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The Legal Framework for Sustainable Tourism Development in Hail Region: A Study in Light of the Saudi Laws and International Standards

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents a survey of the legal and regulatory structure of the tourism sector in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with a special focus on the Hail region as a pioneering model for development under “Saudi Vision 2030”. The study discusses the main national legislations such as the Saudi Tourism Law and the Law of Antiquities, Museums and Urban Heritage and compares them with the international standards set by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and UNESCO.

The findings obtained through a mixed-method approach, including descriptive, analytical, and comparative techniques, along with a detailed study of the World Heritage sites in Hail (Jubbah and Shuwaymis), suggest that the Kingdom has made great strides in promoting sustainable tourism. But there are still significant institutional and regulatory barriers to protecting cultural heritage, fostering community engagement and creating sustainable investment frameworks. The study ends with practical recommendations to improve the legal framework, aiming to find a balance between the conservation of cultural and environmental heritage and the promotion of economic growth in the Hail region.

1. INTRODUCTION:

In recent years, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has shown increasing interest in tourism as one of the most important economic activities that contribute to diversifying sources of income and increasing the share of non-oil government revenues. This interest comes within the framework of Saudi Vision 2030, which aims to expand the national economic base and reduce dependence on oil resources. Accordingly, the Kingdom has paid great attention to developing tourism infrastructure, enacting laws and regulations, and adopting a set of regulatory measures to govern this sector (Alqahtani, 2026).

One of the most prominent features of the Kingdom's approach to tourism is its focus on achieving a balance between economic development, increasing revenues, and creating job opportunities, on the one hand, and preserving nature, protecting natural and cultural heritage, and ensuring its transmission to future generations, on the other, in a manner that ensures sustainable development in this sector (Sampieri, & Bagader, 2024). To achieve this, the Kingdom has issued a set of laws and regulations governing the tourism sector and ensuring its compliance with targeted sustainability standards, in

addition to a number of executive policies and regulatory measures issued by relevant ministries. These measures confirm that sustainability in the tourism sector is a government direction and a national policy with legal and institutional dimensions.

The Ha'il region, in the north of Saudi Arabia, is a singular opportunity for global tourism, not least because of its wide range of heritage sites of universal significance. The formal inscription of the rock art complexes of Jubbah and Shuwaymis on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2015 was a significant milestone and proof of the area's outstanding international importance. (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, UNESCO World Heritage Committee, 2015). Apart from its historical engravings, Ha'il also boasts a diverse ecosystem of rugged desert landscapes, dramatic mountain ranges, ancient fortresses, and protected natural reserves.

Such an unusual geographical and cultural mixture makes it possible to develop a multi-level tourism system, closely linking cultural tourism, heritage tourism, ecotourism and niche mountain tourism. It also positions the region as a valuable model for studying the legal framework for regulating and developing sustainable tourism in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Alboraie et al., 2025; Baumer, 2020; Bednarik, 2017).

Tourism development in the Ha'il region is based on a set of national laws and regulations that constitute the legal framework for this sector, most notably:

- Tourism Law: issued by Royal Decree No. (M/18) dated 26/1/1444 AH. 24/08/2022.
- Antiquities, Museums, and Urban Heritage Law: issued by Royal Decree No. (M/3) dated 9/1/1436 AH. 02/11/2014.
- Regulations and decisions issued by the Ministry of Tourism.
- A set of rules and regulations related to tourism investment: which encouraged attracting local and foreign investment to develop the sector in promising regions such as Ha'il.
- Regulations and decisions issued by the Ministry of Tourism and National Tourism and Heritage Strategies issued by and the Heritage Commission, which established a strategic framework for sustainable tourism development.

This study aims to review and analyze the legal and regulatory framework for tourism in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in general, and in the Ha'il region in particular. It also highlights the compatibility of this framework with international standards for sustainable tourism established by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and UNESCO. The study also identifies the most prominent legal and regulatory challenges facing sustainable tourism in the Ha'il region and proposes possible approaches for developing the legal and regulatory system to support sustainable development in the region.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

Theoretical and practical significance of the study is two-fold. Theoretically, the research makes a contribution to legal scholarship on sustainable tourism in Saudi Arabia, especially in the Hail Region. While the economic, administrative, geographical and heritage aspects of tourism have been the subject of previous research, the number of specialized legal studies analyzing the regulatory framework for sustainable tourism is scarce. The research is intended to serve the interests of regulatory authorities and decision-makers from a practical perspective by recommending legal and institutional measures that could help in the development of tourism policy, improve the protection of cultural and environmental heritage and coordinate tourism investment with sustainability needs in line with the goals of Saudi Vision 2030.

