlation analysis indicated a positive, strong and statistically significant relationship, particularly

between knowledge and awareness and perceived tourist attractiveness. Furthermore, positive yet weakly significant relationships were identified between certain dimensions. In this respect, the correlation analysis contributed to the study's ability to reveal not only group differences but also the interaction between dimensions.

Consequently, in this study, the data were obtained through a systematic data collection process and evaluated using reliability measures, descriptive statistics, t-tests and correlation analysis. The analytical techniques employed enabled the study to identify both the differences between participant groups and the relationships between the dimensions of perception regarding maritime tourism, in line with the study's objectives.

3.5. Scale and Dimensions

The scale used in this study was developed to measure participants' awareness, perceptions, tendencies and attitudes towards underwater and surface tourist attractions along the northern Aegean coast of Balıkesir. During the development of the scale, a theoretical framework relating to the concepts of marine tourism, tourist attractiveness, experience and sustainability was utilised, and the items were formulated in accordance with the research objective.

The statements in the scale were prepared using a five-point Likert-type rating scale, and participants were asked to rate each statement on a scale ranging from "1 = Strongly disagree" to "5 = Strongly agree".

The scale used in the study comprises four dimensions: knowledge and awareness, perceived tourist appeal, experience and participation tendency, and attitude towards sustainable conservation.

The knowledge and awareness dimension measures participants' level of knowledge regarding underwater and

surface-level tourist assets in Balıkesir, as well as their awareness of these assets. This dimension encompasses assessments of the awareness of marine tourism potential, awareness of underwater ecosystems and biodiversity, and the adequacy of promotional efforts.

The perceived tourist attractiveness dimension aims to determine the extent to which participants find the assets attractive and competitive from a tourism perspective. This dimension includes perceptions regarding the contribution of underwater and surface elements to the destination's image and their level of attractiveness.

The experience and participation tendency dimension measures participants' willingness to engage in marine tourism activities and their behavioural tendencies. In this context, elements such as willingness to participate in tourism activities, orientation towards events, and visit intention are assessed.

The sustainable conservation attitude dimension, meanwhile, aims to determine participants' attitudes towards the conservation and sustainable use of underwater and surface tourist assets. This dimension encompasses elements such as conservation priority, sustainable planning, local participation and environmental awareness.

This four-dimensional framework provides a comprehensive measurement framework appropriate to the research objective by addressing the cognitive, perceptual, behavioural and attitudinal aspects of awareness and perception regarding marine tourism.

4. Findings

A Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis was conducted to assess the internal consistency of the scale's sub-dimensions used in the study. According to the analysis results, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the 'Knowledge and Awareness' dimension was found to be 0.777, and this dimension was determined to be reliable at an acceptable level.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Group</u>	<u>f</u>	<u>%</u>
Gender	Female	200	49.9
	Male	201	50.1
Age	18–25	46	11.5
	26–35	94	23.4
	36–45	132	32.9
	46–55	56	14.0
	56+	61	15.2
	Other	12	3.0
Level of Education	Secondary school	17	4.2
	Associate Degree	119	29.7
	Bachelor's	174	43.4
	Postgraduate	73	18.2
	Other	18	4.5
Frequency of visits	I haven't visited before	20	5.0
	I visit rarely	64	16.0

I visit occasionally	77	19.2
I visit frequently	117	29.2
Very often / constantly	123	30.7
Total	401	100

A total of 401 participants were included in the study, and all data were found to be suitable for analysis. Upon examining the participants' demographic characteristics, it is observed that the age distribution is balanced across the different groups. It was determined that 32.9% of participants were in the 36–45 age group, followed by the 26–35 age group at 23.4% and the 56 and over age group at 15.2%. The lowest participation rate was observed in the 18–25 age group at 11.5%. When examining the gender distribution, it is evident that 49.9% of participants were female and 50.1% were male, indicating that the sample has a balanced gender composition.

In terms of educational attainment, the vast majority of participants were graduates with a bachelor's degree (43.4%) and an associate degree (29.7%). The proportion of participants with postgraduate education was 18.2%, whilst the proportion of high school graduates was 4.2%. This indicates that the sample generally consists of individuals with medium to high levels of education.

