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Tourism Sustainability as Interconnection

Lucia Groe^{1,*} & Walter Greco¹

¹ University of Calabria, Italy

Abstract: This short paper presents the results of a research project focused on experiential tourism in the Calabria region, covering the period from 2020 to 2023. One particularly compelling aspect that has emerged is the interpretation of tourism sustainability through the lens of interconnection, grounded in traditional knowledge.

The scientific debate surrounding tourism sustainability has primarily addressed the protection of the environment, natural resources, and wildlife. It has also included specific analyses of the socio-economic benefits for communities living in tourist destinations, as well as strategies for conserving cultural heritage and fostering authentic tourist experiences.

These guiding values — environmental protection, cultural preservation, and community well-being — appear increasingly fragile in the current historical, socio-cultural, and economic context. As such, they require reinforcement and redefinition. In recent years, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism communities have been confronted with new challenges. Chief among them is the urgent need to rethink the concept of sustainability.

Keywords: tourism, sustainability, interconnection

1. Introduction

Our research approach is based on the premise that the interplay between tourism and sustainability is a longstanding subject in scholarly discourse, increasingly framed in terms of responsible practice and discovery. What is novel and compelling today is the shift from analyzing tourism as mass tourism to examining, overtourism, highlighting the often-overlooked dimension of physical touristification. Overburdened facilities, infrastructure, and tourist flows accelerate the transformation of destinations into consumer objects, radically reshaping spatial, social, and economic coordinates. Although tourism has always possessed economic and political significance, contemporary trends emphasize slowness, territorial regeneration, and the deepening of relations between host communities and travelers—marking an evolving

face of the sector.

Modern travelers seek more than standardized packages: they desire narratives that resonate emotionally, connections to internalize, and memories to cherish. They yearn for environments where nature's inherent integrity fosters personal and environmental renewal. Notably, mass tourism seems to be reaching a twilight phase, with tourism trends increasingly targeting specific niches and segments.

Alternative tourism invigorates both supply and demand, rediscovering spaces previously marginalized by mainstream tourism: small destinations are attracting visitors who are embraced not merely as travelers, but as temporary citizens. Yet, as travelers pursue unspoiled nature to foster well-being, it becomes clear that no existing tourism practices can preserve it fully.

“Sustainable tourism,” in its numerous guises, appears insufficient in meeting this demand. Thus, we propose shifting discourse from “sustainable tourism” to “tourism sustainability,” to emphasize the

Corresponding Author: Lucia Groe
University of Calabria, Italy

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need to reform and reinforce educational and socio-ecological processes that underpin tourism activities. This necessitates a transition from expert knowledge toward shared learning, embedding traditional ecological knowledge into modern methodologies at institutional and policy levels.

Tourism may not always be desirable for small territories; hence, when such destinations enter tourism circuits, protection—not exposure—should be the priority. Protection often lies within their historical and traditional fabric. Traditional knowledge must be fully integrated into territorial planning processes.

This contribution highlights a particularly salient aspect of the research project and aligns with recent national and international literature on environmental and tourism sustainability. Findings on tourism sustainability illustrate its interpretation as an interconnection among humans, the natural world, and the broader concept of ‘the Other.’ The development of this manuscript is rooted in a 2019 reflection and subsequent collaboration with colleagues on the need to rethink sustainability through traditional knowledge frameworks. The objective was to address the diminishing efficacy of the term “sustainable” and to bolster its meaning via a humanistic-ecological reform.

The approach advocated a transition from a culture of sustainability to the cultural embedding of society through the recovery of traditional ecological knowledge (Senatore & Groe, 2021). This culturalization process serves as the foundation of a new sustainability model. It is in this context that Groe (2024) introduce the concept of Mitakuyeability, inspired by Lakota philosophy, signifying an innate or cultivated capacity to spiritually interconnect with the universe to: (1) learn from land and relationships, (2) translate traditional knowledge into sustainable socio-economic practices, and (3) engage in dialogue with oneself, the Other, and the natural world. Mitakuyeability supports the emerging scholarly paradigm which posits that sustainability requires a shift in consciousness.

Sustainability is a dynamic and evolving

concept, enriched over recent decades through terms like green, smart, regenerative/reparative sustainability, integral ecology, ecological transition, trivability, and Mitakuyeability. Political strategies have emphasized technological and digital innovation to enhance well-being and resource efficiency. However, this does not require sidelining the human dimension—understood not as anthropocentrism but as emotional, cognitive, and empathetic elements fostering harmonious reciprocity between humans and territory. Today’s sustainability demands an interconnected paradigm grounded in traditional ecological values.

In the wake of the COVID 19 pandemic, the human dimension must regain primacy in sustainability. In this study, tourism sustainability is articulated primarily through emergent pandemic-influenced trends reflecting (1) new motivations, (2) novel forms of active participation, and (3) new dimensions of tourist experience. These three pillars define the new, conscious, and people-centered sustainable tourism community.

2. Methods

This research explores how a collective vision of tourism sustainability emerges as a catalyst for innovative governance. Central to the study is the analysis of tourism operators’ narratives, which reveal sustainability as an integrated tapestry of territorial identity, tradition, and community values rather than a mere environmental or economic concept.

Departing from traditional views that focus on consumer behavior (Shove, 2010), this study recognizes tourists as “prosumers” — active co-creators shaping personalized, meaningful experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified society’s reconnection with nature, highlighting the urgent need to address the growing human-nature disconnect.

The qualitative approach is framed by a multi-layered theoretical lens combining:

- Indigenous knowledge systems, particularly Lakota philosophy emphasizing

interconnectedness and ethical living;

- Critical reviews of sustainability concepts, (TEK) traditional ecological knowledge and local cultures (Berkes, 2018) ;
- Philosophical debates advocating a shift toward ecological and regenerative thinking.