3. RESEARCH PROBLEM:

The research problem is centered on the institutional coherence and sufficiency of the Saudi legislative framework in protecting the cultural and environmental resources of the Hail Region, with a particular emphasis on the locations of Jubbah and Shuwaymis, in light of the requirements of sustainable tourist development. It also pertains to the framework's capacity to maintain the exceptional universal significance of the sites and the substantial involvement of local communities while also attracting investors.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What is meant by sustainable tourism, and what are its principal legal principles at the national and international levels?
- What legal and regulatory framework governs tourism in Saudi Arabia?
- To what extent do Saudi tourism laws and regulations correspond to the international sustainable-tourism standards developed by the World Tourism Organization and UNESCO?
- To what extent do the existing legislative and administrative structures in Saudi Arabia protect sustainable tourism in Ha'il, particularly Jubbah and Shuwaymis, in comparison with international standards?

5. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- To study the laws and regulations of tourism and antiquities and urban heritage in Saudi Arabia.
- To emphasize the role of Vision 2030 in the advancement of sustainable tourism.
- To assess how Saudi Arabia's legal system compares to international norms, conventions, and global sustainable tourism standards (UNWTO-UNESCO).
- To Identify the Main Legal and Regulatory Obstacles to Sustainable Tourism in Hail Region.
- To offer useful suggestions for creating the legal and regulatory framework in light of the unique circumstances of the Ha'il region.

6. SCOPE OF THE STUDY:

In terms of methodology, this study focuses on the provisions pertaining to sustainable development, tourism investment, and cultural heritage protection within the legal and regulatory framework that oversees sustainable tourism in Saudi Arabia. As a key case study, the investigation's geographic scope is restricted to the Ha'il region.

7. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

In order to examine the institutional and legislative aspects of Saudi tourist legislation in relation to environmentally friendly practices, this study uses a descriptive-analytical methodology. In addition, the design uses a comparative perspective that places certain elements of Saudi Arabia's regulatory architecture in a comparative context with international standards of sustainable tourism, namely UNESCO and the World Tourism Organization.

8. PREVIOUS STUDIES:

Regarding the legal framework for sustainable tourism development in the Hail region, studies have varied between local and international works.

8.1. Local Studies in Arabic:

Some faculty members at the University of Hail have conducted important studies on tourism and archaeology in Hail, including works in Arabic:

- Studies by Bashir Al-Shammari (2022 and 2024): These studies aimed to identify the geographical components of natural tourism in Hail, in addition to archaeological sites and their role in promoting tourism development in Hail.
- Study by Muhammad Al-Hajj and Yasser Al-Hayaji (2023): This study highlighted the importance of managing archaeological cultural heritage in Hail as a tool for achieving sustainable tourism development.
- Study by Haifa Al-Shammari (2025): This study examined the readiness of the Jubbah and Shuwaymis sites as mechanisms for tourism investment in Hail, and proposed a framework for their development to contribute to increasing tourism investment in the region.
- Study by Samia Al-Jabri et al. (2022): This study provided an overview of archaeological tourism in Hail and a proposed vision for its exploitation.

8.2. In English:

- Study by Bakr (2024): Focused on rock art in Hail, and assessed the awareness of Hail University students of the importance of this heritage and the need to preserve it to contribute to sustainable development.
- Study by Noaime, Emad, Mohammed Mashary Alnaim, Mohammed Abdulfattah Bay, Ghazy Abdullah Albaqawy, Mohamed Hssan Hassan Abdelhafez, and Khaled Elkhayat. (2022): Addressed the rehabilitation of the historic Barzan Market as one of the city's heritage sites, and evaluated its impact on promoting cultural tourism.
- Study by Al-Tokhais, Abdulelah, and Brijesh Thapa. (2020)., which examined the management of UNESCO World Heritage sites in Saudi Arabia—including rock art sites in Hail—highlighting the challenges they face and possible solutions.

Most of these studies focus on economic, administrative, geographical, or archaeological dimensions without addressing the legal aspect. In contrast, our study focuses on the legal framework for sustainable tourism development in Hail.

Second, Theoretical Framework of the Study:

1. Conceptual and Legal Framework of Sustainable Tourism:

1.1 The Concept and Dimensions of Sustainable Tourism:

The concept of sustainable tourism developed in parallel with the wider development of the concept of sustainable development. The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) defined sustainable development in its 1987 report as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 24).

The three interrelated dimensions of sustainable development are:

The first is the economic dimension, which involves creating prosperity at all levels of society and ensuring the long-term sustainability of economic activities and institutions.

The second is the social dimension, which requires equal opportunities, the fair distribution of benefits and special attention to poverty reduction.

The third is the environmental dimension, which involves conservation and management of resources especially non-renewable resources and protection of natural heritage and biodiversity. (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP] & World Tourism Organisation [UNWTO], 2005, pp. 8-9).