When examining the frequency with which participants visited Balıkesir for tourist purposes, it was found that 30.7% reside in the region or are there on a permanent basis, whilst 29.2% visit frequently. In contrast, 19.2% stated they visit occasionally, 16.0% rarely, whilst only 5.0% indicated they had never visited before. These findings suggest that a significant proportion of participants have direct experience of Balıkesir. Upon examining the skewness and kurtosis values of the variables, it is observed that all variables fall within acceptable

limits. Accordingly, it has been assessed that the data conform to a normal distribution and that the application of parametric tests is appropriate.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Scale Dimensions

<u>Dimension</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation (Std. Dev.)</u>
Knowledge and Awareness	3.7905	0.77383
Perceived Tourist Attractiveness	3.6988	0.67840
Experience and Participation Propensity	4.2005	0.40386
Attitude towards Sustainable Conservation	3.8699	0.64661
* N = 401		

Upon examining Table 2, it can be seen that the dimension with the highest mean score among participants is the tendency towards experience and participation ($\bar{X}=4.2005$). This is followed, in order, by the sustainable conservation attitude ($\bar{X}=3.8699$), knowledge and awareness ($\bar{X}=3.7905$) and perceived tourist attractiveness ($\bar{X}=3.6988$) dimensions. These findings indicate that participants have a high level of willingness to participate in marine tourism activities in Balıkesir, but that their perception of tourist attractiveness remains relatively lower.

Table 3. Results of the Independent Samples t-Test by Gender

<u>Variable</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>p</u>
B1	-.720	.472
B2	1.198	.232
B3	3,157	.002
B4	-0.157	.876
B5	-0.484	.629
C1	.687	.492
C2	.810	.418
C3	.247	.805
C4	-0.204	.839
C5	-0.484	.629
D1	-.960	.338
D2	-2.368	.018
D3	1,194	.233
D4	-.524	.601
D5	-0.486	.627
S1	-.126	.900
S2	.642	.522
S3	1,960	.051
S4	2,102	.036
S5	2,263	.024
S6	1,895	.059

When examining participants' levels of knowledge and awareness by gender, it is observed that, in general, there is no statistically significant difference between the items ($p > 0.05$). However, a statistically significant difference by gender was detected regarding responses to the statement "I am aware that there are areas along the Balıkesir coastline that are notable for their underwater ecosystems and biodiversity" ($p < 0.05$). Upon examining the mean values, it was determined that female participants possessed a higher level of awareness on this matter compared to male participants. This suggests that female participants may possess a higher sensitivity towards environmental and ecological issues. This finding is

consistent with studies in the literature indicating that women are more sensitive to issues of environmental awareness and sustainability.

When the perceived levels of tourist attractiveness were examined according to the participants' gender, no statistically significant difference was found across all items ($p > 0.05$). The findings indicate that the perceived attractiveness of Balıkesir's underwater and surface tourist assets is at a similar level among both female and male participants. This suggests that the perception of tourist attractiveness is formed in a similar manner regardless of gender and that participants generally evaluate destination characteristics from a shared perspective.

When examining participants' experience and participation tendencies by gender, no statistically significant differences were generally found between the items ($p > 0.05$). However, a statistically significant difference was detected regarding responses to the statement "I could participate in boat tours, coastal walks or nature-based activities organised in the region" ($p < 0.05$). Upon examining the mean values, it was determined that male participants had a higher tendency to participate in such activities compared to female participants. This suggests that male participants may show a higher inclination towards participating in outdoor and experience-oriented tourism activities.

When sustainable conservation attitudes were examined by participants' gender, statistically significant differences were identified in relation to certain statements. In particular, it was found that female participants had higher average scores than male participants regarding responses to the statements "raising tourists' awareness" and "tourism activities carried out without regard to carrying capacity may cause harm" ($p < 0.05$). This indicates that female participants adopt a

more sensitive approach to issues of sustainable tourism and environmental conservation. These findings are consistent with studies in the literature that demonstrate women exhibit higher sensitivity towards environmental awareness and sustainability.

