



طبيعةنا جبالنا

PATHWAYS TO IMPACT

ECOTOURISM EXPERIENCES

FOR A NATURE-POSITIVE UAE

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Credit: Emirates Nature-WWF



FOREWORDS

Credit: Natureza Urbana



H.E. Abdulla Bin Touq Al Marri
UAE Minister of Economy and Tourism

Tourism is a cornerstone of the UAE’s economy, generating jobs, supporting small businesses and driving innovation across sectors. To keep this momentum strong, we must sustain growth in ways that are inclusive, future-ready and resilient. Ecotourism offers exactly this opportunity.

As one of the fastest-growing segments of global travel, it has the potential to strengthen our economy while safeguarding the natural and cultural heritage that underpins it. Ecotourism creates value by opening new markets for entrepreneurs, empowering SMEs and diversifying income streams for local communities. It attracts mindful travellers who invest in authentic experiences – from nature trails and cultural heritage sites to farm visits and eco-lodges – creating direct and indirect benefits across our economy.

With the ambition of our National Tourism Strategy 2031, the UAE is charting a path where economic growth and sustainability go hand in hand. This is where ecotourism shows its true value – and it will take the strength of multi-sectoral partnerships to make this vision a reality.



Laila Mostafa Abdullatif
Director General, Emirates Nature-WWF

For over two decades, Emirates Nature-WWF has worked hand in hand with communities, government and the private sector to safeguard the UAE’s nature. From mangroves and coral reefs to deserts and mountain wadis, these ecosystems – and the wildlife they support – are woven into our culture and identity, and are vital for nature, climate resilience and livelihoods.

Ecotourism, when developed in alignment with sustainability principles, offers a powerful way to connect people with this wealth of nature while generating resources to conserve it. Guided by science and rooted in community, our projects demonstrate what is possible: nature interpretation that offers unique experiences of the UAE’s rich heritage and landscapes, designed in line with ecological principles and creating alternative income opportunities for local entrepreneurs.

Emirates Nature-WWF’s position is that well-planned and well-managed tourism, particularly ecotourism, should support the long-term preservation of the natural environment by being environmentally sustainable, economically viable and socially equitable. This low-impact, high-benefit model gives back to nature and people alike – offering pathways for self-sustaining revenue streams for protected areas, and creating jobs and empowering local communities. It is more than travel – it is a journey towards a sustainable future, and a promise to share the enduring beauty of our nation with the world.

MESSAGE TO THE READER

A quarter into the 21st century, humanity faces a defining choice: continue business as usual or secure a future where the next generations and nature can coexist in balance. In these challenging times, we must look to actions that spark hope and drive positive change.

It is with this vision, that Emirates Nature-WWF and Natureza Urbana present **Pathways to Impact: Ecotourism experiences for a Nature-Positive UAE**, a report that reinforces the role of ecotourism within this broader context and showcases how, together with exceptional local and international partners, we are contributing to a new paradigm for ecotourism in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that we hope can also inspire similar actions globally.

Building on the legacy of COP28, where the alignment between climate and nature solutions emerged as a landmark outcome, this document marks a new chapter in which the UAE is advancing innovative market solutions to conserve nature and protect biodiversity. The appointment of Her Excellency Razan Al Mubarak as Special Envoy for Nature of the Minister of Foreign Affairs reinforces this commitment by bringing a global leader in conservation who served as a High-Level Champion during COP, especially as the country welcomes the world's leading conservation experts, leaders and decision-makers during the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) World Conservation Congress.



Over the past 25-years, Emirates Nature-WWF is proud of building its legacy through extensive scientific research, strategic planning and community engagement across conservation initiatives, such as the decade-long efforts that contributed to the establishment of Wadi Wurayah National Park as the first mountain protected area in the UAE. Emirates Nature-WWF partnered with Natureza Urbana (NU) – drawing on its founders' 15+ years of expertise, including extensive expertise in the fast-growing Brazilian and international ecotourism sectors. This collaboration aims to develop a new model that delivers positive outcomes for the ecosystems and local communities of the UAE. Together, Emirates Nature-WWF and NU have designed comprehensive ecotourism masterplans that are grounded in robust science and shared vision. These plans set the foundation for implementation that would require investments in sustainable tourism facilities and low-footprint infrastructure, curate recreational activities and support local business opportunities, setting benchmarks for the nation and beyond.

This document aims to offer a meaningful contribution, reinforcing the importance of ecotourism as a tool for conservation and sustainable development, while highlighting how the projects from this partnership can serve as key allies in driving positive change.

We invite you to explore these findings and join us in shaping solutions.

Credit: Natureza Urbana

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful for the active engagement of a wide range of partners whose contributions made the work reflected in this document possible. From local communities and government authorities to national institutions and international collaborators. This cross-sector, multidisciplinary collaboration allowed us to gather the best and most suitable contributions to create long-lasting impacts. There is no doubt that the results, catalyzed by combining inputs from those best suited to different topics – ranging from deep local insights to scientific and technical expertise and institutional support – produced an outcome greater than the mere sum of individual actions.

We are proud to recognize the partners whose efforts have been instrumental:

UAE federal ministries:

Ministry of Economy and Tourism (MOET)

Ministry of Climate Change & Environment (MOCCAE)

Government authorities:

Emirates Council for Balanced Development (ECBD)

Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi

Environment Protection and Development Authority (EPDA), Ras Al Khaimah (RAK)

Umm Al Quwain Municipality

Department of Antiquities and Museums, Ras Al Khaimah (RAK)

Ras Al Khaimah Municipality

Ras Al Khaimah Tourism Development Authority (RAKTDA)

Umm Al Quwain Tourism & Archaeology Department

Local entrepreneurs:

Mikoko

Creek Adventures

International and local research and technical organizations:

International Center for Biosaline & Agriculture (ICBA) [UAE]

Natureza Urbana [Brazil]

Roland Berger [UAE]

Accenture [UAE]

Corporate Supporters:

HSBC MENAT



Credit: Natureza Urbana

UNITING FORCES FOR NATURE AND PEOPLE

Partnerships have long been at the heart of effective conservation, bringing together diverse strengths and disciplines to address complex environmental, social and economic challenges. This approach is embedded in the culture of Emirates Nature-WWF, a non-profit organisation established to drive positive change in the United Arab Emirates and conserve the nation's natural heritage.