Tourism has been closely linked to sustainable development due to its multidimensional nature and its direct connections with the economy, the environment and local communities. As a result, sustainable tourism is a critical concept in modern tourism policy, particularly in light of the fact that tourism has substantial economic, social, environmental, and cultural influence. It has the potential to generate employment, diversify income, assist local communities, and provide financial support for the preservation of natural and cultural locations. Simultaneously, it may deplete resources, degrade the environment, place pressure on infrastructure, and undermine the authenticity of host communities in the absence of sufficient planning and oversights. Thus, tourism sustainability cannot be measured solely by the number of visitors or revenue. It must also be measured by the sector's ability to create benefits while limiting its present and future negative impacts (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005, p. 9-11).

In its simplest form, sustainable tourism can be defined as “tourism based on the principles of sustainable development” (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005, p. 11). The principles apply to all forms of tourism and to all types of destination, provided that a balance is struck between economic, environmental and social considerations. The World Tourism Organization has given a more specific definition stating that sustainable tourism is “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities” (UNESCO World Heritage Center, n.d.-a).

This approach was then developed by the World Tourism Organization and the United Nations, through an international statistical framework to measure tourism sustainability. The framework measures the economic, social, and environmental impacts and dimensions of tourism at national and subnational levels. It was endorsed by the United Nations Statistical

Commission at its fifty-fifth session in 2024 (World Tourism Organization, 2024; United Nations Statistical Commission, 2024).

For the purposes of this study, sustainable tourism refers to the type of tourism planning, regulation and management which results in economic benefits over time, preservation of environmental resources and cultural value of the sites, ensuring involvement and benefit of local communities and is monitored and evaluated so that tourism does not go beyond the carrying capacity of tourist and heritage sites.

This operational definition is particularly adequate for the Hail study, as it connects four elements that guide the analysis: economic development, environmental protection, cultural-heritage conservation and local-community participation. It further provides a basis for assessing the adequacy of Saudi laws and regulations to regulate these elements.

These considerations are in line with the UNESCO World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Program, which aims to integrate sustainable tourism into the management of World Heritage sites, safeguard natural and cultural assets, and ensure equitable participation of all stakeholders in the protection of properties and their outstanding universal value through appropriate tourism development and management (UNESCO World Heritage Center, n.d.-b).

1.2 The International Legal Basis of Sustainable Tourism:

There is no single international instrument of universal application that regulates sustainable tourism for all states in a comprehensive and binding manner. Its international legal basis is instead an interconnected body of international conventions, United Nations resolutions, codes of conduct and international guidelines on environmental protection, heritage conservation, community rights and economic development (Ljubojević, 2017).

1.2.1 Principles of Sustainable Development in International Law:

The general basis for sustainable tourism regulation is provided by the sustainable development principle. The idea was solidified by the World Commission on Environment and Development's 1987 report, *Our Common Future*, which defined sustainable development as growth that satisfies current demands without jeopardizing the capacity of future generations to satisfy their own (WCED, 1987, p. 24). The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, often known as the Earth Summit, which took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992, further developed the idea on a global scale. Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development were two significant results. Incorporating environmental protection into development processes, taking into account the needs of current and future generations, involving the public in environmental decision-making, applying the precautionary principle, the polluter-pays principle, and international cooperation in environmental protection and development are some of the principles outlined in the Rio Declaration that are pertinent to sustainable tourism (United Nations, 1992a). Agenda 21 also called for tourism activities that assist local projects, encourage sustainable urban and rural settlement development, and take cultural and environmental factors into account (United Nations, 1992b). Because they rethink tourism as more than just an economic activity, these ideas are important. As a result, environmental, social, and cultural factors must be taken into account when developing tourism. Therefore, a tourism project's effects on natural resources, historical sites, local populations, and the destination's carrying capacity should all be taken into account before granting a license based only on its economic viability. Despite lacking legal force, the approval of Agenda 21 by 182 states was a noteworthy manifestation of global agreement (Ljubojević, 2017, pp. 204–206).

1.2.2. The Role of the World Tourism Organization:

The World Tourism Organization, also known as UN Tourism, is a key player in creating global guidelines and standards for sustainable travel. Its role in the legislative domain is different from that of the states; instead of enacting laws that are legally binding on a national level, it creates guidelines, recommendations, and policy frameworks that help states create laws and policies related to tourism.

1.2.2.1 The Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, 1999:

In 1999 the World Tourism Organization's General Assembly adopted a Global Code of Ethics for Tourism. Two years later, in December 2001, the United Nations General Assembly endorsed it as a blueprint for responsible and sustainable tourism (UN Tourism, 2001).

The Code includes principles directly applicable to sustainable tourism, such as: promoting tourism as a tool for mutual understanding and respect among peoples; recognition of the role of tourism for individual and collective development; respecting cultural heritage and encouraging its protection; natural environment and natural resources protection; ensuring economic and social benefits for host communities; respecting the rights of tourism workers and professionals; protecting tourists' rights; recognizing the human right to tourism; and affirming the responsibility of stakeholders in tourism development.

