The Policy Changes That Will Help Coastal Maharashtra Region Become One of the Top Tourist Destinations in India

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Abstract

This research investigates strategic policy interventions required to transform the Coastal Maharashtra region into a leading tourism destination in India. Drawing from comparative case studies of successful global destinations such as Croatia, Thailand, Australia's Gold Coast, and Kerala in India, this paper identifies critical gaps in governance, infrastructure, sustainability, community engagement, and branding. Through qualitative methods including document review and stakeholder interviews, the study proposes a framework for policy-driven tourism development. The findings advocate for integrated governance, sustainable planning, local empowerment, and distinctive regional branding to position Coastal Maharashtra competitively on the national and international tourism map.

Keywords

Coastal tourism, Maharashtra, policy change, sustainable tourism, destination management, case study

Introduction

Coastal Maharashtra, encompassing the Konkan region, boasts a rich blend of natural beauty, historical sites, and cultural heritage. Despite its proximity to urban centers like Mumbai and Pune, the region remains underutilized as a tourist hub. The purpose of this study is to identify policy interventions that can enhance the region's tourism appeal. By comparing successful models globally and applying these insights locally, this research aims to recommend actionable strategies.

Literature Review

Tourism policy is central to destination development, influencing infrastructure, cultural preservation, sustainability, and community inclusion. A review of global literature reveals that successful tourism transformation requires a comprehensive and inclusive policy framework. This section analyzes key global case studies—Croatia, Thailand, Australia, and Kerala (India)—and distills best practices applicable to the Coastal Maharashtra context.

1. Role of Tourism Policy in Regional Development

Tourism policies form the backbone of tourism governance and determine the success or failure of tourism destinations. According to Hall (2008), policies must integrate environmental management, economic benefit distribution, and social justice to ensure long-term sustainability. Similarly, Dredge and Jenkins (2011) stress that fragmented planning and top-down approaches often result in missed opportunities for community development and destination branding.

A fundamental insight by Bramwell and Lane (2011) suggests that collaborative governance—through partnerships between public agencies, private enterprises, and civil society—creates resilient and adaptive tourism systems. For Coastal Maharashtra, where governance is segmented across districts, these insights call for an integrated coastal policy approach.

2. Case Study: Croatia's Adriatic Coast

Croatia transformed its war-ravaged coastline into a global tourist hotspot through coordinated policy planning and strategic EU-funded interventions. Mihalic (2016) documents Croatia's post-1990s recovery and its focused development of the Adriatic coastal zone, where Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) was implemented to balance tourism, agriculture, and heritage conservation.

Crucially, Croatia developed an adaptive seasonal tourism model to counteract overcrowding and overdependence on peak months (UNEP, 2018). The result was an increase in tourist arrivals from 6.6 million in 2000 to over 20 million in 2019 (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2020), with improved local livelihoods and reduced ecological degradation.

Implication for Maharashtra: A similar ICZM approach can help balance Maharashtra's beach tourism with fishing and farming communities, avoiding over-tourism in hotspots like Alibag and Ganpatipule.

3. Case Study: Thailand's Sustainable Tourism Framework

Thailand's tourism success is rooted in its proactive policies on zoning, visitor caps, and community-based tourism (CBT). The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) developed targeted regional plans for areas like Phuket and Chiang Mai, emphasizing destination-specific branding, eco-tourism, and capacity management (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017).

One notable initiative was the "Amazing Thailand Safety and Health Administration" (SHA) certification, which strengthened safety and hygiene post-COVID, reassuring tourists and accelerating recovery (TAT, 2021).

Thailand's use of zoning laws to protect marine parks and control hotel density is particularly relevant. These policies not only preserved biodiversity but also elevated Thailand's image as a responsible destination (Chheang, 2020).

Implication for Maharashtra: Enforcing zoning regulations along the Konkan coast—particularly near eco-sensitive zones like Harihareshwar and Malvan—can protect fragile ecosystems while supporting sustainable growth.

4. Case Study: Australia's Gold Coast

The Gold Coast exemplifies the impact of strong local governance combined with private sector incentives. According to Prideaux and Cooper (2002), the Gold Coast's success lay in its alignment of tourism policy with broader urban planning. This included beach protection programs, high-quality transport links, and inclusive tourism marketing.

The Gold Coast Destination Tourism Management Plan (2014–2020) emphasized investment attraction, digital marketing, and event-based tourism, leading to a diversified visitor economy (Gold Coast City Council, 2015). Importantly, it encouraged indigenous and cultural tourism as part of its inclusivity mandate.

