

Can Tourism be Sustainable? An International Perspective

Czy turystyka może być zrównoważona? Perspektywa międzynarodowa

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Abstract

Sustainability and tourism have had a long-standing relationship. Tourism as an industry has shifted towards making sustainable choices and implementing policies to align with the Sustainable Development Goals. However, this relationship has layers of complexities and is paradoxical in nature. Practising one within the other is a difficult task, as tourism, primarily, is driven by consumption and economic prosperity, sustainability propagates production, inclusivity and restraint for a better future. This paper discusses the nuanced relationship that sustainability and its three key tenets, namely economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection, share with tourism. It proposes a framework of measures to materialise sustainable development goals within the tourism industry in real time and practice and cites examples of such implementations from across the globe. In assessing the dynamism between sustainability and tourism, this paper highlights the need to strike a balance between the two and the significance of newer forms of tourism models, such as regenerative tourism, community-led initiatives, and sustainable practices, which can lead to an equitable and just future.

Key words: sustainable tourism, sustainable development, sustainability paradox, tourism, sustainability, SDGs

Streszczenie

Zrównoważony rozwój i turystyka mają długą historię. Turystyka jako branża ewoluowała w kierunku dokonywania zrównoważonych wyborów i wdrażania polityk zgodnych z Celami Zrównoważonego Rozwoju. Jednak relacja ta jest wielowarstwowa i paradoksalna. Praktykowanie jednego w drugim jest trudnym zadaniem, ponieważ turystyka jest napędzana przede wszystkim konsumpcją i dobrobytem gospodarczym, podczas gdy zrównoważony rozwój promuje produkcję, inkluzywność i powściągliwość dla lepszej przyszłości. Niniejszy artykuł omawia skomplikowaną relację między zrównoważonym rozwojem i jego trzema kluczowymi założeniami, a mianowicie wzrostem gospodarczym, włączeniem społecznym i ochroną środowiska, a turystyką. Proponuje ramy działań mających na celu realizację Celów zrównoważonego rozwoju w branży turystycznej w czasie rzeczywistym i w praktyce, a także przytacza przykłady takich wdrożeń z całego świata. Oceniając dynamikę między zrównoważonym rozwojem a turystyką, niniejszy artykuł podkreśla potrzebę znalezienia równowagi między nimi oraz znaczenie nowszych form modeli turystycznych, takich jak turystyka regeneracyjna, inicjatywy kierowane przez społeczeństwo i zrównoważone praktyki, które mogą prowadzić do sprawiedliwej przyszłości.

Slowa kluczowe: zrównoważona turystyka, zrównoważony rozwój, paradoks zrównoważoności, turystyka, zrównoważony rozwój, Cele Zrównoważonego Rozwoju

Introduction

With the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aiming to accomplish the proposed 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by all United Nations member countries, in its penultimate stages, the discourse around sustainability needs to be louder than ever. The 1987 Brundtland Commission definition of sustainability, which states that sustainability is the approach of living through which we can *meet our present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs* (United Nations, 1987), remains the most widely accepted and academically used till date. Sustainability, while being an individual choice, is also a collective duty, which is largely carried out by the government and its welfare agencies. Any nation's prospects of growth and development are guided by the principles of sustainable development.

Sustainable development as an approach primarily stands on three significant pillars: economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection (Gibson, 2006; Purvis et al., 2019). Economic sustenance revolves around responsible reforms of economic growth that create long-term prosperity (Islam, Munasinghe, & Clarke, 2003). Social sustainability takes into consideration the welfare of communities and individuals, making efforts to provide equal opportunities, safeguard human rights and promote social solidarity to create just and equitable societies (Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017). Ecological sustainability promotes clean practices that decrease negative imprints on nature, biodiversity conservation reforms, and a greener earth (Singh & Vallarasu, 2023). These pillars are interrelated and mutually dependent on each other for any country's holistic development (Ghimire, 2023). However, critics argue that this model is biased, with the pursuit of economic gains prevailing over ecological and social values (Sharpley, 2000).

