Article

Sustainable Tourism: Theories, Practices, and Challenges in the Pursuit of Balanced Development

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable tourism has emerged as a necessary response to the negative impacts generated by traditional tourism, seeking to integrate economic, social, and environmental dimensions in a balanced way. This article reviews the main theories and models that underpin sustainable tourism, such as the Triple Bottom Line, Stakeholder Theory, and Sustainable Governance. In addition, it discusses the practical application of these approaches in various types of tourism, such as ecotourism, community-based tourism, and adventure tourism, highlighting how these practices can mitigate environmental damage, promote local development, and preserve cultures. Considering the relevance of technological innovation, the circular economy, and education in sustainable tourism, the article offers an integrated view that emphasizes the need for collaboration among all stakeholders to achieve truly sustainable tourism development. It concludes that sustainable tourism, in addition to being a viable alternative, is a strategic imperative to ensure the well-being of future generations by preserving natural and cultural resources.

Keywords: sustainable development; tourism management; society and tourism; SDG 12.2. – sustainable production and consumption.

RESUMO

O turismo sustentável emergiu como uma resposta necessária aos impactos negativos gerados pela atividade turística tradicional, buscando integrar as dimensões econômica, social e ambiental de forma equilibrada. Este artigo revisa as principais teorias e modelos que fundamentam o turismo sustentável, como o Triple Bottom Line, a Teoria dos Stakeholders e a Governança Sustentável. Além disso, discute a aplicação prática dessas abordagens em diversas tipologias turísticas, como o ecoturismo, o turismo comunitário e o turismo de aventura, evidenciando como essas práticas podem mitigar os danos ambientais, promover o desenvolvimento local e preservar as culturas. Ao considerar a relevância da inovação tecnológica, da economia circular e da educação em turismo sustentável, o artigo oferece uma visão integrada que enfatiza a necessidade de colaboração entre todos os stakeholders para alcançar um desenvolvimento turístico verdadeiramente sustentável. Conclui-se que o turismo sustentável, além de uma alternativa viável, é um imperativo estratégico para garantir o bem-estar das gerações futuras, preservando os recursos naturais e culturais.

Palavras-chave: desenvolvimento sustentável; gestão em turismo; sociedade e turismo; ODS 12.2. – produção e consumo sustentáveis.

Introduction

Tourism, although economically promising, has generated worrying consequences when conducted in a disjointed and poorly planned manner. Among these consequences, the following stand out: gentrification and the expulsion of residents in cities such as Barcelona and Lisbon; sociocultural conflicts between tourists and local communities in destinations such as Venice and Bali; the romanticization of poverty and the reproduction of symbolic violence in tours of slums in Rio de Janeiro and Mumbai; the health impacts observed during the spread of COVID-19 in mass tourism destinations; and the unfair distribution of economic benefits, especially in regions such as Machu Picchu and the Sacred Valley of the Incas (Fletcher et al., 2019). These examples highlight the urgent need to reconfigure tourism based on sustainable principles that combine economic growth, social justice, and environmental preservation.

In this context, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reinforce the urgency of mitigating the impacts of traditional tourism and promoting a more balanced and inclusive model. In line with the SDGs, the debate on sustainable tourism has consolidated itself as one of the main agendas of the 21st century, recognizing that the integration of economic, social, and environmental dimensions is essential to ensure lasting benefits for tourism without compromising natural resources or the quality of life of future generations (Özgit & Zhandildina, 2021).

In Latin America and the Caribbean, sustainable tourism is emerging as a strategic alternative for strengthening regional socioeconomic development. Santos et al. (2023) highlight the growing commitment of communities and local governments to implementing sustainable practices. According to Fraguas and Lerena (2024), countries such as Costa Rica and Ecuador are often cited as references in community-based tourism, while the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has encouraged policies that promote a more equitable distribution of the benefits generated by the sector. However, it should be noted that a significant part of the specialized literature still favors Eurocentric approaches, neglecting the contexts and challenges specific to countries in the Global South—which constitutes a theoretical and practical gap that deserves further study.

Given this scenario, this study poses the following research question: How can sustainable tourism, based on its theoretical and practical foundations, respond to the contemporary challenges of balanced development? The overall objective is to critically analyze the theoretical foundations, practical applications, and emerging challenges that structure the field of sustainable tourism, preferably from a Global South perspective.

To this end, a methodological approach based on an advisory panel of five Latin American experts was adopted, complemented by a multimodal review of scientific, institutional, and empirical sources. This strategy aimed to integrate multiple perspectives and ensure the timeliness and depth of the proposed analyses. The article is organized into thematic sections that discuss the conceptual and normative frameworks of sustainable tourism, stakeholder approaches, convergent typologies, applied innovations, and formative strategies, composing a comprehensive and critical view. In this sense, more than contributing to the existing literature, this study aims to foster a pluralistic debate committed to the ethical and sustainable transformation of tourism in the region.

Methodological Procedures

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory approach guided by the interpretive paradigm. The methodological choice is based on the premise that understanding the meanings attributed to sustainable tourism must consider the cultural, social, and institutional contexts in which practices develop, thus prioritizing a dense and contextualized analysis of the dynamics involved.

