

A Study on the Development Path of the Zhanjiang International Diving Festival from the Perspective of the Integration of Sports, Cultural Tourism, and Ecology



Wenhai Wu¹ & Yuping Wang^{2,*}

¹Lingnan Normal University, P.R. China

²Wuchuan No.3 Middle School, China

Abstract: Zhanjiang boasts a unique "Five Islands and One Bay" landscape and the nation's largest mangrove reserve, making it rich in resources for diving competitions and eco-cultural tourism. The successful hosting of the 2025 International Diving Competition provided Zhanjiang with valuable practical experience in exploring the integrated development of "sports + cultural tourism + ecology." However, how to convert the event's visitor traffic into long-term development momentum and how to achieve a dynamic balance between ecological conservation and resource development remain core challenges that urgently need to be addressed. This paper adopts a perspective that integrates sports, cultural tourism, and ecology to clarify the development goals of the Zhanjiang International Diving Festival in two areas: safeguarding the ecological foundation and building the event's brand identity. Systematically elaborates on five development pathways—brand cultivation, joint development of ecological resources, integration of cultural and tourism experiences, omnichannel communication, and industrial expansion—and distills three key lessons: balanced ecological development, sustainable conversion of event traffic, and multi-stakeholder collaborative governance. These insights offer a reference for the integrated development of sports events, cultural tourism, and ecology in coastal cities.

Keywords: Zhanjiang international diving festival, integration of sports, culture, and tourism, ecological conservation, coupled development, event branding

Introduction

In 2025, Zhanjiang successfully hosted the International Diving Competition and established a comprehensive event platform integrating "competitions, exhibitions, forums, tourism, training, and entertainment," further promoting the in-depth integration of multiple industries, including sports, culture and tourism, and commerce. Zhanjiang was also included in the first batch of national high-quality outdoor sports destinations, indicating that the development of the "Five Islands and One Bay" coastal water-based outdoor sports destination has reached a new height. Based on a perspective of the coupling of sports, culture, tourism, and ecology,

this study systematically discusses the objectives, pathways, and lessons learned from the Zhanjiang International Diving Festival, with the aim of providing valuable insights for the integration of culture, sports, and tourism in coastal cities.

1. Development Goals for the Zhanjiang International Diving Festival from the Perspective of the Integration of Sports, Cultural Tourism, and Ecology

1.1 Safeguarding the ecological foundation and realizing carbon sink value

Whether it is the Ran Nature Reserve or the healthiest population of Chinese white dolphins in

Corresponding Author: Yuping Wang
Wuchuan No.3 Middle School, China

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Leizhou Bay, these elements collectively form a comprehensive ecological development model that integrates "coastal and ecological conservation with sports and cultural tourism." The Diving Festival is committed to the scientific and rational development of underwater sports resources, ensuring that ecological conservation and sports development advance in tandem, while strictly protecting the marine ecological environment (Zhang et al., 2025). Specifically, it is necessary to establish an evaluation mechanism for the environmental carrying capacity of diving activities, delineate boundaries between developable marine areas and ecological conservation zones, and regulate disturbances caused by competitions and tourist activities to coral reefs, seagrass beds, and other sensitive ecosystems. At the same time, under the influence of the Diving Festival, themes of mangrove ecosystem restoration and marine biodiversity conservation should be incorporated into event promotion and experiential activities, thereby transforming ecological value into tangible carbon sink benefits and brand premium (Zhang et al., 2025).

1.2 Linking diving event IP with all-for-one tourism

The cultivation of diving event IP and its integrated development with all-for-one tourism are the central objectives for transforming the Zhanjiang International Diving Festival from a "one-off event" into a "sustainable brand." Leveraging the professional resources of the Zhanjiang Diving School under the General Administration of Sport of China, its internationally certified training qualifications, and extensive experience in hosting competitions, Zhanjiang has laid a solid foundation for developing a highly recognizable diving event IP. The development goal focuses on transforming the International Diving Competition into a regular, branded annual festival, creating a closed-loop industry ecosystem through event-driven visitor traffic, venue hosting, and subsequent consumer spending (Peng, 2025). At the same time, with diving competitions as the core driving force, the city will integrate regional tourism resources—such as

mangrove ecological tourism, seafood dining experiences, island homestay vacations, and intangible cultural heritage performances—to achieve a synergistic effect of "one day of competition, multiple days of stay, and region-wide consumption," thereby propelling Zhanjiang's transformation from the "Birthplace of Chinese Diving" to a "New Benchmark for International Water Sports."

