

SUSTAINABILITY IN TOURISM: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: *This paper addresses the issues of aligning tourism with the approach to achieving sustainability, as sustainability became a necessity and even a condition for the viability of organizations. In this context, the aim of the research is to highlight the problems and challenges of tourism establishments by aligning them to the achievement of sustainability. In order to achieve the general objective of the research we set the following additional research objectives: researching the theoretical-methodological approach of sustainability in tourism; identifying the premises and factors of achieving sustainability in tourism; identifying the problems and challenges faced by tourism companies in achieving sustainability; outlining the strategic directions of achieving sustainability by tourism companies. The research methodology used in the paper is quite comprehensive, and includes multiple research methods, such as: analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, abduction, documentation, qualitative research. As a result of the research conducted, we underline the fact that in the 21st century, sustainability has become a condition for the viability of companies. Thus, each company is obliged to redesign its managerial system, its principles of activity, in order to align its strategic objectives with the approach of achieving sustainability. Therefore, setting strategic objectives to achieve sustainability and incorporating them into the daily activities of tourism establishments is becoming a vital necessity for tourism organizations, a condition for their viability.*

Keywords: sustainability, sustainability in tourism, sustainable companies, goals of sustainability in tourism, sustainable destinations, sustainable practices.

JEL Classification: Q01, Q56, Z32.

1. Introduction

As society has evolved, the tourism phenomenon has undergone major changes. From mass tourism to luxury tourism, from traditional tourist attractions to exotic tourist attractions, all of these have challenged economic operators on the tourist market to resize their offer in order to satisfy tourists. On the other hand, as tourism in this sector has intensified, significant changes have taken place, from the emergence of new destinations to changes in tourists' consumption behaviour.

As the tourism phenomenon has developed, tourists' behaviour had a negative impact on the ecosystem, contributing to its degradation through the inappropriate use of tourist attractions. In this context, there is a need for tourism companies to reconsider their policies and strategies in order to achieve balance from a triple perspective: economic, social and environmental. *The overall objective of the research* is the theoretical-practical investigation of ways to achieve sustainability in organizations operating in the tourism sector.

The adjacent objectives of the research are:

- O1: investigating the theoretical-methodological aspects of sustainability;
- O2: identifying factors, principles, objectives, successful examples of achieving sustainability in tourism;
- O3: identifying problems and challenges of tourism organizations in achieving sustainability.

The research hypotheses include:

I1: sustainability is an approach to achieving balance from three perspectives: economic, social, environmental;

I2: the main factor influencing the achievement of sustainability in tourism is the responsible use of the potential of tourism destinations;

I3: the main problem in achieving sustainability in tourism organizations is the lack of interest of tourism organizations in achieving sustainability.

Research methodology. In order to achieve the research objectives, we applied a broad research methodology, which includes methods such as: analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, abduction, scientific abstraction, documentation, content analysis and qualitative research. Each of these methods allowed us to advance the research approach and to achieve the overall objective and the adjacent research objectives.

2. Content

The rapid development of the global economy in the 21st century has generated significant imbalances in society as a result of the development of entrepreneurship, the intensification of the utilization of natural resources, creating significant disturbances in the functionality of the global ecosystem. As natural resources are depletable and all factors of production are utilized to their maximum capacity, there is a need to reduce the negative impact of people's activities on the environment. Addressing the imbalance facing society has been one of the most important priorities of the world's countries over the last 20 years.

In this respect, researchers have recently been increasingly pointing out the need for economic agents, educational institutions and market players to focus on the need to achieve balance from a triple perspective: economic, social and environmental.

Thus, along with the concerns of making profit and increasing turnover, economic agents must be concerned with integrating social practices into the work they carry out, with eliminating the negative human footprint on the environment.

Subsequently, we can highlight the fact that since 1987, countries have become aware of the need to concern themselves with achieving economic-social-environmental balance, i.e., to reorganize their classical business models into innovative models that would put a special emphasis on sustainability.

2.1. Theoretical approaches on sustainability

Thus, the concept of *sustainability* originated with the publication in 1987 of the report "Our Common Future" by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), which was also called the Brundtland Commission. Analysing the content of the report "Our Common Future", we can mention that sustainability is "*meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*" (Brundtland Report, 1987). Based on the Brundtland Commission's definition, we can conclude that sustainability is a deep, broad and highly complex concept that focuses on eliminating or reducing the negative impacts of present generations on the development opportunities of future generations.