Based on inductive logic, methodological strategies compatible with the study's objectives were mobilized, especially the use of an advisory panel and a multimodal literature review. The panel was structured according

to the guidelines of Fraussen et al. (2020). Thus, the advisory panel was composed of five Latin American experts with recognized academic and/or practical experience in the field of sustainable tourism. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on criteria such as professional experience, involvement in academic networks, and engagement in projects focused on sustainability in tourism. Contributions were collected through virtual interactions guided by open-ended questions, allowing for the emergence of reflective discourses and multiple interpretations of contemporary challenges in the field.

In addition, an integrative literature review was conducted, covering scientific sources, institutional documents, and empirical evidence. This stage aimed to articulate existing theories, practices, and regulations, composing an analytical body consistent with the study's objectives. To ensure diversity and currency, bibliographic searches were conducted in national and international databases such as Scopus, SciELO, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and institutional repositories.

The choice of qualitative methods from multiple sources, including secondary data and expert insights, allows for triangulation and cross-validation of information, reinforcing the credibility of the findings. In line with the principles of interpretive research, the data were analyzed categorically and thematically, prioritizing emerging meanings, argumentative recurrences, and the identification of discursive patterns that revealed both tensions and convergences in the field of sustainable tourism.

Perspectives on tourism focusing on sustainability

Sustainable tourism presents itself as a necessary response to growing concerns about the negative impacts of tourism, which range from environmental damage to social and economic imbalances. The sustainable approach to tourism is supported by three fundamental pillars—economic, social, and environmental dimensions—which must be integrated in a balanced way to ensure the long-term viability and equity of tourism (Dodds & Butler 2019). This chapter examines the assumptions of sustainable tourism, considering an international perspective, a three-pronged approach, and the relevance of the different stakeholders involved.

International Perspective

Considering the premises of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and their sustainable perspectives, tourism is one of the main sources of income in many countries, especially in emerging economies, where it contributes significantly to gross domestic product (GDP) and job creation. However, the pressure for economic growth often conflicts with the need for environmental preservation and social justice, making sustainable tourism a global priority (León-Gómez et al. 2021).

Internationally, the implementation of sustainable practices in tourism requires collaboration between governments, NGOs, multilateral organizations, and the private sector. It is common among authors to highlight that sustainable tourism is considered an essential strategy for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. According to Hall et al. (2019) and Monsalve-Pelaez et al. (2023), particularly SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), and SDG 13 (climate action). However, achieving a balance between economic, social, and environmental goals remains a complex and dynamic challenge, especially in regions where financial resources and governance are limited.

Triple Perspective: Economic, Social, and Environmental

It is essential that sustainable tourism adopts an approach that balances economic, social, and environmental dimensions. From an economic perspective, sustainable tourism aims to promote local prosperity by ensuring that the financial benefits of tourism are distributed fairly among host communities.

This includes supporting circular economy initiatives, where resources are reused and waste is minimized, and strengthening local economies by encouraging community-based tourism and promoting local products and services (Dogru et al. 2020, Garau et al. 2022). However, the challenge lies in the need to balance economic growth with the conservation of natural and cultural resources, avoiding the degradation of tourist destinations.

For Ramkisson (2023), the social dimension of sustainable tourism focuses on respecting and valuing local cultures, promoting equitable practices, and improving the quality of life of the communities involved (Ramkissoon 2023). As already indicated by Parga and Gonzáles (2019), tourism can be a powerful tool for empowering local communities, providing employment opportunities, strengthening cultural identities, and promoting social inclusion. However, excessive commercialization of culture, exclusion of local communities from the decision-making process, and gentrification are risks that must be mitigated through inclusive and participatory policies.

The environmental perspective is perhaps the most critical, given the urgent need to preserve natural ecosystems in the face of pressures from mass tourism (Dolnicar et al. 2019). Sustainable tourism seeks to minimize the ecological impact of tourism activities through the conservation of natural resources, the reduction of energy and water consumption, the proper management of waste, and the protection of biodiversity (Perkumienė et al. 2020). However, the implementation of sustainable environmental practices faces challenges such as lack of regulation, lack of commitment from the private sector, and the need to educate tourists and communities about sustainable behaviors.

Stakeholder perspective

The success of sustainable tourism depends directly on the involvement and collaboration of a wide range of *stakeholders*, each with different motivations, benefits, and challenges. According to Lindberg et al. (2019), residents in tourist areas are among those most directly impacted and may, in certain contexts, benefit economically—as is the case with many indigenous communities in Peru, which, through community-based tourism, are able to preserve their cultural traditions while earning some income. However, studies such as those by Laličić & Weber-Sabil (2020) warn of significant challenges, such as price inflation and loss of cultural identity, often observed in destinations with high tourist flows. In cities such as Cartagena, Colombia, increased real estate investment aimed at tourism has substantially raised the cost of living for local residents (Martínez, 2025). The perception and attitude of these populations towards sustainable tourism are strongly related to how benefits are distributed and the extent to which their voices are considered in the planning and management of tourism activities. In this sense, participatory experiences, such as ecotourism in Costa Rica—where local communities are involved in the management of nature reserves—have proven to be effective strategies for mitigating resistance and maximizing the positive impacts of tourism (Gutiérrez et al. 2022).

In the sphere of work, as highlighted by Samal & Dash (2024), workers in the tourism sector, in turn, have a direct interest in sustainable practices that can guarantee the continuity of their jobs and improve their working conditions. However, the transition to more sustainable practices may require additional training and adaptation to new ways of operating, which can generate resistance. One example is the training offered at some resorts in the Maldives, where employees are trained in eco- practices, such as efficient water and energy management. Despite the long-term benefits, these programs face implementation challenges, especially in regions where environmental education is limited and resources are scarce.