Table 4. ANOVA Analysis Results

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
Age	B	B1	2,352	.048
		B2	2,478	.032
		B3	11,417	,000
		B4	3,814	.002
	C	C1	2,979	.016
		C3	4,013	.003
		C4	2,819	.016
	S	S2	2,300	.044
S4		3,281	.006	
Education Level	C	C5.	22,231	,000
	S	S4	2,613	.035
Visit Frequency	S	S3	52,817	<.001
	S	S4	48,065	<0.001
	S	S5	31,058	<0.001
	S	S6	73,745	<.001

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. The Welch test was used when homogeneity of variance was not met. Only significant results are shown.

When examining participants' levels of knowledge and awareness by age group, statistically significant differences were observed for most statements. According to the analysis results, perceptions regarding marine tourism values, underwater tourism potential, water- dwater ecosystems and biodiversity, and the diversity of Balıkesir's marine tourism potential were found to differ across age groups ($p < 0.05$). Post-hoc test results generally indicate that the 26–35, 36–45 and 46–55 age groups possess higher levels of knowledge

and awareness compared to the older age group. Conversely, no significant difference was detected between age groups regarding the statement ‘sufficient promotion has been carried out’ ($p > 0.05$). These findings reveal that participants in the middle-aged group have a higher level of awareness regarding Balıkesir’s underwater and surface tourist attractions. This suggests that individuals in the middle-aged group may possess a higher level of awareness when it comes to evaluating destination characteristics, perceiving tourist diversity and recognising environmental factors.

When the perceived levels of tourist appeal were examined according to the participants’ age groups, statistically significant differences were found for certain statements. Assessments regarding the fact that the coexistence of underwater and surface elements in Balıkesir makes the destination unique and that these values could strengthen the destination’s image differ significantly across age groups ($p < 0.05$). Post-hoc analysis results indicate that the 26–35 and 46–55 age groups perceive these characteristics at a higher level compared to participants aged 56 and over. In contrast, no significant differences were found between age groups regarding assessments of the tourism potential of the region’s underwater resources and the ability of coastal and underwater values to compete with other destinations. These findings suggest that participants in the middle-aged group, in particular, perceive Balıkesir’s tourist appeal more strongly. This suggests that individuals in the middle-aged group may have a more distinct perception regarding the destination’s uniqueness, image value and tourist diversity.

When participants’ experience and participation tendencies were examined by age group, no statistically significant differences were found across all statements ($p > 0.05$). Accordingly, no significant differences were observed between age groups regarding the desire to participate in marine

tourism activities, the tendency to participate in boat tours and nature-based activities, the appeal of events showcasing underwater heritage and biodiversity, the desire to learn more about marine tourism opportunities, or the intention to visit or revisit Balıkesir. This finding indicates that the level of experience and participation tendency is similar regardless of the age variable. The results obtained demonstrate that the desire for experience and participation in Balıkesir's underwater and marine tourism potential constitutes a common area of interest across different age groups.

When participants' attitudes towards sustainable conservation were examined by age group, no statistically significant difference was found in the vast majority of statements ($p > 0.05$). However, significant differences were identified between age groups regarding the statements "sustainability principles should be the basis for planning underwater and surface tourism" and "tourists must be made aware of the need to protect the region's natural and cultural marine heritage" ($p < 0.05$). According to the post-hoc analysis results, the sensitivity of the 26–35 age group regarding the inclusion of sustainability principles in planning is higher than that of the 56 and over age group. Similarly, it was determined that the attitude of the 46–55 age group towards raising tourists' awareness is stronger than that of participants aged 56 and over. These findings indicate that participants in the middle-aged group demonstrate a more sensitive approach regarding certain sustainability elements. This suggests that individuals in the middle-aged group may possess a more pronounced sensitivity, particularly concerning sustainable tourism planning and the development of visitor awareness.

