



Leveraging Sustainable Tourism to Project Soft Power: Evidence from the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

In an era when global influence is increasingly shaped by cultural appeal and sustainable development, the intersection of sustainable tourism and soft power has emerged as a pivotal domain of scholarly inquiry. This convergence reflects the dual imperative facing nations today: cultivating positive international perceptions while addressing urgent environmental challenges. Countries that effectively integrate sustainability into their tourism strategies gain a distinct competitive advantage in diplomacy, economic growth, and cross-cultural engagement. This study explores the role of sustainable tourism in strengthening the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) soft power, analyzing both its domestic initiatives and international branding efforts. Using a descriptive-analytical approach, the research draws on extensive library and online sources to assess the UAE's policies, programs, and achievements in sustainable tourism. Findings indicate that the UAE's strategic focus on sustainability has significantly enhanced its standing at both national and global levels. Domestically, government-led initiatives—such as the *UAE Green Agenda 2030* and *Dubai Sustainable Tourism*—have produced tangible progress in environmental protection and economic diversification. Internationally, the UAE's branding as a hub for sustainable tourism, together with foreign investment in green infrastructure and eco-friendly mega projects, has strengthened its global reputation. These efforts have not only attracted environmentally conscious travelers but also expanded the UAE's cultural influence and diplomatic reach. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that sustainable tourism serves as a powerful instrument of the UAE's soft power, simultaneously advancing its economic aspirations, environmental commitments, and positive global image. The UAE's experience offers valuable insights for other nations seeking to leverage sustainable tourism as a strategic tool for soft power projection.

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Introduction

In an era of unprecedented globalization and transnational interconnectedness, soft power has become an indispensable instrument for nations seeking to advance their interests and cultivate positive international perceptions. Unlike *hard power*—which relies primarily on military and economic resources—soft power derives its influence from the cultural values, diplomatic image, and social appeal that a nation projects to the world. Among the various tools that strengthen soft power, sustainable tourism stands out as notably effective. By fostering cultural exchange, environmental respect, and the inclusive use of natural and social assets, sustainable tourism enhances a country's global image and credibility (Özkan & Boylu, 2021; Casado Claro et al., 2023, p. 66). Sustainable tourism holistically addresses the economic, social, and environmental dimensions shaping the needs of both present and future generations. It seeks to meet the diverse expectations of tourists, local communities, and the tourism industry while ensuring responsible management of natural resources (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005). Built upon the pillars of social justice, economic viability, and environmental integrity (ILO, 2010), sustainable tourism encapsulates policies, practices, and programs that promote balanced growth. Within this context, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has emerged as a significant tourism hub in the Middle East despite natural limitations such as scarce water resources and limited arable land. This success is underpinned by advanced infrastructure, robust investment flows, and strong policy commitments to sustainability. The UAE hosted approximately 18.36 million foreign tourists in 2014, a figure that rose to 24.07 million in 2023 and is projected to reach 44.66 million by 2029 (TTW, 2025).

The UAE's remarkable performance in international travel and tourism indicators exemplifies its growing global appeal. According to the Travel & Tourism Development Index (TTDI), the country ranks first worldwide for air transport infrastructure and travel data provision; second in tourism-related infrastructure and services; and third for policymaking efficiency and comprehensiveness (Ministry of Economy, 2024). Additionally, the World Economic Forum's TTDI (2024) positions the UAE first in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and eighteenth globally (Ibrahim, 2024). To sustain this momentum, the UAE continues to invest in innovation-driven tourism strategies emphasizing environmental responsibility—foregrounding both green and sustainable tourism. Green tourism represents a conscientious approach to travel that minimizes ecological footprints and preserves destinations for future generations. Recent studies reveal that nearly 75% of travelers actively seek responsible vacation options (Shaaban, 2024). Consequently, sustainable and green experiences have become essential differentiators among tourism-oriented nations. In response, the UAE has launched a series of initiatives that demonstrate its commitment to sustainability by promoting eco-friendly attractions and responsible visitor experiences.

Beyond economic and cultural achievements, the UAE's sustainable tourism policies have far-reaching environmental and social implications. Through green programs, carbon reduction, renewable energy integration, and biodiversity protection initiatives, the country has articulated a holistic model of responsible development. These efforts align with the broader objectives of UAE Vision 2021 and the Centenary Plan 2071, both emphasizing sustainability, innovation, and economic diversification as cornerstones of national growth. The UAE's approach thus redefines tourism not merely as an environmental measure but as a comprehensive framework grounded in social responsibility, cultural preservation, and economic resilience. Dubai exemplifies this orientation, situating itself as a luxury destination that simultaneously advances sustainability through a series of *pro-tourism* policies and strategic initiatives (Sharples, 2008).

This study critically examines how the United Arab Emirates strategically employs sustainable tourism as an instrument of soft power, addressing an important gap in the existing literature—namely, the geopolitical significance of sustainability initiatives in resource-scarce, hyper-developed contexts. By analyzing the UAE's distinctive model that merges luxury tourism with ecological stewardship, the research seeks to empirically demonstrate how sustainable tourism transcends its conventional economic and



environmental roles to operate as a robust tool of international influence. In doing so, it tackles the apparent tension between the UAE's rapid urbanization and its sustainability ambitions, offering new insights into how emerging global powers can deploy green diplomacy to reinforce their soft power while confronting ecological constraints. Ultimately, this study proposes a transferable framework enabling other nations to align tourism strategies with both soft power objectives and sustainable development imperatives.

Literature Review

Over recent decades, sustainable tourism and soft power have emerged as pivotal themes in international relations, tourism development, and sustainability studies. The concept of *soft power*, first introduced by Joseph Nye (1990), emphasizes influence achieved through cultural appeal, values, and constructive policies rather than coercion or military might. Soft power shapes the international image of nations, strengthens diplomatic relations, and widens cultural outreach. Given the rapid expansion of global tourism and the growing emphasis on sustainability principles, scholars and policymakers have increasingly examined the relationship between sustainable tourism and soft power. A central question within this research field is *how sustainable tourism can enhance a nation's international image and, consequently, its soft power*.

For instance, Bunakov et al. (2018) analyzed Russia's tourism development as an instrument for reinforcing national soft power, recognizing its effectiveness in improving external perceptions. Hawkins (2005) underscores environmental sustainability as a cornerstone of tourism development, positioning the United Arab Emirates (UAE) among countries that have integrated sustainability into national tourism policy. Abdul Salam Hussein et al. (2024) highlight the UAE's unexplored potential for sustainable tourism, noting the need for coherent governmental planning to harness these opportunities. Similarly, Qataf Firuz (2017) attributes the UAE's tourism success in part to its federal governance system, which facilitates coordinated strategic development.