Lakota thought emphasizes interconnection, epitomized by the prayer Miyakuye Oyasin (“we are all related”) and two guiding principles: The Red Path—a virtuous journey toward universal truth, and “in a good way”—conducting actions in alignment with moral and virtuous teachings. These translate to eco sociological sustainability and socio economic sustainable practices.

Indigenous knowledge systems, defined as local knowledge developed and orally transmitted over centuries, constitute valuable adaptive resources for climate change and tourism, yet are underutilized in policy and strategy . Indigenous methods on managed lands sustain 80 % of the world’s biodiversity and reduce deforestation, carbon emissions, and wildfire risk.

Although traditional knowledge has yielded demonstrable successes, the literature reveals conceptual confusion and interchangeability between “sustainability” and “sustainable development.” Sustainability is a broad, complex socio ecological process, while sustainable development focuses on long term economic and quality of life improvements without compromising future generations.

Overuse and misuse of the term “sustainable” have led to concept dilution . As corrective, evocative terms such as regenerative, reparative, integral ecology, trivability, and Mitakuyeability have emerged—shifting attention to humanistic values, ethics, spirituality, and well-being in sustainability discourse.

The literature also conflates tourism sustainability and sustainable tourism. The UNWTO and UNEP define sustainable tourism as tourism that fully considers its economic, social, and environmental impacts over time and across stakeholders. Conversely, tourism sustainability emphasizes the role of local knowledge in fostering

territorial permanence and valorization.

To grasp the novel significance of tourism sustainability, one must transition toward renewable thinking. Tourism sustainability is analyzed here as prioritizing local knowledge, respect and circularity, and the ethno ecological model kosmo corpus praxis.

Interconnection in tourism must operate across several conceptual levels:

- the human–nature divide,
- relationships among tourism actors, community, and territory.

In this framework, communities at destinations must pursue regenerative sustainability strategies that protect identity, culture, and territory. Tourism offerings must incorporate circular production and natural timing, embedding traditional ecological knowledge into collaborative public–private co construction, and mobilities aligned with soft and hard sustainable needs.

The current discourse around sustainability is bifurcated between economic–technological and ethical–spiritual concerns, reflecting its multidimensional nature. The Anthropocene, or Capitalocene (Moore, 2017), necessitates knowledge production as an interdisciplinary endeavor that restores epistemological and ontological primacy to traditional knowledge.

Traditional knowledge paves the way toward renewable, sustainable thinking. Moccia (2022) defines such thinking as “a mindset, a new way of thinking, aware that Earth is a closed system whose resources must be used in a circular manner.” Göpel (2016) asserts: “Sustainable development is the terrible problem of the 21st century... we hear the call for a paradigm shift... but what does this actually mean? ... The answer is: a great mental shift.” He continues, emphasizing the parallel processes of ecological and educational transition.

The educational process thus aims to:

- build a cognitive architecture, i.e., a mental model;
- direct research toward community challenges;
- formulate emergent thought triggered by stress events.

This emergent thinking is generating a new renewable and sustainable mental approach conducive to promoting new sustainability.

3. Results

The potential transformative power of local knowledge leads the tourism community to become part of the process of building a new vision of sustainability.

In the Calabrian context, local communities possess a wealth of traditional ecological and cultural knowledge that informs their relationship with the land, resources, and seasonal cycles. During the research process—through in-depth interviews and stakeholder workshops—several respondents emphasized the need to re-anchor tourism within these inherited practices, especially in smaller destinations vulnerable to overexposure or commodification.

Traditional knowledge plays a pivotal role in shaping a more conscious and community-oriented form of tourism. It offers a culturally grounded perspective that values the preservation of local identities, the respectful engagement with places, and the co-construction of meaning between hosts and visitors. In this context, tourism is not merely an economic activity, but a relational practice rooted in mutual recognition and reciprocity.

Respect for the host community becomes a central ethical and operational principle, guiding both policy design and tourist behavior. When tourism integrates the traditional ecological and cultural knowledge of a place, it contributes not only to environmental sustainability, but also to social cohesion and cultural resilience. Communities are no longer perceived as passive recipients of tourism flows, but as active agents who interpret, negotiate, and shape their own narratives and development paths.

Incorporating traditional knowledge into tourism governance frameworks requires a shift from top-down models to participatory, place-based approaches. These approaches privilege community voices, traditional practices, and intergenerational

knowledge as essential resources for fostering sustainable and meaningful tourism experiences.

4. Conclusions

Scientific debate on sustainability has often emphasized economic degrowth and technological strategies. However, the global environmental crisis has revealed the failure of many such practices, prompting a rethinking of sustainable thought. Sustainability must be reinforced by recovering values and principles embedded in local, territorially grounded knowledges. Traditional knowledge must be fully integrated into the equation of tourism sustainability, hence the emergence of circular tourism inspired by interconnection.

A destination's culture must move beyond mere attraction to actively guide tourists' engagement, transforming place into a space of co-participation and genuine empowerment. Through interconnected tourism, travelers are invited to (re)discover their ancestral bonds with the Earth, shifting from passive consumers to mindful participants in local life. This approach aligns with Indigenous and posthumanist perspectives that view humans as interdependent with natural systems rather than separate from them (Escobar, 2018). Reclaiming these relational dimensions may offer the most profound and lasting path toward sustainability—one rooted not just in systems and metrics, but in shared meaning, responsibility, and care.

Conflict of Interest

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

Contributors

This paper is the result of a collaboration between Prof. Lucia Groe, who developed Sections 1, 2, and 3, and Prof. Walter Greco, who authored the Conclusions.

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