When examining participants' levels of knowledge and awareness according to their educational levels, no statistically significant difference was found across all statements ($p > 0.05$). Accordingly, assessments regarding knowledge of Balıkesir's

above-water and underwater tourist assets, recognition of underwater ecosystems and biodiversity areas, not viewing the potential of marine tourism as limited to beach tourism, and the adequacy of promotion do not vary significantly according to educational level. This finding indicates that participants' levels of knowledge and awareness are distributed in a similar pattern regardless of educational level. This suggests that awareness of Balıkesir's above-water and underwater tourism values is not solely dependent on formal educational level but is similarly shaped among participants with different educational backgrounds.

When the perceived levels of tourist attractiveness were examined according to participants' educational levels, no statistically significant difference was found regarding the attractiveness of surface natural areas, the tourism potential of underwater resources, the potential of underwater and surface elements to make the destination unique, or the potential to strengthen the destination's image ($p > 0.05$). In contrast, a statistically significant difference was found regarding the statement "Balıkesir's coastal and underwater values are of a standard capable of competing with other coastal destinations" when analysed by educational level ($p < 0.05$). Post-hoc analysis results indicate that participants with postgraduate education levels agreed with this statement to a higher degree compared to other educational groups. This finding suggests that perceptions of Balıkesir's competitive tourism potential strengthen as educational level increases. This indicates that individuals with higher educational levels are able to make a more analytical assessment regarding destination competition, tourism positioning and comparisons between coastal destinations.

When examining participants' experience and participation tendencies according to their educational levels, no statistically significant difference was found across all statements ($p > 0.05$).

Accordingly, no significant differences were observed between educational levels regarding the desire to participate in surface-based tourism activities, the tendency to participate in boat tours and nature-based activities, the appeal of events promoting underwater heritage and biodiversity, the desire to learn more about marine tourism opportunities, and the intention to visit or revisit Balıkesir. This finding indicates that experience and participation tendencies are distributed similarly regardless of educational level. This suggests that the desire to experience and participate in Balıkesir's underwater and marine tourism potential constitutes a common area of interest across different educational levels.

When sustainable conservation attitudes were examined according to participants' educational levels, it was determined that there was no statistically significant difference in the vast majority of responses ($p > 0.05$). No significant differences were identified across educational levels regarding the prioritisation of the conservation of underwater and surface marine tourist assets, the incorporation of sustainability principles into planning, the involvement of the local community in the conservation process, the consideration of carrying capacity, and the enhancement of education and awareness initiatives. However, a limited tendency towards differences based on educational level was observed regarding the view that tourists should be made aware of the need to protect the region's natural and cultural marine heritage. However, post-hoc analyses could not clearly identify among which groups this difference was pronounced. These findings suggest that attitudes towards sustainable conservation are generally distributed in a similar manner, independent of educational level. This suggests that attitudes towards sustainable conservation may be shaped more by participants' general environmental sensitivity and personal perceptions of the destination than by their formal educational level.

When the levels of knowledge and awareness of participants were examined according to the frequency of their visits to Balıkesir for tourism purposes, it was found that there was no statistically significant difference across the statements ($p>0.05$). Accordingly, knowledge of above-water and underwater tourist attractions, the perception that the potential for marine tourism is not limited to beach tourism, and assessments of the adequacy of promotion do not vary significantly according to the frequency of visits. However, a limited tendency towards differentiation was observed in awareness regarding areas of interest in terms of underwater ecosystems and biodiversity. Post-hoc results indicate that participants residing in Balıkesir possess a higher level of awareness on this subject compared to those who visit infrequently. This finding suggests that maintaining a more consistent connection with the destination may enhance awareness of specific environmental factors. Visit frequency is generally not a decisive variable in terms of knowledge and awareness; however, it is observed that individuals in constant contact with the destination develop higher levels of awareness, particularly regarding underwater ecosystems and biodiversity.

When the perceived levels of tourist appeal were examined according to the frequency of participants' visits to Balıkesir for tourist purposes, no statistically significant difference was found across all statements ($p>0.05$). Accordingly, the tourist appeal of surface natural areas, the tourism potential of underwater resources, the unique character of the destination conferred by underwater and surface elements, the potential to strengthen the destination's image, and the perceived ability to compete with other coastal destinations do not vary significantly according to visit frequency. This finding indicates that the perception of Balıkesir's tourist appeal is formed in a similar manner, independent of the frequency of

visits to the destination. This suggests that the perception of the appeal of Balıkesir's underwater and surface tourism assets is not solely dependent on the frequency of personal visit experiences but is shaped within the framework of a more general destination perception.

