

ROSITSA RÖNTYNE



ECOSYSTEM  
GOVERNANCE

OF NATURE-BASED  
DESTINATIONS

FOR HEALTH

AND RECREATIONAL

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT



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ARTEMIS

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Rositsa Röntynen

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BACHT:	Bulgarian Association for Climatotherapy and Health Tourism
BBF:	Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation
CAS:	complex adaptive system
COVID-19:	coronavirus disease of 2019
DMO:	destination management organization
EU:	European Union
GPS:	Global Positioning System
IUCN:	International Union for Conservation of Nature
LAC:	limits of acceptable change
MOEW:	Ministry of Environment and Water
NFA:	National Forestry Administration
NGO:	non-governmental organization
PPP:	public-private partnership
RIEW:	Regional Inspectorate for Environment and Water
SME:	small and medium-sized enterprises
SPNHH:	Society for the Protection of Natural and Historical Heritage
STBE :	smart tourism business ecosystem
TIC :	tourist information center
TRMO:	tourism region management organization
UN:	United Nations
UNESCO:	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USP:	unique selling proposition
VAT:	value-added tax
WHO:	World Health Organization

# INTRODUCTION

The topic of this monographic study is related to finding an effective management approach for the development of health and recreational tourism that supports the socio-economic development of the destination. The main challenge is how to apply the ecosystem approach, taking into account the complex interconnections between the ecological, social, and economic aspects of tourism areas.

The study is **timely** due to the need for sustainable tourism development. The focus is on the ecosystem approach in management sciences, which provides new perspectives for developing sustainable strategies across various industries, including tourism – a fragmented and multilateral industry that has recently demonstrated its dependence on numerous non-tourism operators and external factors during the COVID-19 pandemic (Milwood & Crick 2021, 23). The concept of an ecosystem, borrowed from biology, is used in business to understand the complex relationships – partly spontaneously emerging and informal – between operators within a given sector. The ecosystem approach is particularly **significant** in the context of health and recreational tourism, where there is a pronounced involvement of operators from numerous industries and various stakeholders, necessitating the study of the socio-economic aspects of managing these tourism ecosystems. In this context, the ecosystem approach serves not only as a conceptual framework but also as a practical tool for optimizing interactions among different operators and natural resources, thereby creating conditions for the sustainable development of health and recreational tourism.

The search for alternatives to mass tourism, the global demographic changes, and the growing interest in personal health have led to an increased focus on health and recreational tourism. Combined with the need for balanced use of natural resources in protected areas, these factors motivate the development of this study. This sector requires integrated solutions that combine economic efficiency with social justice and environmental conservation.

From a scientific perspective, the study expands the understanding of the application of the ecosystem approach in tourism destination management, exploring new ways to implement it. From a practical standpoint, the research results can assist institutions and operators in creating more effective and sustainable destination management models, particularly in protected areas with potential for health and recreational tourism.

The **object** of the study are tourism destinations located in protected areas that utilize natural resources and have potential for the development of health and recreational tourism.

The **subject** of the study is the functioning of tourism destinations associated with protected areas as ecosystems, and how they can be managed to promote the development of health and recreational tourism.

The **research problem** arises from the lack of in-depth scientific studies and practical applications of the ecosystem approach in tourism management. In most existing studies, tourism is analyzed at the level of industry, cluster, or network, but these approaches are too narrow for a proper understanding and effective management of this multilateral sector. Research on tourism ecosystems often uses the concepts of network and ecosystem interchangeably, and empirical studies of business ecosystems in general are rare. Specific empirical studies of ecosystems in health and recreational tourism are entirely lacking.

The study aims to address the following **research questions**:

1. *How can the management of a tourism business ecosystem effectively integrate social and economic aspects?*

2. *Which elements and factors of a tourism ecosystem need to be managed to promote the development of health and recreational tourism in nature-based destinations?*

The study argues that applying the ecosystem approach to the management of tourism destinations can enhance the potential for developing health and recreational tourism, particularly in the context of protected areas, both socially and economically. Its adoption is an opportunity for a more focused contribution to the sustainable development of these types of tourism.

The **aim** of this study is to analyze the relationship between the ecosystem approach and the development of health and recreational tourism, and to formulate specific recommendations for more effective management of tourism destinations in protected areas.

To achieve this aim, several **research tasks** are formulated and implemented. First, an analysis of the existing literature on the ecosystem approach and its application in tourism, as well as on the development of health and recreational tourism, is conducted. Next, the study reviews the tourism use of protected areas in Bulgaria and Finland, followed by planning and implementation of empirical research. The study also analyzes the state of management in tourism ecosystems in Southern Konnevesi (Finland) and Strandzha (Bulgaria), which are chosen as case studies of destinations for health and recreational tourism development.

Based on this analysis, recommendations are developed to improve the management of these two destinations through the ecosystem approach, and by comparing the two cases, good practices for the sustainable development of health and recreational tourism are identified. The final task of the monographic study is to formulate conclusions and recommendations for the future development of these types of tourism through the integration of the ecosystem approach.

To narrow the scope of the study and focus the research efforts on the essential issues necessary to address the research problem, several **limitations** were introduced. The territorial scope of the study is limited

to Southern Konnevesi and Strandzha. This defines the context of the research, which is related to emerging tourism destinations in remote, nature-based areas with protected environments. Nevertheless, some of the study's findings may be adapted and applied in other contexts.

Regarding the temporal scope, the bibliographic part of the study was developed between August 2023 and August 2024. The conduct of empirical research was constrained by the geographical distance between the examined destinations (over 3,000 km) and the researcher's mobility. The collection of primary data in Strandzha took place in June 2024, while in Southern Konnevesi it was conducted from September to November 2024.

The empirical study was conducted in three languages – primarily Bulgarian and Finnish, due to the locations of the study destinations, and in certain cases, English. Respondents' statements in Bulgarian and Finnish were translated into English, with careful attention to preserve their meaning despite linguistic and cultural differences. The literature review, in addition to the aforementioned languages, included sources in other languages, facilitated by the researcher's linguistic skills and modern information technology, with the aim of incorporating a broader range of perspectives.

The health and recreational benefits of tourism in the selected destinations are assumed to be present and are not subject to direct investigation. The existence and availability of these health-recreational benefits stem from cultural ecosystem services. The study does not include the biological aspects of ecosystems; that is, the concept of ecosystem is used as a metaphor, its meaning transferred from biology to business and society. Moreover, the study does not aim to examine the state of biological ecosystems, nor ecotourism. Exploration of other concepts employing the term ecosystem, apart from the business ecosystem, are also excluded and are only mentioned in the theoretical section. The research also does not focus on other forms of tourism beyond health and recreational tourism.