Further, Najem (2023) investigates the intra-national distribution of tourism resources and their contribution to the UAE's economic diversification, while Ahmed Al-Hajj (2019) stresses competitiveness and the role of structured planning within the sector. Al-Naqbi et al. (2022) trace the evolution of tourism facilities and government initiatives aimed at sustainability and service expansion.

Despite these contributions, existing literature lacks a comprehensive examination of the core components of sustainable tourism that directly strengthen the UAE's soft power. This research thus addresses this gap by adopting a descriptive-analytical and developmental-applied approach. The study employs qualitative methods, drawing upon library and online sources to analyze how the UAE's sustainable tourism strategies enhance its international influence.

Soft Power

American scholar Joseph Nye (2008, p. 2) argues that *attractive power* can complement traditional forms of influence rooted in economic and military capabilities. He distinguishes "hard power"—which relies on coercion—from "soft power," which persuades others to adopt or align with desirable norms, values, and institutions. Similarly, Leonard (2002, p. 4) asserts that soft power is exercised through setting agendas and shaping the preferences of others in international discourse.

As global politics evolves, soft power's significance has expanded. In the modern international system—where coercion through hard power has become increasingly difficult—soft power offers alternative means to achieve geopolitical influence. Gallarotti (2011, p. 26) highlights this transformation, suggesting that cultural appeal, political credibility, and diplomatic reputation are now decisive elements of a nation's power.

According to Dubinsky (2019, p. 156), soft power derives primarily from three sources: culture, political values, and foreign policy. Understanding its role in international relations requires examining the



mechanisms through which soft power operates—namely, norm diffusion and discursive dominance within the global community (Rothman, 2011, p. 56). Furthermore, Rahmani (2015, p. 82) emphasizes that foreign and domestic policies are interdependent; internal institutions and governance models increasingly influence external perceptions and act as soft power channels.

Tourism influences soft power through both hosting functions and relational dynamics. Firstly, destination countries must craft appealing, credible national images to overcome negative stereotypes and attract visitors in the global tourism market. Secondly, tourism policies convey cultural narratives and political values, shaping how the nation is perceived abroad (Yang, 2019; cited in Özkan & Boylu, 2021).

Research has identified four principal linkages between tourism and soft power (Morgan et al., 2011; Ooi, 2014; Pernecky, 2010; World Tourism Organization, 2020; Ooi, 2015):

1. Cultural understanding and empathy – Visitors develop deeper emotional and cognitive connections with destinations, fostering mutual respect.
2. Destination branding – Authorities construct and communicate positive national imagery to counter negative perceptions and promote attractiveness.
3. Global events and mega-projects – Platforms such as the Olympic Games and World Expos serve as showcases of national capability and leadership, strengthening geopolitical standing.
4. Tourist behaviour abroad – Tourists themselves become carriers of soft power; their conduct and consumption patterns influence perceptions of the country they represent.

As scholars and policymakers deepen their understanding of how global perceptions and destination marketing intersect with international geopolitics and trade, tourism's role as a vehicle for soft power projection will continue to grow. From this perspective, the tourist becomes both a subject and an object of geopolitics, embodying the reciprocal relationship between travel, image, and international influence. (See Fig. 1.)



Figure 1. Four Key Linkages Between Tourism and Soft Power



1. Domestic Initiatives and Approaches in the UAE

1.1. Macro Programs and Strategies

Over the past decades, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) government has implemented a series of strategic programs aimed at enhancing the quality and sustainability of tourism, preserving the environment, and promoting national cultural heritage. A comprehensive and long-term strategy has consistently served as the foundation for the country's economic transformation from a resource-based economy toward a diversified, innovation-driven model.

In the early years following its establishment in the 1970s, Dubai set forth three major strategic plans designed to transition from a non-hydrocarbon economy to a globally integrated trading and tourism center. This transformation was not accidental but built upon meticulous strategic planning that positioned Dubai as a pivotal maritime, air, and land transit hub for global business and tourism (Benchabane, 2015, p. 8). A landmark initiative emerged in 2007, when the government introduced the Abu Dhabi Plan 2030, a blueprint for sustainable urban and tourism development. The Plan prioritized the creation of environmentally responsible infrastructure and tourism projects that respected cultural identity and ecological balance. It focused on conserving natural resources, enforcing energy-use standards, and managing waste within hospitality operations. Cultural districts such as Saadiyat Island and Lulu Island were developed under this framework to merge art, heritage, and sustainability (Abu Dhabi Urban Planning Council, 2007).

In 2010, the UAE expanded its sustainability vision through "Vision 2021", a national development framework aimed at improving quality of life and positioning the country among the best places to live globally. The plan underscored environmental sustainability, promoting renewable energy—particularly solar power—within tourism projects and infrastructure (Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, 2010).

Subsequent initiatives deepened the nation's commitment to tourism transformation. In 2013, the "Dubai Tourism Strategy 2020" was launched to attract 20 million visitors by 2020. The program highlighted sustainable hospitality development through green technologies, renewable energy adoption, and eco-cultural conservation. It supported emblematic projects such as the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve and Nature-Friendly Urban Parks, advancing Dubai's reputation as a global leader in sustainable tourism (Zaara, 2021).

A turning point occurred in 2015 with the unveiling of "The UAE Green Agenda 2030", a holistic framework introduced by the Ministry of Climate Change and Environment (MOCCAE, 2016). This agenda aimed to transition the national economy toward environmental resilience, emphasizing carbon emission reduction, natural resource preservation, and green innovation alongside tourism development.

In 2016, the "Abu Dhabi Tourism Strategy 2030" articulated long-term objectives for cultural expansion, environmental protection, and socioeconomic advancement. The plan projected a substantial increase in tourism's contribution to GDP—up to USD 24 billion—and anticipated the creation of 178,000 new jobs within the tourism ecosystem by 2030, reinforcing Abu Dhabi's global status as a premier destination (EW, 2024).

Complementing these developments, the UAE launched the "Net Zero by 2050" initiative in 2017—updated in 2023—anchoring all sectors, including tourism, to decarbonization goals. Notably, in 2019, the government released the Hotel Mission Analysis Reports, enabling hospitality operators to benchmark carbon performance against industry competitors, thus institutionalizing sustainability metrics within the sector (Lootah, 2024, p. 8).