When participants' experience and participation tendencies were examined according to the frequency of their visits to Balıkesir for tourism purposes, no statistically significant difference was found across all statements ($p > 0.05$). Accordingly, the desire to participate in surface tourism activities, the tendency to take part in boat tours and nature-based events, the perception of events promoting underwater heritage and biodiversity as attractive, the desire to learn more about marine tourism opportunities, and the intention to visit or revisit Balıkesir do not vary significantly according to visit frequency. This finding indicates that the level of experience and participation tendency remains similar regardless of visit frequency. The results suggest that the desire to participate in Balıkesir's underwater and surface tourism potential is not solely dependent on current visit experience, but is shaped within a broader framework of tourist interest.

When sustainable conservation attitudes were examined according to the frequency of participants' tourist visits to Balıkesir, very strong and statistically significant differences were identified for certain statements ($p < 0.001$). In particular, views regarding the active involvement of the local population in the conservation of marine tourism resources, the raising of tourists' awareness regarding the protection of natural and cultural marine heritage, the potential harm that intensive tourism activities conducted without regard for carrying capacity could cause to the region, and the need to increase education and awareness initiatives regarding these values differ significantly according to visit frequency. Post-hoc analysis results indicate that participants who visit Balıkesir

more frequently, and particularly those residing in the destination, exhibit a higher level of sustainable conservation attitude compared to those who have never visited or visit rarely. Conversely, no significant difference was found regarding the priority of protecting tourist values and the incorporation of sustainability principles into planning, based on visit frequency. These findings demonstrate that a direct and ongoing relationship with the destination significantly strengthens awareness of sustainable conservation. The findings suggest that as experiential and spatial ties with a destination strengthen, individuals' levels of responsibility and sensitivity towards the conservation of that destination also increase.

Table 5. Correlation Analysis Between Variables

	1	2	3	4
1. Knowledge and Awareness	1	.727**	.195**	.059
2. Perceived Tourist Attractiveness		1	.162**	.087
3. Experience and Participation Propensity			1	.181**
4. Attitude towards Sustainable Conservation				1

N = 401. ** p < 0.01 (two-tailed).

As a result of the Pearson correlation analysis conducted to determine the relationships between variables in the study, a positive, strong and statistically significant relationship was found between knowledge and awareness and perceived tourist attractiveness ($r=0.727$, $p<0.01$). In contrast, whilst a positive, weak yet significant relationship was identified between knowledge and awareness and the tendency towards experience and participation ($r=0.195$, $p<0.01$), no significant relationship was found between knowledge and

awareness and the attitude towards sustainable conservation ($r=0.059$, $p>0.05$). A positive, weak but statistically significant relationship was also found between perceived tourist attractiveness and the tendency towards experience and participation ($r=0.162$, $p<0.01$), whilst no statistically significant relationship was found between perceived tourist attractiveness and the attitude towards sustainable conservation ($r=0.087$, $p>0.05$). Finally, a positive, weak but significant relationship was identified between experience and participation tendency and the attitude towards sustainable conservation ($r=0.181$, $p<0.01$). These findings indicate that knowledge level has a strong influence on the perception of tourist attraction, whereas experience and participation play a more decisive role in the formation of the attitude towards sustainable conservation.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

In this study, awareness, perception, experience and attitudes towards sustainable conservation regarding underwater and surface tourist assets located on the North Aegean coast of Balıkesir were examined; it was analysed whether these variables differed according to demographic characteristics. The findings obtained within the scope of the research reveal that perceptions regarding marine tourism have a multi-dimensional structure and that this structure is influenced to varying degrees by different variables.

