

## THE ROLE OF RURAL TOURISM IN DEVELOPMENT: THE AKÇAKOCA EXAMPLE, Türkiye

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### **Abstract**

*Akçakoca is a district in Türkiye known for its unspoiled natural landscapes, historical landmarks, and rich cultural heritage. For the past 50 years, it has played an important role in tourism and is strategically located at an equal distance from two of the country's largest cities. Alternative tourism is new opportunity for Akçakoca district besides mass tourism. The goal of this research study is to assess Akçakoca region potential to develop rural tourism. To achieve this, the perspectives of local residents engaged in rural tourism were examined. A quantitative research approach was adopted, and data were collected through face-to-face surveys. Using a convenience sampling method, responses from 175 participants were analyzed. The findings indicate that in order to enhance rural tourism in Akçakoca, greater emphasis should be placed on investment, promotion, and infrastructure. Expanding tourism activities throughout all four seasons, increasing local awareness, and distributing tourism revenues more evenly are seen as key steps toward sustainable regional development. Furthermore, collaboration among local authorities, tourism enterprises, and the community is essential for designing effective strategies. In this regard, encouraging greater participation of women and young people in tourism initiatives is expected to strengthen the positive impact of rural tourism on the local economy.*

**Key words:** rural tourism, local development, Akçakoca, Türkiye

## **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, tourism perceptions have begun to change significantly due to economic, environmental and social developments in the world. For example, tourists who face situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change have begun to prefer different tourist products. In addition, it is seen that developed and developing regions that want to generate income from tourism throughout the year focus on different alternative tourism products. In this regard, rural tourism, as one of the alternative forms of tourism which could be considered a prominent activity in the regions with high potential. This study aims to evaluate not only the potential resources for rural tourism development, but also the factors which have a positive and negative influence. In this way, the intention is that the obtained results to bring a significant contribution to the literature on the topic.

### **Touristic Product**

It is the totality of goods and services offered for consumption by tourists within the scope of

tourism activities (Middleton, 1994) [25]. The tourist product is a multi-dimensional structure that brings together physical and abstract elements. It consists of components such as natural and cultural elements, accommodation, transportation, food and beverage, and entertainment (Cooper et al., 1998) [8]. Smith (2009) [35] defined the tourist product as a structure consisting of five components, which are attractions, access, facilities, image and price. Each of these components is among the factors that affect the tourist's travel decision. The tourist product may vary depending on the expectations and experiences of tourists. However, different destinations can offer tourist products tailored to their target audiences, thus gaining a competitive advantage (Kotler et al., 2014; Ritchie and Crough, 2003) [19, 33]. The marketing and management of tourist products is important for the tourism sector.

### **Touristic Product Features**

The most important characteristics of the tourist product are heterogeneity, intangibility, inseparability, perishability and variability

(Kotler et al., 2014) [19]. These features are the basic elements that determine the dynamic structure of the tourism sector. The heterogeneous structure of tourist products means that each consumer has different expectations, making it difficult to provide a standard service (Holloway, 2004) [18]. The intangible nature of the tourist product ensures that it is experience-based and varies depending on the consumer's perception. This increases the importance of service quality and necessitates the provision of customer satisfaction (Buhalis, 2000) [7]. In addition, the perishability of tourist products indicates that the services produced cannot be stocked and must be provided on time (Middleton, 1994) [25].

#### *Tourist Product Diversification*

Tourist product diversification refers to the development of products for different types of tourism in order to increase the competitiveness of destinations (Buhalis, 2000) [7]. Alternative tourism types such as cultural, nature, health, gastronomy, rural and adventure tourism are evaluated within this scope (UNWTO, 2021) [38]. Diversification of tourism products is of great importance in ensuring the sustainability of tourism throughout the year and invigorating the regional economy (Hall & Williams, 2008) [17]. Alternative tourism types ensure that destinations are less affected by seasonal fluctuations and the tourist profile is expanded (Sharpley, 2002) [37]. In addition, tourist product diversification increases tourists' interest in destinations and supports sustainable tourism (Novelli, 2005) [29]. For example, thanks to gastronomy tourism, local cuisine is promoted, while cultural tourism preserves historical and artistic heritage (Richards, 2018) [34]. In addition, the development of areas such as health and wellness tourism helps to increase tourist activities, especially those requiring long-term accommodation, and to provide more economic gain to destinations (Smith & Puczkó, 2009) [35].

#### *Rural Tourism*

It is seen that the world tourism literature has been developed and that rural tourism has been expressed in various studies using different

methods. These studies include concepts such as farm tourism, village tourism, highland tourism and ecotourism. The main reason for this diversity is that the boundaries of rural tourism cannot be determined with clear lines and vary depending on different diversity, cultural structures and natural environmental conditions. Rural tourism has been defined in various ways by scholars. While some describe it as a form of tourism closely connected to nature and committed to preserving ecological balance, others view it as an activity centered on experiencing local production processes or exploring traditional village life.

From a conceptual point of view, it is not easy to establish a general definition of rural tourism, as various authors have their own opinion on this aspect, whose study involves many disciplines depending on the geographic context. To create just one single definition largely accepted is a real challenge as affirmed (Nair et al., 2014; Lane, 1994, pp. 9–10) [26, 22].

In 1994, Lane [21] affirmed that: "*tourism that takes place in rural areas characterized by low population density and open spaces, typically consisting of small settlements with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants, where land is primarily used for farming, forestry, or natural purposes.*" Also, he considers that rural tourism is closely linked to natural resources and cultural heritage of a region.

In 2019, Çetin [9] considered that "*rural tourism characterize villages or similar locations, involves natural and cultural attractions, specific services like: accommodation, food, beverages and infrastructure*".

A similar opinion had Sharpley and Roberts (2004) [36].