Further, in November 2022, the UAE Tourism Strategy 2031 was introduced to chart national tourism growth over the coming decade. This strategy integrates environmental, economic, and cultural objectives, aiming to sustain the UAE's competitiveness through innovation in green tourism practices.



National projects have also reinforced the sustainability agenda. The “Natural Wonders of the UAE” project, launched in 2018 by MOCCA, was a three-phase initiative promoting eco-tourism and the protection of the country’s natural reserves. The first phase raised public awareness of 43 protected areas, representing approximately 14 percent of the UAE’s territory. It also featured digital engagement tools, including an Eco-Tourism microsite, the Eco-Tourism UAE app, and an interactive e-book designed to encourage sustainable travel choices (The National Eco-tourism Project, 2020).

Similarly, Dubai Sustainable Tourism (DST)—established in 2016 under the Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing (DTCM)—serves as one of the country’s flagship programs to align tourism with clean energy and sustainable development goals. A hallmark initiative within DST is the “Sustainability Requirements” program, launched on 1 January 2019, which set forth environmental performance standards for the hospitality industry. These standards are embedded in the DTCM classification framework and have led to measurable improvements across the sector: energy and water consumption reduced by over 20%, waste and sewage disposal costs decreased by 15%, and overall service quality enhanced. Additional greenhouse gas mitigation campaigns and systematic monitoring mechanisms were introduced to strengthen compliance and reporting processes (Dubai Sustainable Tourism, 2019).

Collectively, these initiatives demonstrate the UAE’s integrated approach to sustainable tourism—combining economic diversification, environmental responsibility, and international branding. The country’s progressive alignment of hospitality regulation, ecological policy, and national image-building exemplifies how sustainable tourism can operate not only as a growth engine but also as a strategic pillar of soft power and global influence.

1.2. Pioneering Sustainable Initiatives

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has emerged as a regional leader in pioneering sustainable tourism and environmental conservation. Over the past two decades, the nation has initiated several landmark projects that integrate ecological protection, renewable energy, and technological innovation, exemplifying how sustainability can function as both an environmental imperative and an instrument of national soft power.

A major milestone came in 2002 with the establishment of the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve (DDCR), the UAE’s first large-scale environmental protection project. Covering approximately 5% of Dubai’s total land area, the reserve safeguards biodiversity, native wildlife, and fragile desert habitats while serving as a prominent eco-tourism attraction. The DDCR integrates ecological preservation with tourism revenues, representing one of the earliest successful examples of combining conservation and economic development in the region (DDCR, 2024).

In 2006, Yas Island was initiated as part of Abu Dhabi’s sustainable tourism vision. Designed according to environmental sustainability principles, the island incorporates renewable energy systems and “smart” technologies to reduce energy consumption and carbon emissions. Attractions such as Yas Waterworld and Yas Marina embody the nexus between sustainable design and economic growth, consolidating Abu Dhabi’s reputation for blending leisure tourism with sustainability (YasIsland, 2024).

Perhaps the UAE’s most globally recognized sustainability landmark is Masdar City, launched in 2008 in Abu Dhabi as the world’s first planned zero-carbon city. Conceived as a model for urban sustainability, the project integrates renewable energy, advanced water and waste management, and smart infrastructure. Over time, Masdar City has evolved into an international research hub for renewable energy and environmental technologies, positioning Abu Dhabi as a center for innovation-driven eco-tourism (MasdarCity, 2024).

The UAE continues to enhance its environmental data infrastructure to support carbon-neutral goals. In July 2023, the Ministry of Economy and Tourism relaunched the Carbon Calculator, an online tool for tracking real-time carbon emissions within the hospitality sector. This initiative enables hotels to monitor



their energy performance and align with the country's carbon neutrality roadmap (Benny, 2023). Complementing this, the "Dubai Can" campaign—launched in February 2022—promotes the use of refillable water bottles and provides over 50 public refill stations in parks, beaches, and tourist hotspots. Since its inception, the campaign has eliminated the equivalent of more than 10 million single-use plastic bottles, setting a benchmark for public environmental engagement (Haqqani, 2023).

Another important initiative is the Dubai Sustainable Tourism Stamp Competition, launched in 2023. Seventy hotels received gold, silver, or bronze certification for meeting 19 sustainability criteria established by the Dubai Department of Economy and Tourism, evaluating performance areas such as waste management, energy efficiency, water conservation, community engagement, and staff training. These certified hotels significantly contribute to the UAE's Net Zero 2050 vision and the Dubai Economic Agenda (D33), embodying the private sector's commitment to environmental and social responsibility (MENA, 2024).

Renewable energy development represents another cornerstone of the UAE's sustainability efforts. The flagship Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Park—the largest single-site solar project in the world—is projected to generate 5 gigawatts of electricity by 2030, supporting Dubai's plan to power the entire city with clean energy by 2050 (MBRSIC, 2024). Citizens also play an increasing role in this transformation, with many homeowners adopting rooftop solar panels to reduce both emissions and energy costs.

Transportation innovation has likewise advanced environmental reform. Dubai's Autonomous Transportation Strategy—announced by the Emirates News Agency (WAM, 2016)—seeks to automate 25% of all transport by 2030, reducing costs by 44%, cutting pollution by 12%, and generating an estimated AED 18 billion in annual economic return. This shift toward electric and autonomous mobility also supports national goals for emission reduction and urban efficiency.

Waste management has been another major domain of progress. The UAE Cabinet adopted a national decree on integrated waste management in 2018, standardizing procedures for environmentally responsible collection and disposal. Dubai Municipality subsequently constructed the Middle East's largest waste-to-energy plant, a AED 2 billion facility in the Warsan district, aimed at converting municipal solid waste into clean electricity. The Integrated Waste Management Strategy 2021–2041 further emphasizes innovation in recycling, energy recovery, and sustainable waste processing, paving the way for long-term circular economy solutions aligned with the government's environmental vision (UAE Government, 2024).

Taken together, these pioneering initiatives highlight the UAE's comprehensive approach to sustainable development and tourism management—combining state-led innovation, private-sector participation, and community engagement. The UAE's evolution from isolated pilot projects to system-wide sustainability frameworks demonstrates how a nation can strategically align ecological stewardship, technological leadership, and tourism branding to enhance both its environmental performance and global soft power.