The Code is an instrument of soft law. It is not a binding treaty but it offers a normative framework that states, tourism enterprises, communities and tourists may use in assessing responsible tourism practices. The primary objective of sustainability is to improve the benefits of tourism while reducing its negative impacts on the environment, heritage and host communities (Ljubojević, 2017, pp. 207-211).

The Code could thus be used to measure the Saudi framework by examining the degree to which it covers: on cultural heritage preservation; environmental care; local population participation; equitable sharing of benefits; responsibility of tourism service suppliers; and Protection of tourists' and employees' rights.

1.2.2.2 The UN Tourism Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics, 2019:

Resolution A/RES/688 (XXI) adopted by the General Assembly of the World Tourism Organization in 2015 aimed to turn the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism into a legally binding instrument, thereby improving its effectiveness at the international and national level (Ljubojević, 2017, p. 214). This was later developed into the Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics.

The General Assembly of the World Tourism Organization, at its twenty-third session in September 2019, formally adopted the Convention in the official languages of the organization by Resolution A/RES/722(XXIII). It was opened for signature in October 2019 and was the first international convention adopted under the auspices of the World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism, 2020).

The Convention deals with the responsibilities of the principal actors in tourism, i.e. states, tourism enterprises, local communities and tourists. It also includes principles related to sustainable development of tourism, respect for human rights, protection of natural and cultural resources and benefits to host communities.

1.2.3 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, 1972:

The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted in 1972, aims to protect cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value and to establish a system of international cooperation and assistance for its conservation.

The Convention includes obligations of relevance to sustainable tourism such as: identification, protection, conservation and transmission to future generations of the cultural and natural heritage; integration of the protection of the heritage into general planning programs; establishment of services for the protection, conservation and presentation of the heritage; adoption of the necessary legal, scientific, administrative and financial measures; and prevention of damage to the outstanding universal value of the World Heritage properties (UNESCO, 1972).

The Convention is of particular relevance to the Rock Art in the Hail Region of Saudi Arabia. For inscription on the World Heritage List, an effective system of protection and management, conservation plans, monitoring and reporting mechanisms, and controls on tourism, urban development and infrastructure in and around the property are required.

1.2.4 Convention on Biological Diversity, 1992:

The Convention on Biological Diversity is an important international source of the environmental dimension of sustainable tourism. It seeks to conserve biological diversity, to promote the sustainable use of its components and to ensure fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources.

The Convention is relevant to tourism through principles such as:

the sustainable use of resources; assessment of potential impacts of projects on biodiversity; integration of biodiversity into sectoral plans; participation of local communities and stakeholders; and cooperation in the protection of sites of ecological value (Convention on Biological Diversity, 1992).

2. LEGAL AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN SAUDI ARABIA:

2.1 General Legal Framework for Tourism in Saudi Arabia:

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has created a comprehensive legal and institutional framework to regulate tourism. The sector has expanded from a relatively limited activity into a major element of national economic diversification under Saudi Vision 2030. This framework is primarily based on the Tourism Law issued by Royal Decree No. M/18, dated 26 Muharram 1444 AH, and a set of implementing regulations and administrative decisions related to licensing, tourist hospitality facilities, travel and tourism services, tourist guiding, inspection, and destination development.

2.1.1. The Tourism Law, 2022:

The 1436 AH Tourism Law was superseded by the current one. Definitions, licenses and permits, licensee obligations, Ministry of Tourism functions, public and private entity responsibilities, tourism locations, inspection, infractions, and fines are only a few of the topics covered (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2022).

The Law is the general legislative framework that governs Saudi Arabia's tourism industry. Its significance for sustainable tourism can be investigated from a number of main angles.

a. Preservation of the ecosystem and tourism resources. Natural landmarks and historical and archeological sites are examples of natural or material resources with tourism value, according to Article 1. Although their specific protection is still governed by the applicable environmental and heritage legislation, this definition brings such resources under the purview of tourism planning. In accordance with the Environmental Law (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2022, arts. 1, 6), Article 6 assigns the Ministry duties pertaining to the identification of tourism destinations and resources and the establishment of requirements for environmental protection in coordination with the competent authorities.

In addition, Article 7 mandates that projects and urban planning that could have an impact on tourist destinations or resources be coordinated with the appropriate authorities. This clause offers a legal foundation for coordinating development decisions that impact tourism assets and limiting encroachment (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2022, art. 7).

b. Investment and economic development. The practice of tourism activities within the Ministry's jurisdiction is prohibited by Article 2 unless the necessary license or permit has been obtained. The Ministry is able to verify compliance with this licensing requirement prior to the commencement of an activity and to monitor it thereafter, thereby fulfilling a regulatory and preventive function (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2022, art. 2).

c. Developmental and social factors. The Tourism Law aims to guaranty the dependability and quality of tourism services while safeguarding the interests of travelers. Although these issues should not be attributed to the Tourism Law until a special clause specifically tackles them, related labor and tourism policies also encourage the development of national tourist skills and the localization of tourism jobs.

d. Inspection, enforcement, and governance. The Law lays down procedures for inspection, investigation of infractions and application of sanctions. These techniques may support safety, environmental and heritage compliance when coordinated with the relevant environmental and heritage authorities. The Law also provides for the promulgation of implementing rules to allow the regulatory framework to adjust to evolving operational, environmental and economic conditions (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2022, arts. 13–17).

