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Not peer-reviewed version

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[Angeliki N Menegaki](#) *

Posted Date: 16 January 2025

doi: 10.20944/preprints202501.1244.v1

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Communication

How Do Tourism and Environment Theories Intersect?

Angeliki N. Menegaki

Department of Business Administration and Tourism, Hellenic Mediterranean University, Heraklion, Crete, GREECE, Email: amenegaki@hmu.gr

Abstract: This paper explores the intersection of tourism and environmental theories, highlighting how sustainability serves as a critical bridge between the two disciplines. Tourism theories such as Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) provide insights into destination development and tourist behavior, but often lack an ecological perspective. The environmental framework, including Ecological Modernization Theory (EMT) and Common-Pool Resource (CPR) Theory, emphasizes sustainable resource management and the interconnectedness of human activities and natural systems. This paper examines common concepts such as carrying capacity, sustainable development and behavioral insights, while also identifying tensions between economic growth and environmental preservation. Case studies from Costa Rica, Hawaii and Thailand illustrate practical applications of these theories in real-world settings, revealing how tourism can be both a threat and a tool for conservation. My paper concludes that integrating environmental impact assessment (EIA) and community-based tourism (CBT) models into tourism planning, can lead to better long-term resource management. It recommends the adoption of stricter regulations on tourism development in fragile ecosystems, implementation of eco-certifications, and promotion of locally governed tourism initiatives. These strategies will ensure the sustainability of both tourism activities and the ecosystems on which they depend.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism; environmental impact assessment (EIA); ecological modernization; tourism carrying capacity; community-based tourism (CBT); resource management

1. Introduction

As tourism continues to expand globally, it increasingly affects the natural environment, while simultaneously depending on it for its appeal and success. Many tourism destinations thrive on pristine ecosystems, beautiful landscapes, and biodiversity, making environmental preservation a critical concern for the future of tourism. In recent years, academic research has attempted to explore the theoretical frameworks that guide both tourism development and environmental management (Bramwell and Lane, 2000; 2013; Holden, 2008; Gössling et al., 2012). Tourism theories, which often center on economic growth, social dynamics and traveler behavior, provide valuable insights into the patterns and impact of tourism activities. These frameworks include well-established models such as Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) (Butler, 1980), which examines the stages of tourism destination development and the theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991), which analyzes the role of attitudes and social norms in shaping tourist behavior.

On the other hand, environmental theories approach the issue from a sustainability perspective, offering frameworks to analyze how human activity impacts ecosystems. Theories such as Ecological Modernization Theory (EMT) (Mol and Spaargaren, 2000) and the Environmental Kuznets Curve (EKC) (Grossman and Krueger, 1995) examine the relationship between economic development and environmental degradation, proposing ways in which sustainable practices can mitigate negative impacts. These environmental frameworks also address how natural resources are managed and conserved in the face of increasing pressures from human activities like tourism.

Despite the growing awareness of the importance of sustainability in tourism, the theoretical links between tourism and environmental science remain underexplored (Buckley, 2012). This paper seeks to fill that gap by analyzing how key tourism and environmental theories intersect, highlighting both their commonalities and contradictions. By exploring this intersection, I aim to develop a more holistic understanding of how tourism activities can be managed in a way that promotes environmental sustainability.

My paper begins by examining the core concepts of tourism theories that are relevant to sustainability. Following that, it reviews key environmental theories that provide insights into the ecological impacts of tourism. Then I move into a discussion of where these theories overlap, identifying synergies between tourism development and environmental protection, as well as areas of tension where the goals of economic growth and environmental conservation may clash. By conducting this review, I hope to contribute to the development of more integrated models of sustainable tourism that incorporate both economic and ecological perspectives and support the advancement of sustainable tourism practices that balance the needs of the industry with the imperative of environmental protection.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Seminal Tourism Theories

Tourism theories have long focused on understanding the dynamics of destination development, tourist behavior, and the socio-economic impacts of tourism. One of the foundational models is Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC), which explains how tourism destinations evolve through various stages, namely exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and potentially decline or rejuvenation. This model offers insights into how destinations can experience environmental pressures as they mature, often leading to overcrowding, resource depletion, and environmental degradation (Butler, 1980). However, TALC does not directly integrate environmental sustainability into its framework, leaving room for deeper analysis of how tourism growth interacts with ecological concerns (Butler, 1999; Cole, 2012; Diedrich, and García-Buades, 2009).