However, many researchers sustain that in the rural communities where tourism adopts and implements the principles of sustainability, it becomes a real factor destined to enhance economic and social development (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015) [23].

Rural tourism is an opportunity to create new jobs in villages, to valorize the production potential of the agricultural regions, to increase the income of the agriculturists and of other categories of rural residents (OECD, 2016)

[31]. In addition, in this way, the economic diversity could contribute to the development of the communities and regions. (Wilson et al., 2001) [39].

Expressing rural tourism with different terminologies has revealed that this tourism is multi-faceted and varies according to regional growth. This diversity, together with the significant unknown that strengthens both the economic and social dimensions of rural tourism, also makes it difficult to differentiate a common definition. Although a universally accepted definition of rural tourism has not yet been established, its primary objective is to promote tourism while safeguarding the natural and cultural assets of rural areas, supporting the development of local communities, and fostering a sustainable tourism model. In line with this purpose, the present research seeks to examine the role of rural tourism in regional development. Accordingly, the perspectives of residents in the Akçakoca district regarding rural tourism development were evaluated, and insights into the rural tourism potential of the region were also gathered.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

A quantitative research method was employed to achieve the objectives of the study. The research was designed as a two-stage process. In the first phase, data were collected from 175 voluntary participants through a survey. In the second phase, the study will be expanded by adopting a sampling method that takes into account the overall population size of the research universe. At this stage, participation will be sought from all individuals residing in Akçakoca who are engaged in or interested in rural tourism.

The survey technique was used to collect data in the study. After the literature review, the survey form used in the study of Ölmez and Girgin (2015) [30] was used in this study. This questionnaire was finalized after receiving the opinions of experts on the subject. The questionnaire consists of two main parts. The first section includes statements to determine the attitudes of local people towards rural tourism and includes a five-point Likert scale.

The second part includes questions to determine the demographic characteristics of the participants.

In the study, a preliminary application was first carried out. The preliminary application was carried out on 20 people between December 01, 2024 and December 15, 2024. In this context, the reliability of the collected data was tested, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient obtained from the preliminary application was calculated as 0.90. This result indicates a high level of internal consistency, as the overall Cronbach's alpha value exceeded the 0.70 threshold recommended by Nunnally (1967) [28]. Since the reliability level was deemed satisfactory, the data collection process was continued. In total, 200 questionnaires were distributed to participants, of which 175 were successfully returned and included in the analysis. Descriptive statistical techniques such as percentage and frequency were used to analyze the demographic data obtained. On the other hand, statistical analyses were conducted using Kruskal-Wallis and Mann Whitney U analysis techniques to understand whether demographic differences led to differences in the participants' views on rural tourism and development.

To evaluate the suitability of the data for normal distribution, firstly descriptive statistics were examined, then skewness and kurtosis values were analyzed. In order to determine the suitability for normal distribution, Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests were applied, and histogram and Q-Q plot graphics were also examined. The analysis revealed that the data did not follow a normal distribution. Consequently, instead of parametric tests, nonparametric methods appropriate for the data distribution were employed. In this context, the Mann-Whitney U test and the Kruskal-Wallis H test were applied to examine whether participants' perceptions of rural tourism and rural development varied across demographic variables.

The Mann-Whitney U test was used for variables with two groups (e.g., gender and marital status), while the Kruskal-Wallis H test was applied to variables with three or more groups (e.g., age, education level, and income).

The results provided insights into whether perceptions of rural tourism differed significantly among demographic groups and contributed to the development of more targeted strategies for advancing rural tourism.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Akçakoca is located at the western end of the Black Sea Region, the closest gate of Central Anatolia to the sea, and is a holiday resort where green and blue coexist between two major cities, Istanbul and Ankara. The region, which is 37 km away from Düzce province, is also the largest district of Düzce province. The district has 8 neighborhoods and 43 villages. Nearly 40% of the total land is covered with forests or open areas. The coastline is 30 km long and full of sandy beaches and natural beaches (Akçakoca District Governorship, 2015) [2]. According to the 2024 address-based population registration system results, the total population of the district is 41,223, of which 20,236 are male and 20,997 are female (Akçakoca District Population Directorate, 2025) [1]. In Akçakoca, hazelnut farming is the primary source of income for the people. There are hazelnut gardens in almost all villages. In addition to agriculture, animal husbandry, beekeeping, fishing and tourism are also used as alternative sources of income (Düzce Governorship Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, 2010) [12].

### *Rural Tourism Trends in Akçakoca*

Akçakoca district has special features concerning rural tourism, offering a large range of alternatives such as: ecotourism which is definitely linked to natural resources and the beauty of the landscapes, which are an important attraction (Düzce Governorship Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, 2015) [13].

Akçakoca is the district that attracts the most tourists in the region due to its climate, completely unspoiled natural resources, environment, historical and cultural assets, local lifestyle, traditions, geographical location, proximity to main markets and suitability for coastal tourism (Altanlar, 2007: 85) [4].

Eco tourism area Aktaş waterfall, recreation areas, beaches, Fakilli cave and Genoese castle, which can be easily reached within 10 minutes from Akçakoca center, are touristic areas worth seeing.

The Genoese Castle has been added to the UNESCO World Heritage temporary list. Akçakoca's rural tourism presence can be evaluated under 4 headings: rural areas, rural heritage, rural life and rural activity.

Among these titles, rural areas include mountains, lakes, rivers, forests and nature landscapes.

Within the rural heritage title, there are traditional architecture, industrial heritage, prehistoric heritage, castles, churches and villages.

Under the title of rural life, it includes handicrafts, local activities, culinary culture, agricultural tourism, traditional music.

Under the title of rural activities, it includes walking areas, fishing, horseback riding, cycling, hunting and water sports areas (Mesci and Öztürk, 2017:77-78) [24].