Sustainability as a vision has been adopted across industries and sectors as a guiding model for business development and future progress. Tourism, as an industry, has also attempted to incorporate sustainability. Tourism is one of the prominent sectors in the service-based industries of most developed and developing countries. It is also one of the largest employers, generating nearly 195 million jobs in 2005 (Theobald, 2005), twenty years later, which increased to 357 million jobs globally (WTTC, 2025). It is often perceived as the *world's peace industry* (D'amore, 2014); however, it is also one of the most socially and culturally intrusive phenomena, which has economic motives. According to the latest United Nations World Tourism Barometer 2025, 1.4 billion international tourists were recorded globally, which nearly matches the pre-pandemic levels, indicating the recovery of the tourism sector that suffered significant losses during the COVID-19 pandemic (UNWTO, 2025). These figures highlight the relevance and need for tourism, especially for developing economies that rely heavily on services and hospitality.

However, the same mobility of people, money, and culture that support tourism also creates significant conflicts with the ideas of sustainability. It is paradoxical that tourism serves as both a means of development and a cause of environmental damage, social inequality, and cultural homogeneity (Mowforth & Munt, 2015). Tourism in itself is surrounded by its paradoxes; on one hand, it generates wealth and employment, but on the other hand, it is heavily dependent on cheap labour (Dann, 2017). While it promotes and generates revenue for conservation facilities, it also simultaneously results in landscape shifts and ecosystem losses (Holden, 2015). Tourism, in its promise of escape from everyday mundaneness, ends up creating undesirable expectations of consumption and universal markers of what constitutes *aesthetic* travel (Hall, 2022). The need for well-being and pleasure also stems from the increasing global environmental and economic degradation, which, among other reasons, tourism also helps bolster.

In the 1990s, under the wings of neo liberalisation and globalisation, discourses around tourism expanded and were taken under the framework of sustainable development. To constrain the harms caused by unregulated tourism, notions of sustainable tourism, ecotourism, and responsible travel were introduced (Mishra & Kumar, 2024). The United Nations World Tourism Organisation, in defining sustainable tourism, states, *Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities* (UNWTO, 2018). The rise of *sustainable tourism* as a concept is intended, on one hand, to minimize the ecological damage, and on the other, to create sustainable alternative livelihood measures for host communities (Zolfani et al., 2015). To commemorate the need to raise awareness about sustainable tourism, the UN declared 2017 to be the Year of Sustainable Tourism (UN Tourism, 2017), stating that tourism must incorporate the tenets of sustainable development in its theoretical and practical processes. However, several studies (Buckley, 2012; Mihalic, 2020) claim that despite such initiatives and the creation of bodies like the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), the last decade has not witnessed much evidence of ground-level implementations towards the achievement of sustainable tourism development's goals.

In practice, tourism's sustainability has often been more of a goal than a reality. Sustainability and tourism have a strained relationship; one often cannot be bolstered by the other. Sustainability, as an idea, assumes there are limits to growth, consumption, and exploitation (Mensah, 2019). In contrast, tourism depends on expansion, novelty, and movement. To bridge the gap between these two conceptually separate processes, policymakers and stakeholders must look beyond certifications and technical solutions. There is an urgent need to re-evaluate what is mostly

valued in travel by tourists, what are the primary facets of materialising development in tourist regions, and most significantly, to rethink the ways the human-nature relationship is turning exploitative.

This study thus looks at the question: Can sustainability and tourism really coexist, or are they at odds within the global capitalist system? To answer that question, this study embraces a qualitative and literature-based methodological approach. Scholarly publications and articles relevant to the study's primary question were reviewed to gain a deeper understanding of the existing literature on sustainability in relation to tourism. The sources cited throughout the study are considered based on their relevance, recency and credibility, with preference given to peer-reviewed studies. The collected literature has been thematically analysed to paint a holistic picture of global trends and discourses around sustainability and tourism. The studied works have helped us develop a deeper conceptual understanding of various facets of implementing sustainability in the tourism sector. While using relevant literature, this study formulates and structures a framework that suggests sustainable measures for the tourism sector, citing global examples of similar approaches. This work argues that while sustainable tourism is an important goal, realizing it faces challenges due to deep-rooted contradictions in the economic and cultural aspects of modern tourism. Alternatives like community-based and regenerative tourism (Duxbury et al., 2020) can be a prospective way forward. Such alternatives look beyond the capitalistic models of tourism economy and move towards participatory development (Sheller, 2021).

Tourism and social inclusion

Advocates of sustainable tourism argue that tourism creates employment opportunities, fosters the exchange of culture, aims to empower marginalised communities, and thus promotes social inclusion (Li et al., 2022; Kumar et al., 2023). In places where agricultural or industrial development is limited, tourism often is an alternative source of livelihood (Tao & Wall, 2009). It provides a scope for the host communities' youth and women to engage in social participation and generate income (Scheyvens, 1999). Sustainable tourism, in its ideal form, is an example of the participatory approach of development where the local population actively plays a role in the development process of the region.