Tourists are essential to the demand for sustainable practices. As Raftopoulos (2020) points out, although awareness of sustainability is increasing, as seen in the growing interest in eco-friendly destinations in Iceland, many tourists still prioritize price and convenience over ethical practices. Motivating tourists to adopt more sustainable behaviors, such as respecting local cultures and reducing their ecological footprint, is an ongoing

challenge. The case of Machu Picchu in Peru, where authorities introduced daily visitor limits to protect the heritage site, exemplifies the difficulty of reconciling conservation and tourist demand, but also demonstrates how well-communicated policies can change tourist behavior.

Business partners and suppliers play a crucial role in the sustainable tourism value chain. They can be motivated by financial incentives, consumer demand for sustainable products and services, and government regulation (Panse et al. 2021). One example is Costa Rica's green hotel certification program, which encourages sustainable practices through tax benefits and access to new markets. However, the transition to sustainable practices may require significant investments in green technologies and changes in production and logistics processes, challenges that are particularly acute for small and medium-sized enterprises, which often operate on low profit margins (Higgins-Desbiolles et al. 2019).

Competition in the tourism sector can be both a challenge and an opportunity for sustainability. While some companies, such as Intrepid Travel, are leading the way in adopting sustainable practices as a competitive differentiator, others may resist due to the associated costs (Samal & Dash 2024). Intrepid Travel, for example, has distinguished itself by adopting a carbon-neutral policy, transforming sustainability into a core value that attracts a growing niche market. In contrast, companies that do not adopt such practices may face a loss of competitiveness as consumers become more aware and demanding.

Investors are increasingly aware of the importance of sustainability for the long-term viability of companies. Motivations include financial returns, risk mitigation, and alignment with environmental, social, and governance (ESG) criteria (Sun & Waqas 2024). One example is BlackRock's investment fund, which has prioritized companies with strong sustainable practices, promoting sustainability as a value metric. However, the lack of standardized metrics and transparency can make it difficult to make informed decisions, limiting the potential impact of these investments.

Managers play a central role in implementing sustainable practices. They are responsible for defining strategies, allocating resources, and ensuring compliance with environmental and social standards. A notable example is the hotel sector in Bali, where managers have adopted renewable energy systems and promoted the use of biodegradable plastics. Challenges include the need to balance profitability with social and environmental responsibility and to lead teams through organizational change, especially in destinations where sustainability is not yet a clear priority (Irawan et al. 2022).

Governments have a regulatory and facilitating role in sustainable tourism. They can promote sustainable practices through public policies, tax incentives, and regulations, as is the case with New Zealand's tourism policy, which adopts a "kaitiakitanga" (guardian of nature) approach. However, international cooperation is essential to address transnational challenges such as climate change and biodiversity conservation, and this requires effective coordination between different levels of government and countries (Heslinga et al. 2019). Policy fragmentation and lack of coordination can compromis ly the effectiveness of sustainable initiatives, as seen in the difficulties faced by countries in the Amazon basin in reconciling national interests with environmental conservation.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the assumptions of sustainable tourism, it is essential to consider the different perspectives of the main stakeholders involved in the process. Each stakeholder group has different motivations, benefits, challenges, and attitudes that influence how sustainable tourism is perceived and implemented. The success of this approach depends on understanding and collaboration among these actors, whose interactions can determine the positive or negative impact of sustainable practices in tourism. The following table summarizes this information, facilitating the visualization of the factors that shape the dynamics of sustainable tourism.

Table 1. Stakeholder analysis matrix. The information presented is subject to variation depending on specific contexts.

Stakeholder	Perspective	Motivations	Benefits	Challenges	Attitudes/Examples
Residents in the Territory	Directly impacted by tourism in their communities	Cultural preservation, economic benefits	Income generation, strengthening of cultural identity	Price inflation, loss of cultural identity	Participation in ecotourism (e.g., Costa Rica)
Collaborators/Employees	Interest in job continuity and improvements	Job stability, better quality of life	Improving working conditions	Additional training, adaptation to new practices	Training in ecological practices (e.g., Maldives)
Customers/Tourists	Essential for the demand for sustainable practices	Awareness, interest in authentic experiences	Respect for local cultures, reduction of ecological footprint	Conflict between sustainability and convenience	Visitor limits (e.g., Machu Picchu)
Business partners and suppliers	Crucial role in the value chain	Financial incentives, government regulations	Access to new markets, competitive differentiation	Investment in green technologies, logistical changes	Green certifications (e.g., Costa Rica)
Competitors/Other Companies	Competition can be a challenge or an opportunity	Competitive differentiation, innovation	Improved reputation, leadership in sustainability	High costs, internal resistance	Adoption of carbon neutral practices (e.g., Intrepid Travel)
Investors	Growing interest in ESG practices	Financial return, risk mitigation	Long-term viability, attraction of conscious investors	Lack of standardized metrics, limited transparency	Funds prioritizing ESG (e.g., BlackRock)
Managers	Central role in implementing sustainable practices	Organizational strategy, regulatory compliance	Reduction of environmental impacts, business innovation	Balancing profitability and social responsibility	Use of renewable energy in hotels (e.g., Bali)
National and international government	Regulator and facilitator in sustainable tourism	Sustainable development, international cooperation	Environmental conservation, support for sustainable tourism	Fragmentation of policies, lack of coordination	"Kaitiakitanga" approach (e.g., New Zealand)

This table provides a clear overview of the various forces at play in sustainable tourism. Understanding the motivations, benefits, and challenges faced by each stakeholder is crucial to developing strategies that promote

Source: Own elaboration.

truly sustainable practices. By exploring these interactions and seeking collaboration among all involved, it is possible to move toward tourism that not only minimizes negative impacts but also maximizes benefits for communities, the environment, and the global economy.

