

Sustainable Tourism Development as Destination Governance: An Integrative Framework and Systematic Review

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Abstract:

Sustainable tourism development has moved from a narrow emphasis on environmental protection to a multidimensional approach that seeks to balance economic viability, socio-cultural well-being, environmental stewardship, effective governance, technological capability, and destination resilience. This paper reviews the concept of sustainable tourism development and identifies the principal factors that shape its successful implementation across national and international tourism contexts. An integrative systematic review approach was adopted, drawing on seminal contributions and recent peer-reviewed research, with particular emphasis on studies published during 2025–2026. The synthesis indicates that sustainable tourism is best understood as a destination-level management process rather than a discrete tourism product. Six closely connected factor groups repeatedly emerge from the literature: environmental and climate management; community participation and social equity; economic value creation and local benefit retention; governance and stakeholder coordination; technology, innovation and data capability; and monitoring, resilience and adaptive management. A conceptual framework is proposed to show how these factors interact with the three core sustainability pillars and produce outcomes such as resident well-being, resource efficiency, competitiveness, resilience and intergenerational equity. The review also maps recurring research and implementation gaps to practical mitigation strategies. Recent evidence highlights the growing importance of ESG-based destination governance, community empowerment, destination decarbonisation, smart and green practices, artificial intelligence, circular-economy thinking and shared-value approaches. The paper concludes that sustainable tourism development depends not on a single intervention but on coordinated governance, measurable indicators, meaningful community participation, context-sensitive technology use and continuous adaptation to ecological and social thresholds.

Keywords – Sustainable tourism; Rohtak; Haryana; sports destination management; wrestling akhara; multi-stakeholder governance; groundwater sustainability.

1 Introduction

Tourism generates employment, investment, cultural exchange and regional development, but its rapid expansion can also intensify pressure on ecosystems, infrastructure, housing, heritage assets and host communities. Sustainable tourism development emerged as a response to these competing effects. Its central concern is not whether tourism should grow, but how tourism can create durable economic and social value while remaining within environmental and socio-cultural limits. This perspective is consistent with the broader sustainable-development tradition, which emphasises the satisfaction of present needs without reducing the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Over time, sustainable tourism has evolved from a primarily conservation-oriented idea associated with ecotourism and low-impact travel into a mainstream destination-management agenda. Contemporary scholarship treats sustainability as an integrated system involving economic performance, environmental stewardship, resident well-being, cultural continuity, governance quality and institutional accountability. Earlier research established the importance of destination competitiveness, stakeholder participation, environmental management and tourism impacts, while more recent work has widened the discussion to include resilience, digital transformation, ESG frameworks, circular-economy practices, artificial intelligence, decarbonisation and the distribution of tourism benefits.

Recent research has reinforced the need for this broader approach. Camilleri (2026) positions environmental, social and governance factors as an integrated basis for destination resilience and sustainable growth. Lakhmiri et al. (2026) show that green and smart tourism practices depend strongly on governance quality, policy coherence and institutional coordination. Belkaid and Kummitha (2026) similarly argue that artificial intelligence supports sustainable tourism only when embedded in transparent governance, appropriate infrastructure and context-

sensitive implementation. Community-based research continues to emphasise empowerment, well-being and support as central constructs in sustainable tourism (Muruganantham and Patro, 2026), while destination decarbonisation research highlights the need for multi-level governance because destination organisations often lack the authority and resources to deliver low-carbon transitions independently (Nomm et al., 2026). Within India, the relevance of sustainable tourism is equally strong because destinations vary widely in ecological sensitivity, infrastructure capacity, cultural assets, development levels and governance arrangements. Recent Indian evidence indicates that destination management must create simultaneous value for businesses, residents and the environment rather than treating sustainability as a compliance activity. Shekhar and Das (2026), for example, demonstrate how creating shared value can be adapted to destination management in selected Indian contexts. Accordingly, the present paper adopts a broader national and international perspective rather than limiting the analysis to a single district, city or destination.

Against this background, the paper has two deliberately focused objectives. It first clarifies the concept of sustainable tourism development and then identifies the principal aspects or factors that contribute to it. The analysis is organised through a conceptual framework, a systematic review of literature, and a structured mapping of research gaps to mitigation strategies.