Emirates Nature-WWF brings together the latest scientific knowledge and partners to catalyze meaningful results and lasting impact. By combining deep local connections with communities and authorities, with the expertise of world-class specialists, it applies a cross-disciplinary, science-based approach to develop solutions that protect nature, strengthen the economy and enhance people's well-being.

Based on a thorough evaluation of critical coastal ecosystems in the UAE, Emirates Nature-WWF and Natureza Urbana have formalized a long-term partnership that aims to advance ecotourism opportunities in tandem with biodiversity conservation and sustainable management of critical ecosystems. The partnership aims to integrate multiple expertise and catalyze public and private collaboration to create opportunities for recreation, enhance biodiversity, promote rural sustainable development, support climate mitigation and resilience, and help local businesses thrive, particularly small and medium enterprises, ultimately offering a sustainable benchmark for the UAE and beyond.

Credit: Natureza Urbana



Credit: Emirates Nature-WWF

About Emirates Nature-WWF

Emirates Nature-WWF is an environmental NGO established to conserve the United Arab Emirates' natural heritage and build a future where people and nature thrive. The organization was founded in 2001 by our Honorary Founder and President, H.H. Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Ruler's Representative in the Al Dhafra Region and Chairman of the Governing Board of the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi, inspired by the legacy of the late Sheikh Zayed.

For two decades, Emirates Nature-WWF has been a prominent and active partner in designing, implementing and scaling up science-driven conservation across the MENA

region. We work in association with WWF, one of the world's largest and most respected independent conservation organizations.

As a charity with a federal mandate, Emirates Nature-WWF places local communities at the heart of every initiative. Through the Leaders of Change programme, we engage civil society, government entities and businesses in hands-on conservation, supporting the UAE's sustainability agenda. With roots firmly planted in the UAE, Emirates Nature-WWF operates as a global platform that catalyzes action for climate resilience and environmental protection, delivering lasting impact for both people and planet.

About Natureza Urbana

Natureza Urbana is a multidisciplinary consultancy dedicated to creating new experiences between places and people through strategic planning, innovation, biodiversity conservation, and regenerative development. Since 2009, the studio has been delivering services in architecture and urbanism, offering creative solutions integrated with nature. Its main areas of expertise include territorial planning, tourism masterplans, sustainable architecture, and landscape and urban design.

Based in Brazil, the company has established an extensive track record of innovative and feasible projects across more than one hundred protected areas. In addition, it has

developed initiatives that foster meaningful connections between people and nature, balancing functionality with preservation. Natureza Urbana's portfolio includes collaborations with governments, NGOs, multilateral institutions, and private companies. The firm has played a pivotal role in shaping Brazil's public-private partnership model for protected areas, delivering projects implemented to provide public services in iconic natural assets such as Iguaçu National Park, as well as in the ecotourism planning of Brazil's most important protected areas. Natureza Urbana has expanded its expertise internationally across three continents, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America.

ECOTOURISM BENEFITS FOR NATURE, PEOPLE AND THE ECONOMY



Credit: Natureza Urbana

The need for a nature-positive economy

Earth has maintained a relatively stable and resilient environment where life as we know it has thrived since the last Ice Age¹. Today, however, human activities are disrupting the very processes that sustain these conditions, crossing several planetary boundaries. One striking example is the accelerated loss of biodiversity, with wildlife populations declining by 73% over the past 50 years². Biodiversity loss, coupled with climate change impacts, is rapidly shaping our planet and requires urgent solutions that can bring sustained ecological, social and economic resilience.

Global initiatives such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the Paris Agreement have brought together governments, the private sector and civil society to reverse biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation. Around the world, many efforts are underway to deliver on these international commitments. The concept of

a **Nature-Positive economy** offers both **direction and a framework for a broad economic transition toward models that operate within planetary boundaries**, not only halting nature loss, but continuously restoring and enhancing it over time³.

Nature-based Solutions (NbS) provide a key approach to this shift. Recognizing that integrating nature conservation into key economic sectors is essential for planetary sustainability, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) issued the Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions⁴, built on foundations established since the 1990s and the expertise of its global network of specialists. This robust framework ensures that NbS are designed and implemented with the highest quality, increasing the likelihood of achieving meaningful and lasting outcomes for both people and nature.



“We must sharpen our focus on the indispensable role of nature in maintaining biodiversity, stabilizing our climate and propelling global resilience and economic stability. By uniting our efforts globally, we can fully leverage nature’s capacity to not only protect biodiversity but also bolster resilience, curb emissions, and foster socio-economic progress.”

H.E. Razan Al Mubarak

Managing Director and Treasurer of the Board of Directors of Emirates Nature-WWF
Managing Director of the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi
President of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)
Co-Chair, Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD)
Former UN Climate Change High-Level Champion COP28

1. Richardson *et al*, 2023.
2. WWF, 2024a.
3. WWF, 2024b.
4. IUCN, 2020.

IUCN Standards to drive positive impact

As the world's largest environmental network, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has developed practical guidelines to turn global commitments into action. Among the most influential is the **Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions (NbS)**, a framework built around 8 Criteria and 28 Indicators that translate the concept of NbS into practice. It guides projects to: address societal challenges, operate at the right scale, generate net gains for biodiversity, remain economically viable, empower people through inclusive governance, manage trade-offs fairly, adapt based on evidence and ensure long-term sustainability.

