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MAPPING CONTEMPORARY TOURISM RESEARCH: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW ON SUSTAINABLE, SMART, AND INCLUSIVE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Muhammad Taufik[1*], I Wayan Bratayasa[2], Muharis[3] , Teguh Iman Pribadi[4]

[1,3]Universitas Bumigora
[2]Sekolah Tinggi Pariwisata Mataram
[4]Universitas Islam Negeri Mataram

e-mail: [1]m.taufik@universitasbumigora.ac.id, [2]iwayanbratayasastp@gmail.com, [3]muharis@universitasbumigora.ac.id, [4]teguhpribadi@uinmataram.ac.id

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Abstract

Contemporary tourism research has increasingly shifted toward integrated perspectives that combine sustainability, digital transformation, and social inclusion. This study aims to systematically map and synthesize scholarly developments in sustainable tourism, smart tourism, and inclusive tourism over the period 2015–2025. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach was employed following the PRISMA framework to ensure transparency and rigor in the selection and analysis of relevant studies. Data were collected from major academic databases and screened based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, resulting in 82 eligible articles for final analysis. The findings reveal four dominant thematic clusters, namely sustainable tourism governance, smart tourism technologies, inclusive tourism development, and post-pandemic tourism transformation. Sustainable tourism remains the most established research area, focusing on environmental management and community-based development, while smart tourism is rapidly expanding through the adoption of artificial intelligence, big data, and digital platforms. Inclusive tourism, although growing, remains comparatively underdeveloped and fragmented. The study also identifies an emerging convergence between sustainability and smart tourism, while inclusivity is still weakly integrated within existing frameworks. Methodologically, qualitative and bibliometric approaches dominate the literature, with limited longitudinal and comparative studies. This research contributes by providing a comprehensive conceptual mapping and highlighting the need for an integrated tourism development framework that unifies sustainability, smart technologies, and inclusivity. The findings offer theoretical and practical implications for researchers, policymakers, and destination managers in advancing holistic and future-oriented tourism development models.

Keyword: sustainable tourism, smart tourism, inclusive tourism, systematic literature review, tourism development

Introduction

Tourism has emerged as one of the most dynamic and transformative sectors in the global economy, and it continues to evolve in response to changes in

environmental conditions, technological innovation, and socio-cultural dynamics (Asif & Fazel, 2022; Scott & Gössling, 2015). In the last few decades, the focus of tourism development has changed dramatically from growth to more complex and multidimensional paradigms, focusing on sustainability, digital transformation, and social inclusion (Rodrigues et al., 2022). This transition is closely connected to other global issues, such as climate change, rapid technological change, and persistent social inequality, which all play an increasingly important role in academic discussion and governance in tourism systems. This has led to an understanding of tourism beyond its economic functions, and to seeing it as a means to sustainable development and social welfare.

The most well-known paradigms in current tourism studies are sustainable tourism, smart tourism, and inclusive tourism (Mihalic, 2024; Lin et al., 2022). The development of tourism is sustainable when it can balance the things that are good for the environment, the economy, and the socio-cultural aspects. It is closely tied to the international sustainability agenda, notably the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which focus on responsible consumption, climate action, and inclusive economic growth. In this discourse, tourism is regarded as a positive element of economic development and sustainable long-term ecological resilience, along with the well-being of host communities. At the same time, smart tourism has become a technological paradigm that reframes the tourism system through the use of digital technology, including the use of artificial intelligence, big data, Internet of Things (IoT), and mobile-based platforms (Gretzel et al., 2015; Koo et al., 2025). These technologies will allow more efficient destination management, real-time decision making, and better tourist experiences, making digital innovation a very central issue of today's tourism competitiveness.

Furthermore, the concept of inclusive tourism has received growing academic and research scrutiny as a reaction to the longstanding inequalities in access, participation, and benefit sharing in tourism development(Biddulph & Scheyvens, 2018). The emphasis is on social justice, accessibility, and the empowerment of local communities, including peripheral groups and persons with disabilities. The concept of inclusive tourism aims to promote economic efficiency and social equity in tourism development, so that people have the opportunity to participate in tourism activities and decision-making processes (Korbiel et al., 2025). Although these three paradigms gain increasing significance, they have developed largely separately, and there is rather little conceptual integration in the literature.