The study is conducted using a combination of **methods**, which complement each other and ensure reliability through triangulation. In its

theoretical part, it relies on an analysis of scientific literature related to business ecosystems and their application in tourism, as well as a synthesis of studies on the management of health and recreational tourism, including a critical analysis of definitions, subtypes, stakeholders, value creation, and socio-economic aspects. Moreover, the literature review is integrative, allowing for the development of new conceptual frameworks. Through this approach, an initial conceptual model of a health and recreational tourism destination ecosystem is formulated, serving as the basis for the subsequent research. Significant aspects derived from the critical analysis of theoretical propositions guide the empirical part of the study.

The literature is sourced from multiple scientific databases and supplemented with gray literature identified through online search. In the study of ecosystems, the key term is business ecosystem, distinguished from similar concepts such as networks, entrepreneurial ecosystems, and service ecosystems. Articles on health and recreational tourism published within the last decade are included in the review, as global events such as financial crises, climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and technological advances have significantly transformed tourism. A snowball technique is used to identify additional relevant sources, and to account for terminological differences and regional characteristics. Publications in various languages are examined, including English, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Russian, Turkish, and Finnish, acknowledging the cultural and linguistic differences and varying perspectives of not only the case study countries but other countries leading the development of health and recreational tourism as well.

In the empirical study, document analysis and semi-structured expert interviews are employed. The document analysis of strategic documents, regulations, and policies reveals important characteristics of the case studies and the management models applied in the researched territories. This information is presented narratively and used for triangulation with interview data. Interviews are conducted with key stakeholders, including local authorities, tourism operators, conservation organizations, and community representatives. These provide qualitative

insights into adopted management approaches and challenges in applying the ecosystem approach. The collected data is processed using a template thematic analysis.

The empirical research also includes a comparative case study of two specific territories – Southern Konnevesi in Finland and Strandzha in Bulgaria. The comparison serves as a platform for integrating theory and practice, enabling the derivation of conclusions about the management of both destinations and the identification of common principles and good practices. The development of the conceptual framework is based on inductive thematic analysis, allowing iterative refinement of themes from one chapter to another. The integration of concepts creates synergy: the context of health and recreational tourism contextualizes the business ecosystem within tourism, while the business ecosystem concept provides new management tools for the development of health and recreational tourism.

# CHAPTER 1

## BUSINESS ECOSYSTEMS AND THEIR MANAGEMENT

Due to its multifaceted and complex structure, the tourism industry can function as an ecosystem (Selen & Ogulin 2015). There is no single answer, however, to how the social and economic sciences understand the concept of an ecosystem. The term *ecosystem* appeared in management sciences as a borrowing from the natural sciences, where the biological ecosystem “includes [...] the totality of all living organisms, [...] the non-living part of their environment [...] and all the diverse interactions among them, through which a circulation of matter takes place and, via the flow of energy, a specific biotic structure is created.” (Environment Executive Agency n.d.).

### 1.1. ECOSYSTEM THEORIES IN SOCIOLOGY AND ECONOMICS

#### **Definition, essence and distinction of the business ecosystem**

Moore first mentioned the term “business ecosystem” in his publications from the mid-1990s (Moore 1993; Moore 1996a; Moore 1996b). According to his definition, the business ecosystem is a “growth-oriented synergistic economic” community of “mutually supportive” “customers, suppliers, lead producers and other stakeholders”, investors, owners, “relevant trade associations, standards bodies, labor unions, governmental and quasigovernmental institutions”, “interacting with one another to produce goods and services” (Moore, 1998, 168), coming “together in a partially intentional, highly self-organizing, and even somewhat accidental manner” (Moore, 1998, 169). These agents “work in cooperation and

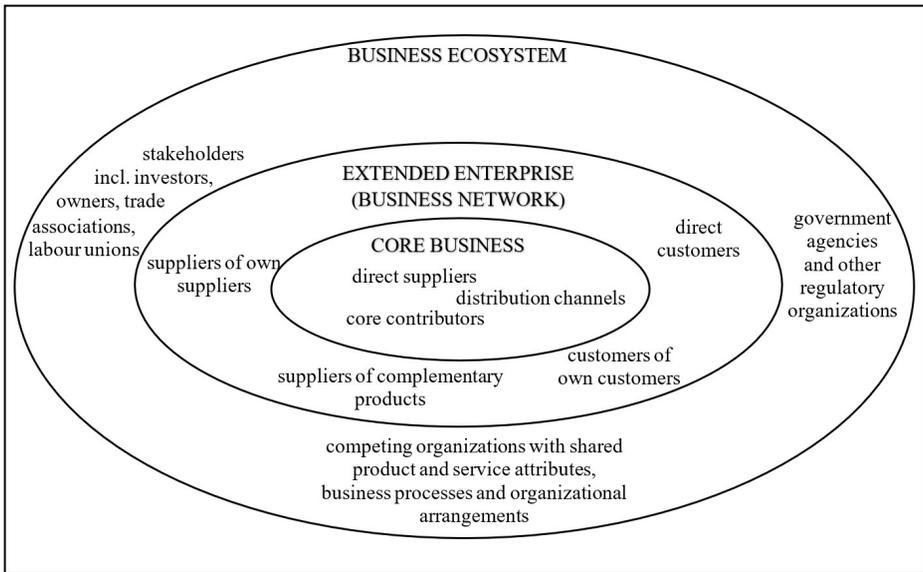
competition” for a common goal, e.g., a new product or satisfaction of a customer’s need, until they finally engage in the next round of innovation (Moore, 1993, 76). There are also other definitions (Thomas & Autio 2012, 2; Peltoniemi, Vuori & Laihonon 2005, 11; Peltoniemi & Vuori 2005, 13; den Hartigh & van Asseldonk 2004, 23), which, however, do not contribute with significant new information beyond Moore’s.

Business science adopts the use of the biological ecosystem model to analyze business relationships and strategic decision-making (Iansiti & Levien 2004a; Iansiti & Levien 2004b) in a state of significant change in the competitive environment, caused by rapid technological advancement, the rise of the information age, and globalization (Hoskisson et al. 1999, 444) – factors contributing to the increasing complexity of the business environment today (Peltoniemi & Vuori 2005, 2). From a social perspective, the ecosystem is nothing new, having been used repeatedly throughout history for community transformation and innovation, as De Meyer and Williamson (2020, 7) point out, e.g., in medieval England, towns had shared grazing areas for all residents, and in the rice terraces of Java, farmers managed water together. However, from an economic perspective, as Ovcharova (2019, 42) emphasizes, the role of connections, partnerships, networks, and alliances in collaborative processes is becoming increasingly significant nowadays.