Regarding tourism in protected areas, the **IUCN Guidelines for Tourism and Visitation in Protected Areas** offer best practices for designing tourism that enhances conservation while creating value for people. These emphasize the need to: generate environmental, social and economic benefits; align with the protected area's context; deliver high-quality visitor experiences; build conservation ethics; account for negative impacts and respect the needs of local communities.

Together, these two references provide more than principles on paper – they are roadmaps that inspire effective action on the ground. They remind us that when well-designed, tourism and Nature-based Solutions can work hand in hand to conserve ecosystems, empower communities and create meaningful experiences for people.



Credit: Christophe Chellapermal

Ecotourism as a path forward

Ecotourism emerges almost naturally as a fundamental tool to support the goal of a nature-positive economy, building on natural assets to generate value for people and the environment.

Ecotourism, when designed in a way that follows sustainability principles, can unlock opportunities where local economies, communities and nature all benefit. When tourists spend money on local services and products so they can have experiences in the natural environment, they stimulate the economy, providing opportunities for local businesses and entrepreneurs. These economic benefits, combined with social and cultural ones, such as the empowerment of local communities and the strengthening of local traditions, enhance the perception of locals and visitors as stewards for long-term conservation of natural areas. In turn, a well-managed and protected environment not only supports biodiversity to thrive, but also offers better recreational opportunities, attracting even more visitors and sustaining a loop of benefits^{7,8}.

What is ecotourism?

The term ecotourism is attributed to the Mexican architect Héctor Ceballos-Lascuráin, who, arguably, first coined it in 1983, although the idea of tourism that integrated nature and local communities had already been circulating independently in both Latin America and Africa⁵.

While there is ongoing discussion regarding the precise components of ecotourism, the definition provided by The International Ecotourism Society is widely accepted for integrating all key elements: “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education”⁶.

5. Honey, 2008.

6. TIES, 2015.

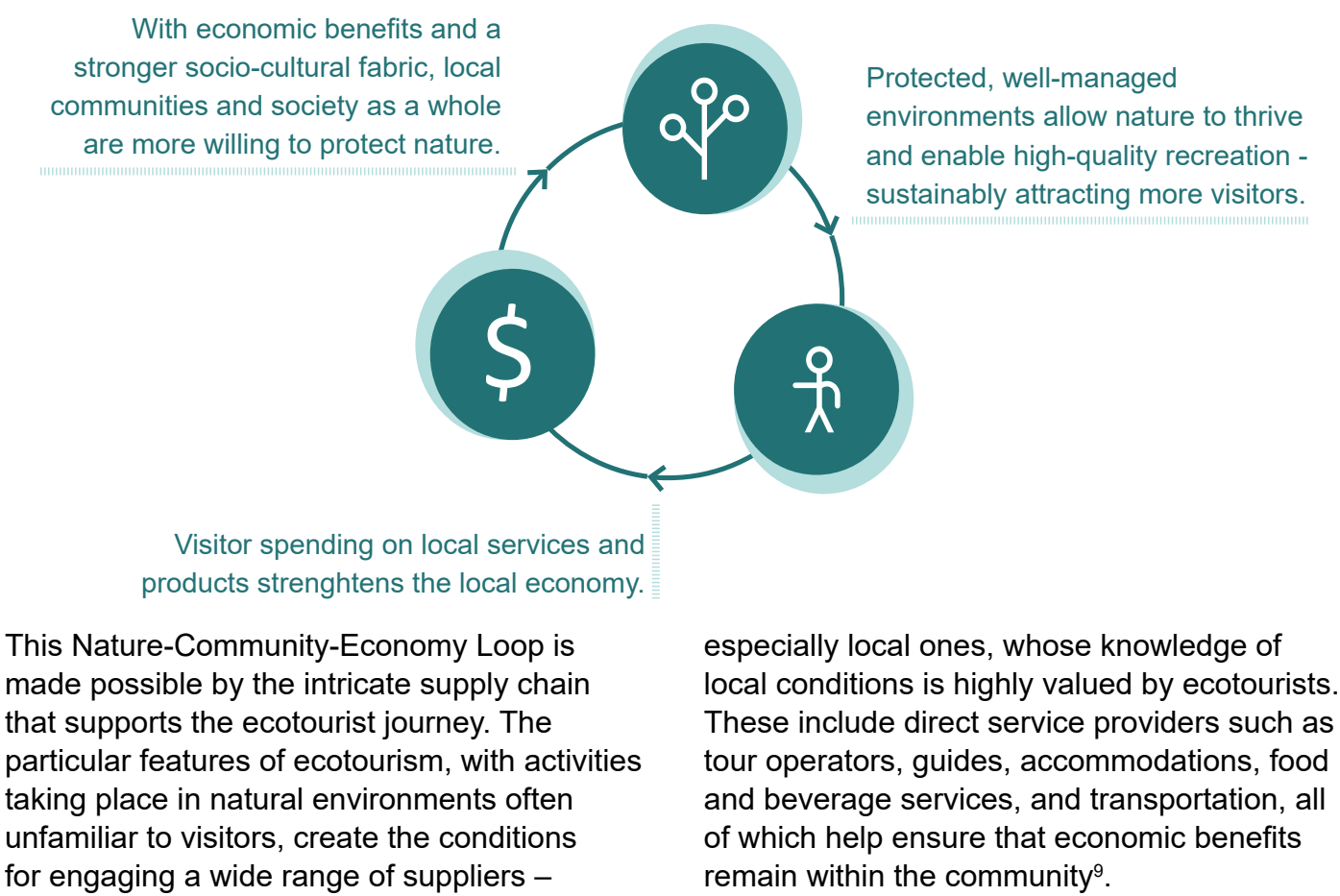
7. Jiménez Pérez, 2018.