2 Research Objectives

1. To understand the concept of Sustainable Tourism Development.
2. To identify the key aspects/factors that contribute to Sustainable Tourism Development.

3 Methodology

This paper used an integrative systematic literature review to synthesise conceptual, empirical and policy-oriented research on sustainable tourism development. The review was designed to capture both foundational work and the newest developments in the field. Priority was given to peer-reviewed research published from 2015 to August 2026, while earlier seminal publications were retained where they were necessary to establish the conceptual foundations of sustainable development, stakeholder theory, destination competitiveness and tourism governance.

The search logic combined terms such as “sustainable tourism development”, “sustainable destination management”, “tourism sustainability factors”, “tourism governance”, “community participation”, “destination resilience”, “green tourism”, “smart tourism”, “tourism ESG”, “tourism decarbonisation”, “circular tourism”, “destination competitiveness”, and “sustainable tourism indicators”. Recent 2025–2026 studies were deliberately prioritised in the final synthesis to ensure that emerging themes were adequately represented. Publisher repositories and scholarly indexing environments were used to identify relevant journal articles, systematic reviews and selected policy-oriented contributions.

Inclusion criteria required a direct contribution to the understanding, determinants, governance, measurement or implementation of sustainable tourism. Studies limited to general tourism marketing without a sustainability dimension, purely technical work without destination implications, and sources lacking a clear conceptual or empirical basis were excluded. The retained literature was coded thematically under environmental, socio-cultural, economic, governance, technological, resilience and measurement dimensions. These themes were then compared to identify convergent findings, unresolved gaps and mitigation strategies.

The review therefore follows a concept-centred rather than place-centred design. Evidence from India is considered alongside international research so that the resulting framework can be applied across diverse destinations while still recognising that implementation must be adapted to local ecological, institutional and socio-economic conditions.

Table 1. Summary of the systematic review methodology

Review Component	Approach	Purpose	Output
Time emphasis	2015–August 2026, with seminal earlier studies	Balance conceptual foundations with current evidence	Contemporary and historically grounded synthesis
Core themes	Sustainability, governance, community, resilience, ESG, technology, indicators	Identify recurring factors of sustainable tourism development	Thematic factor structure

Geographic scope	National and international	Avoid single-destination limitation	Transferable conceptual framework
Analysis	Thematic comparison and gap mapping	Link evidence to implementation problems	Research-gap and mitigation matrix

4 Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Tourism Management

The proposed framework treats sustainable tourism development as the result of interaction between three core pillars: environmental stewardship, socio-cultural inclusion and economic viability. These pillars cannot be managed independently. Their performance is shaped by four cross-cutting enabling systems: (1) governance and stakeholder participation; (2) technology, innovation and data; (3) resilience, climate action and carrying-capacity management; and (4) monitoring, indicators and adaptive management. Effective integration of these elements produces destination-level outcomes such as resident well-being, resource efficiency, competitiveness, cultural continuity, resilience and intergenerational equity. The framework therefore shifts attention from isolated sustainability initiatives to the institutional processes through which trade-offs are negotiated and monitored.