In the year 2025, Akçakoca district was visited by 57,720 tourists, of which 56,798 (94.80%) were domestic tourists and only 922 (5.20%) foreign visitors according to the data provided by Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

Also, in 2025, the accommodation capacity of Akçakoca reached 1,006 rooms and 2,207 beds in total (Düzce Governorship Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, 2025) [14].

### *Socio-economic characteristics of the participants at the interview*

Table 1 presents the socio-economic characteristics of the interviewed individuals in this research.

56% of the participants are male and 44% are female. This distribution shows that the individuals participating in the study are relatively balanced in terms of gender. In terms of marital status, 54.3% of the participants are married and 45.7% are single. These data show that married individuals have more opinions on rural tourism, but single participants also have a significant proportion. When we look at the age distribution, the largest group consists of individuals between the ages of 36-50 with 37.7%, followed by young people between the

ages of 18-25 with 29.1%. While individuals between the ages of 26-35 represent a medium-sized group with 24.6%, participants between the ages of 50-65 constitute the smallest group with 8.6%. This distribution shows that the middle age group is decisive in the evaluation of rural tourism potential and that individuals between the ages of 36-50 are more involved in the process.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants

Variable	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	98	56.0%
	Female	77	44.0%
Marital Status	Married	95	54.3%
	Single	80	45.7%
Age	18-25 years old	51	29.1%
	26-35 years old	43	24.6%
	36-50 years old	66	37.7%
	50-65 years old	15	8.6%
Occupation	Housewife	6	3.4%
	Worker	19	10.9%
Average Income	Civil Servant	64	36.6%
	Other	86	49.1%
Graduation Status	30,000 TL and below	49	28.0%
	30,001-40,000 TL	27	15.4%
Occupation	40,001-50,000 TL	27	15.4%
	50,001 and above	72	41.1%
Average Income	High school and below	33	18.9%
	Undergraduate	92	52.6%
	Postgraduate	50	28.6%
Graduation Status	1-5 years	69	39.4%
	6-10 years	28	16.0%
	11-15 years	26	14.9%
	16-20 years	20	11.4%
	21 and above years	32	18.3%
Connection with the Tourism Industry	No	67	38.3%
	Yes	108	61.7%
Generating Income from Tourism	No	107	61.1%
	Yes	68	38.9%
Length of Life in Akçakoca	Less than 1 year	20	11.4%
	1-5 years	69	39.4%
	6-10 years	20	11.4%
	11-15 years	18	10.3%
	16 years and more	48	27.4%
Economic Activity	Farming/Animal Husbandry	24	13.7%
	Other	151	86.3%

Source: Created by the author.

When the occupational distribution of the participants is examined, it is seen that the

largest group is included in the "Other" category with 49.1%. This category may include freelancers, entrepreneurs or different occupational groups related to tourism. Civil servants come next with 36.6%, workers are represented with 10.9% and housewives are represented with 3.4%. This distribution shows that views on rural tourism are evaluated from a broad professional perspective and how tourism can be associated with various business areas is gaining importance. When the income levels of the participants are examined, it is seen that 41.1% are in the monthly income group of 50,001 TL and above, 28% are in the income group of 30,000 TL and below, and the income groups of 30,001-40,000 TL and 40,001-50,000 TL each have 15.4% of the participants. These data reveal that the majority of individuals making evaluations about rural tourism are at middle and high income levels and that there is an economic potential to invest in rural tourism. When the education levels of the participants are examined, it is seen that 52.6% have a bachelor's degree, 28.6% have a postgraduate education, and 18.9% have a high school education or below. The high proportion of educated individuals among participants suggests that knowledge-based strategies can play an effective role in advancing rural tourism. Regarding professional experience, 39.4% of respondents reported having between one and five years of experience, while 18.3% indicated 21 years or more. This distribution highlights that both younger and more experienced individuals contribute to tourism development. Additionally, 61.7% of participants stated that they were directly involved in the tourism sector, whereas 38.3% reported having no direct connection to it. Although the rate of those who have a connection to the tourism sector is high, the rate of those who earn direct income from tourism remains lower at 38.9%. It is understood that the contribution of tourism income to the regional economy has not yet become fully widespread, but there is a development potential in this area.

An examination of participants' length of residence in Akçakoca shows that the largest group (39.4%) consists of individuals who have lived in the region for one to five years.

Meanwhile, 27.4% reported residing in the area for 16 years or longer, with the remaining groups distributed at lower rates. These findings indicate that rural tourism in Akçakoca involves both long-term residents and recently settled individuals who prefer rural lifestyles. In terms of economic activities, only 13.7% of participants reported working in farming or animal husbandry, while 86.3% were engaged in other sectors. This suggests that while agricultural production may serve a supportive role in rural tourism development, further consideration is needed on how to effectively integrate existing economic activities with tourism.

#### *Findings Regarding the Research Area*

In this section, the opinions of the participants regarding the rural tourism potential of the Akçakoca region, which was determined as the research area, and the benefits of this type of tourism to the region are analyzed. Within the

scope of the research, participants' views on rural tourism were assessed through closed-ended questions, and the findings were used to evaluate both the current situation and the development potential of the region in terms of rural tourism.

#### *General Findings Regarding the Regional Development of Rural Tourism*

To assess the impact of rural tourism on regional development, a scale was developed consisting of 21 statements that measure its economic, social, and cultural contributions. This scale was adapted from previous studies in the field and tailored to reflect the specific characteristics and unique context of the Akçakoca region.

By examining the arithmetic means and standard deviations of the scale items, the study provided a detailed understanding of local residents' perceptions of rural tourism and its impacts.