On the other hand, analysing the definition of sustainability according to the researcher Simonis, 2008, we can note that sustainability is "the concept that boils down to carrying capacity and has long been used by biologists, but until now has rarely been considered by economists" (Simonis, 2008).

In the same context, according to the United Nations (UN), sustainability "encompasses the totality of socio-economic development methods that focus on ensuring a balance between economic, social and environmental aspects" (UN, 2023). According to the UN definition, sustainability is an extremely complex concept, which focuses on ensuring balance from three perspectives: economic, social and environmental.

In the same context, UNESCO defines sustainability as a "development model that includes three components: environment, society and economy" (UNESCO, 2022).

The Cambridge Dictionary defines sustainability as "the ability to continue at a particular level for a period of time: the quality of causing little or no damage to the environment and therefore able to continue for a long time" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). According to this definition, we note that sustainability focuses on producing long-term effects, thus the concern to achieve sustainability is a long-term approach, it is a dynamic process involving multiple actors and influencing factors.

Schematically the essence of the sustainability concept can be represented in Figure

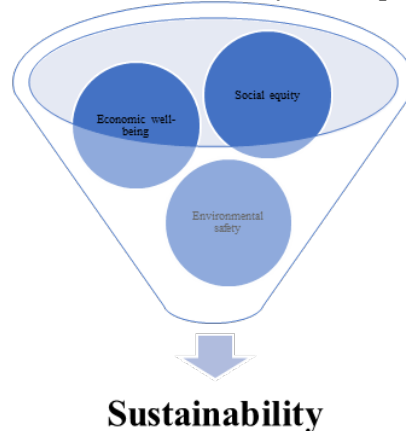


Figure 1. Essence of the sustainability concept

Reference: developed according to <https://www.dadot.com/environmental-education-center>

The role of sustainability was noted as early as the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and reiterated at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 (Baron, 2001). Sustainability includes the most important component, environmental protection, while the environment conditions the achievement of sustainability. The European Union requires a new approach to global environmental problems related to environmental impacts and the pressure of all socio-economic consequences. Being aware of the need for continued economic and social development, it is absolutely imperative to protect and improve the environment, which is the only possibility to create and maintain the well-being of both the current and future generations; this balance has been the factor that can and must ensure the development of society as a whole (Glasbergen, 2018).

Finally, we can point out that sustainability is a complex approach, focused on achieving economic well-being, social equity and ecological security, which focuses on reducing the negative human footprint on the development of society in order to provide development opportunities for future generations. As a result, sustainability aims to sensitize citizens to the need to reduce negative impacts on society, the environment, and to focus on reuse, recycling, regeneration.

2.2. Factors and principles in achieving sustainability in tourism

Achieving sustainability in tourism is an important commitment of countries in the contemporary global context. Studies carried out by researchers in the field argue that achieving sustainability in the tourism industry is recognized as being of particular importance. The Travel and Tourism Development Index (TTDI) is a notable benchmark that highlights the role of sustainability and resilience in the growth of the travel and tourism sector, thereby contributing to the overall development of a country (World Economic Forum, 2023).

Due to their ability to deal with environmental, socio-cultural and economic concerns, sustainable tourism practices have gained popularity. Sustainability in tourism incorporates the conservation of natural resources, the protection of ecosystems and the mitigation of the effects of climate change. Moreover, it emphasizes the preservation of local cultures, heritage sites and local community well-being (Font et.al., 2019).

The economic aspect of tourism sustainability is also crucial. In both developed and developing regions, sustainable tourism practices can stimulate economic development, create employment opportunities and alleviate poverty. However, it is essential to ensure that economic benefits are equitably distributed among local communities, minimizing economic leakage and encouraging local entrepreneurship (World Economic Forum, 2023).

In terms of a destination's competitiveness, sustainability plays a significant influence. Today's tourists are more aware of their impact on the environment and social equity and are looking for destinations that demonstrate a commitment to sustainability. By implementing sustainable practices, destinations can enhance their image, attract conscientious travellers and gain a competitive advantage in the tourism market (World Economic Forum, 2023).

The resilience of destinations is an additional factor demonstrating the importance of sustainability in tourism. Destinations can better withstand risks and challenges such as climate change, natural disasters and crises if they adopt sustainable practices. Sustainability measures, such as climate adaptation and community engagement, contribute to a destination's resilience, enabling a quick recovery and reducing its vulnerabilities (Font, 2019).

Studying the specialized literature, we can note that *sustainable tourism* is a form of tourism that takes into account its economic, social and environmental impacts, meeting the requirements of visitors, industry, the environment and host communities (Font, 2019). On a long-term perspective, sustainable tourism emphasizes a balance between environmental, economic and socio-cultural factors.