8. World Bank Group, 2021.



Credit: Natureza Urbana

The Nature-Community-Economy Loop



Amplifying benefits for nature, people and the economy

The power of contact with nature is immense. In a world that is becoming increasingly digital, nature is increasingly recognized for its benefits to human health and well-being – with evidence showing that even simple contact with natural environments can generate positive effects on mental, physical, social and cognitive well-being^{10,11}. Yet, it goes beyond health benefits alone. Having memorable moments in nature, combined with environmental education, has the potential to instill lasting environmental awareness in those who experience them. The premise is simple: once people know nature, feel connected and understand its threats, they can become allies for its conservation, mobilizing political, financial and social support – not only within a specific territory but also at regional and global scales¹².

Ecotourism can also provide vital resources to finance conservation, including the protection of sensitive ecosystems and threatened species. The economic contributions from visitors can have an impact both locally and nationally. By mobilizing a wide range of services, ecotourist spending creates opportunities for business, particularly small and medium, not only those providing services directly to tourists, but also from the sale of local products, such as food and crafts. According to the World Bank (2021), investments in Protected Areas and nature-based tourism yield an impressive economic return, with every US\$2 spent generating at least US\$12, underscoring the sector’s effectiveness in driving biodiversity conservation¹³. It is also common that ecotourism brings development, with the

9. ATTA, 2022.
10. Bratman, 2019.
11. Nguyen, 2023.
12. Wardle *et al*, 2018.
13. World Bank, 2021.

improvement of infrastructure such as roads for example, benefiting both tourists and residents.

The increase in community revenue generation also boosts residents' purchasing power, which stimulates demand for other goods and services – generating an increase in income, creating jobs and increasing tax revenue, both locally and nationally¹⁴, especially within connected supply chains and integrated tourism markets. When foreign tourists are among the visitors, these benefits can be even greater, enhancing the country's soft power while also increasing the inflow of foreign currency into the national economy.

But the benefits extend beyond the economy. Welcoming visitors from afar to experience the natural environments that communities have lived in for generations, and the culture that thrives within them, often becomes a source of pride. Combined with the recognition of local knowledge and traditions, it further helps preserve cultural heritage. Ecotourism can also build local capacity and strengthen cooperation among residents, empowering communities and enhancing their ability to make collective decisions^{15,16}.

Communities themselves also see their quality of life improved by having a conserved environment at their doorstep, experiencing

many of the same benefits as visitors. Combined with the income generated, these benefits help support a nature-positive economy – closing the positive loop in which locals, visitors and nature all thrive.

Developing ecotourism does not come without specific requirements and challenges. One, for example, is the need for professional management of natural areas, assessing the impacts of visitation and adaptively developing solutions – since some benefits, if not properly managed, can also be contradictory. As popularity grows, economic benefits may increase, but environmental pressures can ultimately threaten the very ecosystems that

made the destination successful. Another common challenge is avoiding the leakage of economic benefits outside the community, ensuring that a significant share remains local.

In this sense, strategic planning that considers local environmental conditions and recreational dynamics, as well as ongoing adaptive management is fundamental to maximize benefits, providing visitors with memorable experiences, supporting a vibrant economy and maintaining thriving ecosystems.

14. Stynes *et al*, 2003.

15. Thapa *et al*, 2022.

16. Leung *et al*, 2018.



Credit: Natureza Urbana

Partnering with the private sector to strengthen Protected Areas

Context

Brazil, despite its extraordinary natural assets, struggled for years to invest in protected areas and realize ecotourism’s potential. A turning point was the introduction of public-private partnerships, where private partners invest in infrastructure and management while earning revenue from tourism.

Comprehensive projects to unlock PPPs

By 2025, over 23 protected areas adopted this model, up from just four in 2018¹⁷. The government’s use of feasibility studies and masterplans that aligned projects with management goals, as well as a strong pipeline of projects, provided investor confidence to enter this market.

Opportunities to scale up

A flagship example is Iguazu National Park, one of the world’s natural wonders. Through a strategic masterplan, new recreational opportunities are being implemented with private investments of nearly US\$100 million for infrastructure and US\$565 million to cover operational costs over 30 years. Alongside this, further investments are being made in local conservation projects, diversifying access to the park and creating new business opportunities¹⁸.

17. OPAP, 2025.

18. Brazil, 2022.





Credit: Emirates Nature-WWF

Multiple-use Marine Protected Area where ecotourism supports people and protection

Context

Tun Mustapha Park (TMP) is the largest marine park in Malaysia (~900,000 ha). It was co-designed by Sabah Parks, local communities, government and WWF-Malaysia. Drawing on both scientific surveys and local knowledge, four different zones were established: strict preservation, small-scale and traditional fishing, sustainable development activities (including tourism) and commercial fishing.

Ecotourism as a management tool

An economic evaluation of potential activities concluded that ecotourism offered the best economic scenario for TMP compared with other options, such as mining. The creation of TMP enabled sustainable operations such as homestays, bird observatories, turtle conservation activities, mangrove tours and volunteering programmes

Benefits for people and biodiversity

As ecotourism became a key part of local livelihoods, it diversified income beyond small-scale fishing – directly and indirectly, creating roles for women and youth. For example, LA'NU's soap-making not only generates income but also supports community conservation. Community members are also proudly engaged in park management, contributing to activities such as boat patrols and data collection^{19,20,21}.