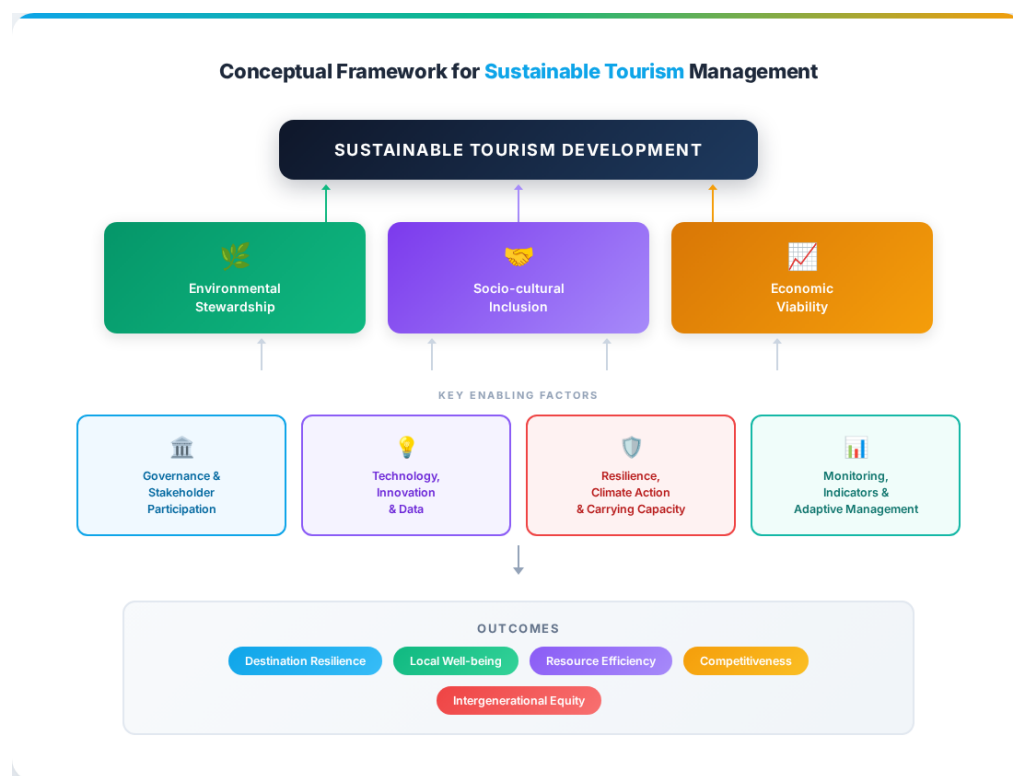


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Tourism Management

4.1 Core Dimensions of the Framework

Table 2. Key dimensions and factors contributing to Sustainable Tourism Development

Dimension	Key Elements	Contribution to Sustainable Tourism
Environmental stewardship	Protection of biodiversity, landscapes, water and energy resources; waste and pollution reduction; climate mitigation and adaptation; carrying-capacity management.	Keeps tourism activity within ecological limits and reduces long-term environmental costs.
Socio-cultural inclusion	Resident participation, social equity, protection of cultural heritage, respect for local identity,	Builds legitimacy, protects host-community interests and sustains cultural assets.

	visitor–resident relations, accessibility and fair distribution of benefits.	
Economic viability	Long-term competitiveness, local employment, support for small and medium tourism enterprises, local procurement, reduced leakage, seasonality management and investment in destination quality.	Ensures tourism remains productive while retaining value within destination economies.
Governance and stakeholder coordination	Clear institutional roles, collaboration across public, private and community actors, transparent decision making, accountability and conflict-resolution mechanisms.	Aligns competing interests and converts sustainability goals into implementable decisions.
Technology and innovation	Smart-destination systems, digital participation, predictive analytics, resource monitoring, artificial intelligence and platforms that improve both management efficiency and inclusion.	Improves information quality, efficiency, visitor management and real-time sustainability monitoring.
Resilience and adaptive management	Capacity to respond to climate risks, crises, changing demand, infrastructure pressure and ecological thresholds through continuous monitoring and policy adjustment.	Enables destinations to absorb shocks, learn from change and maintain long-term viability.

5 Systematic Review of Literature

5.1 Concept and Evolution of Sustainable Tourism Development

Sustainable tourism development applies the principles of sustainable development to tourism systems. It requires destinations to pursue economic benefits without degrading the environmental, social and cultural resources on which tourism itself depends. The concept is therefore broader than ecotourism. It can apply to urban, rural, coastal, cultural, heritage, adventure, business and mass-tourism destinations, provided that tourism is planned and managed according to long-term sustainability principles. Early contributions focused on environmental impacts, destination carrying capacity and responsible resource use. Later research increasingly incorporated competitiveness, resident attitudes, stakeholder theory, governance and the distribution of tourism benefits. The contemporary literature now presents sustainable tourism as a dynamic governance challenge in which sustainability outcomes depend on institutional capacity, participation, data, resilience and the ability to manage trade-offs among growth, conservation and community well-being. Streimikiene et al. (2021) showed through a systematic review that sustainable tourism development and competitiveness are interdependent rather than contradictory when destinations integrate environmental, economic and social objectives. Falatoonitoosi et al. (2022) further linked sustainable tourism development to destination prosperity, while Scheyvens and Cheer (2022) emphasised partnerships and alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals. More recent ESG research consolidates these strands by explicitly connecting environmental stewardship, social equity and governance quality within a destination resilience perspective (Camilleri, 2026).