2. Development Pathways for the Zhanjiang International Diving Festival from the Perspective of the Integration of Sports, Culture, Tourism, and Ecology

2.1 Cultivating the localization of international event brands

Cultivating the localization of international event brands involves deeply integrating international-standard event resources with Zhanjiang's distinctive regional cultural characteristics. The core objective is to ensure that international events "take root" in Zhanjiang rather than merely "passing through" the city. By 2025, the Zhanjiang International Diving Competition will have successfully established a diversified competition system, including the Asian Finswimming Championships, the National Freediving Championships, and the Scuba Diving Open. This system will attract more than 500 athletes from over 10 countries and regions, thereby preliminarily establishing Zhanjiang's professional image as a host city for international diving events (Liu, 2025). The path to localization is first manifested through the deep integration of cultural symbols. Incorporating Zhanjiang's city emblem and marine cultural symbols into the event's visual identity system has created a strong visual connection between the event's VI and the city's image. During the opening ceremony, organizers arranged performances of intangible cultural heritage items such as the human dragon dance, lion dance, and Nuo dance, aiming to showcase Zhanjiang's unique folk arts to athletes and audiences worldwide and transform the event into a vital platform for

displaying the profound heritage of Lingnan culture. During the competition, a "Zhanjiang Folk Culture Experience Week" was held, inviting athletes and spectators to participate in activities such as intangible cultural heritage craft workshops and traditional food tastings, fostering cultural interaction alongside the competitions. The second level of localization focuses on the localization of talent and organizational capabilities. Building on the professional strengths of the Zhanjiang Diving School under the General Administration of Sport of China, outstanding local divers and referees will be selected to participate in international competitions for practical training. Through approaches such as "training through competition," a local professional team capable of independently undertaking the organizational and operational tasks of international events will be gradually cultivated. Establish an international certification training program for local referees and coaches that aligns with the World Underwater Federation's certification system, enabling local talent to obtain qualifications for officiating and teaching at international events, thereby laying a solid grassroots foundation for the sport's development among youth (Xu, 2025).

2.2 Joint development of underwater ecological parks and diving routes

The joint development of underwater ecological parks and diving routes is a concrete approach to integrating ecological conservation with sports development. Its core objective is to transform Zhanjiang's unique underwater ecological resources into sustainable diving tourism products while actively preserving the marine ecosystem throughout the development process (Zhou, 2025). The waters near Zhanjiang feature Doulongjiao on Nanzhou Island, the Xuwen Lighthouse, and numerous tropical coral reef areas. The colorful underwater coral forests and diverse marine life hold great potential for creating a "diving paradise." The collaborative development approach begins with spatial planning. First, marine ecology experts will be organized to conduct a systematic survey of the waters in the proposed development zone, mapping the

distribution of seabed ecological resources and clearly designating core conservation zones with high coral coverage, sustainable use zones with moderate coverage, and suitable development zones with low coverage. Based on this, the spatial boundaries of diving activity zones and core ecological conservation areas will be delineated, and a dynamic adjustment mechanism will be established to respond to changes in coral growth and marine species populations, allowing for timely adjustments to the open areas and carrying capacity. When designing dive routes, a variety of uniquely themed routes will be developed, such as "Exploring the Coral Garden," "Tracing the Wreck Site," and "Witnessing the Fish Swarm," among others. Each route is accompanied by an ecological interpretation booklet for professional dive instructors to use when explaining marine ecology during guided dives (Guan & Guo, 2025). Strict diving conduct guidelines have been established, requiring participants to engage in environmentally friendly diving activities under the guidance of professional instructors. They are prohibited from touching coral or disturbing marine life, and regulations regarding underwater photography prohibit the direct use of flash on sensitive organisms.

2.3 The fusion of fishing port charm and diving culture

Integrating the charm of the fishing port into the diving experience is the key to creating a cultural synergy between Zhanjiang's local identity as a "seafood hub" and "city of fresh flavors" and the Diving Festival. Zhanjiang is widely popular for its abundant seafood delicacies, such as oysters and prawns; the saying "Go to Zhanjiang for seafood" has been widely embraced by tourists. This unique culinary culture gives the Diving Festival a competitive edge over other diving destinations (Tan & Zou, 2025). The integration strategy first focuses on deep culinary experiences. Centered around the competition venue, the Zhanjiang Seafood Food Street was established in the surrounding area. This district brings together iconic local seafood such as oysters, prawns, flower crabs, and sandworms,