The main areas of sustainable tourism research are environmental governance and resource management, while smart tourism research primarily focuses on technological innovation and digital transformation. Inclusive tourism literature, on the other hand, is more interested in social equity, accessibility, and community participation. This fragmentation has left the academic context with a disunited picture, hampering the formation of a comprehensive view of tourism as a networked system. There are some signs of convergence, especially in the use of digital technologies for monitoring sustainability, and in making sustainability accessible, but these paradigms have yet to be inextricably linked in a conceptually robust and empirically consistent way (El Archi et al., 2023) .

This fragmentation is quite challenging for theory as well as for practice. On the theoretical level, it narrows the scope of the creation of a comprehensive framework that can be used to explain tourism as a multidimensional phenomenon

that is affected by environmental, technological, and social factors on a simultaneous basis. In the practical aspect, it hampers the ability of policy makers and destination managers to craft holistic strategies that will take into account sustainability, digital innovation, and inclusivity. Furthermore, the swift pace of the digital transformation and the recovery processes following the pandemic have further increased the importance of more integrated methods in tourism development, making the need to bring together these research streams even more relevant (Gutierriz et al., 2025).

In response to these gaps, this study addresses several key research questions. First, it seeks to identify the dominant thematic trends in contemporary tourism research between 2015 and 2025. Second, it examines how sustainable tourism, smart tourism, and inclusive tourism are conceptually and empirically interconnected within the existing literature. Third, it explores the methodological approaches commonly used in these research domains. Finally, it identifies critical gaps and proposes future research directions to support the development of more integrated tourism frameworks.

The primary objective of this study is to systematically map and synthesize contemporary tourism research related to sustainable, smart, and inclusive tourism development. Specifically, the study aims to identify major thematic clusters, analyse conceptual relationships among the three paradigms, examine methodological trends, and propose a future research agenda that supports more integrative tourism development models. This research is expected to contribute both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it advances tourism scholarship by bridging fragmented research domains into a more cohesive conceptual structure. Practically, it provides insights for policymakers and tourism stakeholders in designing more balanced and inclusive tourism strategies that integrate sustainability principles with digital innovation and social equity considerations.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Contemporary tourism research has increasingly evolved toward multidimensional perspectives that integrate environmental sustainability, technological innovation, and social inclusiveness (Santos et al., 2021). This transformation reflects the growing complexity of tourism systems in the digital era and the increasing demand for responsible development practices. Within this context, three major paradigms have emerged as dominant frameworks in tourism studies, namely sustainable tourism, smart tourism, and inclusive tourism. Although each paradigm possesses distinct conceptual foundations and research trajectories, recent developments indicate the need for a more integrated understanding of their interrelationships in shaping tourism governance and destination development (Mandić & Kennell, 2021).

Sustainable tourism development has become one of the most influential concepts in tourism scholarship over the last two decades. The concept emerged as a response to the negative environmental and socio-cultural impacts of mass tourism, including ecological degradation, cultural commodification, and unequal economic distribution (Liodakis, 2023). Sustainable tourism emphasizes the importance of balancing environmental conservation, economic viability, and socio-cultural preservation to ensure the long-term sustainability of tourism destinations (Nguyen et al., 2024). This perspective is strongly associated with the

principles of sustainable development introduced by the United Nations and is closely aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to responsible consumption, climate action, and inclusive economic growth.

From a theoretical perspective, sustainable tourism is commonly grounded in the Triple Bottom Line framework, which emphasizes the integration of environmental, economic, and social dimensions within development processes. In tourism contexts, this framework highlights the necessity of maintaining ecological resilience while simultaneously supporting local economies and preserving cultural heritage (Driml & Common, 1996) . Sustainable tourism research also emphasizes community participation, environmental governance, and responsible tourist behavior as essential components of destination sustainability. Recent studies further demonstrate that sustainability in tourism extends beyond environmental management and increasingly incorporates issues such as climate adaptation, resilience, and regenerative tourism practices (Duarte et al., 2024; Wulandari, 2026).