2. UAE International Actions and Approaches

2.1. International Branding

The concept of the nation brand was introduced by Simon Anholt (1996), from which derivatives such as country, city, or destination brands subsequently evolved. Scholars including Ryan and Gu (2008) define destination branding as a strategic marketing process that builds the intangible value and reputation of a destination through the promotion of its multiple attributes—culture, sports, tourism, business, and institutions. The same logic applied to products and services also governs destinations: branding constructs a competitive identity that attracts consumers, investors, and tourists. Conversely, country branding operates at a broader level, merging marketing with public diplomacy to advertise a nation's goods and services, promote tourism, expand trade, and attract foreign investment and talent (Kilduff & Tabales, 2017).



Within this framework, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has profoundly invested in international image-building as a key driver of its soft power. Domestic sustainability projects and tourism strategies converge toward creating an internationally recognizable national brand grounded in innovation, cultural sophistication, and environmental responsibility. This strategic effort has yielded measurable global reputation gains—the UAE ranked 10th globally in the 2024 World Soft Power Index, improving notably from 17th in 2021 and 18th in 2020 (Brand Finance, 2024).

On the global stage, the UAE actively positions itself as a leader in sustainable tourism. In 2015, it pledged to derive 24% of national energy from clean sources by 2021, up from merely 0.2% in 2014 (Darby, 2015). Building upon these commitments, in 2022, the Minister of Energy announced the target to raise the share of clean energy to 50% by 2050 (Reuters, 2022).

Aviation accounts for roughly 2% of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions (2022), making decarbonization of air travel a critical sustainability priority. Emirates Airlines responded by establishing a USD \$200 million Sustainable Aviation Fund, the largest single investment ever made by any airline in research and development for sustainable fuels and energy technologies (Utravel, 2024; Al Sairafi, 2023).

Parallel efforts are seen in the field of clean industrial technology. The UAE Green Hydrogen Initiative, a partnership between Masdar Abu Dhabi and OMV Austria, exemplifies transnational cooperation to generate green hydrogen for industrial decarbonization, including tourism-related applications. This collaboration underscores the UAE's vision of leading global transitions to low-emission energy systems.

The hospitality sector mirrors these technological advances. In the first seven months of 2023, the UAE hosted approximately 16 million guests across 1,224 hotels, many of which have adopted green innovations—vertical farming systems, AI-based food waste tracking, and low-energy architecture—to set new standards for sustainability in tourism (Ozan, 2023). Collectively, these efforts reinforce the UAE's international positioning as an eco-tourism hub, simultaneously advancing sustainability goals and enhancing visitor experience.

Environmental protection in the desert ecosystem further supports this global brand. Notably, the UAE allocates 14% of its total territory to protected natural areas—significantly above the global average of 5% across 130 countries. Among these, the Marmoom Reserve on the outskirts of Dubai stands out as a flagship sustainable tourism destination (The First Group, 2024).

Internationally, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has substantially expanded its environmental engagement beyond national boundaries. It has emerged as a pivotal actor in global carbon-credit mechanisms, committing over USD 450 million in financing to the Africa Carbon Markets Initiative (ACMI) announced at COP27. Through its flagship clean-energy enterprise, Masdar, UAE-backed projects operate in more than 40 countries, collectively generating around 20 GW of electricity capacity.

Overall, the UAE has pledged over USD 30 billion toward international renewable-energy ventures, with ambitions to achieve 100 GW of installed generation capacity and to produce one million tonnes of green hydrogen annually by 2030 (Civillini, 2023). This outward-looking investment strategy underscores the country's intent to shape the global energy transition while reinforcing its identity as a leader in sustainable innovation and diplomatic environmental stewardship. Collectively, these activities demonstrate a coherent branding strategy in which sustainability functions as both environmental diplomacy and national soft power. Through global energy leadership, carbon finance, and hospitality innovation, the UAE has constructed an international identity that integrates technological progress, ecological stewardship, and global influence.

2.2. Attracting Foreign Investment

Anchored in innovation and science-driven development, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) pursues a progressive transformation toward a green, low-carbon economy, generating sustained demand for clean technologies and sustainable tourism. Central to this trajectory is economic diversification, designed to



mitigate exposure to oil price volatility while expanding value chains across renewable energy, environmental technology, and green tourism. These strategic transitions foster new employment opportunities, strengthen macroeconomic resilience, and elevate national competitiveness within the global sustainability system.

Situated along fragile coastal ecosystems, the UAE confronts substantial climate change risks, including sea-level rise and increasingly extreme temperature regimes. Consequently, foreign investment in sustainability sectors is conceived not merely as financial inflow but as a strategic adaptive mechanism—a pathway to reduce climate vulnerabilities and enhance resource management, particularly under conditions of water scarcity.

The UAE also consolidates its soft power through sustainability diplomacy, aligning its internal transitions with leading international governance frameworks such as the Paris Agreement. In 2021, the government unveiled the landmark Net Zero by 2050 strategy, pledging USD 163 billion in renewable-energy development and establishing a USD 30 billion climate finance fund (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Such commitments firmly position the UAE at the forefront of global decarbonization and green-finance innovation (Benning, 2024).

Empirical evidence underscores the country's robust performance in attracting tourism-related foreign direct investment (FDI). According to the Foreign Investment Report (2022), the UAE hosted 87 new tourism FDI projects between 2017 and 2021, ranking among the world's top ten destinations for tourism FDI and first among OIC member states (FDI Intelligence, 2022). This momentum reflects the nation's competitive regulatory frameworks, advanced infrastructure, and long-term orientation toward sustainable tourism markets.

Building upon this foundation, the National Tourism Strategy 2031 aims to elevate tourism's contribution to GDP to USD 122 billion by 2031, with an annual increase of approximately USD 7.3 billion. The plan also seeks to attract USD 27 billion in additional tourism-sector investments during the same period (Berger, 2023). Complementary data from the World Investment Report 2024 (UNCTAD) reveal a 35 percent rise in FDI inflows to the UAE, reaching USD 30.5 billion in 2023. Notably, the UAE ranked second globally—behind only the United States—in announced green FDI projects, with 1,323 initiatives, representing a 33 percent expansion over the previous year (Zamya, 2024).

Collectively, these outcomes signify a systemically integrated model in which foreign investment, sustainability governance, and national branding function synergistically. By advancing technological innovation, renewable-energy infrastructure, and eco-tourism assets, the UAE has positioned itself as a regional nexus of climate finance and an exemplary case of low-carbon transition in the Middle East.