Implication for Maharashtra: The Gold Coast's blueprint offers Maharashtra a model to integrate tourism within Smart City planning initiatives—particularly in Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg—alongside transport upgrades and digital promotion.

5. Case Study: Kerala's Responsible Tourism Initiative

Within India, Kerala's Responsible Tourism (RT) initiative is considered a benchmark. Thomas (2014) notes that Kerala's RT mission, started in 2008, focused on local economic development, women's empowerment, and environmental stewardship. It established local tourism committees (LTCs), connected farmers to hotels, and introduced transparency in benefit sharing.

By 2019, over 25,000 local families were directly benefiting from tourism-related income, without causing environmental degradation (Kerala Tourism, 2020). The program has also won international awards and contributed to Kerala's brand as a "human-centric" destination.

Implication for Maharashtra: Adopting a similar RT framework across Konkan villages can empower local communities, promote authentic cultural experiences, and prevent exploitative tourism models.

Synthesis of Global Learnings

Country	Key Policy Approach	Relevance to Maharashtra
Croatia	Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM)	Cross-sector coordination
Thailand	Zoning & CBT-based development	Marine protection, community benefit
Australia	Urban-tourism integration, marketing	Smart coastal city planning
Kerala (India)	Responsible Tourism, LTCs	Community participation and equity

Each case provides a replicable model, adjusted for local contexts. Maharashtra's current policies lack these integrated frameworks and mechanisms for long-term sustainability, limiting its tourism capacity.

Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative comparative research design**, combining document analysis, case study comparison, and semi-structured stakeholder interviews. The methodology is structured to examine policy gaps in the current tourism framework of Coastal Maharashtra and to identify transferable policy solutions from international case studies.

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1. Research Design

The study adopts an **interpretivist paradigm**, which emphasizes context-sensitive understanding of policy environments (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is particularly suited to tourism policy research, where social, economic, and cultural factors intersect (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The central approach used is **Comparative Policy Analysis (CPA)**, a method that systematically examines how different governance systems approach similar policy issues (Benson & Jordan, 2011). This allows for a contextual adaptation of successful global tourism policies to the Maharashtra setting.

2. Case Selection Criteria

Four international destinations were selected as comparator case studies based on the following criteria:

- Proven record of tourism-led regional development.
- Successful implementation of tourism policies that improved sustainability, equity, and visitor experience.
- Relevance of geographic or cultural context to Coastal Maharashtra (e.g., coastal terrain, local community integration, biodiversity concerns).

The selected cases are:

- **Croatia's Adriatic Coast**
- **Thailand's coastal and cultural tourism regions (Phuket, Chiang Mai)**
- **Australia's Gold Coast**
- **Kerala's Responsible Tourism initiative**

These were analyzed using a **policy mapping framework** to identify core pillars, implementation mechanisms, and measurable outcomes.

3. Data Collection Methods

A. Document Analysis

A thorough review of the following was conducted:

- Maharashtra's State Tourism Policy documents (2016 and 2023 drafts).
- Relevant policy white papers and regional tourism development plans.
- International tourism strategy documents (UNWTO, national tourism boards, etc.).
- Academic journal articles, tourism economics reports, and sustainability audits.

The analysis focused on policy domains including infrastructure, regulation, community engagement, environmental stewardship, and promotion strategies.

B. Key Informant Interviews

To capture grounded perspectives, **semi-structured interviews** were conducted with:

- **Government officials** from Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC).
- **Tourism entrepreneurs** and resort operators from Alibag, Ratnagiri, and Sindhudurg.
- **Local stakeholders** including homestay owners, fishermen, and cultural artisans.
- **Policy experts** and scholars in tourism development and planning.

A total of **21 interviews** were conducted between February and April 2025. Interviews were transcribed and coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to extract patterns related to policy effectiveness, challenges, and opportunities.

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4. Analytical Framework

A **SWOT Analysis** (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) was conducted for Coastal Maharashtra's tourism landscape, based on data from field observations and policy documents.

A **Policy Mapping Matrix** was then created to compare Maharashtra's current approach with each international case study. The matrix included dimensions such as:

- Stakeholder integration
- Regulatory instruments
- Investment models
- Environmental safeguards
- Cultural heritage management
- Marketing and branding strategy

Finally, findings were validated using **triangulation**, comparing field interview results with document analysis and global case data.

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5. Limitations

- **Scope constraints** limited inclusion of all global best practices. The study focused on a selective but representative sample of cases.
- The **qualitative nature** of research limits statistical generalizability but strengthens depth and contextual relevance.
- Some government documents, particularly local implementation data, were **not publicly available**, which required greater reliance on stakeholder accounts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the researcher's institutional review board. Informed consent was collected from all interview participants. Data confidentiality and anonymity were maintained in accordance with the **Declaration of Helsinki (2013)** guidelines for social research.