According to the research results, it was determined that the dimension with the highest average among participants regarding marine tourism was experience and participation tendency. This indicates a high level of general interest and willingness to participate in marine tourism activities in Balıkesir. Conversely, the relatively lower average score for the perceived tourist attractiveness dimension suggests that the region's tourist assets have not managed to create a sufficiently strong image. This finding indicates that, despite its tourism potential, Balıkesir has not been adequately positioned at the perceptual level.

Analyses based on the gender variable revealed that, generally, significant differences were limited; however, it

was determined that female participants demonstrated higher sensitivity, particularly regarding environmental awareness and sustainability. This aligns with the literature suggesting that women possess a higher level of awareness regarding environmental issues.

The age variable was one of the variables where the most pronounced differences were observed in the study. In particular, it was found that participants in the middle-aged group (aged 26–55) had higher scores in terms of both knowledge and awareness, as well as their perception of tourist appeal. Conversely, the fact that experience and participation tendencies did not show a significant difference based on age indicates that interest in marine tourism is a general trend independent of age groups.

It was observed that the education level variable generally produced limited differentiation. It was determined that participants' awareness, experience and attitudes towards sustainability were distributed similarly regardless of education level. This situation indicates that perceptions regarding maritime tourism are shaped not only by formal education but also by factors such as experience and environmental interaction.

One of the most striking findings of the study is the strong influence of the visit frequency variable on attitudes towards sustainable conservation. It was found that participants who visited Balıkesir more frequently, and particularly those residing in the region, exhibited higher sensitivity towards sustainability, conservation and awareness. This finding demonstrates that as individuals' experiential connection with a destination increases, so does their conservation awareness.

The results of the correlation analysis revealed a strong relationship between knowledge and awareness and perceived tourist attractiveness. This indicates that as the level of

knowledge about the destination increases, so does the perception of its tourist attractiveness. Conversely, it was determined that the attitude towards sustainable conservation is more closely related to experience and participation tendencies than to the level of knowledge. This finding suggests that conservation awareness is shaped more by experiential processes than by cognitive knowledge.

Overall, it is evident that Balıkesir possesses significant potential in terms of both underwater and surface-level tourist attractions; however, this potential is not fully reflected at the perceptual level. Nevertheless, the participants' high willingness to participate and strong sustainability tendencies suggest that the region could become a major tourist destination with the right planning and promotional strategies.

Based on the research findings, various recommendations have been developed for both practical applications and academic studies. Firstly, there is a need to increase activities aimed at promoting Balıkesir's underwater and surface-level tourist attractions. The fact that the perceived level of tourist appeal was lower than other dimensions in the study indicates that existing tourist attractions are not sufficiently visible. Therefore, the promotion of the region should be strengthened, particularly through the use of digital platforms, social media and destination marketing tools.

Within the scope of marine tourism, product diversity should be increased not only for beach tourism but also for alternative tourism types such as diving tourism, boat tours, nature-based activities and underwater heritage. The participants' high inclination towards experience and participation presents a significant opportunity for the development of such activities.

Research findings indicate that attitudes towards sustainable conservation are particularly stronger among individuals

who have direct contact with the destination. Accordingly, the active participation of the local community in tourism planning processes should be ensured, and educational and awareness-raising initiatives aimed at enhancing conservation awareness should be expanded. Similarly, information activities targeting tourists should be increased, and responsible tourism behaviour should be encouraged.

Particularly for the protection of underwater ecosystems and areas rich in biodiversity, carrying capacity principles must be taken into account, and uncontrolled tourism activities must be prevented. In this context, the effective implementation of sustainable tourism policies by local authorities and relevant institutions is of great importance.

Research findings indicate that the level of information significantly influences the perception of a destination's appeal. Therefore, ensuring an accurate and effective flow of information about the destination should be regarded as a critical factor in shaping perceived value.

From an academic perspective, future studies are recommended to compare different destinations, utilise qualitative research methods, and examine tourist behaviour in greater depth. Furthermore, increasing the number of studies addressing the relationship between perception, experience, and sustainability within the context of maritime tourism will make significant contributions to the literature.

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A Study on the Identification of Above-Water and Underwater Tourism Assets in the North Aegean–Balıkesir Region

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