Table 2. Participants' Views on Rural Tourism and Rural Development- Means and Standard Deviations

Substances	Avg.	Sd.
Rural tourism investments should be increased.	4.22	.872
When people living in our region sell the vegetables, fruits, sausage, cheese and dairy products they produce with their own means, both consumers and producers are satisfied.	4.14	.869
Rural tourism provides the opportunity to meet new people socially.	4.13	.844
Rural tourism contributes to the development of living conditions and the promotion of our culture.	4.11	.890
I believe that the place of women living in our region in society will be strengthened thanks to rural tourism.	4.06	.872
The number of places providing boarding house services in the region should be increased.	4.05	.901
Providing brochures showing the historical and natural values of our region to tourists coming from abroad will increase foreign tourism, which is not yet developed in the region.	4.01	.851
Rural tourism increases the income of local people.	4.00	.797
It makes me happy to take care of the garden with the people staying at the hostel, to grow various products and to taste the flavors such as jam, tarhana and poppy seeds from those products.	3.99	.980
Our local people will gain new job opportunities and additional income thanks to rural tourism.	3.98	.877
Rural tourism increases the income of local people.	3.94	.933
I think that it will be easier to promote my region's traditions, customs, food and drink and lifestyles through boarding houses.	3.91	.948
The fact that the natural environment in the region is intact facilitates rural tourism activities.	3.87	1.004
The rural tourism opportunities of the region are attractive.	3.80	.887
I think our region is an attractive place in terms of rural tourism activities.	3.78	.955
Harvest and other events held on certain dates of the year cause great interest in the region.	3.77	.967
The easy accessibility to Akçakoca district contributes to the increase in mobility for rural tourism.	3.71	1.134
I believe that our region is a tourism, culture, history and health center in every aspect.	3.70	1.017
Rural tourism enables tourism activities in our region to be spread over four seasons.	3.63	1.053
The tourist attractiveness of the region stems from its potential for rural tourism.	3.62	.987
Tourists visiting the region respect the historical and natural beauties and do not engage in harmful behavior.	3.50	.994

Source: Created by the author.

The results highlight the potential of rural tourism to serve as an effective tool for the regional development of Akçakoca (Table 2). An analysis of participants' views on rural tourism and rural development indicates a general consensus that rural tourism represents an important opportunity for the region's advancement. The statement receiving the

highest mean score, "Rural tourism investments should be increased" ( $M = 4.22$ ), reflects the strong belief among respondents that greater investment is necessary to support the development of rural tourism. This is followed by the statement "The sale of vegetables, fruits, sausage, cheese and dairy products produced by the people living in our

*region with their own means satisfies both the consumer and the producer*" (4.14), which emphasizes the benefits that rural tourism provides to local producers and consumers.

Therefore, rural tourism is a creator of economic growth and also sustain the valorization of the local products. The relationship between the local producers and tourists as consumers offers the chance to meet each other and develop social contacts and establish cultural interactions, as conformed by the high average (4.13).

More than this, grace to the increased income of the local residents dealing with tourism, it is obvious that rural tourism is driver for better living conditions and promotion of the cultural heritage as demonstrated by the high value ( $M = 4.11$ ).

The interviewed persons who participated in this research had the opinion that women living in the rural areas will be deeply involved in rural tourism in offering high quality accommodation and food services, cooking local delicious recipes and showing hospitality to better satisfy their guests. This is the result obtained for the opinion: "*I believe that the place of women living in our region in society will be strengthened thanks to rural tourism*" with a high average (4.06).

The interviewees' opinion was that "*The number of places providing boarding house services in the region should be increased*" as it is shown by the high average (4.05).

Therefore, the accommodation capacity in terms of rooms and beds, and also the boarding services should be improved.

The high average (4.01), concerning the promotion of the rural tourist attractions, localities, as attested by the affirmation that: "*Providing brochures showing the historical and natural values of our region to tourists coming from abroad will increase foreign tourism, which is not yet developed in the region*", reflects that promotional support in terms of informative flyers and brochures is pale at present.

Participants also expressed positive evaluations regarding the economic impacts of rural tourism on the region. "*Thanks to rural tourism, there is an increase in the income of the local people*" (4.00) and "*Our local people*

*will gain new job opportunities and additional income thanks to rural tourism*" (3.98) the statements are noteworthy findings in this regard. Participants who believe that boarding house activities contribute positively to rural tourism said, "*Taking care of vineyards and gardens with the people staying at the boarding house, growing various products and tasting flavors such as jam, tarhana and poppy seeds from those products makes me happy*" they also showed a high level of agreement with the statement (3.99). "*I think that it will be easier to promote the traditions, customs, food and beverages and lifestyles of my region with the boarding house business, which is thought to contribute to the preservation of the traditional lifestyle*" the statement (3.91) is another remarkable finding.

An examination of the evaluations concerning the natural and historical appeal of the region shows that the statement "*The intactness of the natural environment in the region facilitates rural tourism activities*" received a relatively high mean score ( $M = 3.87$ ). This finding shows that one of the most important elements in terms of rural tourism is the preservation of the natural environment. The statements "*The rural tourism opportunities of the region are attractive*" ( $M = 3.80$ ) and "*I think our region is an attractive place in terms of rural tourism activities*" ( $M = 3.78$ ) indicate a strong perception among participants that the region possesses considerable attractiveness and potential for rural tourism. In the evaluations made on the impact of the events organized in the region, it was stated that "*Harvest and other events held on certain dates of the year cause great interest in the region*." It is stated that traditional activities are an important attractiveness factor in terms of rural tourism with the statement (3.77). Evaluating the effect of ease of transportation on rural tourism, the statement "*Easy transportation to Akçakoca district contributes to the increase in mobility for rural tourism*" stands out with its average value of (3.71). In addition, the statement "*I believe that our region is a tourism, culture, history and health center in every aspect*" (3.70) indicates that the region has a multi-faceted tourism potential.