3. The Four Pillars of UAE's Green Soft Power

3.1. Cultural Understanding and Empathy

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has cultivated a holistic approach to sustainable tourism that interlaces cultural understanding and empathy, thereby reinforcing its position as a global soft power actor. Sustainability in the UAE is not merely a technical or economic project but a socio-cultural strategy designed to project a forward-looking yet heritage-conscious national identity. This multidimensional approach operates through socio-economic planning, stakeholder engagement, and culturally informed marketing practices—all of which converge to frame the UAE as a bridge between tradition and modernity on the global stage.

Investment in sustainable development and green technologies underscores this ambition, signaling the country's commitment to environmental consciousness as an instrument of international influence. Krzymowski (2020) notes that the UAE's leadership in green economy initiatives serves a dual purpose: addressing ecological challenges while projecting an image of progressiveness and benevolence to the



world. In pursuing the green transition, the UAE actively enhances its soft power capital by exemplifying environmental leadership and sharing best practices with other nations, thus positioning sustainability as a diplomatic and cultural language shared across borders.

Through an integrated framework, the UAE's cultural soft power rests on an ethos of empathy and environmental stewardship, transforming visitors from passive consumers into active ambassadors of Emirati values. Several initiatives illustrate how this paradigm unfolds in practice:

a) *Preservation of Cultural Heritage*

The UAE's commitment to cultural preservation operates as a cornerstone of its sustainable tourism identity. Restoration projects in Sharjah's historic quarters, as well as initiatives promoting *traditional arts and crafts*, sustain the authenticity of Emirati heritage in the face of globalization. Companies such as Platinum Heritage exemplify this philosophy by offering immersive tourism experiences—*Bedouin-style desert camps, authentic Emirati cuisine, and traditional performances* like falconry and poetry—that deliberately replace imported or exoticized representations such as belly dancing. These authentic encounters educate visitors about Emirati traditions while safeguarding heritage from commodification and cultural dilution (Platinum Heritage, 2025).

b) *Community Engagement and Local Employment*

Sustainable tourism in the UAE is designed not only to attract visitors but also to empower local communities and preserve socio-cultural integrity. Stanojevic (2020) emphasizes that such tourism fosters tangible improvements in residents' quality of life. Comparative research reveals notable contrasts in how different demographic groups perceive tourism's impact: Emirati nationals express heightened concern over cultural and environmental effects, whereas expatriates—constituting a significant share of the workforce—highlight economic gains (Papastathopoulos et al., 2019; Mannaa, 2020). These differences underscore the need for context-sensitive tourism strategies that reconcile cultural respect with economic inclusion (Reisinger et al., 2018; Hammad et al., 2018).

Programs like Platinum Heritage's cultural ambassador initiative hire Emiratis to interact directly with tourists, serving as storytellers and artisans who transmit living traditions. Educational partnerships—such as student excursions to conservation reserves—and collaborations with local enterprises ensure that tourism revenues circulate within host communities, thereby cultivating empathy among residents and visitors alike (Blue Ocean Academy, 2025; Awashreh & Ghunaimi, 2024).

c) *Eco-Cultural Immersion*

Projects such as the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve (DDCR, 2024) offer experiential journeys weaving Bedouin ecological ethos with modern conservation practices. By participating in guided desert safaris that emphasize traditional harmony with nature, visitors gain a nuanced appreciation for indigenous sustainability ethics, dismantling stereotypes and deepening mutual respect between cultures.

d) *Academic and Cultural Exchanges*

Masdar City (MasdarCity, 2024) epitomizes the convergence of technological innovation and cultural diplomacy. The city regularly hosts international scholars and students pursuing sustainability research, generating transnational dialogue on clean technology and circular economy models. Collaborations with institutions such as MIT and Siemens underscore the UAE's positioning as a *knowledge-sharing hub*, exporting intellectual capital as part of its green soft power strategy.

e) *Community-Centric Tourism*

Nationwide initiatives like the Natural Wonders of the UAE Project (2020) extend ecotourism into all seven emirates through localized storytelling. A prominent example, Hatta Mountain Reserve, integrates environmental education with narratives of *Emirati resilience and adaptation*, affirming the symbiosis



between natural heritage and cultural identity. Such experiences facilitate emotional and cognitive empathy—anchoring tourists’ understanding of sustainability within the lived realities of local people.

f) Behavioral Campaigns and Shared Responsibility

Public campaigns such as “Dubai Can” (Haqqani, 2023) mobilize tourists and residents alike under the banner of collective environmental responsibility. The initiative—providing over fifty refill stations at iconic locations including Burj Khalifa, beaches, and public parks—has already prevented the consumption of *more than ten million single-use plastic bottles*. Through participatory engagement, visitors internalize sustainability not merely as policy but as a shared cultural value, transforming environmental behavior into a form of civic empathy and identity-building.

Collectively, these initiatives articulate how cultural understanding and empathy operate as foundational mechanisms of the UAE’s green soft power. By aligning environmental innovation with cultural authenticity, the Emirates construct a distinctive international narrative—one where heritage is not static but dynamically reinterpreted through sustainability. The country’s model offers a powerful lesson for the global tourism sector: in the twenty-first century, nations achieve influence not only through wealth or technology, but through *the capacity to inspire empathy, preserve identity, and promote coexistence between people and planet*.

Characteristic	Preservation of Cultural Heritage	Community Engagement and Local Employment	Eco-Cultural Immersion	Academic and Cultural Exchanges	Community-Centric Tourism	Behavioral Campaigns
Description	Protecting cultural identity through restoration projects.	Involving local communities to enhance living conditions.	Immersive experiences with Bedouin heritage.	Fostering global dialogue on green technologies.	Promoting eco-tourism with local storytelling.	Reducing plastic waste through collective action.
Example	Restoring historic buildings in Sharjah.	Employing marginalized groups as cultural ambassadors.	Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve experiences.	Masdar City hosting international researchers.	Guided tours in Hatta Mountain Reserve.	Dubai Can campaign reducing plastic waste.
Impact	Fostering respect for the region’s heritage.	Enhancing social cohesion between residents and visitors.	Cultivating respect for environmental harmony.	Highlighting the UAE’s role as a leader.	Enhancing visitors’ emotional connection to the land.	Internalizing sustainability as a shared cultural value.

