

Marine Sports in South Korea

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand the current status and future prospects of the marine sports industry in South Korea. Marine sports industry is considered one of the most promising industries in the country. In South Korea, marine sports are increasingly emerging as a multifaceted sector with the potential to drive high-value industrial development, promote experiential tourism, enhance public leisure activities, and generate positive economic spillover effects at the local level. Furthermore, public perceptions of marine sports and patterns of participation have become increasingly diversified. Although the industry is growing, more systematic and integrated strategies are needed to ensure its sustainable development. Therefore, understanding the current state of the marine sports industry is essential for formulating a sustainable and long-term strategic framework for its future development. To ensure the effectiveness of such research, it is important to adopt a holistic and forward-looking approach. Accordingly, future studies should incorporate diverse perspectives to capture the complexity and potential of the marine sports sector.

Keywords: Marine sports, South Korea, benefits, current status, future prospects

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1. Introduction

With the advent of the five-day work week and rising income levels, marine sports participation in South Korea has become more diverse (Cha, 2007; Yu & Ha, 2007; Tak, Kim, & Yoo, 2024). Kim, & Yoo, 2024). Marine sports are defined as “systemized competitive activity that using active physical movement or relatively complex physical function through a motivated individual in ocean” (Kang, 1998, p. 263). In South Korea, which is In South Korea, which is surrounded by the sea on three sides, marine sports are establishing themselves as a sector that can influence various aspects such as high-quality industrial development, experiential tourism, public leisure activities, and the ripple effects on the local economy (Cha, 2007). People's perceptions of marine sports and their participation patterns have also diversified (Kim, Kim, Min, Jeon, & Yihan, 2021).

Nevertheless, the marine sports industry in South Korea remains less developed compared to land-based sports industries due to several factors, such as limited popularity, inconvenient accessibility, and economic barriers (Cha, 2007; Kang, 1997). Historically, marine activities mainly involved sightseeing or resting at nearby beaches. However, recent trends show increased participation in dynamic water activities such as scuba diving, water skiing, yachting, and windsurfing. This shift indicates growing demand among both domestic and international tourists for marine sports experiences in South Korea (Cho, Shin, & Son, 2004). The activation of marine sports requires a coordinated effort between the public and private sectors (Kim, 2001). The proper use of marine resources will ensure that future generations can enjoy a wide range of marine sports activities along South Korea's 12,000 km coastline and its 3,300 offshore islands (Kim, 2001). Given these considerations, there is a clear need for comprehensive research on marine sports in South Korea.

2. Components of Marine Sports

Marine sports consist of three essential elements: 1) Resources – living and non-living (e.g., water, marine ecosystems), 2) Development – facilities and infrastructure, and 3) People – local residents, tourists, and potential visitors. Among these, the “people” component is the most critical for industry activation. For instance, promoting coastal tourism without adequate facility development is ineffective and results in wasted investment—initial interest may be high, but it quickly declines once visitors find the area lacking. This is referred to as “putting the cart before the horse.” Conversely, building elaborate facilities without assessing demand may also lead to failure, commonly known as the “build it and they will come” fallacy. If tourists do not arrive as anticipated, marketing teams often face undue blame, and political and financial support may dwindle, negatively impacting local economies (Ji, 2003).

The population related to marine sports can be divided into two broad groups: visitors and non-visitors. Visitors include tourists (i.e., domestic and international) and local residents (i.e., frequent users but distinct from tourists). Non-visitors include potential participants (who might join if conditions improve) and disinterested individuals (those unlikely to ever participate). Non-visitors also play a significant role, as they may endorse the concept of marine sports for its contribution to Korean culture and social well-being, irrespective of their direct participation (Ji, 2003).

3. Benefits of Marine Sports

Marine sports encompass functional values such as leisure satisfaction and welfare benefits, serving as tools to enhance quality of life (Cheung & Lee, 2018; Kwon & Yang, 2015). These marine sports not only positively impact individual well-being but also contribute to the overall improvement of social welfare (Cheung & Lee, 2018; Kwon & Yang, 2015). Choi and Moon (2006) examined the relationship between participation in marine sports and three psychological variables: leisure flow, life satisfaction, and self-efficacy. Their study identified significant positive correlations between leisure flow experience and life satisfaction, between life satisfaction and physical self-efficacy, and between physical self-efficacy and general self-efficacy. These findings suggest that engaging in marine sports not only enhances physical health but also contributes to emotional well-being. Participation in marine sports involves more than physical activity; it fosters emotional refreshment and a sense of fulfillment through diverse recreational experiences.