It is important, at the outset, to determine whether the business network is still the main object of analysis – that is, whether the biological ecosystem is being used merely as a metaphor – or whether we are dealing with a new type of organizational form (Anggraeni, den Hartigh & Zegveld 2007, 2). Moore identifies the economic community with a business ecosystem, arguing that this term describes it better than the concept of an *industry* (Moore 1993; Moore 1996a), effectively excluding the notion of industry from his discussion. According to his described structure (Figure 11.), the business ecosystem extends beyond the boundaries of the business network, also called *extended enterprise*, because it involves not only other *stakeholders* but also government bodies, associations, and standardization

organizations (Moore 1996a) that, even if not directly engaged in business activities, significantly influence its success (Heikkilä & Kuivaniemi 2012, 20). Consequently, the difference from other network constructs is that the ecosystem includes participants on both the product and user sides, including additional asset providers and the customers (Thomas & Autio 2012). In this way, Moore supports the thesis that the business ecosystem represents a “new corporate form” (Moore 1998).

**Figure 1.1.** Structure of the business ecosystem (adapted from Moore 1996a).



In contrast, lansiti and Levien (2004a; 2004b) view the business ecosystem as a type of business network, using an analogy with the biological world. Certain characteristics of natural ecosystems, such as structure, interconnections and relationships among agents, as well as the roles of participating agents, can contribute to understanding business networks (Anggraeni, de Hartigh & Zegveld 2007, 11). Many studies of business networks include indirectly connected agents, relationship dynamics, *cooperation*, *competition*, and shared goals, therefore, it can be argued that a business ecosystem is a type of business network with specific characteristics that deserve investigation (Anggraeni, de Hartigh

& Zegveld 2007, 11), while some general features of business networks can aid in its better understanding and application. Ovcharova (2019, 42) appropriately suggests that the business ecosystem should rather be seen as “a new framework and way of thinking” that characterizes contemporary changes in the economic and business environment.

As for the ecosystem as a metaphor borrowed from biology, it can serve as a useful inspiration for analyzing business as an interconnected rather than an atomic, isolated activity (Anggraeni, de Hartigh & Zegveld 2007, 12). At the same time, the differences between the original concept and the metaphor must be taken into account to avoid misconceptions (Ovcharova 2019, 42). Both types of ecosystems can be self-sustaining without external intervention; over time, they adapt and evolve (Peltoniemi 2004, 4). However, biological ecosystems do not have the capacity to act deliberately or intentionally (Korhonen et al. 2004). Innovations beyond mere survival, competition for attracting new members, and the intelligence of agents are also characteristics of the business ecosystem that are absent in biological ones (Iansiti & Levien 2004b, 39). One should not exceed the boundaries of using the biological ecosystem as a metaphor and attempting a comprehensive imitation of nature should not be exceeded, because, as Hussain and Haley (2022, 1) remind, “when a social system aims to mimic nature, it needs to incorporate all elements holistically: inputs, outputs and positive and negative externalities,” which is not possible in the case of a business ecosystem. Otherwise, the essence of the term business ecosystem may be diluted when translated into a business environment that is artificial and controlled by human intervention, as has also happened with another term borrowed from the natural sciences, namely *sustainability* (Hussain & Haley 2022, 2).

It is also important to distinguish the term business ecosystem from other terms used to describe the economic community. Some of these are:

- *cluster*, whose main differences from a business ecosystem consist in the lack of strict localization, the intense competition

within the cluster, and the positioning of the cluster relative to the industry (Porter 1990; Peltoniemi 2004, 5);

- *value network*, which differs from a business ecosystem in that a value network does not inherently involve competition, and also in that a business ecosystem lacks a dominant agent exerting control (Mariotti 2002; Peltoniemi 2004, 6);
- *innovation network*, which focuses only on the production agents, but not on the consumption agents (Thomas & Autio 2012, 2);
- *industrial network*, which likewise does not include consumption agents as participants in the network processes (Thomas & Autio 2012, 2);
- *supply chain*, in which relationships are one-to-one rather than many-to-many, and which is arranged according to a logical production sequence (den Hartigh & van Asseldonk 2004, 24).

It is also necessary to distinguish the business ecosystem from the concept of *business ecology*. Some environmentalists use the term business ecosystem not as a metaphor, but in discussions of environmental issues related to business. The aim is sustainability through full ecological synchronization and integration of businesses with the places they inhabit, use, and influence (Townsend 2006). Later in this monograph, a connection between the business ecosystem and sustainable development will be established, but this is not based solely on ecology.

There are numerous conceptual and theoretical works developing the idea of the business ecosystem (Moore 1993, 1996a, 1996b, 1998; Gossain & Kandiah 1998; Iansiti & Levien 2002, 2004a, 2004b; Peltoniemi 2004, 2005a, 2005b; Peltoniemi & Vuori 2005; Peltoniemi, Vuori & Laihonon 2005; Vuori 2005; Anggraeni, den Hartigh & Zegveld 2007). However, empirical studies, a quarter of a century after its scientific establishment, continue to be rare – mostly in the context of information technologies (den Hartigh & van Asseldonk 2004; Basole 2009; Iyer, Lee & Venkatraman 2006), with only a few focused on tourism (Selen & Ogulin 2015; Milwood & Crick 2021; Henche, Salvaj & Cuesta-Valiño 2020). There are also studies in which

the term business ecosystem is used simply as a substitute for business network, without discussing any of its distinctive features (Quaadgras 2005; Henche, Salvaj & Cuesta-Valiño 2020; Duy et al. 2020).

The business ecosystem is also discussed through the lens of the *service-dominant logic* (Vargo & Lusch 2008), which is closely related to involving the customer in the production process and, more broadly, to the transactions within the ecosystem. The customer as part of the ecosystem is considered in the present study; however, examining the business ecosystem from the perspective of a *service ecosystem* (Vargo & Lusch 2016, 11-12) with its micro-, meso-, and macro-levels (Akaka & Vargo 2015) is excluded, as it would divert the focus. In a service ecosystem, the service itself is central, whereas in the so-to-say “Moore ecosystem,” the focus is on the community of agents, which in this study is further specified through the concept of a tourism destination.

The concept of a business ecosystem has also inspired the formation of numerous other business-related terms, which remain outside the scope of the present study:

- digital business ecosystem (De Tommassi 2005; Seigneur 2005; Zhao & Li 2003; Peltoniemi & Vuori 2005, 5),
- technological ecosystem (Adomavicius et al. 2006; Thomas & Autio 2012, 19),
- industrial ecosystem (Peltoniemi & Vuori 2005, 3-4),
- social ecosystem Mitleton-Kelly 2003; Peltoniemi & Vuori 2005, 5-6),
- innovation ecosystem (Thomas & Autio 2012, 19),
- entrepreneurial ecosystem (Cohen 2006; Milwood & Maxwell 2020; Spigel 2015),
- the economy as an ecosystem (Peltoniemi & Vuori 2005, 4-5).

### **Characteristics of the business ecosystem**

For a fuller understanding of the business ecosystem, its main characteristics and the ways in which it operates must be briefly examined.