5.2 Environmental Sustainability, Climate Action and Resource Management

Environmental sustainability remains a foundational component of sustainable tourism. Tourism depends on environmental quality yet can contribute to land degradation, emissions, waste generation, water stress and biodiversity loss. Sustainable destination management therefore requires resource-efficiency measures, ecosystem protection, waste minimisation, renewable-energy integration, low-carbon mobility and climate adaptation. Recent literature gives increasing attention to decarbonisation and resilience. Nomm et al. (2026) show that regional destination organisations cannot deliver deep decarbonisation alone because tourism emissions are shaped by transport, land-use, infrastructure and wider policy systems. Their work highlights the importance of multi-level governance, aligned mandates and coordinated resources. Das and Mishra (2026) extend this environmental perspective by integrating circular-economy principles with community resilience in a destination-scale regenerative tourism framework. These developments indicate a shift from simply reducing negative impacts toward redesigning tourism systems to restore ecological and community capacity. Green and smart practices are also increasingly analysed together. Lakhmiri et al. (2026), reviewing 51 studies, identify technological and financial barriers as recurring constraints, while governance quality, policy coherence and institutional

coordination consistently act as enabling conditions. This suggests that environmental technology is effective only when supported by institutional capability and clear sustainability objectives.

5.3 Community Participation, Social Equity and Cultural Sustainability

Community participation is central to the legitimacy and durability of tourism development. Host communities absorb many of the direct consequences of tourism, including employment opportunities, congestion, cultural change, land-use pressure and changes in local prices. Sustainable tourism therefore requires participation that goes beyond consultation and gives local actors a meaningful role in planning, decision making, monitoring and benefit distribution. Muruganantham and Patro (2026), in a systematic review of community-based sustainable tourism, identify awareness, empowerment, well-being and support as principal constructs. Their synthesis also points to persistent problems such as unequal benefit distribution and limited local authority. These findings are consistent with long-standing stakeholder perspectives but add a stronger emphasis on empowerment and resilience. Recent work on digital participation similarly shows that technology can widen engagement and knowledge exchange, although participation remains uneven when access and institutional responsiveness are weak. Cultural sustainability is closely related. Tourism can provide resources for heritage conservation and cultural entrepreneurship, but uncontrolled commercialisation can weaken authenticity and local control. Sustainable tourism management therefore requires community ownership, protection of tangible and intangible heritage, support for local enterprises and mechanisms that prevent the displacement of resident interests.

5.4 Economic Sustainability, Competitiveness and Shared Value

Economic sustainability does not mean maximising visitor numbers or short-term tourism receipts. It refers to the capacity of tourism to generate durable economic value while supporting resident livelihoods and preserving the assets that underpin destination competitiveness. Key factors include local employment, entrepreneurship, value-chain linkages, reduced leakage, seasonality management, infrastructure quality and reinvestment in environmental and cultural resources. Research has repeatedly shown that sustainability can strengthen destination competitiveness when it improves quality, reputation and long-term resource security (Cucculelli and Goffi, 2016; Goffi et al., 2019). More recent work shifts from competitiveness alone to the question of how value is shared. Shekhar and Das (2026) apply the Creating Shared Value perspective to selected Indian destinations and argue that destination management organisations can align business competitiveness with social and environmental benefits. This approach is particularly relevant in developing destinations where tourism growth can coexist with high leakage, unequal benefit distribution and limited local participation. Costa et al. (2026) further demonstrate the importance of economic indicators for sustainable destination management. Their multi-layer framework distinguishes destination economic value, tourism supply, business value, tourism demand, connected-economy effects and the political-institutional context. The implication is that sustainable economic performance requires a broader dashboard than arrivals, occupancy or tourism receipts alone.

5.5 Governance, Stakeholder Coordination and Institutional Capacity

Governance is the mechanism that connects sustainability principles with implementation. Tourism destinations involve governments, tourism businesses, residents, civil-society organisations, transport providers, cultural institutions, investors and visitors, all of whom possess different interests and levels of influence. Fragmented authority can therefore become a major barrier even where sustainability policies exist. Stakeholder theory provides a useful basis for understanding these relationships, but recent tourism research increasingly focuses on the quality of coordination rather than stakeholder identification alone. Camilleri (2026) embeds governance within an ESG framework, while Lakhmiri et al. (2026) identify policy coherence and institutional coordination as central enabling conditions for green and smart tourism. Nomm et al. (2026) similarly show that leadership and destination planning are perceived as essential to decarbonisation but can be difficult to implement when tourism organisations retain marketing-focused mandates. Good governance in sustainable tourism consequently requires clear responsibilities, shared indicators, transparent decisions, formal mechanisms for community participation, cross-sector collaboration and stable funding for long-term destination stewardship.