2.1.2 Regulations Governing Travel and Tourism Services:

The practice of travel and tourism services is governed by the Regulations Governing Travel and Tourism Services, complementing the establishment of the licensing criteria and professional obligations of service providers. (Ministry of Tourism, 2022a).

The regulations relate to sustainable tourism because travel agencies influence the number of visitors, their itineraries, and access to natural and historical sites. These providers could help reduce uncontrolled tourism and relieve pressure on fragile sites through the development of responsible programs and collaboration with the appropriate authorities. The regulations also help businesses remain sustainable by establishing rules for client interaction, service provision, and transparency.

2.1.3 Tourist Guiding Regulations:

The practice of tourist guiding and the licensing of tour guides are governed by the Tourist Guiding Regulations (Ministry of Tourism, 2022b).

Tourist guides can directly contribute to the protection of these sites by explaining the historical importance of heritage sites, leading visitors along designated paths, preventing the touching or defacement of rock art, avoiding harm to wildlife and archeological resources, and promoting respect for local communities and cultural practices. These educational and protective functions are performed by training facilitators in accordance with the licensing and professional qualification requirements.

2.1.4 Tourist Hospitality Facilities Regulations:

The licensing, classification, and operational obligations of hospitality facilities are regulated by the Tourist Hospitality Facilities Regulations (Ministry of Tourism, 2022c).

The Regulations relate to sustainability mainly through licensing, classification, safety and compliance with applicable laws. The detailed environmental requirements are, however, mainly based on the Environmental Law, environmental permits, building regulations and technical requirements issued by the competent authorities.

Therefore, absent identification of a specific provision, the Regulations should not be described as independently imposing all green-building, water-reuse, energy-efficiency, or waste-reduction requirements.

2.1.5 Regulations for Inspection of Tourism Activities:

The Regulations for Inspection of Tourism Activities set out procedures for inspection of tourism activities and verification of compliance with the Tourism Law, its implementing regulations and applicable requirements (Ministry of Tourism, 2022d). And inspection is key to the effectiveness of the regulation of sustainable tourism. Tourism inspectors could look at licensing, operational standards, safety requirements and adherence to tourism regulations. Where an activity is located in an environmentally or culturally sensitive area, tourism inspection should be coordinated with environmental and heritage oversight so that monitoring extends beyond service quality to include potential harm to protected resources.

2.1.6 Tourism Destination Development Regulations:

The procedures and requirements for the designation and development of tourism destinations are governed by the Tourism Destination Development Regulations (Ministry of Tourism, 2022e). They help integrate environmental, urban and community factors into the planning of destinations.

The Regulations, in particular, provide for the consideration of environmental-protection requirements applicable to a proposed tourism destination and for the coordination with the National Center for Environmental Compliance and other competent authorities. They also need to consider tourism resources, planning needs, the surrounding community and the needs of visitors.

These provisions establish a legal foundation for incorporating environmental protection into destination development, though their effectiveness relies on implementation, monitoring, and the presence of management plans at the destination level.

2.2 Legal Framework for Cultural-Heritage Protection:

The Law of Antiquities, Museums, and Urban Heritage, established by Royal Decree No. M/3 on 9/1/1436 AH, serves as the primary legal framework for the protection of antiquities, archaeological sites, urban heritage, and museums in Saudi Arabia. (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2014).

The Law protects the cultural resources necessary for heritage tourism through regulation of registration, archaeological activities, and restoration. It provides legal protection from activities that damage or alter antiquities and archaeological sites, such as unpermitted excavations or interference.

The Executive Regulations for Antiquities and Urban Heritage and the regulations for inspection, control of violations and adjudication related thereto, contributed to reinforcing the implementation framework. (Heritage Commission, 2022a, 2022b).

In the Hail Region, the preservation of Rock Art entails more than just preventing direct damage. This includes roads management, construction, visitor facilities, land use and area investments. The national framework must be consistent with both the World Heritage Convention and the standards established by UNESCO for the protection of outstanding universal value.

2.3 Supporting Laws for Sustainable Tourism Development:

The legal framework for sustainable tourism in Saudi Arabia includes not only the Tourism Law and heritage legislation but also other regulations regarding environmental protection, waste management, investment, tourism finance and land use. These laws are important to keep a balance between tourism development and preservation of natural and cultural resources.

2.3.1 Environmental Law:

The Environmental Law, established by Royal Decree No. M/165 on 19/11/1441 AH, outlines the main legal framework for environmental protection and sustainability in Saudi Arabia. (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2020a).

