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## 1. Introduction

Ecotourism is considered one of the modern strategies adopted by states to achieve sustainable development, as it combines the exploitation of natural and cultural resources with the necessity of preserving them to ensure their continuity for future generations. In Algeria, the concept of "tourism expansion zones" has emerged to align with this developmental trend, serving as a legal and regulatory tool aimed at exploiting natural and cultural tourism resources in a rational manner that preserves the environment.

These zones hold particular importance in Algerian legislation, as they are regulated spaces with unique natural characteristics that enable the attraction of environmentally friendly tourism investments, contributing to the development of the tourism sector without harming environmental components.

While tourism expansion zones provide significant opportunities for investing in Algeria's natural qualifications, the challenges facing these zones manifest in weak environmental oversight, haphazard resource consumption, and a lack of sufficient awareness of the importance of environmental preservation. This raises questions about the extent to which these zones can achieve their objectives in supporting ecotourism and the obstacles hindering their optimal exploitation in this context.

Hence, the problem statement arises: **To what extent have tourism expansion zones in Algeria contributed to the activation of ecotourism, and what are the challenges facing the realization of this objective on the ground?**

This issue will be addressed in two main sections:

The first section: The conceptual and legal framework of tourism expansion zones as a support for ecotourism.

The second section: Contributions of tourism expansion zones to the activation of ecotourism.

In the conclusion of the article, the main challenges facing these zones will be discussed, along with some necessary recommendations to enhance their role in achieving sustainable development.

## 2. The Conceptual and Legal Framework of Tourism Expansion Zones as a Support for Ecotourism

Ecotourism is one of the modern pillars in sustainable development policies, as it combines the enjoyment of nature discovery with the preservation of its resources for future generations. With the increasing global environmental challenges, it has become necessary to study the conceptual and legal frameworks that ensure the rational exploitation of natural potentials and support the balance between tourism development and environmental protection. In this context, this axis sheds light on the concept of ecotourism and its importance, then explains the legal foundations of tourism expansion zones as prepared spaces for embodying this tourism pattern.

### 2.1. The Concept of Ecotourism and Its Importance in Achieving Sustainable Development

The concept of ecotourism is relatively recent, with interest in it beginning in the 1970s, although prior indications called for this orientation, as noted by Hetzer in his 1965 article advocating the establishment of an authority to regulate and develop responsible tourism (Hetzer, 1965). Despite the novelty of the term, forms and practices of ecotourism existed in some traditional activities, such as safari trips that attracted tourists to Africa for decades or organized trips to natural reserves. These activities contributed to attracting new segments of tourists seeking novelty and enjoyment of nature, in addition to those interested in preserving wildlife and plant resources without harming natural components.

Tourism is closely linked to the environment, as the natural environment—with its scenic landscapes, biodiversity, and suitable climate—constitutes a fundamental factor in attracting tourists. Conversely, tourism acts as an influencing factor on the environment; it may contribute to its protection and development through sustainable tourism patterns that allocate resources for preserving ecosystems, or it may cause its deterioration due to haphazard tourism leading to pollution and resource depletion. Hence, the concept of ecotourism emerges as a middle ground aimed at enjoying natural resources while preserving them, ensuring a balance between tourism development and environmental protection.

#### 2.1.1. Definition of Ecotourism

Ecotourism is a type of tourism based on travel to natural areas of high environmental value for the purpose of enjoying the beauty of nature and learning about its ecosystems, while committing to preserving its resources, minimizing the negative impact of tourism activities, contributing to the development of local communities, and supporting environmental protection efforts.

It should be noted that ecotourism differs from nature tourism in that the latter is limited to visiting natural areas for recreation or leisure purposes only, without necessarily including objectives related to environmental awareness or participation in resource protection, whereas ecotourism integrates enjoyment of nature with achieving preservation and sustainable development goals.

#### 2.1.2. Components of Ecotourism

Ecotourism relies on a set of components that ensure its success and sustainability, foremost among them being natural components represented by biodiversity, pristine natural landscapes, and diverse ecosystems such as forests, beaches, deserts, and natural reserves, in addition to a suitable climate that allows for environmental activities year-

round. These components also include human components manifested in the availability of qualified and trained cadres to manage this type of tourism, with the involvement of local communities in providing services and organizing events to enhance economic benefits and preserve resources.