In a similar context, Lee and Kim (2007) investigated the relationships among participation, motivation, and satisfaction among members of marine sports clubs. The findings of the study revealed that participants' motivations and levels of satisfaction varied depending on the specific type of marine sports in which they engaged. In other words, motivation for participation significantly influenced satisfaction levels. While the benefits of participating in marine sports activities are well recognized, these benefits cannot be fully realized without considering the role of motivation. Positive motivation is a key determinant of high satisfaction in marine sports experiences. From this perspective, the potential benefits of marine sports warrant further consideration.

Park (2007) highlighted that the marine sports industry is a high value-added sector with the potential to foster related industries. This industry contributes to national economic growth, with an estimated annual increase of 9–12% in its economic impact. Furthermore, the development of the marine sports industry can play a significant role in regional development by generating employment.

Beyond economic revitalization, marine sports also promote balanced regional development. In addition to its economic benefits, marine sports offer substantial educational advantages. For instance, Ji (2003) studied social environmental factors for marine-sports popularization in South Korea and found that marine sports activities can serve as effective educational programs for youth, fostering cooperation, a sense of adventure, and intellectual curiosity. Moreover, these activities nurture values such as sacrifice and service, offering rich emotional development opportunities.

From an environmental perspective, marine sports can raise awareness of humanity's relationship with nature, encouraging environmentally responsible behavior. Because marine sports are inherently tied to eco-friendly practices, it can serve as a catalyst for environmental conservation (Cho et al., 2004). Socially, marine sports activities can strengthen family bonds, as they provide enjoyable, accessible opportunities for parents and children to spend meaningful time together (Ji, 2003).

4. A Development Strategy for Marine Sports Industry

A marine sports complex is an effective way to attract both domestic and international tourists (Kim, 2008). The development of such a complex should not rely solely on imitating successful existing models but rather focus on gaining a competitive edge through the creation of distinctive, environmentally friendly facilities. These facilities should aim to protect the natural, social, and cultural environments of the region (Kim, 2008).

In addition, dynamic marine activities—such as snorkeling, diving, sailing, boating, fishing, and angling—should be developed alongside high-quality accommodations, all guided by a comprehensive market feasibility study. In order for marine sports to generate high added value, it is necessary to meet the needs of diverse consumers and enhance market competitiveness. Therefore, active research should be conducted on consumer preference surveys, product positioning, service quality improvement measures, and marketing mix strategy development, so that systematic and concrete marketing strategies can be implemented for various segmented markets (Yu & Ha, 2007). Support from local governments is also essential. Substantial assistance is required to establish the necessary infrastructure for a marine sports complex. High-quality facilities encourage greater participation in marine sports activities. In this context, constructing marine sports complexes represents a powerful strategy for revitalizing the marine sport industry in South Korea.

In addition, it is essential for the government to establish a “Korean Marine Leisure Supplies Approval

System” and promote Korean marine leisure sports brands to the international market (Ji, 2002). In this context, the city of Busan should take the lead by constructing a “Marine Sports Experience Center for Youth,” launching “Marine Sports Fundraising” initiatives, and developing a “Yacht Center” as the foundation of marine sports, known as the “Busan Marina.” Furthermore, the government should simplify the process for issuing “Ocean Occupation Permits” and provide both administrative and equipment support to non-profit marine sports organizations. Marinas can serve as valuable facilities for local residents, offering educational and economic benefits. Currently, marina construction is concentrated in the southern coastal areas, such as Busan, Yeosu, and Mokpo. Therefore, it is necessary to expand marina facilities to the eastern coastal cities (e.g., Gangneung, Donghae) and western coastal cities (e.g., Incheon, Seosan).

5. Discussion

Marine sports are one of the most promising industries in South Korea. Since motivation plays a critical role in determining satisfaction in marine sports participation, a variety of motivational factors—such as educational benefits for children and economic opportunities—must be developed and emphasized. In addition to theoretical approaches, practical strategies must be considered. These include thorough market research, collaboration among local governments, universities, and related institutions, as well as a deep understanding of local characteristics.

The direction of marine sports research should focus not on isolated development strategies, but on the integration of all relevant factors within the marine sport industry. In this regard, the development of diverse marine sports programs is necessary to reduce the costs associated with facilities and equipment. Such programs can help address current challenges, adapt to evolving trends in leisure and sport, and meet the growing demand for marine sports. Developing and deploying competent leaders in marine sports is essential—not only to maximize the utility of facilities but also to enhance the efficiency of program management. To address challenges in marine sports leadership, it is crucial to establish dedicated training institutions, improve working conditions, and enhance welfare systems for professionals in this field.

Furthermore, legislation related to marine sports in South Korea remains fragmented and lacks systematic integration. Existing laws are often disconnected from the administrative practices of relevant ministries and agencies, which can hinder the industry's development. To overcome these legal obstacles, it is necessary to enact comprehensive and cohesive legislation for the marine sports sector. Lastly, policymakers should aim for the balanced and sustainable development of marine sports by studying and applying lessons from successful international case studies.

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