According to the World Tourism Organization, 2023, the key principles of sustainable tourism are (Figure 2.).

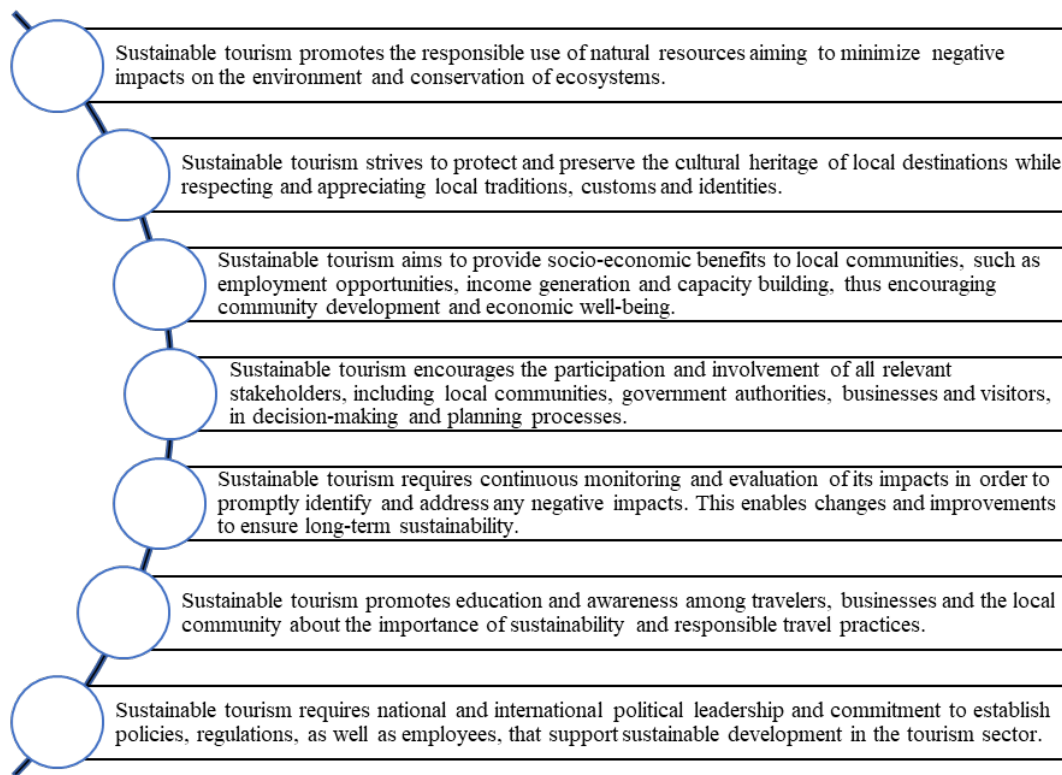


Figure 2. Principles of sustainable tourism

Reference: <https://www.unwto.org/sustainable-development>

The World Tourism Organization, on the other hand, outlined 12 objectives for achieving sustainability in tourism (Table 1.).

Table 1. Pillars and goals for achieving sustainability in tourism, according to UNWTO

Pillars and sub-pillars of sustainable tourism	Goals of sustainable tourism
1. Tourism policy and governance 1.1 Position of tourism in development policies and programs; 1.2 Tourism policy and regulatory framework; 1.3 Tourism governance and institutional set-up.	All 12 goals.
2. Economic performance, investment and competitiveness 2.1 Measuring the development of tourism and its contribution to the economy; 2.2 Trade, investment and the business environment;	1. ECONOMIC VIABILITY; 2. LOCAL PROSPERITY; 5. VISITORS' SATISFACTION.

2.3 Brand, marketing and product positioning; 2.4 Resilience, security and risk management.	
3. Employment, decent work and human capital 3.1 Human resources planning and working conditions; 3.2 Skills assessment and providing training.	3. THE QUALITY OF HUMAN RESOURCES AND JOBS.
4. Poverty reduction and social inclusion 4.1 Integrated approach to poverty reduction through tourism; 4.2 Strengthening pro-poor tourism initiatives; 4.3 Including disadvantaged groups in the tourism sector; 4.4 Preventing negative social impacts.	2. LOCAL PROSPERITY; 4. SOCIAL EQUITY; 6. LOCAL CONTROL; 7. COMMUNITY WELL-BEING.
5. Sustainability of the natural and cultural environment 5.1 Linking tourism with natural and cultural heritage; 5.2 Focusing on climate change; 5.3 Enhancing the sustainability of tourism development and operations; 5.4 Measuring and monitoring tourism impacts.	8. CULTURAL RICHNESS; 9. PHYSICAL INTEGRITY; 10. BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY; 11. RESOURCE EFFICIENCY; 12. ENVIRONMENTAL PURITY.