In addition, ecotourism requires environmentally friendly infrastructure and service components, such as suitable roads, guidance centers, sustainable transportation means, and accommodation facilities that adhere to environmental standards. It also demands legislative and administrative components that establish legal frameworks for protecting natural resources and ensuring proper organization of tourism activities. Cultural and awareness components are no less important, as they contribute to enhancing environmental awareness among visitors and local communities, linking tourism activities to the region's cultural and civilizational values, thereby achieving a balance between enjoying nature and preserving it.

### 2.1.3. Importance of Ecotourism

The importance of ecotourism manifests in several interconnected dimensions, not limited to the environmental domain but extending to economic, social, and cultural aspects, making it an integrated tool for achieving sustainable development. The most prominent of these dimensions can be summarized as follows:

- **Economic Importance**

Ecotourism is one of the promising sectors in supporting local and national economies, as it contributes to diversifying income sources, attracting investments, and creating direct and indirect employment opportunities in fields such as tourism guidance, hotel services, transportation, and traditional crafts. It also stimulates the development of infrastructure and services in a sustainable manner and encourages the marketing of local products, thereby increasing the income of host communities and reducing their reliance on polluting or resource-depleting activities (Faria Débora Cristina et al., 2022).

- **Social Importance**

Ecotourism plays a role in improving the living standards of local residents through providing training and employment opportunities, enhancing community participation in managing tourism resources, and reducing internal migration by creating jobs in rural and remote areas. It supports community cooperation through joint tourism projects and enhances cultural and social exchange between visitors and residents, enriching the human experience for both parties (Ziad Eid Al-Rawadiyah, 2013).

- **Cultural Importance**

Ecotourism contributes to preserving the cultural, architectural, and artistic heritage of host areas by integrating cultural heritage into tourism experiences, such as artistic performances, traditional cuisine, and handicrafts. It encourages the revival of customs and traditions that may fade over time and links tourism activities to the region's civilizational values. This integration between cultural and environmental dimensions provides visitors with a rich experience that transcends mere recreation to deep interaction with local identity (Mustafa Yusuf Kafi, 2013).

- **Environmental Importance**

Ecotourism is an effective tool for preserving biodiversity and ecosystems through encouraging environmentally friendly tourism activities that do not harm natural resources. It supports efforts to protect natural reserves, rehabilitate degraded ecosystems, and raise awareness among visitors and local residents about sustainability. Moreover, the financial revenues generated can be allocated to funding environmental projects, such as protecting endangered species and establishing safe ecological paths (Fouad Ben Ghadban, 2015).

Considering what ecotourism achieves in economic, social, cultural, and environmental gains, the need has emerged for planning and developmental strategies, the most prominent of which is the establishment of tourism expansion zones, as a practical framework for organizing the exploitation of natural resources and directing tourism activities toward sustainability.

## 2.2. Concept of Tourism Expansion Zones

To address the topic of tourism expansion zones accurately and methodically, it is first necessary to define these zones, then explain the procedures for their creation, as they form the basic reference for all actions within their boundaries (Dovgal, O., & Goncharenko, N. (2026).

### 2.2.1. Definition of Tourism Expansion Zones

According to Law No. 03-01 (2003), tourism expansion zones are defined as: "Any area or territorial extension characterized by natural, cultural, human, or creative qualities or specificities suitable for tourism, qualified for the establishment or development of tourism facilities, and can be exploited for one or more types of profitable tourism."

Accordingly, a tourism expansion zone is a defined area based on environmental and natural data that represent the essential material for attracting tourism, provided that its components are complemented through development and urbanization processes to reach its final form.

Law No. 03-03 (2003) emphasized the necessity of adhering to a set of principles to ensure the protection, development, and enhancement of these spaces, the most prominent being: rational and harmonious exploitation of spaces, consolidation of sustainable development, inclusion of zones and their annexes within the national plan for territorial development and sustainable development, and creation of urbanization compatible with their distinctive nature and designated tourism activities.

### 2.2.2. Procedures for Creating Tourism Expansion Zones

Law No. 03-03 (2003) did not precisely specify the procedures for preparing tourism expansion zones or the authorized entity, but Executive Decree No. 98-70 (1998) clarified that the National Agency for Tourism Development is responsible for developing, promoting, and framing tourism activities within the framework of the national policy for tourism development and tourism development, including all matters related to tourism expansion zones and their protection.