Another influential framework is the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), developed by Ajzen (1991), which has been applied extensively in tourism studies to understand how individual attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence tourist behavior. In sustainable tourism, TPB has been used to examine the drivers of pro-environmental behavior among tourists, highlighting how personal beliefs and social influences shape decisions such as choosing eco-friendly accommodation or minimizing waste during travel. Doxey's Irridex Model (1975) (Doxey, 1975) also provides a valuable lens by analyzing how host communities' attitudes toward tourism change over time as tourism impact becomes more intensive, often correlating with increasing environmental and social pressures.

Additionally, the Tourism Carrying Capacity Theory (Mathieson and Wall, 1982) explores the threshold at which a destination can handle tourist activity without causing environmental degradation or compromising the visitor experience. This concept is vital for managing sustainable tourism, as it focuses on balancing economic benefits with ecological preservation. These tourism theories provide foundational insights into how destinations develop and how tourists behave, but they often lack an explicit focus on environmental sustainability. Thus, integrating environmental theories into these frameworks could help address the ecological challenges that arise alongside tourism growth.

2.2. Seminal Environmental Theories

Environmental theories have evolved primarily to address the growing concerns about human activities' impact on ecosystems. One prominent theory is the Ecological Modernization Theory (EMT), which suggests that economic development and environmental protection are not inherently

contradictory. According to EMT, technological advancements and regulatory policies can lead to environmentally sustainable economic growth, a perspective that aligns well with the goals of sustainable tourism (Mol & Spaargaren, 2000). EMT is particularly relevant for analyzing how the tourism industry can adopt cleaner technologies, reduce resource consumption, and implement sustainability certifications such as the Global Sustainable Tourism Council standards (GSTC, 2021).

Another widely discussed theory is the Environmental Kuznets Curve (EKC), which hypothesizes an inverted U-shaped relationship between economic development and environmental degradation. In the early stages of development, environmental degradation increases, but after reaching a certain level of wealth, societies begin to invest in environmental protection, reducing negative impacts (Grossman & Krueger, 1995). For tourism, this theory could help explain why some high-income countries have more sustainable tourism practices, while developing countries struggle to balance tourism growth with environmental protection.

Furthermore, the Common-Pool Resource (CPR) theory, developed by Ostrom (1990), offers a framework for understanding how communities can manage shared environmental resources sustainably, such as water bodies, forests and wildlife, which are often central to tourism activities. The CPR theory has been applied to tourism settings, particularly in ecotourism and community-based tourism initiatives, where local communities manage natural resources, while benefiting from tourism revenues. This theory highlights the importance of local governance and collective action in sustainable tourism.

Finally, the Systems Theory (ST) (Von Bertalanffy, 1968) in environmental science provides a holistic view of ecosystems and human-environment interactions. By viewing tourism as part of a larger ecological system, ST emphasizes the interconnectedness of tourism activities, natural resources, and environmental policies. This approach is crucial for understanding the cumulative impact of tourism on ecosystems, such as the effect of mass tourism on coastal environments or national parks.

2.3. Previous Intersection Studies

Research examining the intersection of tourism and environmental theories has gained traction, particularly as the urgency of climate change and biodiversity loss becomes more evident. A growing body of literature explores sustainable tourism, focusing on how tourism can both benefit and harm the environment. Scholars such as Gössling et al. (2002) have investigated the carbon footprint of tourism, emphasizing the need to integrate environmental sustainability into tourism models. They argue that current tourism growth trajectories are incompatible with climate goals, thus calling for a rethinking of how tourism and environmental concerns intersect.

Studies such as those by Weaver (2012) have developed the concept of sustainable destination management, which integrates environmental conservation into tourism planning. Weaver's work emphasizes the need for tourism to move beyond economic metrics and consider environmental indicators, such as biodiversity conservation, energy consumption, and waste management. These models align with environmental theories like the EMT and ST, offering a more comprehensive view of how tourism impacts ecosystems.

On the other hand, research focusing on tourism in protected areas often applies Common-Pool Resource Theory to explore how local communities and governments can collaborate to manage natural resources sustainably. For example, studies in community-based ecotourism in regions like the Amazon and East Africa demonstrate how tourism can support conservation efforts while empowering local communities (Stronza & Durham, 2008). These studies highlight how tourism can serve as both a threat and an opportunity for environmental sustainability, depending on how it is managed.

Despite this growing body of research, significant gaps remain in fully integrating tourism and environmental theories. Much of the existing literature treats these two areas separately, with tourism theories focusing on economic growth and visitor experiences, while environmental theories

concentrate on resource conservation and sustainability. Bridging this gap is essential to developing more effective frameworks for sustainable tourism.