In parallel with the sustainability discourse, smart tourism has emerged as a major paradigm, driven by rapid advancements in information and communication technologies (ICTs). Smart tourism refers to the integration of digital technologies into tourism systems to enhance operational efficiency, improve tourist experiences, and support data-driven governance (Marinac & Pisker, 2026). The emergence of smart tourism is closely related to the broader concept of smart cities, where digital infrastructure and interconnected systems are used to optimize urban management and public services. In tourism contexts, technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT), big data analytics, cloud computing, and mobile applications have significantly transformed destination management and tourist interactions (Rosário & Dias, 2024).

Theoretically, smart tourism is frequently associated with innovation theory, technology acceptance models, and digital ecosystem perspectives (Collado-Agudo et al., 2023). These approaches explain how technological innovation influences tourist behavior, organizational competitiveness, and destination governance. Smart tourism destinations are generally characterized by high levels of connectivity, real-time information exchange, integrated digital services, and collaborative stakeholder networks. Through digital platforms, tourism stakeholders are able to collect and analyze large amounts of data to support strategic decision-making, personalize tourist experiences, and improve destination competitiveness. Furthermore, smart tourism technologies are increasingly recognized for their potential contribution to sustainability goals through energy efficiency, mobility optimization, environmental monitoring, and resource management (Zhang & Deng, 2024). However, the growing reliance on digital systems also raises concerns regarding technological inequality, digital exclusion, and ethical governance. While smart tourism may improve efficiency and innovation, unequal access to technology may simultaneously marginalize certain social groups, particularly in developing regions with limited digital infrastructure. This issue highlights the importance of integrating social inclusion perspectives into smart tourism development.

Inclusive tourism has therefore emerged as an important paradigm emphasizing equitable access, participation, and benefit distribution within tourism systems (Biddulph & Scheyvens, 2018). Inclusive tourism seeks to ensure that

tourism development benefits diverse social groups, including local communities, women, persons with disabilities, indigenous populations, and other marginalized groups (Gillovic & McIntosh, 2020). The concept is grounded in principles of social justice, accessibility, empowerment, and participatory governance. Unlike traditional tourism models that often prioritize economic growth and visitor numbers, inclusive tourism focuses on improving social welfare and ensuring that local communities actively participate in tourism planning and decision-making processes.

Theoretical approaches to inclusive tourism commonly draw from social inclusion theory, empowerment theory, and stakeholder theory. These perspectives emphasize the importance of community participation, equitable resource distribution, and collaborative governance in achieving sustainable tourism outcomes. Inclusive tourism also emphasizes accessibility in both physical and digital forms, ensuring that tourism services and experiences are available to all individuals regardless of social, economic, or physical conditions (Theofanous et al., 2024). In recent years, discussions on inclusive tourism have expanded to include issues of gender equality, disability rights, indigenous tourism, and community-based tourism development.

Although sustainable tourism, smart tourism, and inclusive tourism have developed as distinct research domains, contemporary studies increasingly demonstrate their interconnected nature. Smart technologies, for example, can support sustainability initiatives through efficient resource management and environmental monitoring, while digital platforms may also enhance accessibility and participation in tourism activities. Similarly, sustainable tourism initiatives are more likely to succeed when supported by inclusive governance structures that empower local communities and ensure equitable participation. Nevertheless, despite these emerging intersections, existing literature remains fragmented, and integrated theoretical frameworks that simultaneously address sustainability, technological innovation, and inclusivity remain limited.

This fragmentation reveals an important research gap in contemporary tourism scholarship. The increasing convergence between sustainability, smart technologies, and social inclusion suggests the need for a more holistic understanding of tourism systems capable of integrating environmental, technological, and social dimensions simultaneously. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to the existing literature by systematically mapping and synthesizing research related to sustainable, smart, and inclusive tourism development in order to provide a more comprehensive conceptual understanding of contemporary tourism transformation.