19. WWF, 2017.

20. WWF-Malaysia, 2024.

21. Malaysia Travel, f.d.

SEIZING THE UAE'S POTENTIAL IN ECOTOURISM

Credit: Natureza Urbana

The United Arab Emirates is home to remarkable natural and cultural assets, with landscapes ranging from turquoise lagoons and mangroves to vast deserts and rugged mountains. Combined with its cultural heritage – shaped in harmony with this environment through centuries of practices such as pearling, fishing and traditional farming – this provides a unique foundation for creating experiences that allow visitors from around the world to connect with nature and culture in truly unforgettable ways.

This diversity of natural assets translates into immense potential for ecotourism – further amplified by the UAE's reputation as a symbol of innovation and world-class hospitality. With of international tourists contributing approximately US\$57 billion in 2024 alone to

the national economy, reflecting nearly 10% annual growth²², the country has built a strong global image that positions it uniquely to attract new segments of travellers in an increasingly competitive market.

This vision is at the heart of the UAE Tourism Strategy 2031, a comprehensive roadmap designed to accelerate growth across all tourism sectors, with a special focus on cultural, adventure and sustainable tourism. Ecotourism can serve as a unifying axis within this agenda – delivering world-class experiences for travellers seeking these segments, while also extending tourism into destinations beyond mainstream attractions – benefiting rural communities, youth and local and small businesses.

Ecotourism is projected to be one of the fastest-growing segments of the global tourism industry, expected to reach US\$945 billion by 2034 with an average annual growth of 14%²³. Beyond its potential to attract visitors, it offers a pathway for countries, including the UAE, to advance their international commitments, such as the 30x30 target of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, which calls for protecting 30% of the planet's land and oceans by 2030. Offering nature-positive solutions, such as a well-designed ecotourism model underpinned by ecosystem principles, can support biodiversity targets in tandem with social and economic benefits. For example, restoration and conservation actions, like mangrove ecosystem protection and expansion, can benefit from sustainable

visitor management practices while also offering opportunities for recreation, including birdwatching, education and nature interpretation, voluntourism, etc²⁴.

Inspired by the natural and cultural richness of each emirate, Emirates Nature-WWF and Natureza Urbana have crafted an innovative approach that merges multiple disciplines and aims to showcase the unique features and strengths of the landscapes we work in, creating tailor-made solutions inspired by and based on local natural and cultural assets. This approach contributes to positioning the UAE as a leader for sustainable ecotourism, where conservation, culture and unforgettable experiences come together.

22. UN Tourism, 2025.

23. Precedence Research, 2025.

24. Stamoulis *et al*, unpublished.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER: ASSESSMENTS AND PLANNING FOR ECOTOURISM IN THE UAE

Turning this potential into practice is no simple task. Unlocking the Nature-Community-Economy Loop towards a nature-positive economy demands vision, collaboration and planning – but it is a challenge worth embracing.

This section brings together all the content explored so far into practical examples, showing how, in environments of outstanding natural capital and well-preserved ecosystems, Emirates Nature-WWF and Natureza Urbana are rising to the challenge through their partnership. Together with key stakeholders and broader partnerships, the vision is to strengthen the long-term conservation of natural, cultural and scenic features through ecotourism, ensuring that economic, social and environmental benefits become a lasting legacy for the UAE – while also providing models that can guide future projects within the country and beyond.

Our recent work focused on two landscapes situated in the emirates of Umm Al Quwain and Ras Al Khaimah. While each landscape has its unique natural assets and cultural values, the projects share common traits – the remarkable beauty of coastal lagoons, including mangroves, seagrass and saltmarshes, vibrant wildlife and rich cultural and historical heritage. These assets offer unique opportunities for recreation and tourism in ways that distinguish these destinations from conventional development and urbanisation.

Both lagoons hold tremendous ecological value, with their coastal

waters designated as Areas of Particular Importance for Marine Biodiversity in the UAE. They serve as essential nursery grounds for fish species and as critical feeding areas for the endangered green turtle. The Umm Al Quwain lagoon is internationally recognized as a Key Biodiversity Area and an Important Shark and Ray Area under the IUCN, as well as an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area, hosting species such as Socotra cormorants, greater flamingos and migratory waders. In fact, more than 400 bird species and 13 megafauna species have been recorded in the area.

While some recreational and commercial activities are already present in these landscapes, the opportunity to develop a comprehensive plan – encompassing nature and economic goals – has become clear. By bringing together diverse expertise and grounding decisions in robust scientific information, the partnership set out to develop an ecotourism approach that can be replicated across different areas while fully embracing the unique particularities of each landscape.

Each site-specific feature (natural and cultural) offers the basis for a tailor-made ecotourism planning exercise that follows a common overarching approach. This approach is not a rigid one. Rather, it is a coherent sequence of stages designed to navigate the complexity of planning and implementing projects that balance and maximize environmental, social and economic benefits.