The Law governs activities that have a significant impact on the environment and requires environmental permits, compliance, monitoring and enforcement. This is relevant for sustainable tourism because tourism projects such as accommodations, roads, and recreational facilities can affect water, land, biodiversity, air quality, waste and landscapes.

The Executive Regulations on Environmental Permits for Establishing and Operating Activities specify further procedures for evaluating and controlling the environmental impacts of projects. (National Center for Environmental Compliance, 2021).

2.3.2 Waste Management Law:

The law that regulates the processes of waste collection, transportation, sorting, storage, treatment, recycling and safe disposal is the Waste Management Law issued by Royal Decree No. M/3 dated 5/1/1443 AH. (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2021).

The Law promotes sustainable tourism by minimizing environmental impacts from accommodations, restaurants, festivals, visitor centers, camps, and tourist mobility, especially in desert areas where waste disposal can harm landscapes and wildlife.

2.2.3 Investment Law:

The Investment Law, established by Royal Decree No. M/19 on 16/ 1/1446 AH, aims to improve the investment climate, stimulate economic growth, and generate job opportunities. (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2024). The Law outlines a framework for attracting both domestic and foreign investment in tourism but does not inherently ensure sustainability. Tourism projects must comply with various requirements, including environmental and heritage considerations. To achieve sustainable investment, it is crucial to link investment approvals and incentives with measurable obligations focused on resource efficiency, heritage conservation, local employment, waste management, and community benefits.

2.2.4 Tourism Development Fund Law:

The Tourism Development Fund Law issued by Royal Decree No. M/147 on 26/10/1441 AH establishes a funding mechanism to support the development of tourism and encourage private sector investment in tourism projects and destinations. . (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2020b). The Fund's support for sustainable tourism is linked to environmental and cultural safeguards, local employment, efficient use of resources, waste reduction and heritage conservation. Law and the financing programs of the Fund in the assessment of funded projects to verify their compliance with the sustainability criteria.

2.4 Assessment of the Saudi Framework against International Sustainable-Tourism Standards:

The sustainable tourism standards have four main dimensions: sustainable destination management, social and economic impacts, cultural protection and environmental protection. These dimensions are categorized in the Destination Criteria of

the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) that provides a globally applicable guidance framework that is not legally binding. (Global Sustainable Tourism Council, 2019).

The legal framework in Saudi Arabia is analyzed to show a significant alignment with the needs of sustainable tourism in the laws of tourism, environment and investment. But there is a lack of integration and implementation since the provisions in this respect are scattered in different regulations. In particular there is a notable absence of cultural impact assessment; carrying capacity of visitors; local participation and sustainability indicators.

First: Environmental and Spatial-Planning Alignment:

GSTC standards call for destination planning that considers environmental, social and cultural impacts, the protection of natural resources and proper impact assessments of tourism projects. (Global Sustainable Tourism Council, 2019).

The Saudi framework responds to the environmental requirements in the Environmental Law and tourism regulations that require coordination with environmental authorities for the designation and development of tourism destinations. Other provisions of the Environmental Law require that activities with possible environmental impacts comply with the regulations. (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2020a).

This alignment requires that environmental assessment be paired with cultural-heritage assessment, public access to findings and post-approval monitoring for completeness.

Second: Social and Cultural Alignment:

International standards require respect for host communities, protection of cultural heritage and involvement of local residents in planning and benefit-sharing. (Global Sustainable Tourism Council, 2019).

The Saudi framework encourages tourism via a set of legislations including heritage legislation, tourist guiding regulations, destination development rules, localisation policies and tourism financing mechanisms. But the mere presence of heritage protection and professional licensing does not mean that meaningful participation and equitable distribution of tourism benefits are guaranteed. To achieve these objectives, explicit consultation processes, the involvement of local representatives in destination management, support for local businesses and transparency in the allocation of benefits are needed.

Third: Economic Alignment:

Economic sustainability depends on several critical factors, including long-term investment, resilience among tourism businesses, the expansion of local employment opportunities, and the effective utilization of resources. Legal structures, such as the Investment Law and the Tourism Development Fund Law, are crucial in boosting this sustainability. They will attract capital, finance tourism projects and increase private sector participation in the tourism sector. (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2020b, 2024) Yet economic alignment is not measured by the volume of investment alone. It should also be evaluated on the basis of indicators such as local employment, project sustainability, resource efficiency, heritage preservation, benefits to the community and the proportion of tourism expenditure that remains in the destination.

Fourth: Governance and Institutional Alignment:

The GSTC criteria emphasizes the need for a responsible destination-management structure, a multi-year strategy, stakeholder engagement and performance-monitoring and reporting systems. (Global Sustainable Tourism Council, 2019).

Saudi Arabia has established specialized institutions in the domain of tourism and related areas, focusing on institutional alignment. But the real challenge is to coordinate these entities, consolidate data, establish lead authorities for each destination and publish performance reports on a regular basis across different domains.

3. SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN THE HAIL REGION:

The Hail Region is a perfect case for the application of Saudi Arabia's legal and institutional framework of sustainable tourism. It is rich in resources including natural, cultural and archeological sites, notably the Rock Art in the Hail Region. Important sites within the property include Jabal Umm Sinman at Jubbah, and the Jabal al-Manjor and Raat at Shuwaymis. The property was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2015. (UNESCO World Heritage Center, n.d.-c).

Hail provides a useful setting to study the dynamics of heritage protection, destination development, tourism investment and community engagement. The region has many tourism resources such as historic markets, archeological sites and cultural events. The development of resources requires the concerted application of several laws: those relating to tourism, antiquities, environmental issues, municipal regulations, etc.

3.1 Tourism Assets in the Hail Region:

Hail's tourism assets are categorized into four main categories:

a. Heritage and Archaeological Assets:

The rock art of the Hail region including Jubbah and Shuwaymis is a major heritage asset of outstanding universal value with a long history of human activity. In addition, Hail hosts a number of other cultural attractions, such as the historical Barzan Market, which has been investigated by Noaime et al. (2022) for its role in promoting cultural tourism in Hail City.

In a study on Saudi heritage-site classification to explore the relationship between heritage classification, conservation and sustainable development, the Barzan Heritage Area was used. (Albaqawy et al., 2023).

b. Natural Assets:

The region's diverse desert and mountain environments have potential for ecotourism and adventure tourism, provided that all developments are compliant with environmental regulations, impact assessments and controls on vehicles, camps, waste and visitor activities.

c. Cultural and Social Assets:

Hail's cultural assets such as handicrafts, local products, oral traditions and folklore enrich the tourist experience, and provide opportunities for local communities to participate in and benefit from tourism.

d. Digital and Service Assets:

Digital platforms and tourism apps are important tools for promoting destinations, organizing visits and providing information. The study on Hail as a case of e-tourism development has pointed out the role of technology, human resources and institutional commitment in achieving sustainable tourism development. (Chaaben et al., 2024).

3.2 The Rock-Art Sites of Jubbah and Shuwaymis

First: International Status:

Rock Art in the Hail Region of Saudi Arabia was inscribed on the World Heritage List by the World Heritage Committee in 2015, under criteria (i) and (iii). It is composed of two parts: Jabal Umm Sinman at Jubbah and Jabal al-Manjor and Raat at Shuwaymis. (UNESCO World Heritage Committee, 2015; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-c).

This inscription emphasizes the significance of safeguarding the property's outstanding universal value, managing visitation and surrounding development to protect its authenticity and integrity. It explains that international inscription does not replace national protection but improves the enforcement of the Law of Antiquities, Museums and Urban Heritage and its associated regulations.

Second: National Legal Protection:

The Law of Antiquities, Museums and Urban Heritage provides legal tools for the protection of archeological resources and urban heritage. It deals with issues of registration, licensing, archeological surveys and excavations, restoration, use, inspection and penalties. (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2014). Practical protection of property involves measures such as preventing damage to rock art, regulating archaeological activities, controlling construction, defining visitor routes, monitoring visitor behavior, documenting property condition, and managing investment activities nearby. (Alboraie et al., 2025).

Third: Administrative and Environmental Challenges:

Al-Tokhais and Thapa (2020) identified operational challenges in managing World Heritage sites in Saudi Arabia, particularly in Hail. These challenges include inappropriate visitor behavior, such as touching rock art, the impact of off-road vehicles, a

lack of an integrated site-management plan, and limited involvement of local communities in management efforts. (Alboraie et al., 2025).

3.3 Applying the Legal Framework to Tourism in Hail:

Tourism activities in Hail are governed by the Tourism Law, requiring licenses and compliance with various regulations. Key considerations for tourism projects, especially near heritage or natural sites, include obtaining tourism licenses, environmental approvals, adhering to heritage legislation, municipal planning, regulating visitor movement, waste management, respecting local communities, and addressing site-specific requirements.

A framework for assessing the impact of tourism projects on natural resources is provided by the Environmental Law. Finance and investment are facilitated by the Investment Law and the Tourism Development Fund Law. They should be consistent with heritage protection, environmental sustainability, local employment and long-term economic benefits. As for sustainability in the tourism of Hail, there are four legal and practical dimensions to be evaluated.

a. Environmental Dimension:

This dimension encompasses the protection of natural resources, the disposal of waste, and the regulation of vehicles and camps. This is especially important given the documented pressures of unregulated visitation and inadequately integrated protection planning in the region. (Al-Anazi et al., 2026, p. 159).

b. Cultural Dimension:

This dimension relates to the authenticity and integrity of heritage properties, such as rock art and historic buildings, and regulation of adaptive reuse. The existing studies emphasize the need for more protection and systematic conservation of heritage sites in Hail. (Al-Anazi et al., 2026, p. 159).

c. Social Dimension:

This dimension means involving local residents in the management of the destination, training them in guiding and hospitality, supporting local crafts and products and ensuring that they benefit from employment and investment. Bakr (2024) highlighted the significance of increasing awareness among Hail University students regarding rock-art conservation, confirming that heritage protection cannot depend only on public authorities but also requires public awareness and community participation.

d. Economic Dimension:

This dimension aims at diversifying local income and supporting emerging enterprises. The Tourism Development Fund finances tourism projects. This is important because tourism is concentrated in Hail City while heritage sites in remote areas have challenges in terms of infrastructure and access, which may lead to unequal economic and social benefits between urban and rural communities. (Al-Anazi et al., 2026, p. 159).