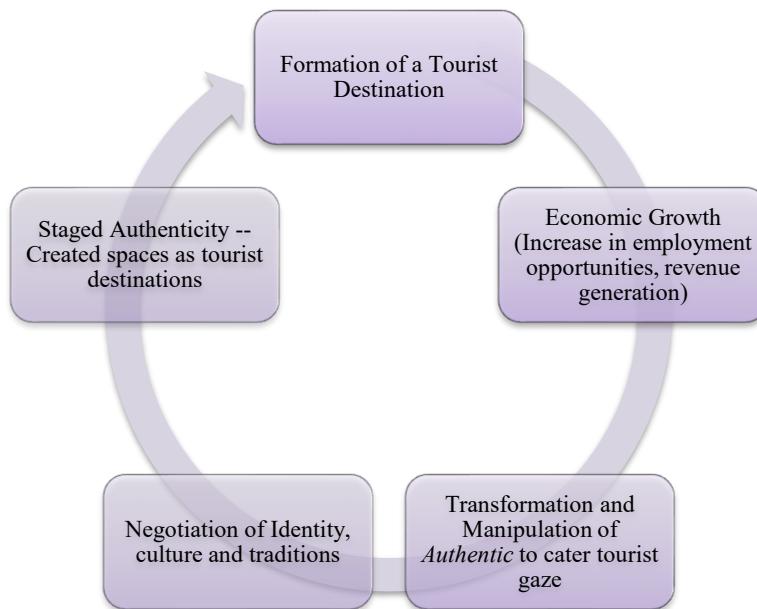


Figure 1. What is *authentic* in a tourist space?

However, the social aspect of sustainability, which includes local participation, fairness, and cultural integrity, is often a point of paradoxical views. Christian (2016), in his work on the Kenyan tourist attraction, Masaai Mara National Reserve, reveals how colonial landscapes and racial history are commodified to cater to global tour operators. Similarly, in his study of Sri Lankan tourism, Kravanja (2012) identifies the patterns of social inequality embedded in the practices and policies of tourism development. Several other studies (Eisenschitz, 2016; Mlilo, Bollig & Diez, 2024) are suggestive of the notion that tourism reinforces social inequalities that exist globally. The enjoyment of wealthy travellers relies on the work and resources of marginalized communities. Cultural performances, landscapes, and even local identities are transformed into commodities for sale, resulting in what MacCannell (1973) referred to as *staged authenticity*. He views tourist spaces as being staged to replicate authentic experiences in a way that pleases the customer, but it is not the real picture. In doing so, local host communities

often negotiate with their cultural practices, traditions, knowledge systems and even their identities. This negotiation results in the transformation of the very space that was intended to be experienced authentically by the tourists (See Fig. 1). And thereby, one must ask how far it is socially sustainable if host communities stray away from cultural and social authenticity for economic gains, growing demands and tourist gaze (Urry, 1992). This often leads to cultural homogenisation of host communities as they continue to imbibe foreign cultures for marketability and tourist demands (Shepherd, 2002).

As a process, tourism facilitates the production and consumption of symbolic capital; tourist destinations are looked at as brands, culture is sold as a commodity, and nature is a background for leisure (Bianchi, 2018). In this context, sustainability often turns into a branding tactic. States and corporations use it to disguise harmful practices under the pretence of ethical consumption (Butcher, 2011). The failure to contain the social and cultural integrity of a region and community is a byproduct of tourism models where social inclusion is not prioritised.

Thus, social inclusion in tourism is a limiting feature, as it is unequal and conditioned. The empowerment and development that tourism promises also brings with it dependencies on global trends and markets, and external interference from political and business circles. Tourism's inclusive goal often covers its structural exclusion. On the one hand, tourists are empowered through cultural consumption; on the other hand, issues such as seasonal unemployment, precarious livelihoods, and limited decision-making capacities cripple the host communities (Godovskykh, Fyall & Pizam, 2025).