Research Method

The study used a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to comprehensively identify, evaluate, and synthesize contemporary tourism research related to sustainable tourism, smart tourism, and inclusive tourism development. The SLR method was selected because it provides a structured, transparent, and replicable procedure for reviewing scientific literature, thereby minimizing subjective bias in the selection and interpretation of studies. In the context of tourism research, the SLR approach is particularly relevant for mapping research

trends, identifying conceptual relationships, and recognizing emerging gaps within fragmented academic domains (Salgado Moreno et al., 2024).

The review process in this study followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. The PRISMA framework was adopted to ensure methodological rigor and transparency throughout the stages of literature identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion. This framework is widely recognized in academic research for improving the reliability and validity of systematic reviews by providing a clear procedural structure.

The literature search was conducted using three major academic databases, namely Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected due to their broad coverage of peer-reviewed tourism research and their relevance for identifying high-quality academic publications. The search process focused on articles published between 2015 and 2025 in order to capture recent developments and contemporary trends in tourism studies, particularly in relation to sustainability, digital transformation, and social inclusion.

Several search keywords and Boolean combinations were used to retrieve relevant literature. The primary search terms included "sustainable tourism," "smart tourism," "inclusive tourism," "tourism development," "digital tourism transformation," and "tourism governance." These keywords were combined using operators such as AND and OR to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant studies. The search strategy was designed to capture interdisciplinary discussions across tourism management, sustainability studies, digital innovation, and social inclusion research.

To maintain the quality and relevance of the reviewed studies, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established. The inclusion criteria consisted of: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles; (2) publications written in English; (3) studies published between 2015 and 2025; and (4) studies explicitly discussing sustainable tourism, smart tourism, or inclusive tourism development. Meanwhile, exclusion criteria included conference proceedings, editorials, book reviews, duplicated records, non-English publications, and studies unrelated to tourism development themes. The screening process was conducted systematically by reviewing titles, abstracts, and full texts to ensure alignment with the objectives of the study.

Following the identification and screening stages, the selected articles were analysed using thematic analysis techniques. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes, conceptual patterns, and relationships among the reviewed studies. In addition, bibliometric mapping techniques were utilized to support the identification of dominant research clusters and emerging research trends. The analysis focused on publication trends, thematic categories, conceptual integration, methodological approaches, and future research directions within contemporary tourism scholarship.

The methodological process of this study is summarized in the PRISMA table below.

Table 1. PRISMA Flow of Literature Selection Process

Prisma Stage	Process Description	Number of Article
Identification	Articles identified through database searching (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar)	512
Identification	Additional records identified through manual searching and references	38
Screening	Records after duplicates removed	467
Screening	Articles screened based on title and abstract relevance	467
Exclusion	Articles excluded due to irrelevance to research themes	289
Eligibility	Full-text articles assessed for eligibility	178
Exclusion	Full-text articles excluded based on inclusion criteria	96
Included	Final articles included in systematic review	82

Source: Analysis result, 2026

The use of the PRISMA framework and systematic screening procedures strengthened the reliability and transparency of this study. Furthermore, the integration of thematic and bibliometric analysis enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the evolution and interconnection of sustainable, smart, and inclusive tourism research. Through this methodological approach, the study provides a robust foundation for identifying research trends, conceptual gaps, and future directions in contemporary tourism scholarship.

Results and Discussion

Results

The findings of this study demonstrate a substantial evolution in contemporary tourism research during the 2015–2025 period, particularly in relation to sustainable tourism, smart tourism, and inclusive tourism development. Based on the systematic review process, a total of 82 articles met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed thematically to identify dominant research patterns, conceptual relationships, and emerging research trends. The results indicate that tourism scholarship has increasingly shifted toward multidimensional approaches that integrate environmental sustainability, digital transformation, and social equity within tourism development frameworks.

One of the most significant findings concerns the rapid increase in publications related to sustainable tourism and smart tourism after 2020. This trend appears to be strongly influenced by the acceleration of digital transformation and the global tourism recovery process following the COVID-19 pandemic (Bulchand-Gidumal, 2022). Sustainable tourism research predominantly focuses on environmental governance, climate resilience, destination sustainability, and community-based tourism models. Many studies emphasize the importance of balancing economic development with environmental protection and socio-cultural preservation, reflecting the continuing relevance of sustainability principles within

tourism policy and destination management (Nguyen et al., 2024; Baloch et al., 2022; Zubiaga et al., 2024).