It is seen that there is a positive perception with the statement "*Rural tourism enables tourism activities in our region to spread to all four seasons*" (3.63) that rural tourism makes regional tourism active throughout the year. However, the relatively lower average of the statement "*The tourist attractiveness of the region stems from the potential for rural tourism*" (3.62) shows that the attractiveness of rural tourism to the region is not yet fully established. Regarding whether tourists are respectful to the environment, the statement "*Tourists visiting the region respect historical and natural beauties and do not engage in harmful behavior*" (3.50) has the lowest average value. This may indicate that there are some concerns about tourist sentiment towards the area.

When evaluated in general, the participants largely agree that rural tourism provides economic, social and cultural contributions to the region. It is emphasized that rural tourism should be developed further while preserving the natural structure and cultural values of the region. However, the findings also suggest that certain areas require further attention, particularly the expansion of accommodation facilities, the strengthening of promotional activities, and the enhancement of tourists' environmental awareness. Overall, the results indicate that while rural tourism has the potential to serve as a powerful instrument for regional development in Akçakoca, existing shortcomings must be addressed to fully realize this potential.

#### *Findings on Inferential Statistics*

##### *Mann-Whitney U Test Results*

The Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to examine whether participants' views on the development potential of rural tourism in Akçakoca differed by gender. The results revealed a significant difference, indicating that women expressed stronger agreement than men with the statement "*Easy access to Akçakoca district contributes to the increase in mobility for rural tourism*" ( $z = -2.918$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ).

Similarly, a significant difference was observed between genders for the statement "*The intactness of the natural environment in the region facilitates rural tourism activities*"

( $z = -2.430$ ,  $p = 0.015$ ). It was determined that women agreed with this statement at a higher level than men. In addition, in the analysis conducted for the statement "*I think our region is an attractive place in terms of rural tourism activities*", a statistically significant difference was found between the genders and it was determined that women agreed with this statement at a higher level than men ( $z = -2.609$ ,  $p = 0.009$ ).

In addition, in the test conducted regarding the statement "*Our local people will gain new job opportunities and additional income thanks to rural tourism*", it was determined that women agreed with this statement more than men ( $z = -2.676$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ). However, no significant difference was found between genders in the analysis of other statements ( $p > 0.05$ ). The results indicate that women hold more positive views than men on certain aspects concerning the development of rural tourism.

The test revealed that singles, based on their marital status, agreed with the following statement: "*Easy access to Akçakoca district contributes to the increase in mobility for rural tourism*" at a higher level than married participants. ( $z = -3.408$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ).

Similarly, a significant difference was observed in terms of marital status for the statement "*I think our region is an attractive place in terms of rural tourism activities*" ( $z = -2.032$ ,  $p = 0.042$ ). Single participants expressed higher levels of agreement with the statement compared to married participants. However, in relation to the statement "*Our local people will gain new job opportunities and additional income thanks to rural tourism*" no statistically significant difference was found by marital status ( $z = -1.915$ ,  $p = 0.056$ ). The analyses of other statements revealed no statistically significant differences based on marital status ( $p > 0.05$ ).

It was noticed that single participants have a more positive perception of the opportunities provided by rural tourism and of the attractiveness of the region as a whole.

It is obvious that the participants connected to tourism consider and agree that "*Rural tourism increases the income of the local people*" at a higher level than those who do not have any link with this economic

sector ( $z=-1.965$ ,  $p=0.049$ ).

In addition, the analysis of the statement "*Providing brochures showing the historical and natural values of our region to tourists coming from abroad will increase foreign tourism, which has not yet developed in the region*" revealed significantly higher agreement among participants employed in the tourism sector ( $z = -2.669$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ). This finding suggests that individuals directly engaged in tourism place greater emphasis on promotional activities and highlights the importance of prioritizing sector stakeholders in strategies aimed at fostering the development of international tourism. In the analyses made regarding other statements, no significant difference was found according to the connection status with the tourism sector ( $p>0.05$ ). The results obtained reveal that the perception of the economic contributions of rural tourism and the importance of international promotion is stronger among individuals connected with the tourism sector. As a result of the test conducted according to whether they earn income from tourism or not, it was determined that participants who earn income from tourism agreed with the statement "*Rural tourism enables tourism activities to spread to four seasons in our region*" at a higher level than those who did not earn income ( $z=-2.584$ ,  $p=0.010$ ).

Similarly, it was observed that participants who earn income from tourism showed higher participation in the statement "*The tourist attractiveness of the region stems from the potential for rural tourism*" ( $z=-2.729$ ,  $p=0.006$ ). In addition, in the analysis of the statement "*The rural tourism opportunities of the region are attractive*", it was determined that those who earn income from tourism agreed with this statement significantly more ( $z=-3.294$ ,  $p=0.001$ ).

In addition, a significant difference was observed for the statement "*The number of places providing boarding house services in the region should be increased*" ( $z=-2.358$ ,  $p=0.018$ ). This finding shows that those who earn income from tourism are more supportive of increasing infrastructure for the development of rural tourism. In addition, in the test conducted on the statement "*Providing*

*brochures showing the historical and natural values of our region to tourists coming from abroad will increase foreign tourism, which has not yet developed in the region*" it was seen that those who earn income agreed with this statement at a higher level ( $z=-2.306$ ,  $p=0.021$ ).

The analyses of other statements showed no statistically significant differences based on income generation from tourism ( $p > 0.05$ ). Nevertheless, the findings indicate that individuals who derive economic benefits from tourism tend to hold a more favorable perspective on the development of rural tourism and the strengthening of related infrastructure.