The agency prepares the necessary studies to classify any area as a tourism expansion zone based on its environmental and natural capacities, then refers the study to the Minister in charge of urban development, environment, and tourism, who prepares the final delimitation report, after which the classification decision is issued in the form of an executive decree. The number of tourism expansion zones in Algeria has reached approximately 205 zones, the latest under Executive Decree No. 16-308 (2016).

Upon issuance of classification decisions, these zones become subject to the provisions of Law No. 03-03 (2003), and the regulations governing land occupation and exploitation are applied to them, ensuring compliance with development and urbanization rules, and preserving natural and cultural resources from pollution and degradation. Consequently, tourism expansion zones may include:

- **Sites with natural landscapes:** These are areas within a land space characterized by a set of physical attributes consisting of various scenic natural terrains and diverse living elements of plants and animals, as well as abstract elements such as lighting and weather conditions, provided that these areas are inherently natural, untouched by human intervention in their natural composition by addition or subtraction; they are virgin natural lands.
- **Historical and heritage sites:** These are places represented by ancient archaeological sites expressing forms of life of past peoples, including sculptures, buildings, and properties left by prehistoric or contemporary civilizations, which may be natural without intervention for protection or restoration, or subject to preventive measures, generally forming an aesthetic, visual, tourism, and environmental asset.
- **Natural reserves:** The natural reserves system was established under Law No. 11-02 (2011) concerning natural reserves within the framework of sustainable development, which established the legal system aimed at protecting fragile areas containing threatened biodiversity, whether adjacent to coastal areas or remote from them.

### 2.3. Tourism Development Plans as the Basis for Tourism Expansion Zones

The tourism development plan is the legal tool through which general and specific rules related to the use of tourism expansion zones are embodied. This plan aims to determine construction and building specifications, in addition to easements specific to the use and protection of properties and built real estate, according to the distinctive tourism character of each site.

The plan works to establish clear obligations for the rational exploitation of tourism expansion zones, relying on their environmental and natural specificities that vary from one zone to another, through identifying areas requiring protection, planned activities, facilities, and infrastructure to be implemented, in addition to determining subdivisions designated for this purpose.

### 2.3.1. Preparation of the Plan

The tourism development plan is prepared at the initiative of the Minister in charge of tourism, based on a decision relying on comprehensive studies specific to the concerned tourism expansion zone. The decision includes all information related to plan preparation reports, existing and potential directives reflecting public interest, in addition to details of deadlines and procedures, the subject and content of the plan, and the list of administrative entities and associations participating in its preparation.

The Directorate of Tourism in the wilaya (province), in consultation with the National Agency for Tourism Development, undertakes the task of preparing the plan, where an accredited and specialized study office in tourism development is assigned this process. After completing the draft, it is presented to the Wilaya People's Council for approval, then referred to the administrative bodies stipulated in Article 9 of Executive Decree No. 07-86 (2007), to express their opinions within a maximum period of 30 days.

Subsequently, the wali (governor) publishes the approved draft preparatory to subjecting it to public inquiry in accordance with Article 12 of the same decree. Upon completion of all legal procedures, the wali sends the file to the Minister in charge of tourism for adoption.

### 2.3.2. Contents of the Plan

The approved plan project includes a set of documents, the most important being:

(A comprehensive report) that clarifies the current situation of the tourism expansion zone, the measures decided for its development, enhancement, and management, in addition to provisions related to local development and urbanization plans, the status of existing construction if any, a strategy for solid waste disposal, a description of economic and social activities and available facilities, and determination of the legal status of lands and real estate within the zone's boundaries.

(Building rights system) that determines land use rules, easements, and projects planned for implementation within the framework of development and investment, accompanied by technical and infrastructure plans that illustrate the decided conditions and clarify homogeneous areas.

- (Annexes) that may include planning documents specific to land exploitation plans, especially if the tourism expansion zone is near an urban area or urbanizable.

### 2.3.3. Approval of the Plan

After fulfilling all legal procedures stipulated in Law No. 03-03 (2003) and Executive Decree No. 07-86 (2007), the plan is approved by a decision from the Minister in charge of tourism, then published in the Official Gazette, becoming mandatory upon adoption.