showcasing a fresh "from the ocean to the table" experience through "caught and cooked on the spot" preparation. The launch of "diving-themed set menus" enhances the thematic appeal by blending seafood plating with diving elements. A "Seafood Cooking Competition" was held, featuring local celebrity chefs demonstrating traditional Zhanjiang seafood cooking techniques on-site, while visitors participated in tasting and voting activities. At the same time, bundled products such as the "Tournament Cheering Package" and "Island Leisure Package" were introduced, offering combined sales of event viewing, accommodation, and dining to extend visitors' stay. In terms of integrating cultural and tourism resources, a tourism route themed "Delicious Zhanjiang" was planned, linking the island landscapes of Nanzhou Island and Techeng Island and incorporating unique resources such as the Huguangyan World Geopark, the Mangrove Nature Reserve, hot spring resorts, and the Suixi Lion Dance Cultural Base, collectively forming diverse product combinations such as "Diving Plus Island Vacation," "Diving Plus Geological Exploration," "Diving Plus Hot Spring Wellness," and "Diving Plus Experiential Activities." During breaks in the competition, a variety of nighttime activities—including beach music gatherings, island bonfire parties, and nighttime tours of the fishing port—were organized to fill the experiential gap created by downtime in the event schedule. This achieved full-day coverage of consumer scenarios—"diving into the sea by day, enjoying the shore by night"—transforming the fishing port's charm and diving culture from mere "experiences" into "memories to take home."

2.4 Omnichannel media matrix and festival communication strategy

The communication strategy adopted a multi-layered, three-dimensional approach to achieve synergistic development between traditional media and social media. Regarding traditional media, by leveraging the platform resources of CCTV Sports Channel, Guangdong Sports Channel, and Migu Sports, the festival secured professional-level live broadcasts and in-depth coverage of key events.

Specially invited sports commentators and diving experts provided real-time analysis, enhancing the professional impact of the competitions and expanding audience reach. At the same time, Olympic champions and renowned athletes from Guangdong were invited to serve as promotional ambassadors for the Diving Festival, leveraging their public influence to boost the event's popularity and generate buzz. On social media, platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou, Xiaohongshu, and Weibo served as primary channels for sharing captivating highlights, athlete interviews, short videos showcasing the city's charm, and behind-the-scenes footage—all presented as concise, fast-paced content that was disseminated in bite-sized segments across the media matrix. Official hashtags were established to encourage tourists, audiences, and diving enthusiasts to share their competition experiences and travel stories from Zhanjiang, thereby generating a viral UGC content effect. Regarding the pace of information dissemination, a three-phase strategy of "Build-up—Peak—Follow-up" was adopted. A promotional video was released two months before the competition to build anticipation, while countdown updates and stories about athletes' preparations were concentrated in the week leading up to the event. Live streaming and real-time coverage were maintained throughout the event, and after its conclusion, long-form videos featuring highlights and cityscapes were continuously released to sustain public interest.

The content strategy emphasized a dual narrative of "competition and city," showcasing not only high-level athletic competition but also Zhanjiang's coastal scenery, seafood cuisine, and local stories. A short video series titled "One City, One Ocean" was released. These videos explored the deep connection between Zhanjiang and the ocean from multiple perspectives and skillfully integrated the stories of the Diving Festival into the city's overall development narrative. This elevated brand communication from "event promotion" to the level of "city marketing," building lasting brand equity for the Diving Festival.

2.5 Expansion of the diving training and marine education industries

Expanding the diving training and marine education industries is a sustainable path to transform the Diving Festival from a "short-term event" into a "long-term industry." As a national-level training center directly administered by the General Administration of Sport of China, the Zhanjiang Diving School holds training certification from the World Diving Federation and is equipped with a team of experienced instructors and comprehensive training facilities, providing indispensable professional support to the diving training industry. The first step in this expansion involves the tiered development of diving training programs. For general tourists with no prior experience, the "First Dive Experience" program offers one-on-one instruction by professional instructors in safe, controlled shallow-water areas. With a duration of approximately two hours, this program lowers the barrier to entry. For enthusiasts with a certain level of interest, the center offers Open Water Diver certification courses, systematically teaching diving theory, equipment use, and safety skills; upon passing the assessment, participants receive an internationally recognized diving certification. For professionals, the center provides advanced diving, rescue diving, and diving instructor training courses, forming a multi-tiered training product system ranging from basic experience to specialized skills. Additionally, the center has developed educational travel programs integrated with marine ecology education. We have specifically designed educational programs for elementary and middle school students on topics such as mangrove wetland ecology, coral reef biodiversity, the conservation of the Chinese white dolphin, and marine plastic pollution. Examples include the "One-Day Camp: A Day in the Life of a Marine Scientist" and the "Three-Day Camp: Coral Guardians." The curriculum organically integrates interactive activities such as marine life observation, water quality testing experiments, and eco-friendly craft projects, enabling students to develop a sense of marine conservation through