5.6 Technology, Smart Tourism and Artificial Intelligence

Digitalisation is increasingly intertwined with sustainable tourism management. Smart technologies can support visitor-flow management, reduce congestion, monitor resource use, improve public transport, personalise information, forecast demand and provide real-time environmental data. Digital platforms can also improve market access for small tourism enterprises and widen channels for stakeholder participation. However, technology is not inherently sustainable. Belkaid and Kummitha (2026) conclude that the contribution of artificial intelligence depends on regulatory capacity, digital infrastructure, governance arrangements and contextual readiness. AI can support energy management, predictive analytics and destination monitoring, but it can also

reproduce inequality through digital exclusion, high implementation costs, data risks and algorithmic bias. Lakhmire et al. (2026) reach a similar conclusion regarding green-smart integration: technology becomes an enabler only when governance and implementation conditions are adequate. This evidence suggests that sustainable smart tourism should be evaluated by the sustainability outcomes it produces rather than by the sophistication of the technology deployed. Data governance, accessibility, privacy, transparency and capacity building should therefore be treated as integral sustainability concerns.

5.7 Resilience, Carrying Capacity and Adaptive Destination Management

Resilience has become a major extension of the sustainable tourism agenda because destinations face climate hazards, health crises, geopolitical disruptions, infrastructure stress and rapidly changing visitor behaviour. A sustainable destination must therefore be capable not only of minimising current impacts but also of adapting to shocks without undermining community well-being or ecological integrity. Carrying-capacity management is one part of this adaptive process. Rather than relying on a single fixed visitor threshold, contemporary management increasingly combines spatial planning, demand dispersal, timed access, pricing, monitoring and resident feedback. This is especially important in overtourism contexts where visitor concentration can damage both visitor experience and resident support. Resilience also requires economic diversification and local capability. Destinations that rely heavily on a narrow tourism market, season or attraction are more vulnerable to disruption. Strengthening local supply chains, community enterprises, workforce skills and digital capability can therefore contribute simultaneously to economic, social and crisis resilience.

5.8 Synthesis of Recent 2025–2026 Research

Table 3. Selected recent studies incorporated into the revised review

Study	Focus	Main Insight	Relevance to This Review
Camilleri (2026)	ESG and sustainable tourism	Environmental, social and governance integration supports destination resilience and sustainable growth.	Strengthens governance and multidimensional sustainability factors.
Lakhmire et al. (2026)	Green and smart tourism systematic review	Governance quality, policy coherence and coordination are key enablers; technology and finance are common barriers.	Links technology with institutional capability.
Belkaid and Kummitha (2026)	AI in sustainable tourism	AI benefits are conditional on governance, infrastructure, ethics and context.	Positions technology as a managed enabler rather than an automatic solution.
Muruganantham and Patro (2026)	Community-based sustainable tourism review	Awareness, empowerment, well-being and support are core constructs; unequal benefit distribution remains a challenge.	Reinforces community participation and equity.
Nomm et al. (2026)	Destination decarbonisation	Low-carbon transitions require multi-level governance beyond the capacity of individual destination organisations.	Highlights climate governance and institutional alignment.
Shekhar and Das (2026)	Creating shared value in Indian destinations	Destination governance can align competitiveness with societal and environmental value.	Adds a current Indian destination-management perspective.
Das and Mishra (2026)	Regenerative tourism, circular economy and resilience	Regenerative destination thinking integrates circularity with community resilience.	Extends sustainability from mitigation toward regeneration.
Costa et al. (2026)	Economic indicators for	A multi-layer indicator framework supports sustainable monitoring of tourism's economic effects.	Supports measurable and adaptive management.

	destination management		
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6 Mapping Research Gaps to Mitigation Strategies

The literature reveals that the main challenge is no longer a lack of awareness of sustainability principles, but the gap between principles and implementation. Across different destination types, recurring problems include fragmented governance, weak measurement, unequal benefit distribution, overtourism, climate vulnerability, resource-intensive infrastructure and uneven digital capacity. Figure 2 maps these gaps to corresponding mitigation strategies.