3. Theoretical Intersections

3.1. Common Concepts

The convergence of tourism and environmental theories reveals several shared concepts, particularly around sustainability and resource management. Carrying capacity, a concept central to both fields, serves as a bridge between tourism development and environmental protection. In tourism, carrying capacity refers to the maximum number of visitors a destination can accommodate without causing environmental degradation or negatively affecting the visitor experience. Similarly, environmental theories use carrying capacity to describe the limit of resource usage that ecosystems can endure before suffering irreversible harm (O'Reilly, 1986). This overlap suggests that tourism planners and environmentalists both prioritize managing human activities to maintain ecological balance.

Another shared concept is sustainable development, which originates from environmental science but has been widely adopted in tourism studies. The Brundtland Report (1987) (WCED, 1987) defines sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In tourism, this concept has evolved into sustainable tourism, which aims to minimize the industry's environmental footprint while maximizing social and economic benefits. Sustainable tourism models often integrate environmental theories such as Ecological Modernization, promoting the idea that technological innovations and regulatory frameworks can lead to eco-friendly tourism practices (Weaver, 2006).

Behavioral insights also connect the two fields, especially in understanding how tourists and local communities interact with the environment. Tourism theories, particularly the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), have been applied to study tourists' willingness to engage in pro-environmental behaviors, such as choosing eco-friendly accommodation or reducing waste during travel (Ajzen, 1991). These studies overlap with environmental psychology, which examines the factors that drive individuals to adopt environmentally responsible behaviors. Both fields recognize the importance of norms, values, and attitudes in shaping behaviors that contribute to sustainability.

3.2. Contradictions and Gaps

While there are areas of convergence, there are also significant tensions between tourism and environmental theories, particularly around the goals of economic growth and environmental conservation. Traditional tourism theories, like TALC, are often focused on increasing visitor numbers and expanding tourism infrastructure, which can conflict with the environmental goal of preserving natural resources. For example, the TALC model does not explicitly account for the ecological consequences of unrestrained tourism growth, leading to overtourism in many popular destinations, where natural ecosystems are overwhelmed by visitor numbers (Butler, 1980). This creates a fundamental contradiction between tourism's growth-oriented models and environmental theories focused on limiting resource use and preventing degradation.

The Environmental Kuznets Curve (EKC) further exemplifies this tension. According to EKC, economic growth initially leads to environmental degradation, but after a certain level of income, societies begin to invest in environmental protection (Grossman & Krueger, 1995). While this theory might apply to some high-income countries that have implemented sustainable tourism practices, it is less applicable to developing countries, where the environmental costs of tourism growth often outweigh the benefits. In these cases, economic gains from tourism frequently come at the expense of long-term environmental health, contradicting the goals of sustainability.

Moreover, systems thinking in environmental science, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of ecosystems, often clashes with the segmented approach of tourism development. Tourism planning tends to focus on specific locations or attractions rather than viewing destinations as part

of broader ecological systems. This creates a gap in how tourism developments consider their cumulative impact on ecosystems, particularly in terms of biodiversity loss, pollution and habitat disruption (Gössling et al., 2002). Systems theory calls for a more holistic approach, where tourism is managed not only at the destination level, but also in the context of regional and global ecological systems.

3.3. Cultural and Social Dimensions

The integration of cultural and social dimensions into both tourism and environmental theories is essential for understanding how these fields intersect in practice. Tourism, particularly community-based tourism (CBT) and ecotourism, has often been viewed as a tool for fostering environmental conservation, while supporting local communities. Common-Pool Resource (CPR) Theory, developed by Ostrom (1990), is particularly relevant in this context, as it focuses on how local communities can sustainably manage shared environmental resources. In CBT and ecotourism settings, local populations often have a vested interest in preserving the natural environment, because it directly affects their livelihoods. This creates a synergy between tourism and environmental management, where the social and cultural importance of natural resources aligns with ecological conservation goals.

However, cultural dimensions also reveal potential conflicts between tourism and environmental theories. For example, in many developing countries, tourism is seen as a path to economic development, which can lead to overexploitation of natural resources. Doxey's Irridex Model (1975) highlights how local communities' attitudes toward tourism shift from euphoria to antagonism as the negative environmental and social impacts of tourism accumulate. In this sense, the cultural value of tourism as a driver of economic growth can clash with environmental imperatives to limit resource use and preserve ecosystems.

Additionally, gender and social norms play a role in shaping the intersection of tourism and environmental sustainability. Research has shown that women are often more engaged in conservation and environmental protection activities than men, especially in community-based tourism initiatives (Scheyvens, 2000). Gender dynamics can influence both the development of sustainable tourism practices and the management of natural resources, suggesting that social factors must be considered in any theoretical integration of tourism and environmental theories.