Theories of Sustainable Tourism

The debates that gave rise to dialogue on sustainable development began in the 1970s in Stockholm. Subsequently, according to Gómez & Garduño (2020), the concept was first introduced in the Brundtland report in 1987, giving rise to the evolution of practices that incorporate a path to sustainable tourism. Sustainable development is defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising

the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Applied to tourism, this approach involves managing resources in a way that maximizes economic, social, and environmental benefits in the long term. This requires a balance between environmental conservation, the well-being of local communities, and the economic viability of tourism activities (MacKenzie & Gannon 2019). Within this context, the theoretical development of sustainable tourism has been greatly influenced by advances in adjacent areas of knowledge, such as management, social sciences, and sustainability. These disciplines have contributed to the creation of models and theories that guide the practice of sustainable tourism, helping to understand the complex interactions between the various actors involved and the impacts generated by tourism activities.

One of the most widely recognized models in sustainable tourism is the Sustainable Development Model, commonly known as the Triple Bottom Line (TBL). This model, which originated in management, proposes that sustainable tourism should be evaluated and managed based on three fundamental pillars: economic, social, and environmental. By adopting this three-pronged approach, sustainable tourism seeks to strike a balance between generating economic benefits, promoting social justice, and protecting the environment. In practice, this means that the success of a tourist destination should not be measured solely by financial profit, but also by its positive impact on local communities and the preservation of ecosystems (Csikósová et al. 2020). The TBL model establishes a conceptual basis for decision-making that takes into account the needs of all stakeholders involved, promoting more equitable and responsible tourism development.

Another central theory in sustainable tourism is Systems Theory, which views tourism as a dynamic and interdependent system. Originating from general systems theory, this approach suggests that sustainable tourism can only be achieved if all components of the system—including social, economic, and environmental factors—are managed in an integrated manner. This holistic perspective requires collaboration between different stakeholders and consideration of the cumulative impacts of tourism activities (Javanmardi et al. 2020). Systems Theory is especially relevant in destinations where pressures on natural and cultural resources are high, requiring careful coordination between tourism development and environmental conservation. Thus, Aranibar-Ramos and Olarte-Pacco (2025) reinforce that Systems Theory is especially relevant in destinations where pressures on natural and cultural resources are high, requiring careful coordination between tourism development and environmental conservation.

Stakeholder Theory, widely used in management, also plays a crucial role in sustainable tourism. It emphasizes the importance of identifying and engaging all stakeholders—such as residents, tourists, businesses, governments, and NGOs—in tourism planning and management. This theory suggests that the success of sustainable tourism depends on balancing the interests of these diverse groups, ensuring that everyone has a voice in decisions that affect tourism development (Song et al. 2021, Im et al. 2023). In sustainable tourism, Stakeholder Theory promotes a participatory governance model, where dialogue and collaboration are essential to achieving results that benefit both the local community and visitors.

Social Capital Theory, which originated in the social sciences, addresses the importance of networks of relationships, trust, and cooperation between individuals and groups. In the context of sustainable tourism, social capital is fundamental to strengthening local communities and effectively managing the impacts of tourism (Zmyślony et al. 2020). By building strong social networks, communities can organize themselves to protect their natural and cultural resources, ensuring that tourism contributes to their economic and social development rather than causing degradation. Social capital is thus a valuable resource that can be mobilized to promote more responsible and sustainable tourism practices.

Resilience Theory, derived from ecology, is also applied to sustainable tourism to analyze how destinations can resist, adapt, and thrive in the face of change and crisis. This theory suggests that a destination's ability to maintain its functionality in the face of disturbances—whether natural, such as disasters, or economic, such as

recessions—is crucial for long-term sustainability. The concept of resilience is particularly relevant in a world where climate change and other environmental pressures threaten the viability of many tourist destinations (Han et al. 2021; Hemmonsbey & Knott 2023). By implementing strategies that increase resilience, destinations can not only survive crises but also adapt and evolve to meet future challenges.

Another traditional model in sustainable tourism is the Carrying Capacity Model, which assesses the maximum number of visitors a destination can support without compromising its natural, cultural, or social resources. This concept is central to destination management, as it helps to set limits and guidelines for the use of resources (Bertocchi et al. 2020). Carrying capacity is a practical tool for avoiding overcrowding and environmental degradation, ensuring that tourism can be maintained sustainably over time. However, the application of this model requires a flexible and adaptive approach, as a destination's capacity may change over time in response to new challenges and opportunities.

The Theory of Green Economic Growth suggests that economic growth can be achieved simultaneously with environmental preservation. Applied to tourism, this theory proposes that sustainable practices not only protect the environment but can also be a source of innovation and competitive advantage (Ji & Yang 2024). The transition to green tourism can stimulate the development of new technologies, improve resource efficiency, and create new employment opportunities. However, for this transition to be successful, a strong commitment is needed from all parties involved, including governments, businesses, and local communities.