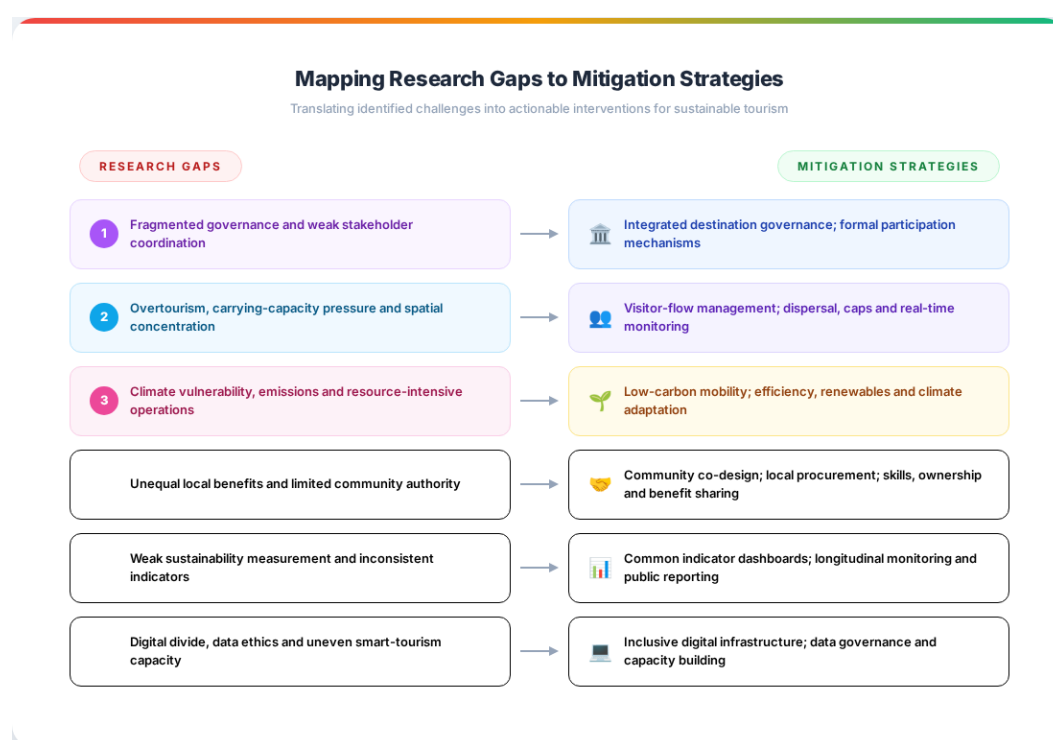


Figure 2. Mapping Research Gaps to Mitigation Strategies

6.1 Key Research and Implementation Gaps

1. First, governance research often identifies stakeholders but does not sufficiently explain how authority, funding and accountability should be distributed among them. Future work needs stronger comparative evidence on governance arrangements that successfully coordinate tourism, transport, environment, culture and local development.

2. Second, sustainability measurement remains inconsistent. Destinations frequently use different indicators, making comparison difficult and allowing economic growth measures to dominate assessment. A stronger common core of environmental, social, economic and governance indicators is required, complemented by destination-specific measures.

3. Third, community participation is widely endorsed but often weakly institutionalised. Consultation does not necessarily create influence, ownership or equitable benefit distribution. Research should distinguish symbolic participation from genuine co-decision and examine which governance mechanisms improve resident power and well-being.

4. Fourth, climate mitigation, adaptation and tourism resilience are still insufficiently integrated. Much research treats emissions, disaster risk and destination management as separate themes even though they are operationally interdependent.

5. Fifth, smart tourism and AI research is expanding rapidly, but empirical evidence on long-term sustainability outcomes remains limited. More comparative work is needed to test whether technology actually reduces resource use, congestion and inequality rather than merely improving efficiency and visitor convenience.

6. Sixth, there remains a geographic imbalance in the evidence base. More studies are needed from developing and emerging destinations, including India, where institutional capacity, infrastructure, informality, community dependence and ecological pressures may differ substantially from high-income destinations.