3.4 Regulatory Challenges:

Hail is rich in heritage and resources. Despite the availability of a legal framework for tourism, environment preservation and heritage conservation in Saudi Arabia, the transition to sustainable tourism in the region is hindered by a number of challenges.

First, there is the problem of institutional integration. The Ministry of Tourism, the Heritage Commission, environmental authorities, municipalities, the Hail Region Development Authority and investment bodies share responsibilities. The field study in Hail revealed that one of the challenges affecting sustainable tourism development is the lack of coordination among agencies. (Al-Anazi et al., 2026). The correct response is not to establish a new authority, but rather to identify a lead destination-management entity, establish a permanent coordination mechanism and build a shared database.

Second, visitor infrastructure and site protection issues pose a challenge for the management of the rock-art property. UNESCO reports point to weaknesses in visitor facilities and tourism management, recommend an extension of the buffer zone around Jabal Umm Sinman, and call for heritage impact assessment of infrastructure projects (UNESCO World

Heritage Center, 2017, 2021). This means that tourism infrastructure has to be developed in concert with the protection of outstanding universal value.

Third, Local participation must change from being public awareness to institutional participation. Evidence suggests that people participate more in conservation and tourism when they are aware of heritage value and have significant opportunities to participate. Conversely, poor communication and limited access discourage participation. (Nassr et al., 2026).

Fourth, Infrastructure, accessibility and local skills are the backbone of sustainable tourism. Empirical research shows good quality infrastructure promotes sustainable tourism but regional problems such as poor services, skills shortages and logistical constraints inhibit development. (Al-Anazi et al., 2026).

4. RESULTS:

- Saudi Arabia employs a diverse legal and institutional framework for tourism regulation, encompassing the Tourism Law, the Law of Antiquities, Museums, and Urban Heritage, the Environmental Law, the Investment Law, and the Tourism Development Fund Law.
- The Saudi framework is consistent with the basic principles of sustainable tourism such as licensing, supervision, preservation of the environment, conservation of heritage, easy investment and development of tourism destinations.
- The regulation of sustainable tourism is scattered in several laws and does not have a comprehensive legal framework that clearly defines sustainable tourism and sets comprehensive measurement indicators and implementation mechanisms.
- The Tourism Law is a basic law in respect of tourism destinations, activities and facilities. Its effectiveness in promoting sustainability depends on its integration with the environmental, heritage and urban-planning laws.
- The Law of Antiquities, Museums and Urban Heritage is the main legal basis for the protection of the Jubbah and Shuwaymis sites. But effective legal protection requires the development of practical management plans, monitoring systems and regulations for visitation and investment in adjacent areas.
- The Hail Region has large tourism, cultural and natural resources and is suitable for the development of a number of types of tourism, especially cultural, heritage, ecological and mountain tourism. The Rock Art sites of Jubbah and Shuwaymis are the major highlights.
- The inclusion of the Hail Region's rock art on the World Heritage List has increased its significance on a global scale and established obligations to preserve its integrity, authenticity, and exceptional universal worth.
- The case study brought to light challenges in coordinating duties between the Hail Region Development Authority, the Ministry of Tourism, the Heritage Commission, municipalities, and environmental authorities.
- Additional detailed regulation is required for the management of visitors, carrying capacity and organization of vehicles, roads and facilities at Jubbah and Shuwaymis.
- Sustainable development depends on local community involvement and skill development, which calls for more transparent institutional frameworks.
- Tourism investment and the Tourism Development Fund can contribute to the development of Hail, but for their impact to be sustainable, financing and investment need to be aligned with the protection of the environment and heritage and the securing of local benefits.
- Applied studies on Hail emphasize the significance of infrastructure, accessibility, digital transformation, public awareness and human-resource development for the promotion of sustainable tourism development.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS:

The study calls for an integrated management plan for Jubbah and Shuwaymis, including heritage protection, visitor regulation and environmental assessments. It requires better coordination among the relevant authorities, involvement of the community through training and support to local enterprises and linking of Tourism Development Fund financing to heritage

and resource efficiency criteria. It also suggests the establishment of monitoring indicators and a shared database for the site conditions and benefits, as well as better infrastructure and awareness programs to protect the area's universal value and desert environment.

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