The Theory of Environmental Justice, with roots in the social sciences, emphasizes that the benefits and costs of tourism should be distributed fairly among different social groups. In sustainable tourism, this theory is used to ensure that local communities are not marginalized or overwhelmed by the negative impacts of tourism (Morea 2021). Environmental justice in tourism involves the creation of policies and practices that ensure that all groups, especially the most vulnerable, have access to the benefits of tourism and are protected from its potential harms.

The Ecotourism Model, which emerged as a response to mass tourism, is a specific approach within sustainable tourism. Focused on environmental conservation and the benefit of local communities, ecotourism seeks to minimize the negative impacts of tourism through environmental education and the promotion of responsible practices (Zhang & Yang 2021). This model has been widely adopted in destinations with rich biodiversity and sensitive natural resources, offering an alternative to conventional tourism that often causes environmental degradation.

Transition Theory proposes a framework for understanding how societies can evolve from unsustainable practices to more sustainable ones. In tourism, this theory addresses the changes needed in policies, behaviors, and business models to align the sector with the principles of sustainability (Sigalat-Signes et al. 2020). Transition Theory suggests that the transformation of tourism requires innovation, leadership, and a fundamental restructuring of existing paradigms.

Complementing established theories, the Circular Economy Model, which originated in economic and environmental sciences, stands out as an emerging approach in sustainable tourism. This model proposes the reuse, recycling, and recovery of resources instead of the linear model of production and consumption (Manniche et al. 2021). In tourism, the circular economy can be applied through waste reduction, the use of renewable energy, and sustainable resource management, promoting a tourism system that minimizes environmental impact and maximizes resource efficiency.

In addition, Community Development Theory, which comes from the social sciences, emphasizes the role of local communities in sustainable tourism development. This approach recognizes that communities are the main beneficiaries and guardians of the natural and cultural resources that attract tourists (Chilufya et al. 2019). The theory suggests that the active involvement of communities in tourism planning and management is

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essential to ensure that economic and social benefits are distributed equitably and that cultural traditions are preserved.

Another significant contribution is the Theory of Sustainable Governance, which comes from political science and public administration. This theory proposes that sustainability in tourism depends on effective governance, characterized by transparency, accountability, and the inclusive participation of all stakeholders (Choi et al. 2021). Sustainable governance in tourism seeks to create a regulatory environment that promotes responsible and equitable practices, ensuring that tourism development occurs in harmony with local and global needs.

The Ecological Footprint Model, derived from ecology, is a tool that measures the environmental impact of tourism activities in terms of the land area needed to sustain these activities (Tang et al. 2022). Applied to tourism, this model offers a clear metric for assessing the sustainability of different practices and destinations, providing crucial information for the management and mitigation of environmental impacts.

Finally, the Theory of Collaborative Networks, which comes from the social and administrative sciences, highlights the importance of partnerships and cooperation between the various agents involved in tourism. As Kimbu et al. (2019) point out, the theory suggests that sustainability in tourism is best achieved when stakeholders work together in collaborative networks that share knowledge, resources, and responsibilities. This approach strengthens local capacities, promotes innovation, and ensures that sustainable practices are widely adopted and maintained over time.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the theories and models that underpin sustainable tourism, it is essential to organize information in a clear and systematic way. The theories and models presented above are the result of years of research and reflection on how to reconcile tourism development with the preservation of natural, cultural, and social resources. To aid in this understanding, the following table summarizes the main models and theories, highlighting their representatives and the characteristics that differentiate them in the context of sustainable tourism.

Table 2. Theories and models of sustainable tourism: authors and key elements.

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Theory or Model	Pioneers	Distinguishing Features
Sustainable Development Model (Triple Bottom Line)	John Elkington	Emphasizes the balance between economic, social, and environmental pillars to achieve sustainability. A three-pronged approach that considers success beyond financial profit.
Systems Theory	Ludwig von Bertalanffy	Sees tourism as a dynamic and interdependent system, requiring integrated management of all social, economic, and environmental components.
Stakeholder Theory	R. Edward Freeman	Emphasizes the importance of engaging all stakeholders in tourism planning and management for balanced and participatory development.
Social Capital Theory	Pierre Bourdieu	Focuses on building networks of relationships, trust, and cooperation in local communities to promote responsible and sustainable tourism practices.
Resilience Theory	C. S. Holling	Analysis of the capacity of tourist destinations to adapt and thrive in the face of change and crisis, ensuring long-term sustainability.
Carrying Capacity Model	Max Neef	Assesses the maximum number of visitors a destination can support without compromising its natural, cultural, or social resources.
Green Economic Growth Theory	UNEP (United Nations Environment Program)	Proposes that economic growth can be achieved alongside environmental preservation by promoting innovation and efficiency.
Environmental Justice Theory	Robert Bullard	Seeks to ensure that the benefits and costs of tourism are distributed fairly among different social groups, protecting the most vulnerable.
Ecotourism Model	Hector Ceballos-Lascuráin	Focused on environmental conservation and benefiting local communities, promoting responsible tourism practices and minimizing negative impacts.
Transition Theory	Johan Rockström	Framework for understanding the evolution from unsustainable to sustainable practices, with a focus on innovation and paradigm shifts.
Circular Economy Model	Ellen MacArthur	Promotes reuse, recycling, and resource recovery in tourism, minimizing environmental impact and maximizing resource efficiency.
Community Development Theory	Sherri Torjman	Emphasizes the role of local communities as the main beneficiaries and guardians of tourism resources, promoting equitable and sustainable development.
Sustainable Governance Theory	Elinor Ostrom	Proposes that sustainability depends on effective, transparent, and inclusive governance, with the participation of all stakeholders.
Ecological Footprint Model	Mathis Wackernagel	A tool that measures the environmental impact of tourism activities in terms of the land area needed to sustain these activities.
Collaborative Networks Theory	James Coleman	Emphasizes the importance of cooperation and partnerships between tourism stakeholders to strengthen local capacities and promote long-term sustainable practices.