Reference: UNWTO, 2023.

Available at: <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/epdf/10.18111/9789284415496>

The essence of the 12 goals for achieving sustainability in tourism is:

1. **ECONOMIC VIABILITY:** To ensure the viability and competitiveness of tourist destinations and enterprises so that they can continue to prosper and provide long-term benefits.

2. **LOCAL PROSPERITY:** To maximize the contribution of tourism to the prosperity of the host destination, including the proportion of visitor spending that is retained locally.

3. **QUALITY OF HUMAN RESOURCES AND JOBS:** To strengthen the number and quality of local jobs created and supported by tourism, including the level of pay, conditions of service and availability to all without discrimination by gender, race, disability or otherwise.

4. **SOCIAL EQUITY:** To seek a widespread distribution of the economic and social benefits of tourism throughout the beneficiary community, including improving the opportunities, incomes and services available to the poor.

5. **VISITOR FULFILLMENT:** To provide visitors with a safe, satisfying and fulfilling experience available to all visitors without discrimination based on gender, race, disability or in other ways.

6. LOCAL CONTROL: To engage and empower local communities in planning and decision making about the future management and development of tourism in their area, in consultation with other stakeholders.

7. COMMUNITY WELFARE: To maintain and strengthen the quality of life in local communities, including social structures and access to resources, facilities and life-support systems, avoiding any form of social degradation or exploitation.

8. CULTURAL WEALTH: to respect and enhance the historical heritage, authentic culture, traditions and distinctiveness of the host communities.

9. PHYSICAL INTEGRITY: To maintain and enhance the quality of landscapes, both urban and rural, and avoid physical and visual degradation of the environment.

10. BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY: To support the conservation of natural areas, habitats and wildlife and minimize damage to them.

11. RESOURCE EFFICIENCY: To minimize the use of scarce and non-renewable resources in the development and operation of tourism facilities and services.

12. ENVIRONMENTAL PURITY: To minimize air, water and land pollution and waste generation by tourism businesses and visitors (Sustainable Tourism for Development, 2023).

In conclusion, the importance of sustainability in tourism is argued by its ability to protect the environment, ensure the preservation of socio-cultural heritage, promote economic development, enhance destination competitiveness and cultivate resilience. Many reports and research studies emphasize the need for sustainable practices to ensure a sustainable and responsible future for the tourism industry, reflecting the importance of sustainability in tourism.

2.3. Sustainability in tourism: successful stories

Sustainability in tourism became a committed priority, which practically all countries in the world have defined and are currently trying to achieve through concrete, safe, complex and effective measures. Although achieving sustainability in tourism is a complex, dynamic, ongoing and far-reaching process, in the last 10 years various countries have made far-reaching changes to the tourism supply and the regulatory framework for tourism, thus intervening in tourism consumption, breaking down stereotypes of irrational consumption and bringing national policies of the nation states into line with the process of achieving sustainability in tourism.

Thus, we present below some successful stories where countries have implemented measures to achieve sustainability in tourism.

Case study 1: Andaman Discoveries Company from Thailand. An example of achieving sustainability in the tourism sector is given by Andaman Discoveries, a Thai company serving local communities. After the devastating tsunami in 2004, Andaman Discoveries, together with a network of supporters, helped villages in southern Thailand to implement more than 120 projects in over 20 villages. All projects have focused on creating realistic economic opportunities for local communities. Andaman Discoveries placed long-term social, economic and environmental sustainability as a top priority in all its projects.

Case study 2: NGO Feynan Ecolodge. Another example of sustainable tourism development is provided by Feynan Ecolodge which is a Jordanian Non-Governmental Organization that has contributed to the development of sustainable tourism in the area.

Feynan Ecolodge is located in the “Dana” Biosphere Reserve and is designed to contribute to local socio-economic development in total harmony with its environment.

In Table 2. we presented examples of successful measures to achieve sustainability in rural localities.

