

REVIEW ARTICLE

Accessible Ocean Tourism in Travel, Tourism, and Recreation: Bridging Policy and Practice for Inclusive and Sustainable Destinations

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Abstract

Accessible tourism has gained increasing attention within travel and recreation studies; however, ocean and coastal tourism contexts remain insufficiently examined from a disability inclusion perspective. This article situates Accessible Ocean Tourism within the broader fields of travel, tourism, and recreation, arguing that inclusive access to ocean environments is both a human rights obligation and a strategic policy priority for sustainable destination development. Drawing on disability studies, accessible tourism literature, and international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the paper identifies gaps between policy intent and lived travel experiences of persons with disabilities. It proposes pathways for governments, destination management organizations, and private sector actors—particularly through corporate social responsibility (CSR)—to bridge these gaps and advance inclusive, safe, and meaningful ocean-based travel and recreation.

Keywords: Accessible Tourism, Disability Travel, Ocean Tourism, Inclusive Recreation, Public Policy, CSR, UNCRPD, Sustainable Destinations.

1. Introduction

Travel and recreation are integral to social participation, cultural exchange, and well-being. Within tourism research, accessible tourism has emerged as a growing field that addresses barriers faced by persons with disabilities across transport, accommodation, and urban environments (Darcy & Buhalis, 2011). Yet, ocean and coastal tourism—despite its global economic and cultural significance—remains underexplored in disability travel scholarship.

Ocean tourism encompasses a range of recreational and travel activities, including beach tourism, marine recreation, coastal travel, and experiential learning in marine environments. These spaces are often characterized by complex physical, environmental, and safety conditions, which amplify accessibility challenges. This article argues that accessible ocean tourism must be recognized as a core component of inclusive travel and recreation systems, requiring coordinated policy action and organizational commitment.

2. Accessible Ocean Tourism within Travel and Recreation Studies

Accessible Ocean Tourism refers to the design and provision of ocean and coastal travel experiences that enable persons with disabilities to participate independently, safely, and with dignity. Within travel and recreation studies, this concept expands accessible tourism beyond the built environment to include natural and semi-natural settings, which have historically been treated as inherently inaccessible.

From a recreation perspective, access to ocean environments contributes to:

- Leisure participation
- Physical and mental well-being
- Social inclusion
- Identity and belonging

However, exclusion from ocean recreation limits these benefits for persons with disabilities, reinforcing inequalities within travel systems.

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3. Rights-Based and Sustainability Frameworks

3.1 UNCRPD and Disability Travel Rights

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities establishes access to recreation, leisure, and tourism as a fundamental right. Article 30 explicitly affirms the right of persons with disabilities to participate in recreational and cultural life, while Article 9 emphasizes accessibility across environments, services, and information.

Despite these provisions, disability travel rights are often unevenly implemented in tourism policy, particularly in coastal and marine contexts where accessibility is perceived as optional or impractical.

3.2 Sustainable Development Goals and Inclusive Destinations

Accessible Ocean Tourism aligns with several SDGs relevant to travel and recreation:

- SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities): Inclusive travel systems
- SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities): Accessible public and recreational spaces
- SDG 14 (Life Below Water): Inclusive engagement in ocean stewardship

Inclusive destinations are increasingly recognized as more resilient, competitive, and socially sustainable (UNWTO, 2016).

4. Gaps in Disability Travel Experiences in Ocean Tourism

Despite growing commitments to accessible tourism, persons with disabilities continue to experience unintended exclusionary outcomes when traveling to ocean destinations. These include:

- Inaccessible beaches, boats, and coastal facilities
- Limited accessible transportation within coastal regions
- Lack of accessible information regarding marine activities
- Safety and risk management systems that fail to accommodate diverse needs
- Fragmented responsibility across tourism actors

These gaps reveal a disconnect between policy rhetoric and lived travel experiences, particularly in recreation-heavy destinations.

5. The Case for Government Policy Intervention

5.1 Policy Integration in Tourism and Recreation

Governments play a central role in shaping travel systems through tourism policy, coastal regulation, and destination planning. Integrating accessible ocean tourism into formal policy frameworks enables:

- Systematic identification of accessibility gaps
- Collection of disability-disaggregated tourism data
- Enforcement of inclusive standards across public and private actors

Policy coherence across tourism, transport, disability affairs, and environmental ministries is essential for inclusive recreation planning.

5.2 From Voluntary Measures to Accountability

While voluntary accessibility initiatives are valuable, they often result in uneven implementation. Government policy can establish minimum accessibility benchmarks, ensuring that inclusive ocean travel is not dependent on individual providers' goodwill.

6. Organizational and CSR Roles in Bridging the Gap

6.1 Corporate Social Responsibility and Accessible Travel

Organizations involved in tourism, hospitality, transport, and recreation increasingly adopt CSR frameworks focused on inclusion and sustainability. Accessible Ocean Tourism provides a tangible avenue for CSR action by:

- Investing in accessible coastal infrastructure
- Supporting adaptive recreation programs
- Training staff in disability-inclusive service delivery
- Partnering with disabled persons' organizations (DPOs)

CSR initiatives that support accessible travel not only advance rights but also expand market reach and destination reputation.

6.2 Destination Management and Industry Leadership

Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) and tourism boards can promote accessible ocean tourism through:

- Inclusive destination branding
- Accessibility audits and certification schemes
- Public–private partnerships for inclusive recreation
- Integration of accessibility into visitor experience design

Bridging Policy and Practice in Travel and Recreation

Bridging the gap between policy and lived experience requires:

- Participatory planning with persons with disabilities
- Capacity building for tourism and recreation professionals
- Inclusive risk and safety management in marine contexts
- Continuous monitoring and feedback from disabled travelers

Accessible Ocean Tourism demonstrates that inclusion enhances rather than constrains recreation systems, benefiting diverse travelers including older persons, families, and first-time visitors.

8. Conclusion

Accessible Ocean Tourism represents a critical frontier in disability travel, tourism, and recreation research. Ensuring equitable access to ocean

environments requires coordinated government policy, organizational responsibility, and disability-led engagement. By embedding accessibility into tourism governance and CSR strategies, destinations can move toward travel systems that are inclusive, sustainable, and just—affirming the right of all individuals to experience ocean spaces as sites of recreation, learning, and belonging.

9. References

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