4. Case studies and Practical Applications

4.1. Tourism Initiatives with an Environmental Focus

Numerous real-world tourism initiatives have integrated environmental principles to minimize their ecological footprint, while promoting sustainable tourism development. A prime example is ecotourism, which aims to create low-impact travel experiences that educate visitors about the environment and contribute to conservation efforts. In Costa Rica, for instance, ecotourism has become a national strategy for both environmental protection and economic development. Costa Rica's success is largely due to policies that integrate Ecological Modernization Theory (EMT), promoting environmentally friendly technologies, such as renewable energy in eco-lodges and eco-certification systems for tourism businesses (Honey, 2008). By focusing on sustainability, Costa Rica's tourism sector has become a model for how tourism and environmental goals can align.

Another successful case of integrating tourism with environmental protection is the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) certification. This initiative offers guidelines and standards for sustainable tourism management, helping destinations, hotels, and tour operators minimize their environmental impact. The GSTC draws on both Systems Theory and Carrying Capacity Theory, advocating for a holistic approach to tourism that considers resource limitations and the interconnectedness of human and natural systems. Certified destinations, such as Palau, have used these frameworks to limit visitor numbers and promote sustainable marine tourism, ensuring the long-term protection of fragile ecosystems like coral reefs (PalauGov.pw, 2021)

In addition to ecotourism and certification systems, nature-based tourism has gained traction as a practical application of Common-Pool Resource (CPR) Theory. In regions like the Amazon and East Africa, community-managed tourism initiatives allow local populations to oversee natural resources, while benefiting financially from tourism. These initiatives, often supported by non-governmental organizations and governments, promote sustainable resource use by aligning the interests of local communities with environmental conservation. Such models demonstrate how tourism can serve as a tool for both economic development and environmental stewardship when grounded in community-based management principles (Scheyvens, 2000).

4.2. Inter-Disciplinary Research and Projects

There have been numerous examples of cross-disciplinary collaboration where tourism and environmental scientists work together to develop sustainable tourism models. In the European Union, the Sustainable Tourism and Environment Program brought together ecologists, geographers, and tourism researchers to assess the impact of tourism on sensitive ecosystems across Europe, from the Mediterranean coastline to the alpine regions. This project applied Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) from environmental science to tourism development projects, ensuring that new tourism infrastructure minimized environmental degradation (European Commission, 2014). By integrating ecological considerations into tourism planning, this inter-disciplinary approach has influenced policy changes across the EU, leading to more sustainable destination management strategies.

In another example, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) has worked closely with tourism operators and environmental scientists to manage one of the world's most sensitive ecosystems. Systems Theory has been particularly useful in this context, allowing the GBRMPA to view the reef as an interconnected system where tourism, biodiversity, and climate change interact. By implementing policies that limit tourist access to vulnerable areas and regulate the number of visitors, the GBRMPA has successfully protected key areas of the reef from further degradation, while maintaining tourism as a vital part of the local economy (Marshall & Schuttenberg, 2006). This collaboration demonstrates the importance of integrating environmental science into tourism management to achieve long-term sustainability.

4.3. The Impact of Tourism on Environmental Policies

Tourism has also influenced environmental policies in regions heavily reliant on natural resources for tourism income. In Hawaii, for example, mass tourism has led to increased pressure on coastal ecosystems, particularly coral reefs and beaches. In response, the Hawaiian government has implemented stricter environmental regulations, such as limiting the construction of beachfront properties and introducing marine protected areas. These policies are informed by Common-Pool Resource (CPR) Theory and Carrying Capacity Theory, recognizing that uncontrolled tourism can lead to the depletion of shared environmental resources. By setting limits on tourism development and actively managing natural resources, Hawaii has sought to balance tourism growth with ecological preservation (Uyarra et al., 2005).

In Thailand, the effects of mass tourism on the islands of Koh Phi Phi and Phuket have led to extensive environmental degradation, including coral reef damage, water pollution, and waste management issues. Following these impacts, Thai authorities have integrated environmental impact assessments (EIA) into tourism development plans, requiring developers to consider the environmental consequences of their projects. The closure of Maya Bay, a famous tourist site on Koh Phi Phi, is a direct result of these assessments, as the area's coral reefs and marine life were severely impacted by excessive tourist activity. By implementing EIAs and temporary closures, Thailand is beginning to adopt more sustainable tourism practices, recognizing the need for environmental restoration to ensure the long-term viability of its tourism industry (Sawasdee Thailand, 2024)

5. Discussion

5.1. Synthesis of Major Findings

The intersection between tourism and environmental theories reveals a dynamic relationship characterized by both synergy and tension. Seminal tourism theories, such as Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), provide valuable insights into how destinations develop and how tourists behave. However, they often lack a comprehensive ecological perspective, which environmental theories like Ecological Modernization Theory (EMT) and Common-Pool Resource (CPR) Theory offer. By integrating environmental frameworks into tourism studies, we gain a fuller understanding of how tourism activities affect natural systems and how sustainable tourism can be achieved.