- Complexity

According to *complexity theory*, *complex adaptive systems* (CAS) are non-linear, adaptive, and co-evolving (Urry 2005, 2). A complex system can only be understood in its entirety, rather than as a sum of its parts (Baggio 2008, 6). Peltoniemi and Vuori (2005, 9) emphasize that the business ecosystem fits the definition of a CAS because it contains many heterogeneous components that are relatively independent yet highly interconnected and interactive, which, through a somewhat mysterious process of self-organization, acquire an ordered structure and a degree of awareness.

In CAS, the so-called *butterfly effect* is observed, where small contributions or changes in the initial conditions can lead to dramatic consequences and unforeseen outcomes (Lewin 1993). Iansiti and Levien (2004b, 9) note that the health of a business ecosystem can reverse very rapidly. The relationship between individual agents and the long-term systemic outcome is unpredictable and, in many cases, untraceable (Smith & Stacey 1997, 83).

- Self-organization

The ecosystem, both in biology and in business, emerges through a chaotic process (Peltoniemi & Vuori 2005, 2), in which it is not precisely known how individual organisms come together to form a stable community (Kauffman 1995, 211). This process is influenced in part by environmental factors, with each ecosystem responding to specific existential challenges (Peltoniemi & Vuori 2005, 2-3).

In self-organization, there is neither an external nor an internal leader to set goals or control the system; the process unfolds spontaneously through local interactions (Mitleton-Kelly 2003). The concept of self-organization and decentralized decision-making is embedded in Moore's very definition of a business ecosystem (Moore 1998, 169). Peltoniemi and Vuori (2005, 10) confirm that the formation of a business ecosystem is a self-organizing process, in which participants come together voluntarily, and objectives are set through local interactions and negotiations. Although there is no

leader in the process, the authors note that control and incentives can be provided, primarily to encourage the process rather than to impose specific parameters on the emerging structure (Peltoniemi & Vuori 2005, 10).

- Interconnectedness and coevolution

Distinguishing individual ecosystems is difficult because, as in biology, in society and business, there are no clear boundaries between communities and habitats (den Hartigh & van Asseldonk 2004, 23). However, such a distinction is less important than the connections within and between ecosystems (Peltoniemi & Vuori 2005, 3; Mitleton-Kelly 2003, 31). Some authors suggest using the compatibility of an agent's complementary product functions as an indicator of participation in an ecosystem (den Hartigh & van Asseldonk 2004, 23), but it should not be forgotten that ecosystems involve agents not only on the production but also on the consumption side.

Iansiti and Levien (2004b, 8) emphasize that an ecosystem involves a large number of agents who depend on each other for efficiency and survival, but the connections between them are loose. Their interconnectedness is expressed through shared fate: if the ecosystem is healthy, individuals within it thrive, but if it is unhealthy, each individual suffers the consequences (Iansiti & Levien 2004b, 9). If customers, as agents of an ecosystem, leave it, its value for producers and remaining customers decreases (den Hartigh & van Asseldonk 2004, 23). March and Wilkinson (2009, 456) note that interconnections in a business ecosystem can be not only economic but also social. For example, Ovcharova (2019, 43) highlights that agents' ability to learn and adapt together contributes to the success of the business ecosystem. Efficiency is expressed in the optimized use of resources, which in a business ecosystem correspond to the energy flowing through a biological ecosystem (Power & Jerjian 2001, 263). To survive, the ecosystem, as a CAS, must interact with its surrounding environment, maintaining the input and output of energy flows (Baggio 2008, 21).

The interconnectedness among ecosystem agents is also expressed through symbiosis, guided by three principles (Thomas & Autio 2012). First,

participants are specialized, each contributing in a specific way. Second, participants are heterogeneous but complementary in terms of functionality and responsibilities toward the ecosystem, creating synergy and cumulative interaction. Third, participants coevolve, meaning they find ways to grow and develop while maintaining the balance of the ecosystem.

The interconnectedness among ecosystem agents can also be examined through the distinction between *influencing* and *influenced* agents. Agents who neither affect value nor are affected by it are *irrelevant* to the ecosystem and are excluded from it (Hillebrand 2022, 518). Those who influence value but are not affected by it are *necessary* agents, whose resources are essential for the ecosystem's success (Hillebrand 2022, 519). Agents who both influence and are influenced by value are *interdependent* agents, while those affected by value but lacking resources to influence it in turn are *remote* agents (Hillebrand 2022, 519). This classification based on agents' influence can be useful for positioning them within the ecosystem.

*Coevolution* of agents is another characteristic phenomenon of ecosystems – it cannot be observed in isolation (Mitleton-Kelly 2003, 29). Its significance lies in the mutual evolutionary changes of interacting, interdependent agents (Merry 1999, 272).

- Dynamics

Ecosystems, both in biology and in business, are dynamic, continuously self-renewing, and responsive to disturbances and competition between species. The ecosystem's ability to respond to these internal and external changes depends on ensuring that at least some of its participants can survive in the new conditions (Peltoniemi & Vuori 2005, 3).

A business ecosystem is not static; it goes through a life cycle of birth (a need or desire that goes beyond merely satisfying the customer's needs), expansion (testing the growth potential of the developed concept), leadership (achieving stability and profitability), and self-renewal or death (adapting to emerging changes and new ecosystems) (Moore 1993, 76).

While change creates problems and threats for an individual agent, for the ecosystem it is a positive signal that necessary adaptation is occurring

in response to constantly changing environmental conditions, and that there is a tangible response to the tensions arising from the differing values and interests of participants (Hillebrand 2022, 519-520).

The success factors of a business ecosystem proposed by lansiti and Levien (2004b, 46) – productivity, robustness, and niche creation – are directly linked to its life cycle phases. Productivity is necessary for realizing value in the first three phases, niche creation drives expansion and growth, and robustness is tested both in stable situations and during change and adaptation. Another characteristic related to robustness is *resilience*, understood as flexible resistance. It represents “the autonomous reorganization capabilities of a complex system, exercised to react to external impulses that may disrupt it” and refers to “the magnitude of a shock that the system can absorb while remaining within a given state” (Baggio, 2008, 18).

- Added value

The existence of a business ecosystem is justified by the creation of added value, which makes it “greater than its constituent parts” (Mitleton-Kelly 2003, 40). In other words, the value generated cannot be achieved by a single organization or industry alone (Ovcharova 2019, 43). Moore considers the value received by the customer as not only the core product but also a *total experience*, which includes a range of complementary offerings (Moore 1996, 15).

The logic of added value can also be observed in the concept of *complementary products*. They are designed to be used together, providing greater value to the user than if they were used separately, with the added benefits being observable at either product or technological level (den Hartigh & van Asseldonk 2004, 11).

- Co-creation and stakeholder involvement

*Co-creation* is an interactive process involving at least two willing participants who integrate resources and engage in specific forms of mutually beneficial collaboration, resulting in value creation for them (Frow, Payne & Storbacka 2011).