Table 2. Examples of successful measures to achieve sustainability in rural localities

Dimensions	Activities performed	
	Andaman Discoveries Company from Thailand	NGO Feynan Ecolodge
Preservation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Restoring local orchids due to the project „The Orchid Conservation reestablished water lily into original habitat”. - Collaborating with the Mangrove Action project and the International Union for Natural Conservation to create groups to participate in Youth in Action for next generation. - Implementing Youth education project funded to focus on „Local Action, Global Change” to educate young people about the environment, human interaction with the environment and local conservation efforts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Generating electricity exclusively using photovoltaic (PV) panels with the capacity to store up to three days of electricity to account for cloudy days. b. For lighting, 8W CFL bulbs or 1-3W LEDs are used in only three areas: kitchen, toilets and offices. At night the cabins are lighted using candles made on site. c. Purchasing only essential appliances and only those rated Energy Star or A/A+ in the US and EU respectively.
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Providing lessons in English. - Providing restaurant and catering courses, planning trips to local communities. - Initiating tour guide and first aid training for local communities. - Donating books to libraries in nearby villages, gym equipment and traditional Thai tools. - Recruiting volunteers to provide training and education sessions in first aid, dental care, hygiene. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Employing only staff from local communities and sourcing up to 80% of food and supplies from nearby villages. This provides jobs, supports the local economy and creates an authentic local experience for guests. b. Providing opportunities for local women in candle making and on-site workshops at the lodge; c. Transportation to and from the reception centre is provided by 45 local Bedouin drivers in their spare time, which provides their families with additional sources of income.
Culture	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It helped the Moken community to develop snorkelling trips and Koh Surin. 2. It developed in-depth tours of island communities and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promoting the region's rich Bedouin culture; - Bread, candle, leather goods and cultural exchange projects to create a rare income-generating opportunity for

	<p>villages.</p> <p>3. It developed customized tours focused on benefiting local communities in the areas of social welfare, community development and conservation.</p>	<p>women.</p> <p>- Activities such as local intercultural cultural exchange, where guests can spend a day with a local shepherd and learn Bedouin traditions including coffee brewing, goat hair tent making, bread baking from locals providing an authentic insight into local life.</p> <p>- Local guides share their culture, history and environment with guests.</p>
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Reference: own analysis based on *Compendium of best practices in sustainable tourism*. Available at:
<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/3322Compendium%20of%20Best%20Practices%20in%20Sustainable%20Tourism%20-%20Fen%20Wei%2001032014.pdf>

If we were to analyse the initiatives to achieve sustainability in tourism by tourist accommodation establishments, then we have to note that the initiatives of a tourist accommodation establishment claiming to contribute to achieving sustainability should focus on the following initiatives:

1. *Energy saving in hotels*: heating through air conditioners, kitchen hardware, all-inclusive hotels reduce energy use and switch to renewable energy sources;
2. *Hotel water conservation*: hotels continue to implement water-saving features. Such initiatives include the reuse of sponges and towels, which are now the norm in the hospitality industry, as well as the installation of low-flow faucets and other installations.
3. *Paper recycling and waste reduction*: Along with reuse efforts, hotels are trying to decrease the amounts of paper used, as well as separately collecting paper for recycling. Reducing waste and recycling waste is one of the initiatives that hotels in Europe are promoting.
4. *Providing hotel bathroom facilities*: Many hotels create a great impression by offering visitors unique bathroom features that create the impression of an ECO hotel. For example: Rock Resorts encourages the use of different natural, additive-free creams and oils and offers them to their guests in the bathrooms etc.
5. *Using environmentally friendly hotel room keys*: Current hotel room keys are made of plastic (polyvinyl chloride) which is a by-product of a dangerous manufacturing process. Many hotels are switching to card alternatives made from paper, wood and bio-plastic that are better for the earth but just as strong.
6. *Bio cleaning products*: Many hotels have reoriented their purchases towards organic products for tourists, including cleaning products with bio-based oils and other unique cleaning products. On the other hand, reducing the use of goods containing chlorine dyes and petrochemical chemicals is another initiative of sustainable hotels.
7. *Cooking*: a focus on more feasible and beneficial food offerings, cooperation with locals, purchasing local products are some of the initiatives that sustainable hoteliers are practicing.
8. *Alternatives to bottled water in hotels*: in order to reduce waste and provide a higher quality of experience, more hotels are rejecting plastic bottles as the norm and instead

offering innovative refreshment options for meeting attendees and independent travellers, look for filtered water stations that are easily accessible, free refillable bottles, and other options that are designed to offer visitors simple and appealing alternatives to water in plastic bottles.