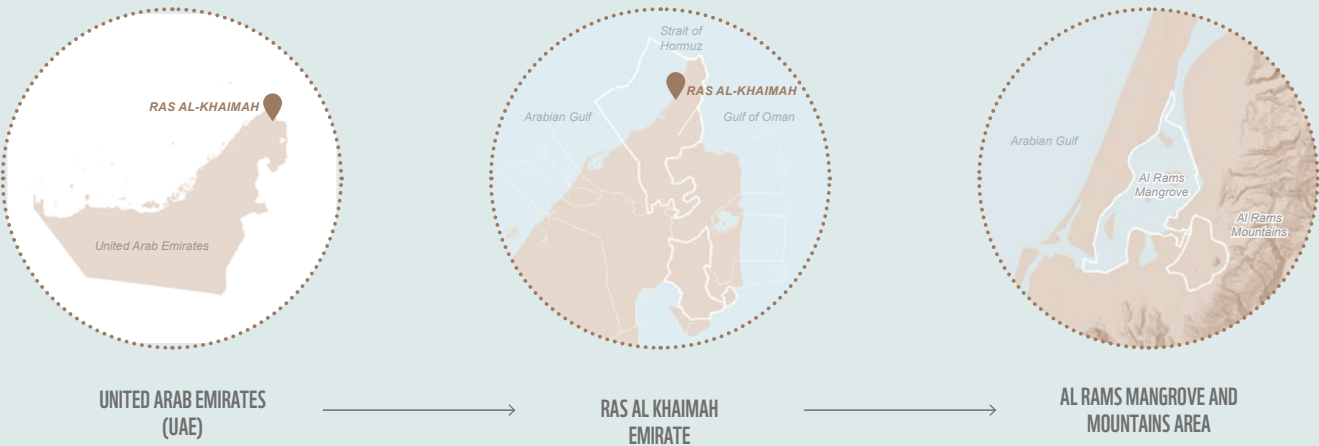
Credit: Emirates Nature-WWF

Our work in Ras Al Khaimah

Connecting mountains and coastlines through ecotourism

Located near the city of Al Rams, this project encompasses a wide variety of landscapes, offering stunning views and diverse experiences for visitors within a short distance. From the pristine beaches and turquoise waters of the Khor Hulaylah lagoon to traditional date farms, historical sites and the majestic Jebel Jais mountains, the area represents a significant opportunity to strengthen the territory while enhancing both nature and cultural heritage.

Our approach aims to integrate three different landscapes: the coastal lagoon (known for its rich marine biodiversity and diverse natural habitats, it is also home to the deep-rooted tradition of pearl farming), the mountains (a getaway to the magnificent Hajar mountain range showcasing the rich cultural heritage), and farming areas (agricultural lands dedicated to date cultivation, traditionally sustained by the ancient falaj irrigation systems). We are currently working with our partner to refine the ecotourism plans and conduct pilot projects involving local communities to showcase the ecotourism potential in that area benefiting the local economy, community and biodiversity.





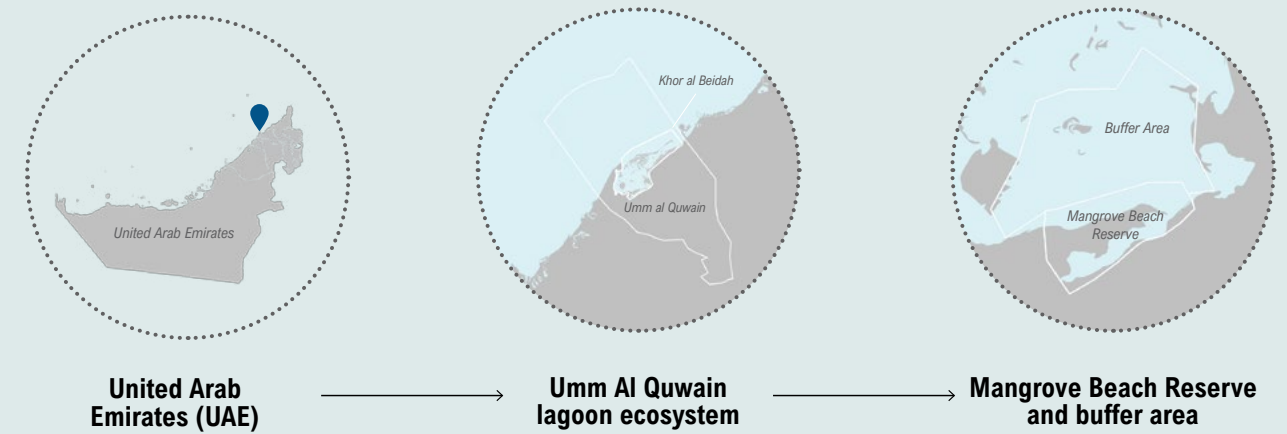
Credit: Natureza Urbana

Our work in Umm Al Quwain

Advancing conservation of mangrove ecosystems

The project is centred on the Umm Al Quwain Mangrove Beach Reserve where Emirates Nature-WWF has already restored more than 5 hectares of mangroves and collected critical biodiversity data to support management, further strengthening the ecological importance of the entire ecosystem.

Our work delivered an ecotourism vision and masterplan along with a preliminary business plan to facilitate discussions towards implementation and partnerships. Some of our recommendations include marine kayak safaris, lodging and agro-experiences that can be implemented in partnership with business and local entrepreneurs. The emirate's first ecotrail was also developed, crossing coastal dunes and raising awareness of this sensitive seascape and its biodiversity. In addition, successful awareness initiatives demonstrated the potential of cultivating local salt-tolerant plants, which, in collaboration with world-class chefs, can be positioned as potential climate-resilient superfoods for the UAE.



The approach consisted of six stages, designed to establish thriving ecotourism models:

1. **Biodiversity and site assessment**
2. **Community engagement**
3. **Ecotourism vision**
4. **Ecotourism masterplan**
5. **Preliminary architectural design**
6. **Moving forward**

1. Biodiversity and site assessment

The foundation of any ecotourism activity lies in the natural environment where it takes place. Every intervention should therefore aim to minimize its impact, disturbing ecosystems as little as possible, while seeking to maximize contributions to their conservation. Achieving this requires a deep understanding of the area, grounded in both scientific research and traditional knowledge, and informed by multiple, highly detailed site assessments. In the cases discussed, it was especially important to examine the complexity and interconnectivity of lagoon habitats – such as mangroves, intertidal mudflats, microbial mats, seagrass meadows, algae areas and brackish wetlands – and to understand how these habitats interact and relate to biodiversity, with particular attention to vulnerable and sensitive species using those habitats for critical life stages such as breeding.

