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Guest editorial: Transforming tourism: diverse perspectives to boost environmental, social and economic sustainability

In recent years, the tourism sector has experienced continuous growth, as indicated in the latest UNWTO reports which show, for example, an 11% increase from 2023 to 2024 in international overnight stays, with the total number reaching 1.4 billion in 2024 (UNWTO, 2024c). Although the outbreak of COVID-19 and the ensuing pandemic in 2020 brought the sector to a near standstill, recovery is well under way and the UNWTO reports, “2024 marks the consolidation of international tourism recovery from its worst crisis ever, four years after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic” (e.g. UNWTO, 2024b).

It is well-known that the development and growth of tourism is a bringer of economic and socio-cultural benefits (Blancas *et al.*, 2010); but also, of costs to both the socio-cultural and natural environments. For instance, tourist destinations may experience deterioration in the local flora and fauna, jeopardize water supplies and experience other forms of environmental degradation, such as an increase in noise and air pollution (Juvan and Dolnicar, 2017).

The call to change tourism to mitigate the costs has come from numerous sources and/or stakeholders, not least residents. For example, in the summer of 2024, the British news media carried numerous reports of demonstrations against tourism by local people, see for example a report by Nick Beake of the BBC about issues faced in the Mediterranean island of Mallorca, Spain (BBC News, 2024). We should be mindful, however, that the issues pertaining to tourism development and the impact on the environment are not new. Writing in *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1997, Frederick Noronha outlined the concerns by locals in Goa, India, about the costs of tourism development on the area’s natural resources.

Policymakers, tourism organizations and tourism researchers have acknowledged the need for change (Hall, 2019). The desire to make changes is inexorably influenced by the evolution of society and the policies of many national governments, increasingly oriented towards the need to protect the environment due to the challenges that the future holds because of climate change (e.g. Becken *et al.*, 2020). Further, guidance has emerged from the United Nations in the form of The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which the UN describes as a “shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future” (UN, 2021). Research by UNWTO has shown that tourism can contribute to 16 of the SDGs (UNWTO, 2024a). Such an ambitious strategy inevitably influences tourism policies because of the sector’s on-going influence on the natural environment (Gössling, 2021) and the fact that many national economies are inextricably linked with tourism

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(UNWTO, 2024c). Sustainability is not only, therefore, necessary to avoid the degradation of the environment of tourist destinations, it is also necessary for the very survival of the sector (Juvan and Dolnicar, 2017). This is because tourism is reliant on the quality of the environment (Coghlan, 2012; Uyarra *et al.*, 2009).

A tourist destination with a degraded environment is not attractive and as such loses competitiveness; sustainability becomes, then, a key factor for competitiveness (Fernández-Ruano *et al.*, 2022). It should also be noted that many environmental problems are caused by irresponsible human behavior (Hopkins, 2020). Regulatory solutions have proven insufficient in this respect, so there is also a requirement to focus on tourists adopting more environmentally friendly behavior (Dolnicar, 2020).

Therefore, destinations need to implement strategies designed to encourage tourists to behave in a more environmentally responsible manner. Several studies have addressed this issue from different perspectives, including tourist information provision (Tiefenbeck *et al.*, 2019); how firms can pass on to their clients the savings they make thanks to adopting sustainable practices; games that encourage environmentally friendly behavior among tourists; encouraging tourists to commit to the desired behaviors and changing how services are offered (e.g. Baca-Motes *et al.*, 2012; Dolnicar *et al.*, 2019). Other studies have focused on identifying techniques in attempts to influence human behavior towards adopting nature-based form of tourism. At the same time, specialist offers and nice tourism products have been developed using tourism programs such as, for example, including ecotourism, green tourism, slow tourism, culture-rich tourism, self-regulated responsible tourism, adventure tourism, reef tourism, regenerative tourism and spiritual tourism (Le Busque *et al.*, 2022; Adebayo, 2017; Mihalic, 2016; Coghlan, 2012).

Given the need to address the environmental issues that the planet faces, and that can also jeopardize the future of tourism, both academics and practitioners should focus on identifying effective strategies that can mitigate the adverse effects of tourism development. At the same time, there is a need to adopt sustainable practices to protect and guarantee the existence of tourism in the long-term (Demeter *et al.*, 2023).

With this background in mind, the focus of this special issue is on discussions that seek to understand how destinations and tourism companies foster practices of sustainability that encourage businesses, residents and tourists to adopt such approaches. The contributions in this special issue offer diverse perspectives on fostering sustainable tourism around the world. From theoretical frameworks, empirical studies and applied case studies, these works illuminate pathways to harmonize tourism development with ecological preservation and community well-being. All the papers in this special issue offer a combined vision of how tourism offers can be reoriented to achieve improvements in the environment. The paper by Rodney Westerlaken and the article by Tafadzwa Matiza and Elmarie Slabbert are examples of how the environment can be enhanced. In terms of improving the social world of the destination, the proposals outlined in the work of Ian Patterson and Adela Balderas-Cejudo and the paper of Elif Vozar provide examples. They show how it is possible to develop a tourism offer based on the involvement and participation of the local population, where the governance dimension becomes important. This is further elaborated on the contribution of Azizah Ismail, Norwani Mohd Nazari and Nur Ainna Aznida Abdullah and the paper by Azwindini Isaac Ramaano.