As a result of the test conducted according to the type of economic activity carried out, it was determined that the level of agreement with the statement "*The tourist attractiveness of the region stems from the potential for rural tourism*" showed a significant difference regarding the type of economic activity ( $z=-2.221$ ,  $p=0.026$ ). Therefore, individuals engaged in different economic activities have affirmed tourist attractiveness has changed.

Similarly, a significant difference was found according to the type of economic activity for the statement, "*The sale of vegetables, fruits, sausage, cheese and dairy products produced by the people living in our region with their own means satisfies both the consumer and the producer*" ( $z=-2.502$ ,  $p=0.012$ ). In addition, in the analysis conducted for the statement "*Providing brochures showing the historical and natural values of our region to tourists coming from abroad will increase foreign tourism, which has not yet developed in the region*", it was determined that there was a significant difference according to the type of economic activity ( $z=-2.432$ ,  $p=0.015$ ).

In the analyses made regarding other statements, no significant difference was found according to the type of economic activity ( $p>0.05$ ). The findings reveal that perspectives on the contribution of rural tourism to the regional economy and on promotional activities vary according to participants' type of economic activity. In particular, individuals engaged in farming or animal husbandry appear to hold different views regarding the

economic benefits of rural tourism and its influence on the region's attractiveness to tourists.

#### *Kruskal-Wallis H Test Results*

The results of Kruskal-Wallis H test showed that the participants have a different opinion on the development potential of rural tourism in Akçakoca depending on the age group. This is confirmed by the level of agreement with the statement "*Easy access to Akçakoca district contributes to the increase in mobility for rural tourism*" which is reflected by ( $H=26.616$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). This shows that different age groups have different perceptions of the impact of ease of transportation on rural tourism.

Similarly, a statistically significant difference was observed among age groups in relation to the statement "*I think our region is an attractive place in terms of rural tourism activities*" ( $H = 12.794$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ).

In addition, a significant difference was found between age groups for the statement, "*Our local people will gain new job opportunities and additional income thanks to rural tourism*" ( $H=18.997$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), this shows that the perception of rural tourism's employment creation potential varies depending on age.

Furthermore, the analysis of the statement "*The rural tourism opportunities of the region are attractive*" revealed a statistically significant difference among age groups ( $H = 8.514$ ,  $p = 0.037$ ). A similar pattern was observed for the statement "*The sale of vegetables, fruits, sausage, cheese, and dairy products produced by the local people with their own means satisfies both the consumer and the producer*" ( $H = 10.698$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ), indicating that perceptions of both the attractiveness of rural tourism and the benefits of local product sales vary significantly across different age groups. However, in the analysis of the statement "*Providing brochures showing the historical and natural values of our region to tourists coming from abroad will increase foreign tourism, which has not yet developed in the region*" it was determined that there was a significant difference between age groups. ( $H=11.220$ ,  $p=0.011$ ). Similarly, significant differences were found between age groups for the statements "*Rural tourism provides the opportunity to meet new people socially*"

( $H=10.517$ ,  $p=0.015$ ) and "*Rural tourism contributes to the improvement of living conditions and the promotion of our culture*" ( $H=10.348$ ,  $p=0.016$ ).

In the analyses regarding other statements, no significant difference was found between age groups ( $p>0.05$ ). The results obtained reveal that different age groups have different perceptions, especially regarding the economic, cultural and social contributions of rural tourism. Young participants and older age groups have different perspectives on the benefits of rural tourism to the region.

As a result of the test conducted according to occupational groups, it was determined that the level of agreement with the statement "*The number of places providing boarding house services in the region should be increased*" showed a significant difference according to occupational groups ( $H=7.701$ ,  $p=0.043$ ). This result shows that professional groups may have different views on the development of accommodation infrastructure in rural tourism. Similarly, in the analysis of the statement "*Harvest and other activities held on certain dates of the year cause great interest in the region*", it was observed that there was a significant difference between occupational groups ( $H=7.501$ ,  $p=0.048$ ). This finding suggests that different occupational groups may hold varying perceptions regarding the attractiveness of rural tourism activities. However, the analyses of other statements revealed no statistically significant differences across occupational groups ( $p > 0.05$ ).

The findings indicate that while perceptions of rural tourism differ in certain respects across occupational groups, no substantial overall differences were observed. Nevertheless, examining variations in perceptions related to boarding houses and rural activities by occupational group may provide valuable insights for shaping rural tourism policies.

In terms of income levels, the analysis revealed a significant difference in agreement with the statement "*Easy access to Akçakoca district contributes to the increase in mobility for rural tourism*" ( $H = 17.705$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), suggesting that views on the role of transportation in rural tourism vary across income groups.

Similarly, a significant difference was found for the statement "*Our local people will gain new job opportunities and additional income thanks to rural tourism*" ( $H = 12.396$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ), indicating that perceptions of the economic benefits of rural tourism also differ according to income levels. This situation reveals that the perception of the economic benefits of rural tourism differs depending on income levels.

In addition, a significant difference was found between income groups in the analysis of the statement "*The tourist attractiveness of the region stems from the potential for rural tourism*" ( $H=9.437$ ,  $p=0.024$ ).

However, "*I think our region is an attractive place in terms of rural tourism activities*" ( $H=10.429$ ,  $p=0.015$ ), "*Rural tourism provides the opportunity to meet new people socially*" ( $H=10.971$ ,  $p=0.012$ ) and "*Rural tourism contributes to the improvement of living conditions and the promotion of our culture*" ( $H=10.560$ ,  $p=0.014$ ) significant differences were also found between income levels for the statements.

The analyses of other statements revealed no statistically significant differences across income levels ( $p > 0.05$ ). Nonetheless, the results suggest that perceptions of the economic and social benefits of tourism vary according to income distribution, with particularly low- and high-income groups approaching the contributions of rural tourism from differing perspectives.