In the ecosystem, value is co-created; that is, it is generated jointly by the participants through interaction, combination, and reciprocal processes, rather than in a linear fashion (Thomas & Autio 2012). The sources of value of ecosystems can vary and determine the shared goals: flexibility (in response to systemic challenges and opportunities; for access to information, resources, markets, technologies; for risk-sharing), innovation (through resource combination, knowledge coevolution, and improved opportunities for technology transfer), or efficiency (for establishing competitive advantage through shared resources and reduced transaction costs) (Thomas & Autio 2012). Different sources of value create different dynamics within the ecosystem. Value creation is not a given but a potential that must be realized, with value capturing being a crucial element of the ecosystem (Thomas & Autio 2012). Value must be captured and distributed among all participants for the ecosystem to function, and each participant must capture a sufficient amount of value to justify their participation (Thomas & Autio 2012).

According to the very definition of a business ecosystem, a distinctive feature is the participation of consumption-side actors, not just producers. The current paradigm of value creation is clearly shifting from a product- and firm-oriented approach toward creating personalized experiences for the customer, which requires including the customer in the value-creation process through active dialogue and co-construction of the product (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004b, 5-8). The participants in the co-creation process within a business ecosystem can, of course, include not only customers but also a range of businesses and public organizations.

Regarding cooperation and the inclusion of a broader set of actors in the ecosystem, *stakeholder involvement* should also be considered. Stakeholder involvement exists as a separate concept and is not always linked to ecosystems. Freeman (1984, 46) defines a stakeholder as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives.” Stakeholder involvement is a popular and widely used approach in the field of development. The approach has both

supporters and opponents (Wanner & Pröbstl-Haider 2019): some view it socially as a means to encourage active citizenship, prevent conflicts of interest, and strengthen community spirit, while others criticize it as *tokenism* (International Science Council 2021) and seeming sustainability.

- **Coopetition**

Firms, associations, public authorities, and other participants in the ecosystem assume different roles depending on the situation and their interactions with each other. They can act as partners, mutually complementing each other's services; as subcontractors, strengthening each other's resources; or as competitors, sharing the market for a particular service (Kylänen & Rusko 2011, 194). When cooperation and competition occur simultaneously, this phenomenon is called *coopetition* (Luo 2004).

Coopetition aptly describes the relationships among participants in an ecosystem, where operations are non-linear (Selen & Ogulin 2015). It is also linked to value creation within the ecosystem. According to Brandenburger and Nalebuff (1996), coopetition means creating a larger business pie, which market players then compete to share. Kylänen and Rusko (2011) emphasize that coopetition is not always a conscious or planned part of strategic decision-making; sometimes it arises spontaneously and in an unplanned way.

### **Roles in the business ecosystem**

In the natural environment, there is a set of relationships among individuals and species: predator-prey, parasitism, symbiosis (Hussain & Haley 2022, 6). In a business ecosystem, there exists a variety of "species" with unique functions, needs, and desires, as well as distinct contributions to the survival and growth of the system as a whole (den Hartigh & van Asseldonk 2004, 24).

Iansiti and Levien (2004b) identify four different roles taken by agents in a business ecosystem: keystone, niche player, dominator, and hub landlord. *Keystones* (or, in more recent literature, *keystone holders*) (De

Meyer & Williamson 2020, 9) as critical resource bearers) are few agents in the ecosystem with strong influence, enabling its proper functioning. Most agents are *niche players*, who, through their specialization, contribute to the system's functioning, e.g., by producing complementary products, services, or components. *Dominators* and *hub landlords* attract resources from the ecosystem toward themselves but do not always act reciprocally, i.e., they may prevent the fair distribution of produced value.

Fair value distribution is supported by trust in a central ecosystem agent, such as a hub landlord or keystone, who coordinates the creation and allocation of value, however, excessive domination by a central agent can drain value for their own benefit and potentially destroy the ecosystem, as lansiti and Levien (2004a, 2004b) point out. Other authors consider hub landlords as connectors among participants, providing a platform for enabling relationships (den Hartigh & van Asseldonk 2004, 25).

Hagel (1996) proposes the roles of *shaper*, who attempts to build an ecosystem around their own product or technology at the cost of significant investments, and *follower*, who aligns with the shaper. Another possible role is the *adapter*, who collaboratively develops offerings that complement dominant products, gaining opportunities to learn and scale in the shadow of the dominant player (Hagel 1996). An additional role is the *reserving the rights to play*, an agent who keeps their options open to secure a strong position in the ecosystem at a later, more advantageous stage (den Hartigh & van Asseldonk 2004, 26).

An organization that focuses not only on its own connections with other participants but also considers the links between other agents can identify opportunities for coalition-building and may act as a *broker* between otherwise unconnected agents (Hillebrand 2022, 520).

It remains unclear, however, how this role division can be incorporated into Moore's ecosystem structure (core business, extended enterprise, business ecosystem) and what roles agents positioned more peripherally – such as regulatory bodies, clients, and community representatives – can play within the ecosystem.

Thomas and Autio (2012) summarize that, despite the diversity of agents participating in a business ecosystem, *institutional stability* must prevail. According to the authors, this stability refers to the persistence of participants who constitute the ecosystem and carry out its processes; it consists of validated organizational principles derived from the legitimacy of the participants, and governance structures through which authority is exercised.

For institutional stability to exist, first, there must be a *locus of coordination* (Thomas & Autio 2012). This could be a central agent coordinating the ecosystem, but not all ecosystems have such; instead, it may be a consortium, association, platform, or another organizational architecture that unites all participants and provides the necessary services, technologies, and tools for value creation (Thomas & Autio 2012). The responsibilities of the locus of coordination include generating and distributing value, as well as maintaining the ecosystem's institutional logic and governance structures alongside the individual structures of each participant.

The second prerequisite for institutional stability is the existence of legitimacy and a good reputation of the ecosystem, conferred through the legitimacy and reputation of the coordination locus, ensuring the validity that other participants seek by engaging in the ecosystem and confirms that the ecosystem is more than the sum of its parts (Thomas & Autio 2012). Scott (2007) and Suchman (1995) emphasize that legitimacy is socio-political, with key participants, opinion leaders, the state, and society validating the ecosystem and its locus of coordination. This legitimacy and reputation underpin the formation of rules and boundaries, participation conditions, and role assignments, so that trust and commitment also contribute to the stability of ecosystem relationships.

According to Geersbro and Ritter (2010), uncertainty, ambiguity, and conflicts between the ecosystem center and its participants can be minimized through reputation and relationship management, such as risk management, flexibility, information seeking, learning, communication, interpretation, and negotiation.

The third element of institutional stability is the presence of governance mechanisms through which the coordination locus exercises authority. These mechanisms consist of shared values, norms, rules, and agreements among participants, serving as a framework for co-creation of value and symbiosis, thereby reducing the overall complexity of the ecosystem (Thomas & Autio 2012).