Tourism and economic growth

Unlike most industries, tourism deals not in the exchange of goods and products but in the exchange of services and experiences. Tourism's charm lies in its ability to drive economic growth, development, employment and foreign interest. Global South countries, in particular, view tourism as a gateway into the global economy. Tang and Tan (2018) suggest that the impact of tourism on economic growth varies across different countries and different income groups and is proportionate to the institutional qualities of the host communities. Being a diverse and fragmented industry, it is often challenging to accurately assess its economic impact. Tourism helps local regions gain exposure to global markets and attract people from across the world. It also boosts their livelihoods by creating employment opportunities. Tourism leads to an increase in hotels, resorts, and homestays to accommodate the growing number of tourists. Any region that experiences a growth in tourist influx also sees an increase in transport facilities, shopping centres, restaurants, and other leisure spaces (Khan et al., 2020). Economic gains via tourism are spilled over to other sectors that produce or consume goods and services, which are secondarily used up in the tourism sector (Gwenhure & Odhiambo, 2017). For example, the growth in agriculture, fisheries, and textile industries in certain areas is often driven by tourist demand.

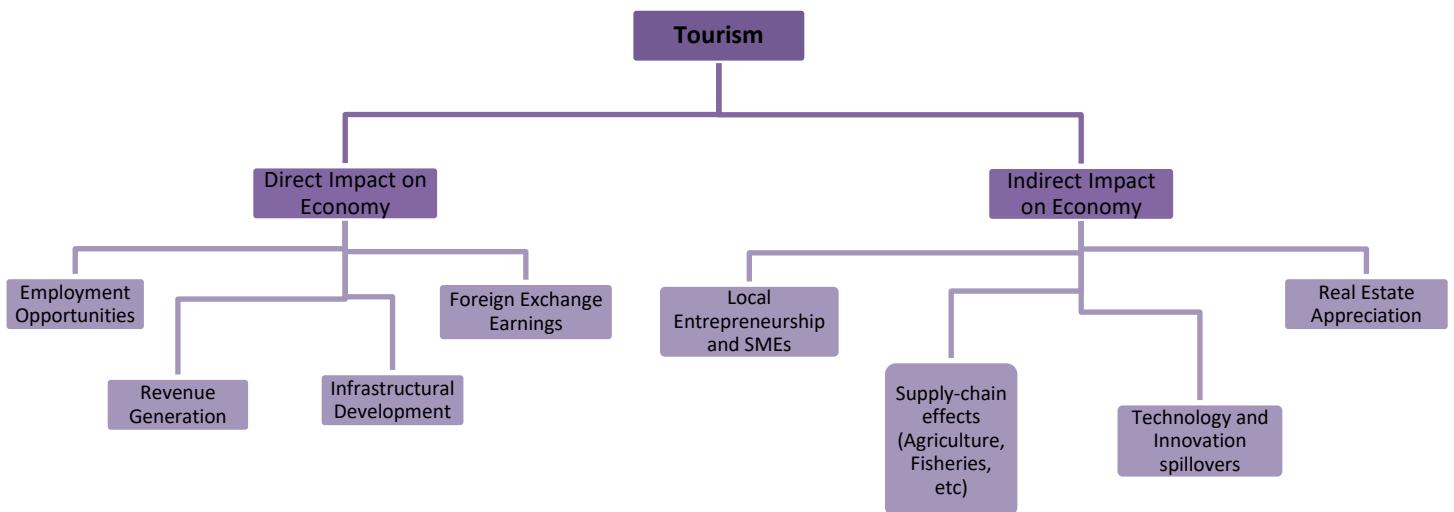


Figure 2. Direct and indirect economic impact of tourism

However, several studies suggest that tourism increases income inequality (Zhang, 2021; Chi, 2021) among communities, as the revenue generated through tourism finds its way back to corporate business and capitalists via hotel and restaurant chains, transportation ownership, and very little of that revenue is retained by local workers and participants (UNWTO, 2014). While governments and other stakeholders create policies to attract tourism, enabling local economies to flourish, policymakers often emphasise the positive economic impacts of tourism.

However, very little attention is given to the distribution of the generated revenue to local communities (Lee, 2009).

Tourism is often also accused of promoting hedonistic consumerism among tourists (Font & McCabe, 2017). With increasing spending capacities, the growing popularity of luxury tour packages and adventures, and capitalistic marketing of tourist places and experiences, tourism often results in exploitative processes that harm the larger society. Tourism functions on the shoulders of informal labour and the magnified scope of daily wages, seasonal work. To cater to and curate tourist ventures, prominent areas of land are acquired from locals. For example, mass tourism in Bali, an Indonesian island, which caters to economic growth, has resulted in a significant amount of land and labour dispossession (Fagertun, 2017).