As a result of the test conducted according to graduation status, "*Rural tourism increases the income of local people*". It was determined that the level of agreement with the statement showed a significant difference according to graduation status. ( $H=7.198$ ,  $p=0.027$ ). This finding shows that the perceptions of individuals with different education levels regarding the economic contributions of rural tourism vary.

Similarly, "*The easy access to Akçakoca district contributes to the increase in mobility for rural tourism*". It was found that there was a significant difference between the graduation groups for the statement ( $H=7.758$ ,  $p=0.021$ ). In addition, in the analysis made for the statement "*I think our region is an attractive*

*place in terms of rural tourism activities*", it was determined that there was a significant difference according to graduation status ( $H=8.644$ ,  $p=0.013$ ).

However, a significant difference was observed according to graduation status for the statement "*Our local people will gain new job opportunities and additional income thanks to rural tourism*" ( $H=9.878$ ,  $p=0.007$ ). This shows that the perception of the employment creation potential of rural tourism varies depending on the level of education.

In the analyses made regarding other statements, no significant difference was found according to graduation status ( $p>0.05$ ). The findings indicate that perceptions of the economic and social benefits of rural tourism vary according to education level, with individuals possessing higher levels of education demonstrating a more informed and conscious perspective toward rural tourism.

As a result of the test conducted according to professional experience, it was determined that the level of agreement with the statement "*Rural tourism increases the income of local people*" showed a significant difference according to professional experience ( $H=10.982$ ,  $p=0.027$ ). This finding suggests that perceptions of the economic contributions of rural tourism differ across groups with varying levels of professional experience. Similarly, a statistically significant difference was identified among professional experience groups regarding the statement "*Easy access to Akçakoca district contributes to the increase in mobility towards rural tourism*" ( $H = 23.329$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

In addition, in the analysis made for the statement "*The intactness of the natural environment in the region facilitates rural tourism activities*", a significant difference was found according to professional experience ( $H=9.888$ ,  $p=0.042$ ).

However, a significant difference was observed between the professional experience groups for the statement "*Our local people will gain new job opportunities and additional income thanks to rural tourism*" ( $H=12.983$ ,  $p=0.011$ ). This shows that the perception of the employment creation potential of rural tourism varies depending on professional experience.

In the analyses made regarding other statements, no significant difference was found according to professional experience ( $p>0.05$ ). The results obtained reveal that the perception of the economic and social benefits of rural tourism differs according to professional experience, and especially individuals with long-term professional experience may have a different perspective on the contributions of rural tourism (Gurbuz et al., 2019) [15].

The analysis based on participants' length of residence in Akçakoca revealed no statistically significant differences for any of the statements ( $p > 0.05$ ).

This situation shows that the perceptions of individuals living in Akçakoca for different periods of time towards rural tourism are generally similar. Participants' opinions about the economic, social and cultural contributions of rural tourism do not change depending on how long they have lived in the region. This finding suggests that rural tourism enjoys broad acceptance among the local population and that individuals with different lengths of residence share a common perspective. An examination of the demographic characteristics of the participants shows that the majority were middle-aged and relatively well educated. Of the respondents, 56% were male and 44% female, while married individuals (54.3%) slightly outnumbered single participants (45.7%). In terms of age distribution, the largest group fell within the 36–50 age range (37.7%), followed by the 18–25 age group (29.1%). With respect to occupation, nearly half of the respondents were classified in the “other” category (49.1%), while civil servants represented a substantial share (36.6%). Furthermore, although a significant proportion of participants (61.7%) reported a connection to the tourism sector, only 38.9% earned direct income from tourism. These findings indicate that while rural tourism is not yet economically widespread, a considerable number of individuals are indirectly linked to the sector.

It has been widely accepted by the participants that rural tourism and rural development will develop, rural tourism will contribute to the local economy, increase cultural interaction and improve living standards. The high mean

score for the statement “*Rural tourism investments should be increased*” ( $\bar{X} = 4.22$ ) reflects a strong demand among participants for greater investment to support the development of rural tourism.

In addition, the statement “*The sale of vegetables, fruits, sausage, cheese, and dairy products produced by our local people using their own resources will satisfy both the consumer and the producer*” ( $\bar{X} = 4.14$ ) indicates that rural tourism is perceived as a model that generates economic benefits for local producers. Regarding its social effects, the high mean score for the statement “*Rural tourism provides the opportunity to meet new people socially*” ( $\bar{X} = 4.13$ ) demonstrates that rural tourism is also regarded as an important factor in fostering social interaction among individuals.

When perceptions towards rural tourism were evaluated in terms of demographic variables, it was determined that women participated more in the positive aspects of rural tourism than men in the analyses made according to the gender variable. In particular, “*The easy access to Akçakoca district contributes to the increase in mobility for rural tourism*” ( $z=-2.918$ ,  $p=0.004$ ), “*The fact that the natural environment in the region is intact facilitates rural tourism activities*” ( $z=-2.430$ ,  $p=0.015$ ) and “*I think our region is an attractive place in terms of rural tourism activities*” ( $z=-2.609$ ,  $p=0.009$ ) women showed higher levels of agreement with the statements.

As affirmed before, single individuals have a more positive opinion on rural tourism compared to married persons. This is confirmed by “*The easy access to Akçakoca district contributes to the increase in mobility for rural tourism*” ( $z=-3.408$ ,  $p=0.001$ ), where single individuals had a higher participation in the statement.

Individuals involved in the tourism sector believe more in its economic contribution to the development of the region. Also, the promotion of the region as a tourist historical and natural attraction will have a beneficial effect on the increase of the number of visitors. “*Providing brochures showing the historical and natural values of our region to tourists*

*coming from abroad will increase foreign tourism, which has not yet developed in the region”* led to good results ( $z=-2.669$ ,  $p=0.008$ ), reflecting higher levels of agreement with the statement.