6.2 Mitigation Strategy Matrix

Table 4. Research gaps and corresponding mitigation strategies

Gap	Mitigation Strategy	Expected Benefit
Fragmented governance	Create integrated destination governance platforms with defined mandates, cross-sector representation and transparent accountability.	Improved coordination and policy coherence.
Overtourism and carrying-capacity pressure	Use visitor-flow analytics, spatial dispersal, timed entry, demand management and resident feedback.	Reduced pressure on sensitive locations and improved visitor–resident balance.
Climate and environmental pressures	Adopt low-carbon mobility, efficiency standards, renewable energy, ecosystem restoration and climate-risk planning.	Lower emissions, reduced resource use and stronger destination resilience.
Unequal local benefits	Strengthen local procurement, community enterprises, skills development, ownership opportunities and benefit-sharing mechanisms.	Greater resident support and inclusive economic development.
Weak measurement	Use balanced sustainability dashboards covering environmental, social, economic and governance indicators.	Evidence-based decisions and accountability.
Digital divide and technology risks	Invest in inclusive digital infrastructure, staff capability, data governance, privacy protection and transparent AI use.	More equitable and responsible smart-tourism adoption.

7 Implications

7.1 Theoretical Implications

The review supports a multidimensional understanding of sustainable tourism development in which environmental, social and economic outcomes are mediated by governance, technology, resilience and measurement systems. This extends the traditional triple-bottom-line approach by showing that the three sustainability pillars are not self-executing. Their performance depends on the institutional mechanisms through which resources are allocated, stakeholder conflicts are resolved and outcomes are monitored. The proposed framework also positions resilience and digital capability as cross-cutting dimensions rather than separate research streams. Climate adaptation, data systems, visitor management and community participation increasingly interact in practice, suggesting that future theory should model sustainable destinations as adaptive socio-ecological and governance systems

7.2 Policy Implications

Governments should move from tourism-promotion models toward destination-management models that assign clear sustainability responsibilities to relevant agencies. Policy frameworks should connect tourism planning with transport, climate, land use, heritage, water, waste and local economic development. National and sub-national tourism strategies should also establish common sustainability indicators while allowing local adaptation. Public reporting of destination-level environmental, social and governance performance would improve transparency and enable evidence-based allocation of resources.

7.3 Managerial Implications

Destination management organisations and tourism businesses should treat sustainability as a source of long-term destination quality rather than as a separate corporate-social-responsibility activity. Practical priorities include resource efficiency, local sourcing, skills development, digital monitoring, visitor-flow management and collaboration with residents and public agencies. Technology investments should be justified against clear sustainability outcomes. Smart systems and AI should therefore be assessed in terms of reductions in congestion, emissions, waste, resource use, exclusion or management uncertainty rather than adoption levels alone.

7.4 Community and Stakeholder Implications

Community participation should be formalised through continuous consultation, co-design, monitoring and representation in destination governance. Local communities should have access to tourism value chains through employment, entrepreneurship, procurement and ownership opportunities. Meaningful participation is especially important where tourism development affects land, heritage, natural resources or everyday resident access to public spaces.

8 Conclusion

This paper addressed two focused objectives: to understand the concept of Sustainable Tourism Development and to identify the key aspects or factors that contribute to it. The review shows that sustainable tourism development is best understood as a long-term destination-management process that balances environmental stewardship, socio-cultural inclusion and economic viability while safeguarding the capacity of future generations and host communities to benefit from tourism resources. Successful implementation depends on more than the traditional three pillars. Governance and stakeholder coordination, community empowerment, technology and data capability, climate resilience, carrying-capacity management, shared economic value and robust sustainability indicators operate as enabling factors that determine whether sustainability principles are translated into measurable outcomes. The recent 2025–2026 literature confirms a clear evolution in the field. ESG frameworks, destination decarbonisation, community-based sustainability, artificial intelligence, green-smart integration, regenerative tourism and creating shared value are becoming increasingly important. At the same time, the literature consistently warns that technology, sustainability certification or isolated environmental initiatives cannot substitute for coherent governance and meaningful participation. For India and other diverse tourism economies, this is particularly important because destination conditions vary widely and require context-sensitive implementation rather than uniform solutions. The conceptual framework presented in this paper therefore offers a broad national and international basis for understanding sustainable tourism while allowing individual destinations to adapt indicators, priorities and mitigation strategies to their own ecological, social and institutional realities.

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