Sustainable Tourism, however, attempts to steer away from the growth-minded development and bend towards creating a balance between ecological responsibility and social inclusivity, thereby preaching that it can be both profitable and ethical. Similarly, alternative forms of tourism, like community-based tourism, attempt to contain the economic benefits of tourism of any particular region within the local participants who provide services to tourists. Initiatives like local homestays, farm-to-market stores, and restaurants are a step towards inclusive economic growth in the tourism industry (Das, 2024).

Tourism and environmental protection

The tourism and sustainability paradox extends beyond concerns about social inclusion and economic growth. While the tripartite model of sustainability does not claim a hierarchy among the three pillars, an exclusive focus on environmental protection is the need of the hour. Maharana (2025) emphasises the significance of environmental sustainability, stating that it is the root cause of systemic and structural inequality in society.

In a world enveloped by technology, we witness rapid economic development, but at the expense of ecological costs. In the recent past, we have seen several instances where exponential development has resulted in reduced forest cover, polluted seas and oceans, increase in greenhouse gas emissions. The environmental impact of tourism-related activities is immense; 40% of tourism's carbon footprint is attributed to air travel (Peeters & Dubois, 2010). The carbon emissions from flying, the water and food waste from hotels and resorts, increased footfall in natural spaces, and the waste generated by mass tourism in public areas clearly contradict the ecological balance that sustainability requires (Gössling & Hall, 2019). Lukashina et al. (1996), in their study of the Sochi region of Russia, reflect on the rapid real-estate development of resorts and hotels for tourists that causes deforestation and ecological imbalance in the coastal areas. Tourist regions in China, as reported by Teng, Cox, and Chatziantoniou (2021), have experienced growth in their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) but at the cost of higher levels of carbon dioxide emissions, which are harmful to the environment.

To counter such costs, the tourism sector often resorts to adapting eco-labels and sustainable certifications; these efforts are more symbolic than structural and amount to greenwashing (Font & Lynes, 2018), which fails to address systemic causes of environmental degradation and ecological harm. Sustainable practices are often used as gimmicks to attract tourist attention; they are often imposed on local participants without providing awareness or the means to make alternative choices. In Indian local markets, vendors are advised not to use plastic bags; however, the revenue they generate does not allow them to opt for alternatives, considering plastic bags are cheaper (NITI Aayog, 2022).

The discourse surrounding the detrimental impacts of tourism, which cannot be addressed solely through sustainable tourism, has led to the emergence of newer and alternative forms of tourism (Ei & Karamanis, 2017), including ecotourism and regenerative tourism, which aim to prioritise the needs of nature first. These forms of tourism call for an alternative paradigm whereby continuous monitoring, feedback generation and restoration of natural resources and habitat will be catered to. It focuses on conservation and preservation of nature through community engagement and participatory approaches (Owen, 2007).

Tourism and Sustainable Development Goals

Sustainability, in its aspirations of conservation and a just future, can often sideline the existing inequalities present in our society (Peterson, 2015). After considering how the three pillars of sustainability align within the realm of tourism and its nuances, the paper proposes a framework to incorporate multiple implementations, with reference to the tourism industry, in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals proposed by the United Nations through community involvement, welfare schemes, and policy-making. These measures are broader methods of creating inclusivity among local communities and generating a trickle-down impact, so that the benefits of increasing tourism in any region reach the people without compromising their cultural and social integrity. Although these are primarily theoretical policies, if implemented with the backing of ground-level data surveys and community participation, they can ultimately lead to sustainable futures for the tourism industry. Relevant examples from across the globe are also listed to substantiate the possibility of proposed implementations.