Source: Own elaboration

Each theory or model plays a crucial role in the development of tourism practices that respect the environment, promote social equity, and ensure economic viability. From this synthesis, it is possible to understand how these models contribute to the formation of strategies and policies that seek to transform tourism into a positive force for global sustainable development.

Practices in Sustainable Tourism: A Political and Regulatory Framework and Perspectives for Innovation

Based on a critical analysis of recent studies (Guo et al., 2019; Nepal et al., 2019; Niñerola et al., 2019; Mihalic, 2020; Sharpley, 2020; Roxas et al., 2020; Achmad et al., 2023), it can be observed that sustainable tourism requires an integrated and balanced approach between economic benefits, environmental conservation, and social well-being. However, the implementation of these principles varies widely between countries and regions, depending on different socio-political and institutional realities. These authors agree that regulatory and normative frameworks play a decisive role in defining sustainable practices, while creating unequal contexts for tourists, businesses, and host communities. This normative heterogeneity has repercussions on multiple experiences and expectations—both for travelers and for workers in the sector—highlighting the need for harmonization of global guidelines, as well as continuous training and awareness-raising processes to promote responsible tourist behavior.

In addition to regulatory aspects, Mihalic (2020) points out that the informality present among tour operators is usually one of the main obstacles to the consolidation of sustainable practices. The absence of registration and formalization often implies non-compliance with environmental and social regulations, fostering practices that are not committed to sustainability and encouraging dynamics typical of mass tourism. Even among legally established companies, adherence to sustainable criteria tends to be voluntary, resulting in considerable asymmetries in the application of sustainable principles, depending on the degree of individual commitment and the requirements imposed by local policies.

Sharpley (2020), in turn, reinforces the importance of certification systems and eco-labels as mechanisms to encourage the adoption of good practices. However, he warns of the limitations of these tools, mainly due to the costs of adherence and the complexity of their requirements. The standardization and international recognition of these labels are identified as urgent strategies to avoid ambiguities and increase their effectiveness. In this sense, multisectoral cooperation—between international organizations, states, civil society, and the private sector—is essential to enable the implementation and consolidation of sustainable practices. Initiatives such as the "Plano Verde y de la Biodiversidad de Barcelona" (Barcelona Green and Biodiversity Plan), developed by the Ajuntament de Barcelona (2020), illustrate how coordinated and participatory actions can drive environmentally responsible solutions, distribute benefits equitably, and ensure long-term sustainability.

Technological innovations are also playing an increasingly central role in advancing sustainable tourism. The use of smart technologies, such as IoT sensors for monitoring energy and water consumption, has contributed to more effective management of natural resources, encouraging environmentally friendly operational practices. Similarly, the incorporation of renewable energy sources and the adoption of environmentally efficient buildings enable the reduction of the carbon footprint and generate significant savings for the sector, promoting environmental conservation and cultural appreciation.

In turn, Choonhawong and Phumsathan (2022) recognize that digital social networks are emerging as allies in disseminating sustainable initiatives, strengthening environmental education, and promoting regenerative tourism—which not only avoids damage but aims to restore and revitalize the ecosystems visited. Growing consumer demand for low-impact experiences is forcing industry players to adapt by adopting innovative, ethical, and environmentally conscious practices.

Regarding the interface between marketing and sustainability, Mihalic (2020) and Nepal et al. (2019) highlight the role of green marketing and the circular economy as effective strategies in attracting a more conscious consumer audience, in addition to contributing to waste reduction and resource reuse. Mihalic (2020) also emphasizes the use of digital technologies and data analysis tools as allies in personalized and efficient tourism management, while Nepal et al. (2019) highlight the need to integrate innovation, technology, and

sustainability as pillars of transformative tourism. Both point out that such practices not only benefit local communities and tourism operators, but also consolidate a tourism model capable of effectively contributing to a more environmentally just and resilient future.

Convergent Types of Tourism

In the current sustainable tourism scenario, several types are gaining prominence for aligning their practices with the principles of sustainability, seeking to minimize negative impacts and maximize social, cultural, economic, and environmental benefits. Among these, community-based tourism, slum tourism, adventure tourism, rural tourism, ecotourism, cultural tourism, gastronomic tourism, volunteer tourism, creative *tourism,* spiritual *tourism, watching tourism*, and solidarity tourism stand out (Lima et al., 2022). Despite the particularities of each modality, they all share the purpose of promoting fairer, more participatory tourism that is committed to balanced development.