Upon adoption of the plan, the specified tourism expansion zones become subject to its provisions, and those responsible must manage them according to the decided specifications, which are published by the concerned minister and the competent wali.

From a legal perspective, the tourism development plan contributes to environmental protection and urbanization regulation, as it divides tourism expansion zones into protected spaces and others suitable for construction. Article 13 of Law No. 03-03 (2003) stipulated that this plan is one of the tools for urbanization and territorial development, granting it an alternative role to local urban tools within tourism zones.

This is particularly evident in regulating construction and urbanization rules in urbanizable areas within tourism expansion zones, where the latter are automatically considered subdividable areas suitable for construction.

## 3. Contributions of Tourism Expansion Zones to the Activation of Ecotourism

Tourism expansion zones are among the most important legal and regulatory tools adopted by the Algerian state to achieve a balance between tourism development requirements and environmental protection necessities. They represent distinctive spaces where urban, economic, and environmental dimensions integrate into a single framework aimed at valorizing natural and cultural qualifications on one hand, and ensuring their rational exploitation that considers the ecological fragility of tourism spaces on the other. However, this objective is only achieved through



establishing a set of controls and procedures that regulate urbanization and real estate management operations within these zones, whether related to sale and purchase, construction and demolition, or even subsequent field oversight. From this standpoint, the contribution of tourism expansion zones to the activation of ecotourism can be highlighted through:

### 3.1. Legal Controls for Protecting Natural Spaces as a Support for Ecotourism

Tourism expansion sites are often linked to natural spaces typically distant from population agglomerations, making them strategic areas requiring restructuring or development according to a system compatible with their environmental and heritage specificities. For example, the coastal domain is one of the most prominent of these spaces, due to its natural and cultural components that make it one of the preferred areas for tourism expansion and investment in ecotourism. However, this specificity makes it vulnerable to numerous risks resulting from development and urbanization operations.

In this framework, Law No. 03-03 (2003) concerning tourism expansion zones and tourism sites consolidated environmental and sustainable development dimensions through a set of objectives, the most important being:

- Protection of natural components designated for tourism.
- Preservation of cultural heritage and tourism resources and their employment for tourism purposes.
- Creation of harmonious and qualified urbanization compatible with tourism activity and preserving environmental specificities.

The importance of these objectives lies in achieving a balance between valorizing coastal ecological environments and tourism development requirements that necessitate establishing new urban structures adhering to sustainable urbanization principles and avoiding haphazard consumption of natural resources.

#### 3.1.1. Limiting Urban Expansion Through the Protected Areas System

The Algerian legislator adopted, under Law No. 11-02 (2011) concerning protected areas within the framework of sustainable development, an effective mechanism to limit urban expansion at the expense of natural domains, manifested in the "classification" system, which grants legal protection to fragile natural areas and prevents their exposure to encroachment. Article 8 of the law prohibited all forms of excavation, prospecting, exploration, land leveling, or construction within these areas, subjecting them to non-construction easements as public utility easements, which are mandatorily included in development and urbanization tools.

#### 3.1.2. Regulating Dangerous Activities Within Protected Areas

Human activity, such as urbanization, is one of the most prominent dangers threatening classified natural areas, given its conflict with the primary objective of preserving natural wealth. Therefore, a set of controls were established to balance public interest needs with environmental preservation constraints. The effects of this protection are embodied through:

- **Legal Effects of Classification:** Upon issuance of the classification decision for the protected area in accordance with Law No. 11-02 (2011), mandatory legal effects arise that impose maintaining the physical status of the protected space, especially regarding urban interventions. The law stipulated dividing the protected area into three basic zones, each with a specific system compatible with its ecological characteristics and the purpose of its establishment.
- **Methods of Prohibition and Licensing:** The legislator adopted two main methods to regulate activities within these areas:
  - **Prohibition:** Absolute or relative for material interventions that may harm the natural environment, such as excavation, prospecting, land leveling, and construction.
  - **Licensing:** An exception allowing the implementation of some necessary works provided they comply with the specified environmental controls.