These ecological evaluations, combined with a thorough understanding of the physical conditions of the environment – including studies such as hypsometry (altimetric variation of the lagoon), bathymetry (underwater topography), tides and floods, and carbon capture – form the basis for assessing the risks posed by current threats, such as habitat loss from urban development, pollution and other human activities that pressure ecosystems. Together, these scientific evaluations provide the foundation for any project that truly seeks to develop ecotourism while protecting and enhancing the environment. For example, having a clear understanding of the most sensitive habitats for wildlife allows planners to design activities that avoid disturbing them, while also creating opportunities for ecotourism experiences such as wildlife watching.



Credit: Emirates Nature-WWF

2. Community engagement

Community engagement is a fundamental cornerstone of an ecotourism project. Local communities are not only central to the very existence of ecotourism but must also be, together with nature, its direct beneficiaries. Communication and collaboration with these communities should be carried out with full respect for cultural traditions, ensuring that their voices and perspectives are heard. Importantly, this dialogue cannot be limited to the planning phase – it must extend throughout all stages of the project and continue over time, building trust, ownership and lasting partnerships. In the cases discussed, traditional **Majlis discussions** played a pivotal role in engaging communities and bringing them into the projects.

Majlis

An intangible cultural heritage in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other countries of the Arabian Peninsula recognized by UNESCO, the Majlis are cultural and social places where communities gather to receive guests, socialize, pay condolences and discuss local matters – such as an ecotourism project.



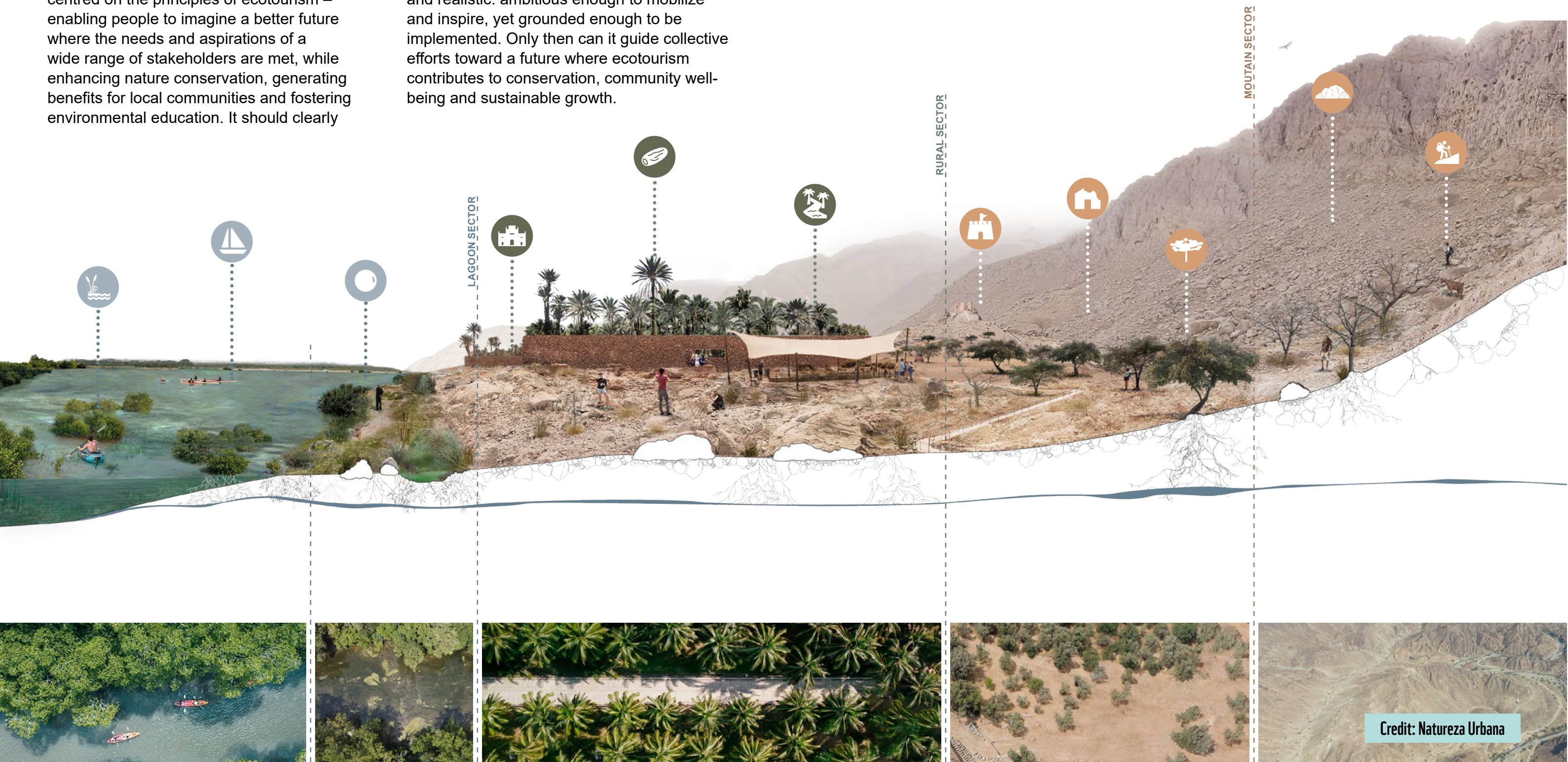
3. Ecotourism vision

Establishing a shared ecotourism vision is essential. It not only inspires policymakers and other key stakeholders but also sets an ambitious yet feasible common goal that everyone can work towards.

To be effective, this vision must be ambitiously centred on the principles of ecotourism – enabling people to imagine a better future where the needs and aspirations of a wide range of stakeholders are met, while enhancing nature conservation, generating benefits for local communities and fostering environmental education. It should clearly

define who the beneficiaries are, bringing everyone into the loop: promoting better living conditions for local communities, strengthening their cultural heritage, stimulating the economy and generating tangible benefits for nature.