Community-based tourism and community-based tourism stand out for actively involving local populations in the management and planning of tourism activities. Although often used as synonyms, they differ in the latter's emphasis on local control of enterprises, ensuring that economic benefits remain within the community itself (Lee & Jan, 2019). Examples such as indigenous communities in Ecuador illustrate how these practices contribute to autonomy, territorial conservation, and cultural appreciation by offering authentic experiences.

Favela tourism, on the other hand, seeks to redefine marginalized urban spaces by highlighting their cultural dynamics and histories of resistance. When developed with the active participation of the community, it can strengthen local initiatives and generate income, as is the case in some experiences in Rio de Janeiro (Freire-Medeiros & Moraes, 2022). This modality, however, requires constant ethical attention to avoid exoticization or misappropriation.

Adventure tourism and rural tourism, in turn, share a focus on the environment and local development. The former involves activities in natural environments, such as hiking, climbing, or rafting, requiring responsible management to avoid the degradation of sensitive ecosystems. The latter provides an experience of rural daily life, preserving traditional ways of life and offering alternative sources of income. In Chilean Patagonia, for example, adventure tourism operators adopt practices with low environmental impact, such as the use of solar energy and visitor flow control (Shaheen et al., 2019).

Ecotourism and cultural tourism often overlap in prioritizing the conservation of natural and cultural resources. Ecotourism stands out for its environmental education and visits to preserved areas, while cultural tourism values historical heritage and local cultural expressions. Both favor visitor awareness and boost the economy of host communities, as in Costa Rica, where part of the profits from ecotourism are reinvested in protected areas and environmental education programs (Wardana et al., 2019).

In the field of food, gastronomic tourism is based on the appreciation of local products and traditional culinary practices, encouraging short production chains and sustainable agriculture (Gimenes-Minasse, 2023). In Tuscany, Italy, this modality has been central to keeping centuries-old agricultural techniques alive, promoting tourism as a tool for resisting food standardization.

Volunteer tourism and solidarity tourism involve visitors in social, educational, and environmental projects. Such practices must be conducted ethically, prioritizing the needs of communities and avoiding a welfare-based approach. In Nepal, school reconstruction and child support programs are examples of successful initiatives that generate lasting benefits (Lee, 2020).

Creative tourism, in turn, promotes the active participation of tourists in cultural, artistic, or educational activities, valuing local knowledge. Craft or gastronomy workshops, such as those held in Spain, enable cultural

exchange and generate direct income for residents (Lee & Jan, 2019). Related modalities, such as experiential tourism, strengthen this interaction through experience and co-creation.

Although less widespread, spiritual tourism and watching tourism have great potential. The former promotes retreats and wellness practices that foster self-knowledge and connection with nature (Halim et al., 2021), while the latter—focused on bird, cetacean, and other animal watching—depends on habitat conservation and stimulates ecological awareness (Meza-Arce et al., 2020).

Thus, these different types represent converging paths toward sustainability in tourism. They serve as a basis for the development of tourism products and services that balance environmental preservation, cultural appreciation, social inclusion, and local income generation. By integrating ethical and sustainable principles into their practices, they become not only viable alternatives to mass tourism, but also true strategies for achieving fairer and more conscious tourism development.

In order to visually synthesize the multiplicity of sustainable approaches in the field of tourism, the following chart presents twelve types of tourism that converge around a common core: sustainability. Organized in a circular format, these modalities illustrate the dynamism and interconnection between different tourism practices committed to ethical, environmental, social, and cultural principles. The orbital arrangement symbolizes the cohesion and complementarity of these typologies, reinforcing the idea that, despite their specificities, they all orbit around the same purpose: to promote fairer, more conscious, and transformative tourism.

Illustration 1.
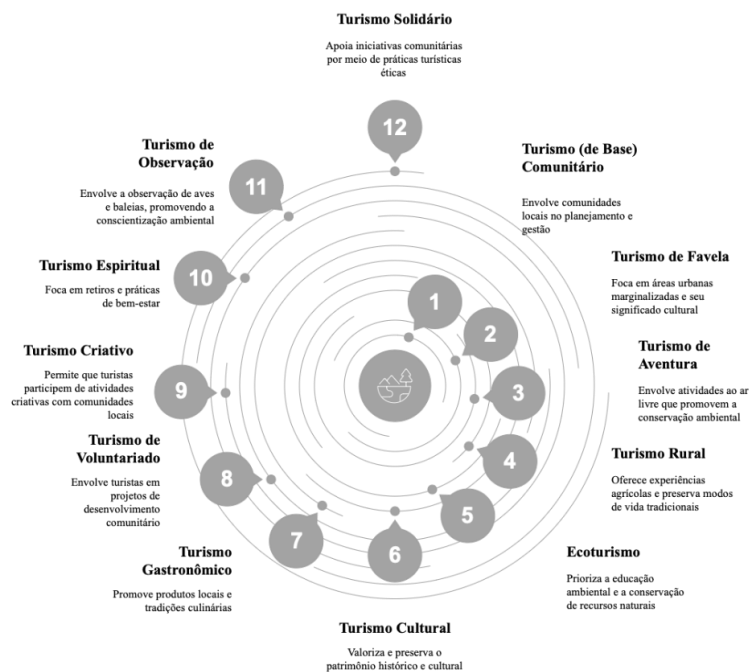
Types of Tourism Converging with Sustainable Tourism. Note. Own elaboration

Looking at the chart, it is clear that the twelve selected typologies not only represent emerging trends but also reflect an ecosystem of mutually reinforcing practices. Arranged in circular layers, these typologies indicate varying degrees of articulation with the territory, the community, and visitors, reaffirming the diversity and flexibility of sustainable tourism. This representation helps to highlight the need for integrated policies and collaborative actions between public, private, and community actors in order to foster tourism experiences that respect local identity, promote conservation, and drive regional development in an equitable manner.