Through this approach, the inclusion of protected areas within directive plans for development and urbanization, land occupation plans, and even maritime maps was emphasized, to ensure sustainable protection as a public interest.

### 3.2. Oversight Controls on Real Estate Transactions Within Tourism Expansion Zones

It is noted initially that upon completion of preparing tourism development plans and their entry into force, the task of managing tourism expansion zones is entrusted to the National Agency for Tourism Development, which supervises their proper organization and ensures their operation according to the outlined objectives. The legislator granted it flexibility in monitoring various real estate transactions conducted by private parties within these zones, whether related to buildings or lands, thanks to the legal powers granted in acquisition, development, promotion, resale, and leasing of real estate located within these zones.

In this context, the legislator strengthened the state's role through Article 28 of Law No. 03-03 (2003), which mandated notifying the Ministry in charge of tourism of all sale or lease operations of properties within tourism expansion zones, to enable it to exercise its preemption right. Failure to comply with this essential procedure results in the invalidity of the transaction, as it is considered a prior authorization for sale, either through state intervention by exercising its preemption right or by its silence.

It can be inferred from this right that its objective is to ensure harmonious and attractive development of these zones, respecting environmental and urban controls, to preserve the aesthetic urban facade and its integration within the tourism space, contributing to effective tourism and investment attraction.

The legislator also affirmed this principle regarding the resale of lands by the National Agency for Tourism Development or granting concession rights on them, requiring that these lands be fully developed according to a specifications book that considers the requirements for valorizing the tourism space and preserving its fragile character (Executive Decree No. 07-23, 2007).

The matter does not stop there but extends to monitoring acquisition or investment requests regulated under Executive Decree No. 07-23 (2007), particularly regarding submitted offers, which must include clear commitments to environmental protection and ensuring the preservation of the surroundings from any negative impacts that may arise from investment projects. Offers conflicting with the provisions of tourism development plans are directly rejected.

The legislator's interest in prioritizing environmental protection is clearly evident by granting preference to applicants for concession contracts or acquisition in case of multiple offers, where priority is given to the project owner who provides the strongest guarantees and tangible measures related to integrating the project into the environment and complying with surroundings protection provisions.

Furthermore, the legislator went further by obliging contractors and rights holders with a set of environmental commitments listed in the specifications books specific to each case, which impose on them an explicit undertaking to respect the environment and preserve tourism expansion zones or tourism sites from all forms of pollution and harm to natural and cultural resources.

### 3.3. Controls Related to Building and Demolition Rights Within Tourism Expansion Zones

The Algerian legislator obligated owners of building rights within tourism expansion zones to respect general urbanization rules in general and the specific provisions in tourism development plans in particular. For this purpose, the legislator restricted construction and demolition operations to obtaining a prior license, subjecting licensed works to oversight procedures during implementation or after completion.

#### 3.3.1. Prior Oversight on Construction Activities

A building permit is mandatory for every person holding building rights within areas classified as ecotourism zones, according to the legislation and regulations in force. However, the study of building permit applications in these zones is conducted in accordance with tourism development plans, ensuring compatibility with their specific provisions.

In this regard, Article 24 of Law No. 03-03 (2003) stipulated that granting a building permit is mandatorily subject to the prior opinion of the administration in charge of tourism, in coordination with the administration in charge of culture if archaeological sites exist within the zone. To activate this, Executive Decree No. 04-421 (2004) was issued, emphasizing the necessity of subjecting applications to examination to verify their compliance with environmental and urban controls, and the site's suitability for the planned activities, according to what is specified in tourism development plans and specifications books for investors and acquirers.

The municipality undertakes the task of notifying the administration in charge of tourism of building permit applications as the original competent authority. With the entry into force of the "single window" system under Executive Decree No. 15-19 (2015), this process has become smoother, as a representative from the wilaya's tourism directorate and a representative from the wilaya's culture directorate participate in studying urbanization contract applications.

Regarding demolition operations within tourism expansion zones, although Law No. 03-03 (2003) did not address them explicitly, Law No. 99-01 (1999) stipulated the necessity of obtaining a special license when undertaking demolition or modification operations concerning hotel establishments, according to project plans subject to approval by the Ministry in charge of tourism. As for demolition operations initiated by private parties within classified areas, they are subject to general urban legislation, with the necessity of their conformity with the provisions of the applicable tourism development plan.