Figure 2. Cultural Understanding & Empathy

3.2. Destination Branding

The relationship between the United Arab Emirates (UAE)’s green soft power and destination branding is inherently multidimensional, aligning sustainability initiatives with global perception management and strategic marketing. The UAE employs environmentally oriented campaigns not merely as domestic conservation tools but as vital communicative instruments that project a progressive, eco-conscious national identity on the world stage. A prime example is the “Dubai Can” campaign, which successfully eliminated more than ten million plastic bottles from circulation. Beyond its tangible environmental benefits, this campaign symbolizes Dubai’s commitment to sustainability and resonates with international audiences seeking destinations aligned with ethical and ecological values (Yaqub et al., 2023). Such initiatives directly enhance the UAE’s brand equity, positioning it as a forward-looking tourism leader and echoing global consumer trends favoring destinations that demonstrate sustainable responsibility (Heidbreder et al., 2020). At the institutional level, the Dubai Sustainable Tourism (DST) framework embodies the structured integration of environmental standards across the hospitality industry. The DST’s mandatory sustainability requirements for hotels signify an operational paradigm shift—promoting energy



efficiency, waste reduction, and water conservation while simultaneously enriching the symbolic value of UAE accommodations as “responsible” travel experiences (Nadkarni & Haider, 2022). These practices appeal to an emerging demographic of conscious travelers, reinforcing the notion that sustainability itself can serve as a competitive brand asset (Heidbreder et al., 2020).

Strategically, the UAE’s national vision extends beyond tourism management to encompass a broader rebranding of the nation’s identity from oil dependency to green innovation. Initiatives like the UAE Green Agenda 2030, alongside international platforms such as COP28, facilitate the projection of the UAE’s sustainability narrative to global audiences (Prawira et al., 2023). This transformation is integral to the evolution of the country’s soft power: environmental stewardship now functions as a core dimension of national image, influencing both tourism inflows and foreign investment patterns. Indeed, the Soft Power Index (2024) places significant weight on the UAE’s commitment to sustainability as a determinant of its international standing (Yaqub et al., 2023). By integrating ecological performance into branding frameworks, the UAE effectively transcends traditional marketing toward a form of green diplomacy—cultivating reputational capital that attracts not only visitors but also investors and collaborators interested in environmentally responsible growth (Salman, 2025).

Conceptual models in soft power and destination branding emphasize how sustainability can reshape public perceptions and reinforce international credibility. Martin et al. (2023) argue that environmental leadership enhances diplomatic trust and intercultural admiration, while Salman (2025) highlights its role in diversifying tourism markets and strengthening global networks. The UAE’s initiatives thus exemplify the translation of green governance into persuasive branding, where policy outcomes and aesthetic narratives converge to generate emotional and strategic appeal across cultures. Collectively, these interactions illustrate that green soft power and destination branding are mutually reinforcing forces. The UAE’s environmental campaigns—paired with institutional sustainability standards and comprehensive national strategies—demonstrate how ecological responsibility can function simultaneously as a moral, economic, and communicative resource. By embedding sustainability into its core brand identity, the UAE secures both economic competitiveness and cultural legitimacy within the global tourism system. In essence, the UAE’s destination branding model transforms sustainability from a policy obligation into a strategic image asset, ensuring relevance in a global arena increasingly defined by environmental consciousness. Through flagship programs such as Dubai Can, the Dubai Sustainable Tourism Initiative, and the UAE Green Agenda 2030, the nation effectively leverages its green soft power to strengthen its reputation as a sustainable innovation hub and to assert a distinct cultural voice in international tourism diplomacy. (Fig. 3)

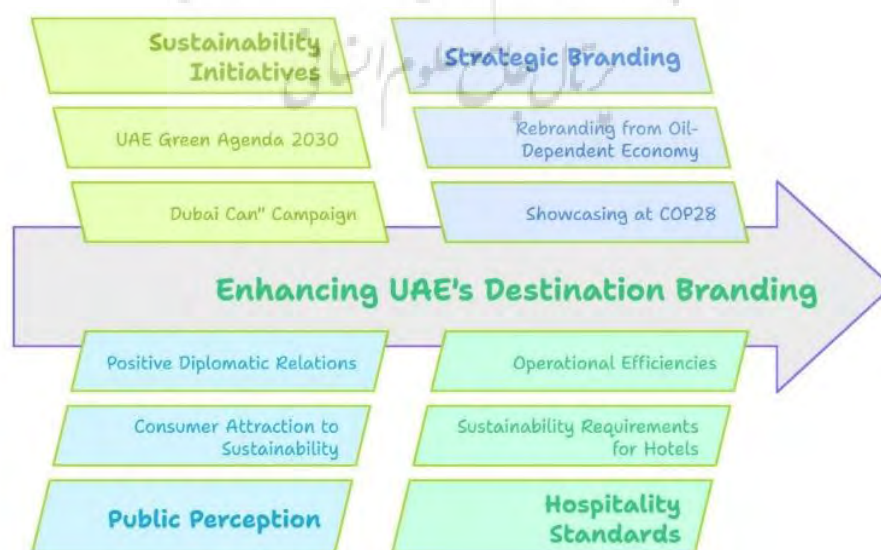


Figure 3. Enhancing UAE's Destination Branding through Sustainability



3.3 Mega-Events as Soft Power Tools

The nexus between the United Arab Emirates (UAE)'s green soft power and its organization of mega-events reflects a deliberate strategy to consolidate environmental diplomacy and global reputation through highly visible international platforms. The nation's experience with Dubai Expo 2020 and COP28 demonstrates how sustainability can be mobilized as both a normative and economic instrument of international influence. Through Dubai Expo 2020, the UAE presented a model of environmental modernity shaped by technological innovation and ecological awareness. The Sustainability Pavilion, visited by more than 25 million guests, served as an architectural and symbolic centerpiece illustrating the country's commitment to renewable energy, efficiency, and circular design principles. Exhibitions highlighting projects such as the Mohammed bin Rashid Solar Park underscored the nation's pledge to produce 5 GW of solar power by 2030, simultaneously demonstrating technical capacity and signaling a broader normative commitment to global carbon-neutral futures (El-Dabt, 2025). In positioning itself as a clean-technology leader, the UAE deployed the Expo as a communicative medium—an arena where technological excellence and ecological stewardship coalesced into national branding and soft power projection.