This analysis shows that concepts such as carrying capacity and sustainable development are foundational to both fields, serving as common ground for balancing tourism growth with environmental protection. Initiatives like eco-certifications and nature-based tourism demonstrate that tourism can contribute to conservation efforts when guided by strong environmental principles. At the same time, significant contradictions remain, particularly when traditional tourism models prioritize economic expansion over ecological preservation. The challenge lies in addressing these tensions and creating integrated models that balance economic growth with sustainability.

5.2. Theoretical Contributions

This paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on sustainable tourism by proposing a more integrated theoretical approach that bridges tourism and environmental sciences. Tourism theories have traditionally focused on economic and social factors, often neglecting environmental impacts. Meanwhile, environmental theories like Systems Theory and the Environmental Kuznets Curve (EKC) offer broader perspectives on how human activities interact with ecosystems. By bringing these two fields together, this paper suggests that tourism can no longer be studied in isolation from its environmental context. Sustainable tourism must account for the interconnectedness of natural resources, local communities, and tourism dynamics.

Moreover, this theoretical integration offers practical insights for tourism management. Concepts like Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) and CPR Theory emphasize the importance of long-term resource management, advocating for policies that align with both economic and environmental goals. The inclusion of social and cultural dimensions, such as gender and local governance, further enriches the discussion, highlighting the need for socially equitable and ecologically sustainable tourism models.

5.3. Implications for Policy and Practice

The insights from this analysis have significant implications for tourism policy and practice. First, the integration of environmental theories into tourism planning can help destinations adopt more sustainable practices, such as implementing carrying capacity limits and promoting eco-friendly certifications. Destinations that rely heavily on natural resources, such as coastal areas and protected landscapes, must prioritize environmental preservation to maintain their long-term viability. This includes stricter regulations on tourism infrastructure development, waste management, and resource use, particularly in regions facing environmental degradation from overtourism.

Second, the adoption of community-based tourism models, grounded in CPR Theory, offers a pathway for engaging local populations in sustainable tourism practices. By empowering communities to manage their natural resources, these models align tourism goals with conservation efforts, ensuring that economic benefits from tourism do not come at the expense of environmental health. Policymakers should actively support such initiatives through funding, capacity-building programs, and environmental education.

Finally, climate change presents an urgent challenge for the tourism industry, particularly in vulnerable regions like small islands and coastal zones. By incorporating climate resilience strategies

into tourism planning, such as the use of Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) and adaptive management frameworks, destinations can better prepare for the impacts of climate change, such as rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and shifts in biodiversity. Policies that reduce the carbon footprint of tourism, such as promoting sustainable transportation options and reducing energy consumption in tourism facilities, will be essential in aligning tourism development with global climate goals.

5.4. Future Research Directions

While my paper has explored the theoretical intersections between tourism and environmental sciences, there is ample room for further research. Future studies could study how specific environmental policies, such as carbon pricing or marine protected areas, directly influence tourism practices. Additionally, more research is needed on how tourism behavior can be shaped through environmental education and awareness campaigns, particularly in encouraging tourists to adopt eco-friendly behaviors during their travels.

Another area of potential research is the development of new tourism models that integrate both economic and ecological metrics. For instance, incorporating biodiversity indicators or ecosystem service valuation into tourism planning could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how tourism impacts the environment. Furthermore, cross-cultural comparative studies could explore how different regions or countries integrate tourism and environmental policies, revealing best practices for sustainable tourism development.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, this short paper has demonstrated that tourism and environmental theories are deeply interconnected, with sustainability serving as the critical bridge between the two. While tourism theories traditionally focus on economic and social aspects, integrating environmental perspectives provides a more holistic approach to understanding and managing the impact of tourism on ecosystems. Case studies from destinations such as Costa Rica, Hawaii, and Thailand reveal the potential for tourism to contribute to both economic development and environmental conservation, when guided by sustainable practices.

Moving forward, policymakers, researchers, and tourism practitioners must work together to ensure that tourism growth aligns with environmental protection goals. By adopting integrated approaches that draw on both tourism and environmental theories, we can promote tourism models that protect natural resources, support local communities and contribute to global sustainability efforts. Achieving this balance will be essential for the long-term viability of the tourism industry and the preservation of the natural environments upon which it depends.

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