### 3.3.2. Subsequent Oversight on Illegal Exploitation of Tourism Lands

In the framework of the legislator's efforts to combat illegal exploitation of lands and unlicensed constructions, subsequent oversight procedures were approved, including stopping works or demolishing violating buildings, and restoring the situation to its original state according to the applicable legislation and regulations.

Law No. 03-03 (2003), in Article 33, authorized qualified agents to conduct oversight and inspection operations in licensed implementation sites, to verify the extent to which project owners respect the imposed provisions and controls, especially those related to environmental protection and preserving tourism sites from pollution and depletion.

It is evident that adopting tourism expansion zones reflects, on one hand, a strategic orientation toward exploiting natural wealth in service of economic diversification, and on the other hand, a commitment to achieving a balance between investment and environmental protection. The oversight and development mechanisms granted to the state allow for regulating various urban interventions within these sensitive areas, contributing to improving urbanization efficiency, combating illegal construction, economizing on consumption of tourism real estate—especially coastal ones—and creating sustainable, harmonious urbanization that enhances the attractiveness of these zones.

However, practical reality reveals several deficiencies, the most prominent being:

- Haphazard consumption of natural space resulting from unorganized expansion of buildings and developments, whether through investment contracts or private interventions, due to the laxity of administrative bodies responsible for oversight.
- Weakness of studies related to developing tourism expansion zones and failure to consider the environmental carrying capacity of fragile areas, due to the scarcity of allocated financial resources.
- Lack of organization in some development works, such as sewage channels often implemented away from environmental protection and public order standards, in addition to the spread of beach sand depletion in construction and development, sometimes with facilitations from entities supposed to oversee the protection of this wealth.
- Encroachment on agricultural lands within tourism zones, considering them suitable sites for urban projects, leading to a continuous decline in this vital wealth.

## 4. Conclusion

Ecotourism has today become one of the fundamental pillars for achieving sustainable development in many countries, including Algeria. With Algeria's diverse natural and cultural wealth, tourism expansion zones represent a strategic tool for achieving a balance between tourism development and environmental protection through sustainable development and organization of tourism activities. These zones contribute to preserving natural resources and enhancing biodiversity, while providing important opportunities for responsible tourism investment.

The study has confirmed that tourism expansion zones in Algeria, despite the legal and regulatory frameworks in place, still face numerous challenges at the practical implementation level. These challenges primarily relate to field oversight, where there is still laxity in enforcing laws related to environmental protection and resource sustainability, in addition to the weakness of environmental studies accompanying tourism projects in these zones. Moreover, weak



coordination between different bodies may lead to unorganized exploitation of natural spaces, especially in coastal areas.

Nevertheless, tourism expansion zones remain a significant role in enhancing ecotourism in Algeria, especially if oversight is strengthened and laws are strictly enforced, alongside investment in environmental and economic studies that accompany tourism development. To achieve this objective, focus should be on improving planning and development mechanisms and enhancing community participation and environmental associations in the process of monitoring and protecting these zones.

In light of what has been reviewed, the study offers some recommendations that may contribute to improving the status of ecotourism in Algeria, such as enhancing field oversight, elevating the level of environmental and economic studies before adopting any investment project, updating legislation to align with modern environmental and technological developments, with the necessity of involving civil society and environmental associations in monitoring tourism development.

Thus, it can be said that tourism expansion zones in Algeria possess the necessary potentials to be a major engine for sustainable ecotourism, but their success depends on achieving a real balance between environmental and economic aspects, with the provision of a legal and institutional framework capable of preserving and developing these zones sustainably.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This research was conducted in accordance with internationally recognized academic and ethical standards, including the principles of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). No human or animal subjects were involved in the study, and therefore no personal data or experimental ethics approvals were required. All legal documents, legislative texts, and official regulations analyzed in this work were publicly accessible and cited transparently. The author confirms that all sources were properly attributed and that no plagiarized or misleading content was used. The work maintains academic neutrality and objectivity in interpreting legal frameworks related to tourism expansion and ecotourism in Algeria.

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The author declares that there is no conflict of interest. No personal, financial, or institutional factors influenced the design, execution, or interpretation of the research. The findings and views expressed represent the author's independent scholarly assessment.

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