Simultaneously, smart tourism emerged as a dominant research cluster characterized by discussions on artificial intelligence, Internet of Things (IoT), big data analytics, and digital platforms in tourism systems. The findings reveal that smart tourism studies largely emphasize technological efficiency, tourist experience enhancement, and data-driven destination governance. Digital innovation is increasingly viewed as a strategic tool for improving tourism competitiveness and operational effectiveness. Furthermore, several studies indicate that smart technologies contribute to sustainability objectives through resource optimization, mobility management, and environmental monitoring.

In contrast, inclusive tourism represents a comparatively smaller but steadily growing research area. Studies within this cluster mainly discuss accessibility, community empowerment, participatory governance, and equitable tourism development. Inclusive tourism research highlights the importance of involving local communities and marginalized groups in tourism planning and benefit distribution. However, compared to sustainable and smart tourism, inclusivity remains less integrated within broader tourism innovation frameworks.

Another important finding is the emerging conceptual convergence among the three paradigms. Several recent studies demonstrate that digital technologies can support sustainability initiatives while simultaneously improving accessibility and participation in tourism activities (Fernández-Díaz et al., 2025; Sukma et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the analysis also reveals that the integration of sustainability, smartness, and inclusivity remains fragmented and lacks comprehensive theoretical models. Most studies continue to examine these dimensions separately rather than as interconnected components of tourism systems.

Methodologically, the reviewed studies are dominated by qualitative approaches, followed by bibliometric and mixed-method research designs. Longitudinal and comparative international studies remain relatively limited, indicating opportunities for future research. Overall, these findings confirm the growing complexity of tourism research and highlight the urgent need for more integrative frameworks capable of connecting environmental sustainability, technological innovation, and social inclusion within contemporary tourism development.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that contemporary tourism research has experienced a significant paradigmatic transformation during the last decade. The increasing dominance of sustainable tourism, smart tourism, and inclusive tourism within academic discourse reflects the broader transition of tourism from a growth-oriented industry toward a more integrated system emphasizing environmental responsibility, technological innovation, and social equity (Santos et al., 2021; Alves et al., 2025). This transformation demonstrates that tourism development is no longer evaluated solely based on economic performance, but increasingly assessed through multidimensional indicators related to sustainability, digital adaptability, and community welfare.

One of the most notable findings is the strong expansion of sustainable tourism research, particularly in relation to environmental governance, climate resilience, and community-based development. This trend suggests that sustainability has become a foundational principle within contemporary tourism studies. The growing attention to ecological preservation and responsible tourism practices reflects increasing global awareness regarding the environmental consequences of mass tourism activities. Furthermore, the integration of sustainability discourse into tourism governance demonstrates a broader institutional shift toward aligning tourism policies with international sustainability agendas, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Hall et al., 2022). However, the findings also reveal that sustainability research often remains concentrated on environmental dimensions, while social and technological dimensions receive comparatively less integrated attention.

In parallel, the rapid development of smart tourism research highlights the increasing influence of digital transformation within tourism systems. The integration of technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data analytics, Internet of Things (IoT), and digital platforms has fundamentally reshaped destination management and tourist experiences (Mahjabeen et al., 2026; Mukesh, 2024). Smart tourism is increasingly perceived as an important mechanism for improving efficiency, competitiveness, and service personalization in tourism destinations. The findings indicate that digital technologies are not only used to improve operational performance but also to support sustainability initiatives through environmental monitoring, mobility management, and resource optimization. This demonstrates the growing convergence between sustainability objectives and technological innovation within tourism development.

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal several critical challenges associated with smart tourism implementation. While digitalization creates opportunities for efficiency and innovation, it may simultaneously generate new forms of inequality and exclusion. Limited access to digital infrastructure, technological literacy gaps, and unequal participation in digital tourism ecosystems may marginalize certain communities, particularly in developing regions (Minghetti & Buhalis, 2010). This issue reinforces the importance of inclusive tourism perspectives within contemporary tourism governance. Without adequate inclusivity, smart tourism development risks reproducing social inequalities under the guise of technological advancement.