### **Managing the business ecosystem**

The management of business ecosystems is a relatively underexplored aspect in the scholarly literature. There is no consensus on whether a business ecosystem (or any network) can be managed in the traditional sense, due to the absence of a clearly defined hierarchy. Power and Jerjian (2001, 3) emphasize that it is not possible to manage an individual business in isolation; rather, the entire ecosystem must be considered.

In the English-language literature, the discussion has largely become a wordplay, with *governance* preferred over *management* (Anggraeni, den Hartigh & Zegveld 2007, 20). Since the governance is exercised by an organization that lacks formal authority over other participants, it is more accurately described as influencing (Anggraeni, den Hartigh & Zegveld 2007, 20-21) or coordinating (Thomas & Autio 2012, 10). This influence can also be interpreted as *leadership*. Northouse (2010, 3) defines leadership as “the process by which an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.”

From the perspective of complexity theory, management is understood as influencing the process of change through a combination of prediction (anticipating possible future behavior) and adaptation (adjusting direction during structural changes) (Vargas-Sánchez 2017, 197).

The primary goal of ecosystem governance is to support participants in the creation of value (Hillebrand 2022, 520). Moore (1996) notes that the most commonly applied forms of business ecosystem governance are *community governance* systems and quasi-democratic mechanisms. Ovcharova (2019, 44) emphasizes that the complex interactions among

participants in an ecosystem are difficult to direct through a high-ranking dominant agent. Iansiti and Levien (2004b) highlight that business ecosystems are guided by a shared fate.

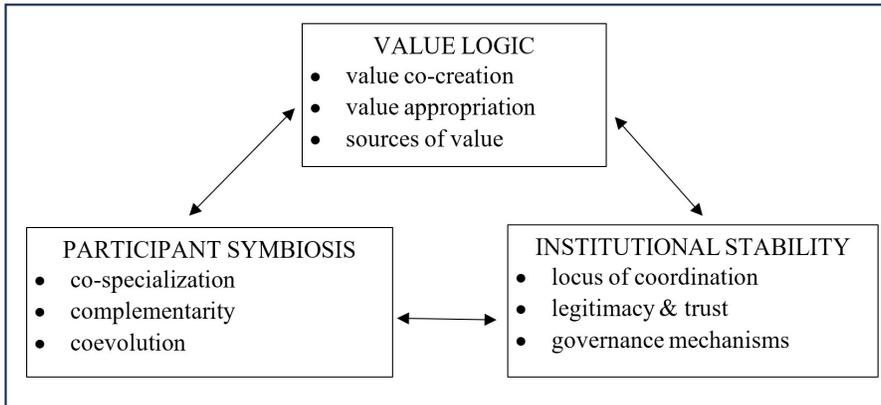
Vos (2006) describes ecosystem governance as a balance: it provides incentives and motivation for participants to work toward a common goal while allowing them the freedom to pursue their individual objectives according to their own initiative, ensuring that motivation is not hindered or obstructed. Such governance employs *steering mechanisms* to guide agents' actions toward the collective goal, enhancing the ecosystem's capacity to respond to external changes and the internal innovation pace. The key motivation comes from the necessity of collaboration, which achieves not only the common objective but also benefits each individual agent (Ovcharova 2019, 43). Governance first requires a deep understanding of the ecosystem, its participants, their interests, and the existing interconnections (Hillebrand 2022, 520), however, this alone is insufficient. Governance is supported by mechanisms and tools that facilitate connections and collaboration among agents (Ovcharova 2019, 44).

Thomas and Autio (2012, 17) propose an ecosystem model designed to support strategic planning and governance for the generation, delivery, and capture of value within the ecosystem (Figure 1.2.). They acknowledge that this model is adapted from the business model of an individual firm (Thomas & Autio 2012, 17). Through this model, the authors clarify the distinctions between business, technological, and innovation ecosystems (Thomas & Autio 2012, 18-19), noting that:

- the primary sources of value in a business ecosystem are efficiency and flexibility, whereas in innovation and technological ecosystems, innovation is the main source of value;
- symbiosis in a business ecosystem is driven by efficiency in producing goods and services to satisfy customer needs, whereas in an innovation ecosystem, the complementary function is most important;

- the locus of coordination in a business ecosystem is a firm or platform, while in an innovation ecosystem it is more often a firm, and in a technological ecosystem, it is typically a platform.

**Figure 1.2.** Ecosystem model for strategic planning and governance (adapted from Thomas & Autio 2012).



This distinction between types of ecosystems is rather superficial and overly theoretical. In practice, it is common to encounter combinations of characteristics from different ecosystem types, e.g., efficiency achieved through innovation, a technological platform coordinating innovation. Therefore, it can be assumed that all the characteristics described are valid for a business ecosystem.

Although the scientific literature on this topic is scarce, guidance for managing business ecosystems can be found in their structure and characteristics, as well as in the roles and behavior of the participants, which have been more extensively discussed.

### **Guidelines for building the business ecosystem**

De Meyer and Williamson (2020, 8) provide guidance to participants on “nurturing” and “guiding” the development of a business ecosystem. It is interesting to note the authors’ soft phrasing regarding management. They also refer to the *building* of ecosystems, a term closer to *developing* rather

than *creating* them, as some other authors describe (Heikkilä & Kuivaniemi 2012, 8), implying a more spontaneous emergence. The authors note that, in their case studies, organizations sometimes participate in ecosystems even unconsciously, thus, it can be inferred that by following these guidelines, participants in ecosystems can become their leaders through awareness of their position and the opportunities it entails.

The guidelines consist of the following (De Meyer & Williamson 2020, 8-9):

- identifying the ecosystem's value, which extends beyond the capabilities of any single participant;
- maximizing the generated value, or creating a “larger pie” (Brandenburger & Nalebuff 1996). of benefits to be shared among participants;
- identifying the keystone – an activity or component critical to the value produced in the ecosystem, which the organization can influence; this includes establishing control points (*tollgates*), such as licensing or transaction fees, sufficient to generate revenue from the keystone but small enough not to discourage paying participants;
- exercising a form of leadership different from that required to manage an individual organization – this involves charisma, credibility, embracing diversity and dilemmas, listening to weak signals, using soft power based on respect, and, above all, fostering collaboration.

The management of a business ecosystem is exercised through *soft power* and leadership, consisting of a set of activities (Table 1.1.). This can only be achieved through gaining awareness of value as the main goal of the business ecosystem, recognition of the necessary roles and available resources, and the creation of an environment of trust and respect toward the ecosystem itself rather than merely toward its leader or coordinator. For leadership, communication skills and the ability to create and maintain relationships and networks are vital.