Ultimately, the vision must be both shared and realistic: ambitious enough to mobilize and inspire, yet grounded enough to be implemented. Only then can it guide collective efforts toward a future where ecotourism contributes to conservation, community well-being and sustainable growth.



Credit: Natureza Urbana

4. Ecotourism masterplan

The masterplan is the stage where the vision is translated into the landscape. To achieve lasting impact, it is essential to carefully plan how facilities, infrastructure and activities will be placed, taking into account the natural and cultural features of the project site and its surroundings. Masterplan activities and facilities are proposed and placed considering the ecosystem status and potential fragility to ensure that visitation and use is planned according to conservation goals.

More than a collection of isolated actions, a masterplan requires looking at the whole picture – including environmental, social and cultural assessments – and proposing a detailed, strategic roadmap. This roadmap should guide implementation in the short term while remaining in harmony with a long-term vision, aligned with the diverse interests of multiple stakeholders, so that every step contributes to a shared goal.

Creativity is essential for a masterplan, proposing new possibilities that integrate with existing activities and enhance local features, as well as ensuring these ideas are validated through expert review and enriched by inputs from local communities. It is also important to recognize that, as the project advances and more stakeholders join to implement infrastructure and services – from tour operators and concessionaires to other local providers – adaptations will inevitably be required. With a well-designed and comprehensive masterplan, however, these adjustments are not obstacles but natural refinements that maximize benefits for all involved.

5. Preliminary architectural design

While the masterplan focuses on a strategic scale, the preliminary architectural design is the stage where planned infrastructure and services are conceived with attention to both human and natural scales. Particularly in ecotourism projects, it is essential that design establishes a strong connection with the environment – not only ensuring harmony with natural and cultural settings, but also reinforcing the bond between visitors and nature, serving as an ally for environmental education.

Nature can be a powerful source of inspiration. Shapes, lines and textures found in the environment can inform the design of facilities such as rest areas, visitor centres, shaded areas and even trail delimiters. By developing a coherent set of designs, with a clear and consistent rationale, the preliminary design provides the foundation for long-term infrastructure development while preserving the site's identity and strengthening its connection with both visitors and locals.



Credit: Natureza Urbana

Leaders of Change

Emirates Nature-WWF's Leaders of Change is a nationwide initiative that empowers individuals from all walks of life to take meaningful action for nature and climate. Rooted in the belief that everyone has a role to play in shaping a sustainable future, the programme unites youth, professionals, families and community leaders through over 200 conservation experiences, capacity-building workshops, and citizen science activities each year.

Since its launch in 2021, Leaders of Change has engaged 10,000 members and has a community of 5,000 active changemakers. Together, they have contributed over 37,000 hours to protecting nature, gathered 100,000 data points, recorded 22,000+ nature observations across the UAE, restored 5 natural habitats (including mangroves, wetlands, falaj, deserts and mountains) and are helping build more than 12 KM of nature and hiking trails!

Through their actions, our Leaders of Change are saving the lives of countless species, helping monitor local ecosystems and gathering data that can inform conservation strategies.



Credit: Emirates Nature-WWF

6. Moving forward

Implementation means turning the results of all previous stages into concrete outcomes. To achieve this, it is important to address several key aspects, consider their interrelationships, and follow an adaptive approach.

From vision to action

Implementing the ecotourism vision and masterplan requires taking key steps to activate the Nature–Community–Economy loop. Firstly, conservation and management measures are the foundation to ensure long-term safeguarding of the precious natural and cultural assets. The plan would need to deliver on community and economic benefits, hence business planning is necessary to support engagement with private sector stakeholders who wish to create a share-value model, and attract impact investments. Lastly, our vision for ecotourism aims to create opportunities for the creation of community-based enterprises, hence continuous engagement with the local communities and advancing key levers that support small-scale business is crucial.

Guidelines for a nature-positive path and engaging the community

Developing comprehensive guidelines ensures that tourism development contributes effectively to a nature-positive economy. These guidelines can support tourism within the territory while also serving as a reference for other activities and regions.

Encouraging community participation is also key. Engaging families, youth and civil society creates the power to drive positive change. Community involvement can take many forms, from field trips and environmental education to citizen science programs, giving residents opportunities to contribute directly to conservation and become ambassadors for ecotourism.

Delivering high-integrity ecotourism and conservation models in the UAE can only succeed through whole-of-society involvement engaging government, private sector, communities, academia, and civil society moving in concert. As Emirates Nature-WWF, we will continue to align our work with national priorities: advancing the UAE's biodiversity commitments, contributing to economic diversification, and catalysing sustainable tourism opportunities.

Our partnerships will aim to deliver on this nature-community-economy loop: healthier ecosystems that safeguard heritage and culture, empowered local communities, and resilient local economic development. Reimagining the future means protecting the UAE's precious nature, celebrating community culture, and showcasing that conservation is a driver of prosperity.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of Emirates Nature-WWF and Natureza Urbana show that ecotourism, when carefully designed and strategically implemented, is far more than a tourism initiative. It can become a driver of conservation, a platform for communities and partners to co-lead solutions, and an engine of sustainable economic growth rooted in local priorities. This takes on even greater meaning as human actions push us dangerously close to crossing multiple planetary boundaries, threatening the very systems that sustain life. Achieving transformation in this context calls for consistent effort, long-term vision and collective action. With science-based planning, strong partnerships and community-led approaches that honour local knowledge and traditions, this collaboration offers outcomes that can inspire not only the UAE, but also other regions across the world.



Credit: Natureza Urbana

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Credit: Natureza Urbana

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