Education and Training in Sustainable Tourism

Education and training in sustainable tourism are essential to ensure that responsible practices are integrated at all levels of tourism activity. However, it is crucial to adopt a more comprehensive perspective, considering the education, knowledge, and learning of all stakeholders involved, such as residents, professionals, operators, and tourists. These different groups play interdependent roles in the success of sustainable practices and, therefore, all should be included in educational and training strategies (Edelheim 2020).

Although formal education in sustainable tourism is recommended, it is not always feasible or accessible to all professionals in the field. In this sense, flexibility in the provision of educational content and formats becomes indispensable. Universities, technical schools, and higher education institutions can play an important role by including specific modules on sustainable tourism in their curricula. However, it is necessary to consider the diversity of methods and degrees of formality in learning (Choe & Kim 2024). Technical training, short courses, and continuing education programs are practical alternatives for disseminating fundamental knowledge about sustainability among those who work directly in the sector, such as tour guides and operators.

In addition, education in sustainable tourism must be contextualized and accessible not only to professionals in the sector but also to residents of tourist areas, who are directly affected by tourism activities. Valuing local knowledge and involving communities in sustainable planning and management are essential steps toward strengthening practices that respect local culture and the environment (Zhang & Tavitiyaman 2022). Organizations that promote workshops and training, such as the Rainforest Alliance, exemplify how practical and contextualized education can empower both operators and communities to adopt responsible practices.

Adopting an integrated view of learning in sustainable tourism also implies recognizing that tourism can be both the content and the means of learning, generating new practices for citizens to enjoy their free time. Tourism experiences that educate visitors about environmental conservation, cultural appreciation, and social responsibility offer a practical and immersive approach, generating lasting impacts on tourist behavior (Proença & Panosso 2022). Initiatives such as "Conservamos Galápagos" in Ecuador show how raising visitors' awareness of the importance of ecosystem preservation can be directly incorporated into tourism activities, benefiting everyone involved.

The internationalization of knowledge and scientific dissemination are also crucial strategies for strengthening training in sustainable tourism. Academic collaborations, exchanges, and the use of educational technologies, such as e-learning and b-learning, expand access to global and up-to-date content, enabling sustainability standards to be applied in diverse cultural contexts (Bowan & Dallam 2020). In addition, international certifications, such as Green Globe and EarthCheck, establish parameters that promote excellence and consistency in sustainable practices in the sector.

Finally, the perspective of considering all stakeholders—from residents and professionals to tourists—is vital to ensuring the effectiveness of sustainable tourism practices. All these groups must be educated and sensitized in an appropriate manner, respecting their needs and contexts (Ferreras-Garcia et al. 2020). Only through an inclusive and comprehensive approach to education and training will it be possible to consolidate sustainability as a guiding principle throughout the tourism value chain.

Final Considerations

This article sought to answer the research question of how sustainable tourism, based on its theoretical and practical foundations, can contribute to addressing the contemporary challenges of balanced development. The results indicate that sustainable tourism is a well-founded and applicable response to the environmental, social, and economic problems widely associated with conventional tourism. Based on an integrated approach, it was possible to show that tourism sustainability requires the articulation of multiple knowledge and agents,

based on consolidated theories—such as the Triple Bottom Line Model, Stakeholder Theory, and Sustainable Governance—and driven by innovative practices, including in contexts of the Global South.

It is clear that, in order to achieve effective sustainability in tourism, harmonious integration between the economic, social, and environmental pillars is crucial, which requires the involvement of all stakeholders, from local communities to large corporations and governments. Collaboration between these actors, based on inclusive and participatory practices, is essential to ensure that the benefits of tourism are distributed fairly and that cultures and ecosystems are preserved.

Technological innovation and education also play critical roles in advancing sustainable tourism. The adoption of green technologies, the circular economy, and green marketing have proven to be effective solutions for reducing the ecological footprint and promoting more responsible practices. At the same time, continuous training and the dissemination of knowledge, both formal and informal, are essential to empower professionals and raise awareness among tourists and communities about the importance of sustainable practices.

It can therefore be concluded that sustainable tourism is not only a viable alternative but also an ethical and strategic imperative to ensure that future generations can enjoy the benefits of tourism without compromising the natural and cultural resources that are the basis of this activity. The success of this transition depends on a collective commitment at all levels, guided by consistent policies, disruptive innovations, and education that values sustainability as a guiding principle.

It is important to note, however, that this study has some limitations. The composition of the advisory panel was restricted to five Latin American experts, which, although enriching, limits the generalization of the findings to other geographical and sociocultural contexts. In addition, the methodological approach did not include face-to-face interviews or the application of quantitative methods, which could have strengthened the triangulation of data. It is therefore recommended that future research incorporate comparative analyses between regions and adopt mixed approaches that enable a more in-depth and robust understanding of the dynamics that permeate sustainable tourism at different scales.

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