Another important result showed that individuals with a higher income assessed rural tourism more positively, as confirmed by

*“The easy access to Akçakoca district contributes to the increase in mobility for rural tourism”* ( $H=17.705$ ,  $p=0.001$ ) and *“Our local people will gain new job opportunities and additional income thanks to rural tourism”* ( $H=12.396$ ,  $p=0.006$ ).

Professional experience is also an important factor in connection with the future development of rural tourism. In this respect, it was found that the people with a long working life in rural tourism consider that: *“Rural tourism increases the income of local people”* ( $H=10.982$ ,  $p=0.027$ ).

These findings reveal that rural tourism is considered as an important development tool for the Akçakoca region. However, problems such as the relatively low income from tourism, infrastructure deficiencies and seasonality need to be solved.

It is clear, that for increasing the contribution of rural tourism to the region development it is needed to protect and promote the natural and cultural heritage within the framework of a sustainable tourism approach.

In this context, local governments and tourism businesses can collaborate to make the region more attractive. Furthermore, the active involvement of women and young people in the tourism sector is essential for enhancing the social and economic contributions of rural tourism.

For rural tourism, unspoiled nature and the peace and quiet it brings are still the most important factors, but there is also a need to change something in the daily monotony of rural life (Dimitrovski et al., 2012) [10]. In this context, the development of facilities such as walking trails, bicycle routes, tourist maps, and horse-riding paths in Akçakoca may represent important steps toward strengthening rural tourism.

Rural tourism must also align with the expectations of visitors. For instance, food

offerings should be organic and of high quality, while opportunities to experience food production processes can allow guests to appreciate the distinction between village-based and city-based consumption (Dimitrovski et al., 2012) [10]. As local residents begin to derive greater economic benefits from rural tourism, their willingness to embrace and support this alternative form of tourism is likely to increase. Moreover, the integration of Akçakoca’s distinctive natural beauty and rich cultural heritage into rural tourism activities will further enhance the district’s appeal to visitors.

Rural tourism is a real driving force for the development of rural tourism in Akçakoca, because it produce both a higher income for local residents and also stimulates the tourist attraction the region. Therefore, the level of attractiveness and accessibility of the area have a crucial role in enhancing the potential of rural tourism (Zivcovic et al., 2025) [40].

Neumeier & Pollermann (2014) emphasized that fact that the regions should collaborate among them to enhance the potential of rural tourism [27]. While rural tourism creates attractions for visitors, it also provides significant economic benefits for local communities (Zivcovic et al., 2025) [40]. The active involvement of local residents is therefore essential for the success of rural tourism (Phillip et al., 2010) [32]. Moreover, fostering interaction between locals and tourists can contribute not only to cultural exchange but also to the social and personal development of community members (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015) [23].

Intensive and sustainable development of tourism in rural areas will provide rural residents with the opportunity to earn income from their homes, and will also develop families specializing in transportation, food products and other services provided in rural areas (Bestaeva, S., 2022) [6]. In the context of rural tourism, entrepreneurs can join forces by establishing cooperatives and contribute to the development of regional destinations (Aktürk ve Demir, 2021) [3]. This cooperation may also involve joint efforts from both the public and private sectors (Kuşat, 2016; Hall & Jenkins, 1998) [20, 16]. Rural tourism also offers a

great opportunity for the preservation of cultural heritage and the continuation of traditional handicrafts (Bessière, 1998) [5].

More than this, the development of rural tourism must take into account the need to preserve the natural resources, biodiversity and maintain the beauty of the landscapes, purity of forests, waters, soil, protecting them of pollution. Therefore, it is needed of an ecological thinking as affirmed Dorobantu & Nistoreanu, 2012) [11].

Gurbuz et al. (2019) [15] considers rural tourism is a generator of economic income, a driver of social collaboration, a promoter of cultural heritage, and a contributor to a better living standard of the local population.

To assure a sustainable development of the rural tourism it is needed to raise the local awareness, to build infrastructure facilities, to enlarge de accommodation capacity and service variety and sustain a continuous promotion of the local attractions as affirmed Zivcovic et al. (2025) [40].

In this context, the historical upper neighborhood market established in Akçakoca can be supported by new entrepreneurs and new touristic products can be created. For example, carpet weaving and wooden products can be diversified in this region.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this study, the perceptions of local people residing in Akçakoca regarding the regional development of rural tourism were evaluated. Akçakoca was preferred because it was one of the first places where tourism started and because it has recently focused on rural tourism activities. Today, climate change has become noticeable and has necessitated tourism regions to focus on different types of alternatives. From this perspective, given Akçakoca's location on the Black Sea coast—where sea-swimming rates remain relatively low throughout the year—it is essential to prioritize rural tourism as an alternative form of tourism. This study was conducted to evaluate the rural tourism potential of the Akçakoca region and to examine its effects on regional development. Participants' perceptions of rural tourism were analyzed according to their demographic

characteristics and various socio-economic variables, while the economic, social, and cultural contributions of rural tourism to local communities were assessed.

The results emphasize rural tourism as a driving force for the development of the local economy, creating jobs, income sources, maintaining the traditions and increasing life quality of the local people.

Also, the research results allowed to identify both the stimulating and constraining factors in the development of rural tourism.

As a result, the following recommendations are made to enable the local authorities to think about:

- Tourism activities should be extended across all four seasons;
- Local population to be more involved in tourism initiatives;
- Tourists must become aware that environment must be protected and preserved;
- Women must be encouraged to be more involved in developing rural tourism affairs;
- Single persons are encouraged to contribute to the development of the local tourism;
- The people with a long experience in tourism business to be an example for the others and teach them how to get a better income;
- Rural tourism development could become a reason to determine young people to remain in the rural localities and diminish migration to the cities.

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