Hosting COP28 further deepened the UAE's narrative of sustainability-oriented leadership. Pledges toward carbon neutrality, green investment acceleration, and fossil-fuel diversification transformed the conference from a diplomatic event into a performance of national strategy. These commitments expanded the country's external credibility as a progressive innovator within global climate governance (Duignan et al., 2019; Ki et al., 2020). COP28's success emphasized how the UAE uses mega-events not merely to host dialogue but to shape it—leveraging its infrastructural capability and organizational prestige to frame sustainability as a central pillar of its foreign policy identity. The economic outcomes following COP28 substantiate the tangible dimension of soft power. The UAE recorded USD \$30.5 billion in green foreign direct investment (FDI) during 2023, marking a significant increase that reflects amplified international confidence in its environmental agenda (Ilevbare & McPherson, 2022). This surge in sustainable investment evidences the fusion of reputation and economic viability: the stronger the UAE's environmental credibility, the greater its attractiveness as a destination for investors seeking alignment with global ESG—and thus the more consolidated its soft power (Knott et al., 2024).

The relationship between mega-events and soft power extends far beyond logistical success or cultural display. As theorized by Grix et al. (2021) and Al-Muhannadi et al. (2024), such events constitute arenas for strategic narration—where states actively produce desired perceptions, foster long-term diplomatic networks, and stimulate economic and technological collaborations. By integrating green messaging within these high-visibility gatherings, the UAE effectively articulates its developmental ambitions, establishes transnational partnerships, and enhances legitimacy across both political and commercial spheres. In sum, the interplay between the UAE's green soft power and mega-event strategy is characterized by a coherent, intentional alignment between national branding, policy credibility, and economic diplomacy. Events like Dubai Expo 2020 and COP28 serve as catalysts for projecting environmental leadership, converting sustainability into reputational capital, and steering foreign investment toward clean technologies. Through these orchestrated engagements, the UAE not only elevates its international profile but also institutionalizes sustainability as a defining feature of its national identity—ensuring its emergence as a central actor in the global clean-technology and green diplomacy landscape. (Fig. 4)

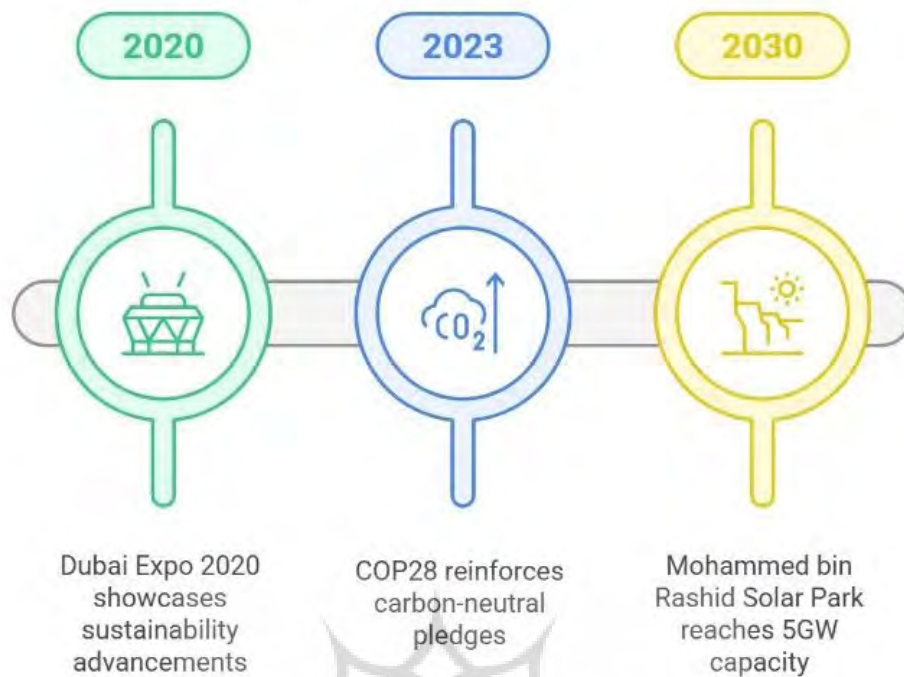


Figure 4. UAE's Journey to Green Leadership

3.4 Tourist Diplomacy

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) exemplifies an advanced model of green soft power whereby tourism becomes an instrument for cultivating diplomatic relationships and projecting global environmental leadership. Through sustainability-oriented initiatives, the UAE transforms its hospitality and tourism sectors into platforms of public diplomacy, disseminating ecological norms, reinforcing intercultural engagement, and strengthening geopolitical influence. This section delineates the behavioral, institutional, and transnational mechanisms through which the UAE operationalizes tourist diplomacy as a cornerstone of its soft-power strategy. Introduced in 2023, the Dubai Sustainable Tourism Stamp (DSTS) functions as an institutional certification framework assessing hospitality entities against 19 sustainability indicators, encompassing energy and water efficiency, waste management, community involvement, and social responsibility (MENA, 2024). As of 2024, over 70 hotels have earned the certification, collectively reducing energy and water consumption by 20 percent and waste-management expenditure by 15 percent (Lootah, 2024). The program directly supports the UAE Net-Zero 2050 agenda, embedding environmental performance into the branding matrix of Emirati tourism.

From a diplomatic standpoint, certified hotels operate as symbolic ambassadors of the UAE's sustainability ethos. They influence the behavior of more than 24 million annual visitors (Ministry of Economy UAE, 2024), thus contributing to transnational diffusion of eco-conscious travel norms consistent with the "Civilized Tourist" model (Hammad et al., 2018). The DSTS initiative demonstrates how behavioral regulation within the tourism sector produces normative spillovers, amplifying the UAE's image as an ethical ecological innovator. Relunched in 2023, the Carbon Calculator for Hospitality enables real-time tracking of greenhouse-gas emissions across an operational network of 1,224 hotels (Benny, 2023). Preliminary evidence reveals a 12 percent reduction in emissions within six months among participating establishments, contributing to the national goal of reducing hospitality-sector emissions by 40 percent by 2030 (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

The technological transparency embedded within this tool enhances the UAE's credibility in global climate governance—especially through its leadership in COP28 deliberations (Al-Muhannadi et al., 2024).



By institutionalizing performance measurement, the UAE establishes a framework where accountability and innovation jointly underpin its green soft-power narrative. The UAE's US \$450 million investment in the Africa Carbon Markets Initiative (Civillini, 2023) highlights a paradigm of environmental diplomacy extending well beyond domestic tourism. Through financing carbon-offset projects, the UAE reinforces its identity as a climate ally for Global South nations, counterbalancing critiques of its hydrocarbon heritage while expanding its sphere of geopolitical influence (Krzyszowski, 2020). Such transregional engagement demonstrates the transformation of sustainability investments into instruments of international trust-building and reciprocal legitimacy.