**Table 1.1.** Components of ecosystem leadership (author's elaboration).

<b>Leadership qualities</b>	<b>Leadership skills</b>	<b>General activities of soft power</b>	<b>Specific activities related to the agents and the ecosystem</b>
charisma	communication	coordinating	activating and involving diverse agents in the system
credibility	foresight	influencing	
legitimacy	collaboration	supporting	promoting desired activities and behaviors
adaptability	negotiation	steering	
reliability		incentivizing	directing actions toward the common goal
respect from others		motivating	preserving participants' initiative
		encouraging	
		building	building respect for and trust in the system

The specific management of the ecosystem, as described in the existing literature, can be summarized in several steps, presented in Table 1.2. These steps are not exhaustive; they contain only the general guidelines for initiating ecosystem management, which need to be specified for application in each practical case.

**Table 1.2.** Steps of ecosystem governance (author's elaboration).

<b>STEPS OF ECOSYSTEM GOVERNANCE</b>	
1.	A player with the potential and resources of a central agent becomes aware of their own position and the opportunities arising from it.
2.	The central agent takes measures to make other players aware of their participation in the ecosystem.
3.	Participants, led by the central agent, discover value beyond the capabilities of any individual participant, from sources such as efficiency, flexibility, innovation, and resilience.
4.	Participants create and strengthen their interconnections to optimize the added value.
5.	The central agent fosters and maintains individual participants' motivation by communicating the personal benefits of participation.
6.	The central agent secures their own benefit by identifying and controlling a keystone – an activity or component crucial for the ecosystem's value – and establishing tollgates for others to the keystone without draining the system's overall value in own favor.
7.	The central agent employs ecosystem leadership to communicate shared goals and achieve consensus among agents systematically throughout all stages of the ecosystem's life cycle.

## 1.2. ECOSYSTEM APPROACH IN TOURISM

Tourism is an *experience economy*, where the ability to deliver experiences successfully is key for tourism organizations that face ongoing industry changes, such as emerging destinations, intense competition, and the introduction of new technologies (Buonincontri et al. 2017, 265).

It is widely acknowledged in academic research that tourism is multilayered and fragmented (Leiper 1990; Wang & Fesenmaier 2007; Palmer & Bejou 1995; Scott, Baggio & Cooper 2009). It is often not easy to determine whether a company qualifies as a tourism business, since the demand for its services may be shared between local residents and tourists (Lassila 2019, 101). The issue is even more complex because such firms frequently operate in multiple sectors simultaneously (Tunkkari-Eskelinen 2014, 47) or offer different services seasonally.

Tourism is not easily controlled, measured, or analyzed, as it is an extractive industry lacking traditional production functions, and tourism activities span across multiple conventional economic sectors and involve long, complex supply chains, as well as community infrastructure, environmental services, and social dimensions (Baggio 2008, 2; Hussain & Haley 2022, 5). Tourism combines goods and services produced by other economic sectors through complex, non-linear relationships, influenced by business connections and the impact of both national and international factors (Nikolaeva 2014).

The tourism industry is defined not by the production of specific goods, but by the circumstances under which goods and services are consumed (Australian Treasury, as cited in Hussain & Haley 2022, 5). Tourism is defined by tourism consumption – no economic activity is tourism until its product has been sold (Goodwin 2016, 9).

Tourism organizations – such as tour operators, hotels, cruise lines, activity providers, and *destination management organizations* (DMOs) – must collaborate and network with a wide range of actors, including customers, government bodies, interest groups, local communities, co-suppliers, and many others (Hillebrand 2022, 517). The stakeholders in tourism are interconnected like elements in a natural system, which calls for the application of holistic management approaches (Hussain & Haley 2022, 1).

Interconnectedness and cooperation are essential for the creation of the tourism product (Björk & Virtanen 2005; Pechlaner et al. 2003; Tinsley & Lynch 2001), yet not all participating in its creation perceive their link to tourism – e.g., public transport providers, bakeries, museums, or media organizations (Goodwin 2016, 9-10). Networking in tourism also supports sustainability, as the industry relies on numerous small players who cannot achieve a sustainability balance in isolation (Halme 2001).

Scott, Baggio, and Cooper (2009) also emphasize that networking compensates for the inherent fragmentation of the tourism industry. Collaboration is the core reason for the existence of networks (Scott, Baggio & Cooper 2009), however, the relationships within a tourist destination

cannot be fully explained by the network theory alone. Therefore, tourism as a socio-economic phenomenon should be viewed as an ecosystem. At the same time, it should be recognized that the comprehensiveness of tourism and its interconnectedness make the tourism system open and vulnerable to local, regional, national, and international disruptions (Hussain & Haley 2022, 6).

Selen and Ogulin (2015) argue that the understanding of the tourism value chain must be broadened, since the tourist destination operates within a unique combination of interconnected agents, which – in addition to intermediaries and partners within the tourism industry – includes various stakeholders such as authorities, visitors, and the natural environment. The functioning of tourism operations is highly dependent on the natural environment (Hussain & Haley 2022, 7); therefore, it should not and cannot be separated from this discussion.

The tourism ecosystem is most often mentioned in the context of a destination with a leading operator, typically represented by a hotel, a DMO, or a travel agency, and in the sense of the digitalization of the tourism industry (*smart tourism business ecosystem*), where a digital technology company acts as a hub landlord (Baggio & Chiappa 2013; Jovicic 2017).

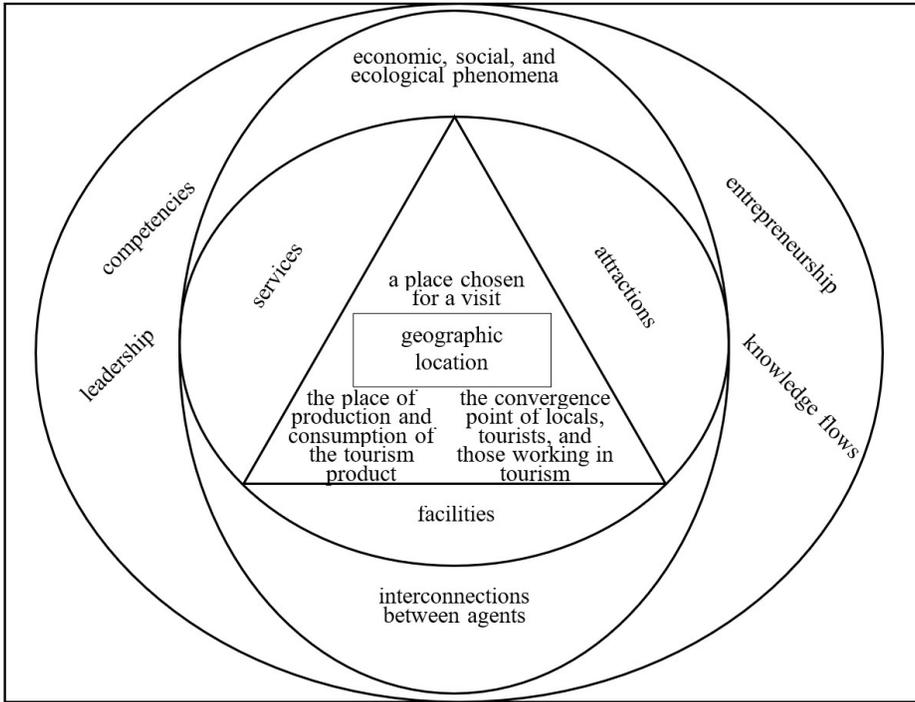
From an economic perspective, the ecosystem approach is particularly relevant in complex situations, such as radical innovations or the development of sustainable tourism (Hillebrand 2022, 518). Nikolaeva (2019) sees potential in applying the *blue ocean strategy* to create and capture markets with low or no competition and unmet demand, particularly in interface-rich industries such as tourism, where the multitude of diverse agents come together to generate added value, producing additional products that can be used either independently or as part of a holistic tourism offering. Hussain and Haley (2017, 7) also emphasize the social application of the ecosystem approach, noting that the typical ecosystem characteristic of self-organization, observed in tourism, transforms into an evolutionary process of societal development.