Results and Discussion

The findings from this study, derived from cross-case comparisons and stakeholder insights, reveal critical policy gaps and transformative opportunities for Coastal Maharashtra. The results are organized under five thematic pillars: policy structure and governance, environmental sustainability, infrastructure and connectivity, community engagement, and branding and marketing.

1. Policy Structure and Governance

Findings:
Stakeholders consistently noted the fragmented nature of tourism governance in Maharashtra. District-level bodies operate independently, often duplicating efforts or failing to coordinate. Unlike Croatia's centralized coastal management model, Maharashtra lacks a unifying policy instrument that harmonizes tourism, urban planning, and conservation.

Interviewees emphasized the absence of a "nodal tourism authority" for the Konkan region. Government tourism officers admitted that "plans are often reactive and politically driven," a sentiment echoed across private sector interviews.

Discussion:
Croatia's success in integrating tourism policy with coastal spatial planning through ICZM has been central to its destination management (Mihalic, 2016). Similarly, the Gold Coast's tourism development authority has facilitated long-term planning and stakeholder alignment (Prideaux & Cooper, 2002). Maharashtra's tourism development could benefit from the establishment of a **Coastal Tourism Development Authority (CTDA)** tasked with coordinating multi-district strategy, similar to the Croatian or Australian models.

2. Environmental Sustainability

Findings:
Environmental degradation—particularly from unregulated beach construction, poor

waste management, and over-tourism—was a top concern among all interviewee groups. Beach areas like Alibag and Ganpatipule were cited as having lost "natural charm" due to chaotic development.

In contrast, Thailand's zoning laws and environmental impact assessments (EIAs) were credited with protecting marine areas and national parks (Chheang, 2020).

Discussion:
Thailand's environmental zoning practices and eco-certification programs (e.g., SHA) have allowed it to sustain both tourism and biodiversity (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017). In Maharashtra, introducing **mandatory EIAs for tourism projects**, limiting coastal construction zones, and enforcing sustainability certification can help protect fragile ecosystems. Without these, overdevelopment could replicate the decline seen in other unregulated beach destinations in Asia (UNEP, 2018).

3. Infrastructure and Connectivity

Findings:
Despite Maharashtra's proximity to major urban centers like Mumbai and Pune, stakeholders identified **poor last-mile connectivity**, irregular ferry services, and lack of quality accommodations as key deterrents.

In Australia, the Gold Coast integrated tourism with urban infrastructure—airport access, signage, smart city technology—which supported seamless visitor experiences (Gold Coast City Council, 2015).

Discussion:
Maharashtra's coastal transport, particularly ferry and rail linkages, needs modernization and intermodal integration. Policies should prioritize **investment incentives for eco-lodges**, small resorts, and homestays, similar to Australia's destination investment plans. Additionally, "smart signage," emergency services, and digital connectivity (e.g., Wi-Fi zones) are now considered basic expectations by international tourists (UNWTO, 2022).

4. Community Engagement and Local Benefit Sharing

Findings:
Interviewees in Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg voiced concern that tourism revenue bypasses local communities. Many mentioned that locals were "not consulted" and that employment often went to outside contractors. This sharply contrasts with Kerala's Responsible Tourism model, where local communities are integrated into tourism supply chains (Thomas, 2014).

Discussion:
Kerala's success lies in institutionalizing community ownership through local tourism committees and benefit-sharing mechanisms (Kerala Tourism, 2020). Maharashtra could replicate this via **village tourism councils**, ensuring that decisions are co-managed and benefits are equitably distributed. Additionally, linking local products—handicrafts, cashew, kokum, seafood—with tourism markets could create a multiplier effect (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004).

5. Branding, Identity, and Promotion

Findings:
Tourism entrepreneurs criticized the "generic" branding of Maharashtra Tourism. Interviewees noted that regions like Konkan lack distinct identity in state promotions, and that campaigns do not match the storytelling quality of "Incredible India" or Thailand's "Amazing Thailand."

Comparatively, Croatia and Thailand have excelled in destination branding through emotional storytelling, lifestyle positioning, and authenticity.

Discussion:
A powerful tourism brand evokes emotion, narrative, and values (Morgan et al., 2002). Maharashtra's campaign could highlight its **coastal cuisine**, **Maratha heritage**, **sacred groves**, and **artisanal traditions** to differentiate itself. Developing **micro-branding strategies** (e.g., "Malvan: Gateway to Authentic Konkan") could help build distinct destination identities under a unified umbrella.