9. *Selecting the hotel menu*: Hotels and resorts are adding a growing number of choices in a variety of menus from organic products that coordinate natural delivery, hormone-free meats and dairy, and other common products that offer visitors more favourable maintenance options.

Finally, it can be noted that different companies in the tourism sector, both hospitality establishments and all other categories of economic agents, in the last 10 years, have implemented various initiatives to achieve sustainability in the tourism sector through the reduction of water and energy consumption, reuse of resources, recycling and re-circulation of resources.

According to the UNWTO, 2024, in order to assess the top most sustainable rural areas (villages) offering tourism services, 9 principles (Figure 2.) have been identified for assessing sustainability initiatives in rural areas:

1. *Cultural and natural resources*: the village has natural and cultural resources (tangible and intangible) recognized at national, regional or international level.

2. *Promotion and preservation of cultural resources*: the village engages in the promotion and preservation of cultural resources that make the destination unique and authentic.

3. *Economic sustainability*: the village is committed to promoting economic sustainability by supporting business development, entrepreneurship and investment.

4. *Social sustainability*: the village is committed to promoting social inclusion and equality.

5. *Environmental sustainability*: the village is committed to achieving environmental sustainability by promoting and/or disseminating policies, measures and initiatives that advance the conservation of its natural tourism resources and minimize the environmental impacts of tourism development.

6. *Tourism development and value chain integration*: the village tourism is significantly commercialized and developing. The village further promotes the strengthening of the tourism value chain and the competitiveness of the destination in areas related to market access, marketing and promotion, innovation, product development and quality.

7. *Governance and prioritization of tourism*: The village is committed to making tourism a strategic strategy, a pillar of rural development. It further promotes a governance model based on the development of public-private partnership, cooperation with other governments.

8. *Infrastructure and connectivity*: The village has infrastructure to facilitate access and communications that improve the well-being of rural communities, promote business development, and enhance the visitor experience.

9. *Health, safety and security*: The village has health, safety and security systems in order to protect residents and tourists.



Figure 2. Principles in assessing sustainability initiatives in rural areas in the EU, according to the UNWTO, 2024

Reference: <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/epdf/10.18111/9789284424368>

At the level of 2023, the top 3 sustainable villages in the EU are shown in Table 2.2.

Table 3. Top 3 sustainable villages in the EU

Village	Image
<p>Damanhur, Italy</p> <p>Damanhur has its own constitution, culture, art, music, currency and schools. It invites visitors to come and visit through its website and is a fascinating example of a long-standing, well-organized, lively, open-minded, visionary community, successful in doing things its own way.</p>	
<p>Findhorn, Scotland</p> <p>The Findhorn Eco-Community was founded in 1962 by a family who had started growing vegetables, finding that over the years more people joined them, bringing their vision and ideas. Findhorn has become known as one of the most established and well-organized organic villages in the world. They welcome visitors to participate in their “experience week”, to attend their vegetable growing classes.</p>	

Tamera, Portugal

Tamera is another open educational community offering online and on-site courses. Love, spirituality, ecology and renewable energy are key themes in the courses they offer, along with the intention to work for stewardship of the earth in a post-capitalist world, a political expression that will no doubt attract some visitors and put off others.



Reference: adapted according to ¹ <https://lumohouses.com/learn/eco-villages-communities-europe/>

Analysing the table, we observe that each rural community is focused on promoting the conservation of tourism resources, educating youth and tourists, community development through achieving ecological, economic and social sustainability.

3. Conclusions

Based on the research carried out, there is a strong need for tourism businesses to focus their activities on aligning their activities towards sustainability. As a result, by assuming their responsibilities, tourism establishments will help communities on the one hand and society as a whole to achieve sustainability. Through activities such as: saving resources (energy, water, etc.), responsible use of tourism resources, use of organic products and equipment, awareness raising activities on the need to achieve sustainability in tourism, tourism establishments can help communities and society to anchor themselves in the approach to achieving sustainability.

In addition, the 12 sustainable tourism goals, approved by the UNWTO in 2023, need to be implemented by tourism organizations in order to identify the most relevant measures that would support them in aligning their strategic objectives with sustainability principles.

Moreover, another measure that would help to establish a culture of sustainability in tourism is the education of tourists, which is becoming a major challenge for tourism establishments, as it is very difficult to uproot certain toxic habits of tourism that contribute to the pollution and destruction of tourist attractions and to cultivate new values of responsible tourism. As a result, joint efforts are required from the authorities on the one hand, but also from economic entities and tourists on the other hand, in order to align the achievement of sustainability in tourism.

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