hands-on experiences. By collaborating with education authorities and schools to incorporate marine study tours into the comprehensive practical activity curriculum for primary and secondary schools, the center has established a stable source of participants. With the further development of the diving training and marine educational tour industries, the impact of the Diving Festival has expanded from the competition phase to cover various periods throughout the year. Relying on professional training and educational tour products, a year-round business model has been established that is not constrained by seasonal fluctuations. This has facilitated a structural upgrade of the industry chain from "event-driven, single-point growth" to "multi-point support through training, activities, educational tours, and sightseeing," laying a solid foundation for the long-term and stable development of Zhanjiang's diving industry.

3. Summary of Development Experiences from the Zhanjiang International Diving Festival from the Perspective of the Coupling of Sports, Cultural Tourism, and Ecology

3.1 Dynamic balance between ecological carrying capacity and development intensity

Maintaining a dynamic balance between ecological conservation and development intensity is the primary principle for the sustainable development of coastal sports events. Zhanjiang's experience demonstrates that ecological resources represent both the "hard power" of hosting events and the "soft power" of the city's brand; the two are not mutually exclusive or in direct opposition to one another. Event development requires the establishment of an environmental carrying capacity assessment mechanism. With the protection of mangroves and coral reefs—as core ecological assets—as a prerequisite, event spaces must be scientifically planned, and event scale adjusted based on ecological monitoring data. At the same time, ecological conservation principles should be integrated into event processes and experience design, enabling the Diving Festival to truly serve as a vehicle for

spreading marine conservation awareness, thereby achieving a dynamic unity of conservation and development at a higher level.

3.2 Converting festival traffic into a long-term foundation for the regional economy

The true value of such events lies in transforming short-term concentrations of people, goods, and information into sustained growth for the regional economy. By establishing a closed-loop industrial model of "events driving traffic, venues hosting visitors, and consumption following," Zhanjiang has effectively channeled event traffic into diverse consumption scenarios across dining, lodging, transportation, shopping, and entertainment. The key lesson is that the conversion benefits of the festival economy depend on the completeness of the industrial chain and the richness of consumption scenarios. It is necessary to embed a "dining, lodging, transportation, sightseeing, shopping, and entertainment" into the planning phase of the event. By designing promotional packages, customized itineraries, and distinctive products, the duration of visitors' stays can be extended, per capita spending boosted, and the transition of the event economy from "one-time consumption" to "sustained contribution" achieved.

3.3 Government guidance and collaborative governance by diverse stakeholders

The successful hosting of large-scale sports festivals requires the joint cooperation of multiple stakeholders, including the government, professional organizations, market entities, and community residents. The Zhanjiang International Diving Festival has demonstrated that the government coordinated event positioning, safety measures, and public services; the Zhanjiang Diving School provided professional technical support and facilitated connections with international resources; businesses participated in sponsorship, services, and product development; and community residents integrated into the activities as volunteers and performers. This multi-stakeholder collaborative governance model not only promoted the professional development of event organization but

also enhanced local residents' sense of participation and fulfillment, transforming the event into a tangible shared endeavor in the city's development.

Conclusion

From the perspective of the coupling of sports, cultural tourism, and ecology, the Zhanjiang International Diving Festival sets its development goals on achieving both the transformation of ecological value and the integration of all-for-one tourism. Its development path encompasses five dimensions: event brand cultivation, joint development of ecological resources, integration of cultural and tourism experiences, omnichannel communication, and industrial expansion. Together, these three elements form a systematic framework of "Purpose—Path—Experience." A dynamic balance between ecological carrying capacity and development intensity, the long-term conversion of festival traffic into regional economic growth, government guidance, and collaborative governance by diverse stakeholders collectively form a methodological framework for the integration of sports, culture, tourism, and ecology in coastal cities. The Zhanjiang model demonstrates that a high-quality ecological foundation serves as the bedrock, international events act as the catalyst, and comprehensive integration provides the pathway; coastal cities can fully achieve the synergistic advancement of the culture, sports, and tourism industries through the dialectical unity of conservation and development.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

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