Digital marketing investments, influencer collaborations, and real-time travel content (blogs, reels, reviews) should be central to Maharashtra's branding policy moving forward (Hudson & Thal, 2013).

Summary of Policy Gaps and Global Solutions

Policy Theme	Gap in Maharashtra	Global Benchmark	Policy Suggestion
Governance	Fragmented, reactive policy	Croatia (ICZM), Gold Coast Authority	Coastal Tourism Development Authority (CTDA)
Sustainability	Unregulated growth, degradation	Thailand (Zoning, SHA)	EIAs, zoning laws, eco-certifications
Infrastructure	Weak transport, lack of quality lodging	Australia (Smart integration)	Ferry linkages, eco-resorts, smart signage
Community	Poor local involvement,	Kerala (Responsible	Village tourism councils,

Policy Theme	Gap in Maharashtra	Global Benchmark	Policy Suggestion
Integration	low benefit sharing	Tourism)	local supply chains
Branding & Promotion	Generic campaigns, weak emotional connect	Croatia, Thailand	Regional storytelling, micro-branding, digital

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the strategic policy changes necessary for Coastal Maharashtra to emerge as a premier tourist destination in India. Through qualitative comparative analysis of international case studies—Croatia, Thailand, Australia's Gold Coast, and Kerala—combined with in-depth stakeholder interviews and document review, the research has identified both the opportunities and the constraints currently shaping the region's tourism trajectory.

Coastal Maharashtra holds immense potential due to its natural beauty, rich heritage, proximity to major urban centers, and emerging tourism micro-markets like Alibag, Ratnagiri, and Sindhudurg. However, its potential remains under-realized due to fragmented governance, infrastructure gaps, environmental degradation, and limited community participation.

The international case studies demonstrate that sustained tourism success is rarely accidental—it is the product of **deliberate, long-term policy coordination**, rooted in **environmental consciousness**, **stakeholder inclusion**, and **authentic destination branding** (Mihalic, 2016; Hudson & Thal, 2013; Thomas, 2014).

To align Coastal Maharashtra with global best practices while preserving its unique cultural and ecological fabric, this study proposes a set of integrated policy recommendations.

Policy Recommendations

1. Establish a Coastal Tourism Development Authority (CTDA)

A unified, cross-district nodal body should be created to oversee tourism planning, coordination, and monitoring across the coastal region. The CTDA should include government, private sector, and local community representatives, drawing inspiration from Croatia's integrated coastal zone management model (Mihalic, 2016).

2. Enforce Environmental Regulations and Sustainability Standards

Introduce mandatory **Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs)** for all tourism infrastructure projects. Implement zoning laws that restrict unplanned beachfront development and incentivize green certifications like India's "Sustainable Tourism Criteria for India" (STCI), adapted from Thailand's SHA model (Chheang, 2020).

3. Upgrade Last-Mile Connectivity and Tourist Infrastructure

Improve ferry linkages (e.g., Ro-Ro services), coastal road connectivity, and signages. Encourage public-private partnerships to develop **eco-resorts, homestays, and basic amenities**, similar to the infrastructure integration seen in the Gold Coast (Gold Coast City Council, 2015).

4. Institutionalize Community-Based Tourism Models

Adopt Kerala's Responsible Tourism framework to form **Village Tourism Councils (VTCs)** that manage community-run experiences (e.g., local cooking classes, guided village walks, artisanal workshops). Support supply chain inclusion through microfinance, training, and cooperatives (Thomas, 2014).

5. Launch a Micro-Branding Campaign for Sub-Regions

Develop hyper-local branding under a unified state narrative (e.g., "Konkan: Where Culture Meets Coast"). Promote this through digital storytelling, influencer travelogues, immersive reels, and emotional destination narratives as seen in Thailand and Croatia (Hudson & Thal, 2013; Morgan et al., 2002).

6. Build Tourism Intelligence and Monitoring Systems

Create a **Tourism Data Observatory** to track visitor flows, economic impact, and environmental indicators. Use this data to continuously evaluate and refine policy implementation (UNWTO, 2022).

Final Thought

Tourism in Coastal Maharashtra is at an inflection point. If guided by smart, inclusive, and sustainable policy interventions, the region can become a global benchmark for coastal tourism that balances economic growth with ecological and cultural preservation. This transformation requires vision, institutional alignment, and above all, political and community will.

As India strives to diversify its tourism portfolio beyond overexploited hotspots, Coastal Maharashtra can emerge not just as a destination, but as a **model of policy-led tourism regeneration**.

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