The analysis further demonstrates that inclusive tourism remains comparatively underrepresented within tourism scholarship despite its growing relevance. Most inclusive tourism studies focus on accessibility, community participation, and empowerment of marginalized groups (Korbiel et al., 2025). However, inclusivity is often treated as a separate social issue rather than as an integrated component of sustainable and smart tourism systems. This fragmentation indicates that contemporary tourism research still lacks comprehensive theoretical frameworks capable of simultaneously integrating environmental sustainability, digital innovation, and social equity.

Another important issue emerging from this study concerns methodological trends within tourism research. The dominance of qualitative and descriptive approaches suggests that much of the current literature remains exploratory in nature. Although bibliometric and systematic review studies are increasing, there is

still limited use of longitudinal, comparative, and interdisciplinary approaches capable of explaining the complex interactions among tourism systems, technology, and social structures. This limitation reduces the ability of existing research to generate more predictive and integrative models of tourism development.

The findings of this study therefore suggest the urgent need for a more holistic paradigm in tourism research. Future tourism studies should move beyond fragmented approaches and develop integrated frameworks that position sustainability, smart technology, and inclusivity as interconnected dimensions rather than isolated concepts. Such integration is increasingly necessary in the context of post-pandemic tourism recovery, where destinations are expected to become not only economically resilient and technologically adaptive, but also socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable. Consequently, the future direction of tourism research should prioritize interdisciplinary collaboration, integrated governance models, and community-centered innovation to ensure that tourism development contributes to long-term societal and ecological well-being.

Conclusion

This study has systematically mapped the development of contemporary tourism research related to sustainable tourism, smart tourism, and inclusive tourism during the 2015–2025 period. The findings demonstrate that tourism scholarship has undergone a substantial transformation characterized by the increasing integration of environmental sustainability, digital innovation, and social equity within tourism development discourse. Sustainable tourism remains the dominant research paradigm, primarily focusing on environmental governance, resilience, and responsible destination management. At the same time, smart tourism has emerged rapidly through the expansion of digital technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and Internet of Things (IoT), which increasingly shape destination governance and tourist experiences. Meanwhile, inclusive tourism continues to develop as an important perspective emphasizing accessibility, participation, and equitable benefit distribution for local communities and marginalized groups.

The study further reveals that although these three paradigms are increasingly interconnected, contemporary tourism research remains fragmented and lacks comprehensive theoretical integration. Most existing studies continue to examine sustainability, smartness, and inclusivity separately rather than positioning them as mutually reinforcing dimensions of tourism systems. This fragmentation limits the development of holistic tourism models capable of addressing contemporary challenges related to environmental degradation, technological disruption, and social inequality simultaneously. Furthermore, methodological trends indicate the dominance of qualitative and exploratory approaches, while longitudinal and interdisciplinary studies remain relatively limited.

Based on these findings, this study recommends that future tourism research should prioritize the development of integrated conceptual frameworks that combine sustainability, digital transformation, and inclusivity within a unified tourism governance perspective. Future studies are also encouraged to employ interdisciplinary and comparative approaches to better understand the complex relationships between technology, society, and environmental sustainability in tourism contexts.

Policymakers should develop and enact inclusive tourism policies that support the incorporation of digital technologies, environmental sustainability and community empowerment. This involves investing in digital infrastructure, narrowing the technology gap between destinations, creating regulatory frameworks to facilitate smart and sustainable tourism development and having local communities engage in tourism planning and decision-making processes. Tourism stakeholders should embrace technology-based practices that can improve the tourist experience and contribute to sustainable management of the destination. Tourism businesses, DMTs, and local communities are invited to leverage digital platforms and data-informed decision-making and innovative technologies to enhance the quality of tourism services, operational efficiency, environmental sustainability, and community engagement, in order to foster more inclusive and sustainable tourism ecosystems. Such an integrated approach is essential to ensure that future tourism development is not only economically competitive and technologically adaptive, but also socially equitable and environmentally responsible.

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