Projects such as "Natural Wonders of the UAE" (2020) merge cultural heritage with environmental learning. In destinations like the Hatta Mountain Reserve, visitors interact with local communities and experience traditional water-conservation practices rooted in Emirati rural knowledge systems (Awashreh & Ghunaimi, 2024). This dual emphasis on ecology and tradition situates Emirati tourism as a conduit for cross-cultural understanding, enhancing empathy and social sustainability within the larger soft-power spectrum. The UAE's approach epitomizes "green public diplomacy" (Salman, 2025)—a multidimensional process in which environmental initiatives perform three interdependent diplomatic functions (Fig. 5).

Together, these functions illustrate how tourist diplomacy integrates behavioral regulation, technological transparency, and climate investment into a coherent system of soft-power management. Through environmentally branded hospitality and climate partnerships, the UAE situates sustainability not only as a domestic policy imperative but also as a diplomatic language—facilitating recognition, trust, and influence across multiple geopolitical contexts. By embedding ecological ethics within its tourism governance and foreign-policy circuits, the UAE operationalizes tourism as diplomacy—transforming visitors, institutions, and investment flows into vectors of green soft power. The country's behavioral programs, carbon-market investments, and heritage-based eco-tourism experiences collectively reinforce a narrative of environmental leadership, serving both moral and strategic purposes. In this model, sustainability becomes diplomacy itself: a communicative resource through which the UAE extends international goodwill, attracts green capital, and consolidates its standing as a global innovator in sustainable development.

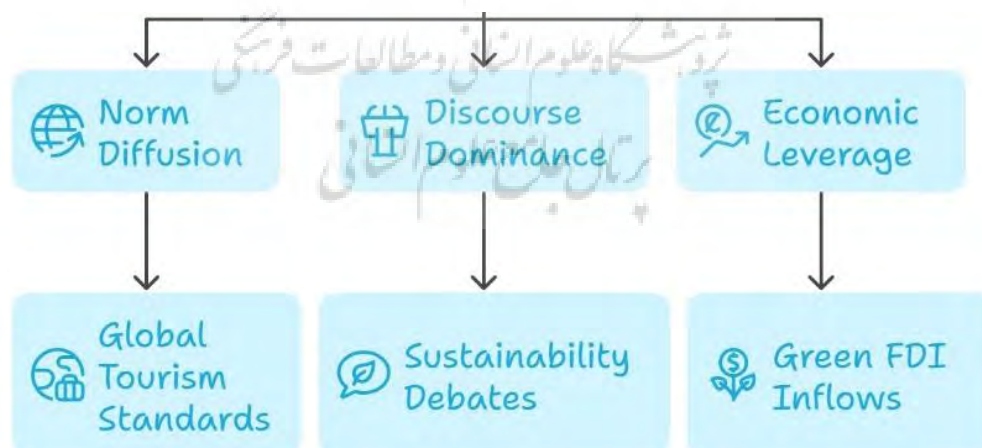


Figure 4. Green Initiatives as Diplomatic Tools: The UAE's Strategic Framework

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) demonstrates how *tourist diplomacy* can transcend conventional tourism metrics by embedding sustainability within the nation's broader soft-power apparatus. Through integrated mechanisms—ranging from certification systems and carbon-accountability instruments to strategic transnational investments—the UAE not only consolidates its global reputation but also redefines



the function of tourism as a conduit of diplomacy in the twenty-first century. As Al-Muhannadi et al. (2024) observe, “the UAE’s ability to convert eco-initiatives into geopolitical capital offers a replicable model for emerging economies.” This synthesis of environmental governance and diplomatic practice illustrates how the UAE transforms sustainability into an operative form of influence, positioning tourism as a vector for both ecological responsibility and geopolitical outreach.

Discussion and Conclusion

The intersection of sustainable tourism and soft power has emerged as a transformative paradigm for states seeking to deepen international influence while confronting environmental and socio-economic challenges. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) stands as a salient exemplar of this strategy—mobilizing sustainability as both a developmental framework and a diplomatic resource. By integrating ecological consciousness into its tourism governance, the UAE translates environmental stewardship into reputational capital, thus redefining how tourism can function as an instrument of global engagement in the twenty-first century. Domestically, the nation’s commitment is codified through comprehensive policy architectures such as the UAE Green Agenda 2030, Dubai Sustainable Tourism strategy, and the ambitious Net Zero by 2050 initiative. These frameworks embody a multidimensional vision of sustainability that merges environmental protection, economic resilience, and social inclusivity. The incorporation of green technologies—from solar-powered urban systems like Masdar City to eco-certified hospitality standards—has led to measurable reductions in resource consumption and generated new employment opportunities, thereby reinforcing the UAE’s identity as a nexus of innovation and sustainable prosperity. At the international level, the UAE’s sustainable tourism agenda operates as a deliberate soft-power mechanism. Through its stewardship of global forums—including Expo 2020 Dubai and COP28—the country has projected a compelling image of forward-looking environmental leadership. These mega-events serve as arenas for cross-cultural dialogue, environmental diplomacy, and foreign investment, advancing not only economic objectives but also normative influence. External partnerships such as the Africa Carbon Markets Initiative (ACMI) further extend this narrative, positioning the UAE as a strategic ally in climate cooperation and as a pioneer of green public diplomacy. Equally vital are initiatives that align cultural preservation with ecological sustainability. Projects like the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve and the Hatta Mountain Reserve intertwine heritage, local participation, and environmental education—transforming landscapes into living classrooms that foster empathy and mutual respect between visitors and host communities. These community-based programs reflect the UAE’s insistence that the benefits of tourism must be distributed equitably, ensuring that modernization does not eclipse social cohesion or indigenous value systems. Nevertheless, the UAE’s path forward demands vigilance. Rapid urbanization, resource intensity, and the ecological implications of luxury tourism remain genuine obstacles. Sustaining progress will require continuous innovation, integrated policy enforcement, and active civic engagement. Yet the UAE’s institutional adaptability and long-term vision suggest the potential for lasting leadership in green tourism diplomacy. In essence, the UAE demonstrates that sustainable tourism transcends its conventional functional domains to become a strategic instrument of soft power. By embedding sustainability within its national identity and external outreach, the country cultivates trust, admiration, and collaboration—hallmarks of twenty-first-century global influence. As Al-Muhannadi et al. (2024) observe, “the UAE’s ability to convert eco-initiatives into geopolitical capital offers a replicable model for emerging economies.” In an era defined by climate urgency and geopolitical fluidity, the UAE’s trajectory exemplifies how environmental responsibility and cultural diplomacy can converge to shape a more interconnected, credible, and sustainable global future.

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