In more detail, the first paper by Ismail *et al.* (2025) identify and analyze through a multi-stakeholder lens, the fuzzy relationships among criteria for the development of community-based tourism (CBT) in Malaysia. By exploring these relationships, the study provides valuable insights for stakeholders and policymakers to enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of CBT initiatives in Malaysia. The article focuses on understanding the interplay between environmental, economic and socio-cultural criteria to guide decision-making and planning processes for sustainable tourism development.

Pursuing the same theme of CBT, this time in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province in South Africa's Musina Municipality, the second paper by Ramaano (2025) explores the

substantial relationship between information and studies on sustainable tourism, environmental sustainability and local resource governance issues. It further contextualizes the essence of natural biodiversity, ecotourism and the involvement of the local people in touristic activities explaining how these are integrated and become a source of income for locals. Simultaneously, the paper delves into the perceptions held by members of the community about sustainability and climate change.

In the third paper, [Westerlaken \(2025\)](#) investigates the consequences of anthropogenic disturbance caused by dolphin-watching boats on the local spinner dolphin population in the seas around Lovina, Bali. It offers a novel approach to the issue, and from the research Westerlaken proposes recommendations for developing sustainable destination practices that influence both the boatmen who take the tourists to the dolphins and the tourists in an effort to reduce the negative impacts of tourism activities on the animals. The study reveals a consistent breach of national and international guidelines, with boats approaching dolphins at distances well below the recommended minimum. Undesirable behavior by the boatmen and signs of distress in the dolphins along with their attempts to get away from the boats were frequently observed. The findings highlight the need for stakeholders to develop and implement sustainable practices that influence boatmen and tourists to minimize their impact on the dolphins. It proposes actionable recommendations for developing sustainable destination practices that influence both boatmen and tourists and contributes to the growing body of knowledge on sustainable wildlife tourism management.

The fourth paper by [Vozar \(2025\)](#) explores stakeholders' perspectives on sustainability at a nature-based tourism destination – Dartmoor National Park – in the UK. The research is approached through the lens of socio-cognitive mindfulness theory. Specifically, this study attempts to find out how stakeholders work with the unique qualities of a place to engage with visitors and contribute to their level of mindfulness. The stakeholders revealed how the special qualities of Dartmoor National Park, along with visitor control, novelty, and connecting with visitors not only contributed to local and business development, but also promoted mindfulness and sustainable practices among tourists. This study offers an original and innovative application of mindfulness theory to the consideration of supply-side perspectives on sustainability in visitor-environment relations. In doing so, the research provides new insights about these relationships that can help to promote positive engagement with natural settings.

This is followed by the fifth paper by [Matiza and Slabbert \(2025\)](#). It explores the effect of pro-environmental measures and the green behavior of star-graded accommodation establishments on the consumer perceived value that domestic tourists associate with them. From this study's perspective, value creation via green hospitality may promote more responsible and environmentally friendly consumptive behavior amongst domestic tourists. The findings imply that green hospitality positively influences the value perceptions of tourists. More in-depth analyses indicate gender-based heterogeneity in the effect of green hospitality on consumer perceived values. The findings establish pro-environmentalism within the accommodation sector as an approach can initiate pro-environmental behavior change through value creation. The theory around pro-environmental behavior provides empirical evidence from domestic tourists as an under-researched population within the debate around tourism sustainability and green hospitality.

The final paper by [Patterson and Balderas-Cejudo \(2025\)](#) presents the idea that nostalgia is related to sustainable tourism, especially regarding issues of social sustainability and bringing people together. Nostalgia is also regarded as one of the main contributing motives behind an older traveler's choice of a sustainable destination. Despite this, however, very few studies have acknowledged the importance of nostalgia as a motivation for travel, and especially so for repeat visits. Patterson and Balderas-Cejudo provide a conceptual paper that uses secondary data analysis as the main method of inquiry. They ask if nostalgia is or can be an important travel motive to explain why older tourists choose a specific sustainable destination. The findings suggest that nostalgia significantly contributes to the overall tourism experience for

older travelers. This is because this demographic group often has a strong sense of nostalgia that dominates their memories and provides a positive view of the past that contributes to a greater sense of continuity and meaning in their lives.

This special issue provides diverse perspectives on how tourism practices can be reoriented towards models that can potentially enhance sustainability. The articles presented address critical aspects of tourism development, such as CBT, wildlife tourism management, green hospitality and factors – nostalgia – that influence tourism decision-making regarding sustainable destinations. They demonstrate how both theoretical and practical approaches can drive progress in this vital area. It is important to acknowledge, however, the inherent limitations and potential biases in the selection of research presented here. This includes the geographic and thematic scopes covered, which cannot not fully represent the vast diversity of challenges and opportunities in sustainable tourism worldwide.

Building on these contributions, several promising avenues for future research nevertheless emerge. Firstly, there is a need to explore the integration of digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence and big data, in promoting sustainable practices and decision-making within tourism. Secondly, future studies could explore in more depth the socio-economic impacts of sustainability initiatives, particularly in underrepresented regions and marginalized communities, the redistribution of tourism to favor mass destinations, and the design of policies that promote the integration of tourists and residents. Thirdly, there remains significant potential to investigate the role of interdisciplinary collaborations in addressing complex sustainability challenges, bridging tourism with fields such as, for example, environmental science, behavioral economics, anthropology and cultural studies. We encourage researchers, practitioners and policymakers in the tourism sector to engage with the insights presented in this issue, using them as a foundation for further innovation and critical inquiry. By learning from the advancements showcased here and continuing to propose new, actionable solutions, the global tourism industry can move closer to achieving sustainability goals that benefit both people and the planet.

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