Sustainable Development Goals	Possible Implementations in the Tourism Industry	Examples (International)
Goal 1: No Poverty	Community-led tourism, Government welfare schemes for local craftsmen, artists, and unskilled labour.	Thailand – community-based tourism (Boonratana, 2010) Peruvian Taquile Island – textile artisan welfare schemes (Oliveira, 2024)
Goal 2: Zero Hunger	Farming schemes linking with food joints, Agro-tourism, Sustainable agriculture initiatives as tourist attractions.	Italy- Agritourism integrating farms with tourism (Tedioli, 2025)
Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being	Promoting wellness tourism, maintaining health and hazard standards in tourist destinations.	Bali and Indonesia -wellness retreat tourism (Utama & Nyandra, 2021)
Goal 4: Quality Education	Capacity-building programs and vocational training programs in craft, hospitality and culture sectors.	Kenya- Masaai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Associations (Odour, 2020)
Goal 5: Gender Equality	Women-led enterprises – Homestays, exhibitions	Nepal – Women-led homestays, trekking groups (Hillman, 2024)
Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation	Community-led waste and sanitation projects, protection of water bodies in tourist destinations	Costa Rica – Blue flag programme for community-based coastal water protection (Creo & Fraboni, 2011)
Goal 7: Affordable and Clean Energy	Eco-huts, solar-powered systems, and renewable energy schemes for tourist destinations	Maldives – Solar-powered island resorts (Balkhi, 2017)
Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	Formalisation of informal jobs in tourism sector, scope for equal employment, and inclusive growth schemes	South African Fair Trade Tourism to improve labour rights (Strambach & Surmeier, 2013)
Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	Promoting local startups, green infrastructure for tourism economy	Singapore – Smart cities, transportation, smart tourism infrastructure (Haque, Chin, & Debnath, 2013)
Goal 10: Reduced Inequality	Policies against exploitative tourism models, inclusive frameworks for indigenous and marginalised communities	Canada - Aboriginal tourism initiatives (Lemelin, Koster, & Youroukos, 2015)
Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	Curbing Over-tourism, promoting heritage conservation and cultural tourism by community-led initiatives	Venice – Tourist Carrying capacity model to curb over-tourism (Bertocchi et.al, 2020)
Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production	Certifying sustainable products, zero-waste tourism policies, and raising awareness on sustainability choices	Slovenia – Zero waste capital, tourism waste management (Lavtizar et al., 2021)
Goal 13: Climate Action	Eco-friendly transportation, mapping carbon footprint, and climate conservation projects	Iceland, Bhutan, Ethiopia – Carbon neutral pledges (Flagg, 2015)
Goal 14: Life Below Water	Sustainable coastal tourism, regulating water sports and underwater activities.	Coral reef restoration programs (Suggett et al., 2023)
Goal 15: Life on Land	Biodiversity conservation policies, restricting deforestation for real estate development, promote eco-tourism.	Wildlife Conservation through CSR and Governance policies in India (Baroth & Mathur, 2019)
Goal 16: Peace and Justice Strong Institutions	Transparent governance, participatory decision-making models for tourism sector	Sweden – Governance of Locality model (Hultman & Hall, 2012)
Goal 17: Partnerships to Achieve the Goal	Collaborations with state, local and international bodies for sustainable structures of tourism development	European Union – Cross-border tourism governance policies (Stofelen & Ioannides, 2025)

Table 1. SDGs, possible measures for sustainable tourism practices and international examples

Conclusion

Tourism and sustainability can coexist, but with conditions. Their relationship is necessary, as tourism in the long run cannot be sustained if it does not prioritise social inclusion, ecological protection, and inclusive economic growth. The place that attracts tourists does so due to its social, cultural, and natural appeal; if sustainability is not practised, that very place loses its appeal. To flourish as a tourist destination, beyond economic measures, social and environmental awareness are significant requirements.

However, tourism and sustainability stand at a crossroads, as they differ structurally. This paradoxical nature is rooted in the contemporary crisis of development, where the quest for prosperity coincides with limited resources. Tourism and sustainability are not compartmentalised economic and environmental categories, but also moral economies where what constitutes a good life, what constitutes morally sustainable choices, and what is right for both the host and the tourist are constantly evolving narratives. Tourism is the epitome of modern aspirations for

exploration, movement, and self-fulfilment, while sustainability symbolises limitations, conservation and justice. Creating a bridge between the two requires remoulding both. From being an extractive industry, tourism must evolve into a practice of care, and sustainability must spread beyond being frameworks and discourses to become ethical and political policies of transformation.

Emerging models, such as community-based tourism, eco-tourism, and regenerative tourism, are examples of sustainable transformations that can be incorporated into the tourism sector. However, their impacts are restricted without significant structural changes. The success of such models depends on the political and governmental capacity to reimagine new schemes that co-construct community and culture, rather than promoting mindless consumption, foster connections within society, rather than exploiting resources, and sustain economic gains while building a relationship between humans and nature. In times of climate change, crisis, and global inequality, sustainable tourism, though contested, hopeful, and nascent, may indeed be the most necessary and vital choice that humanity makes for a better and more sustainable future.

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