## The tourism destination as a business ecosystem

According to one definition, a tourist destination is a “geographical location (city, region, resort, etc.), with a pattern of attractions, facilities and services, which tourists choose for a visit” (Baggio 2008, 3). It is “a complex agglomeration of diverse systems of interrelated economic, social and environmental phenomena and networks” (Baggio 2008, 16) and also the place where both the production and consumption of tourism occur, where tourists, local residents, and those employed in the tourism sector converge (Goodwin 2016, 11). The *tourism experience* within the destination is evaluated holistically by the visitor, based on their engagement with multiple services provided by a network of tourism-related organizations (Selen & Ogulin 2015, 167).

The destination represents a unique combination of contextual factors that shape the experience offered to visitors, and in this sense, Selen and Ogulin (2015, 167) define it as a business ecosystem. Its performance depends not only on its internal characteristics but also on the network of relationships among the agents within it (March & Wilkinson 2009, 455). Although the destination is concentrated in a specific location (area, city, region, country), some of the agents contributing to the holistic tourism experience may be situated elsewhere without violating the location-independent principle of a business ecosystem, since it is the visitor’s choice and overall experience that define the destination, rather than its geographic boundaries. The destination encompasses not only the tourism product but also a set of core competencies, leadership, knowledge flows, and entrepreneurship (Brawn 2005, 4), which contribute to its value, making it more than its constituent parts (March & Wilkinson 2009, 455). The destination can be understood as both a CAS (Baggio 2008, 4) and a tourism ecosystem (Vargas-Sánchez 2017, 194). The various aspects of the ecosystem that generate destination’s added value are illustrated in Figure 1.3.

**Figure 1.3.** Added value of the destination as an ecosystem (author's elaboration).



### **Agents of the tourism ecosystem – cooperation and competition**

Similar to business ecosystems in general, for the tourism ecosystem it is less important where its precise boundaries lie than which agents are interconnected and how they influence the business (Selen & Ogulin 2015, 171).

Agents within the tourism ecosystem include not only those directly involved in providing tourism services (accommodation, transportation, entertainment, activities, booking services), but also those ensuring general amenities within the destination area (local authorities, local businesses, and local producers), tourists as co-creators of the service, and the broader *local community* (March & Wilkinson 2009, 455). Tourist generating regions are also connected to this ecosystem (Hussain & Haley 2022, 6). Due to its wide spectrum of agents, tourism offers a particularly strong opportunity for stakeholder involvement, and such involvement

contributes to responsible development and sustainability (Wanner & Pröbstl-Haider 2019).

Local residents represent a distinctive group of stakeholders actively involved in the tourism ecosystem. They serve both as a resource on which tourism depends and as a reason for developing tourism in a particular location (Richards & Hall 2002, 1). According to Vargas-Sánchez (2017, 199), incorporating *people* into the *3P model of public-private partnerships* (PPPs) would increase the chances of survival and success by generating added value. This added value is created through greater social engagement oriented toward sustainability (Hillebrand 2022, 519). In many cases, however, locals have limited resources to influence the value, and therefore they are often overlooked as remote agents (Hillebrand 2022, 519). Hussain and Haley (2022, 6) emphasize that tourism that merely extracts from the destination and the local community without contributing anything is parasitic in nature; to foster conditions of symbiosis and shared benefits, the interests and needs of locals must also be taken into account.

Koprinarov (2014, 773) argues that the role of agents in corporate transactions is not strictly defined, as each can simultaneously act as a partner, client, and supplier. Collaboration ensures the fulfillment of vital tasks and functions in destination management by enhancing its competitiveness (Zehrer et al. 2014, 62). It also complements the inherent competition in business, fostering flexibility and efficiency, while giving rise to the phenomenon of co-competition (Kylänen & Rusko 2011).

Kylänen and Rusko (2011, 196) further specify the phenomenon of co-competition in the context of tourism through the concept of *colocation*, defining it as the concentration of the entire spectrum of ecosystem participants' activities within a destination as a location-based market, jointly utilizing its resources (natural environment, infrastructure) and experiencing it holistically.

The same study sheds light on the division between the objects of competition and cooperation within co-competition in a destination:

collaboration occurs at the strategic level to gain a competitive advantage over other destinations and to attract tourists specifically to that destination, whereas competition among agents begins once the tourists arrive (Kylänen & Rusko 2011, 199). The synergy resulting from cooperation among otherwise competing organizations has multiple dimensions. During the peak season, collaboration multiplies the available resources, while in the off-season it rationalizes work shifts, and additionally, agents united within a destination enhance their opportunities for public funding for regional and tourism development (Kylänen & Rusko 2011, 199).

In addition to cooperating with each other, the economic agents of the tourism ecosystem cooperate with consumers in the context of co-creation. Recently, there has been a shift in human consciousness and the emergence of the so-called *networked individual* (Ribov 2014). While the traditional, passive tourist allows a travel agency to organize their leisure time and pays a fixed price under strictly defined conditions, the new type of tourist actively engages in planning their journey, seeking to enrich everyday life and personal experience and to gain new knowledge and skills as added value from the visit (Ribov 2014, 762). Tourists take a more active role in deciding how to spend their time during the trip, interacting with service providers in the destination, influencing other tourists, and choosing how to satisfy their needs. Consequently, the tourism industry must identify critical touchpoints with clients and invest the necessary resources to build a stable dialogue (Buonincontri et al. 2017, 266). The trend toward individualized tourism consumption and the rise of niche tourism, driven by specific interests, necessitate closer collaboration between businesses and consumers in shaping the tourism experience (Koprinarov 2014, 771), transforming tourists into a valuable resource for innovation (Koprinarov 2014, 773), which is a key factor for competitiveness and sustainable development (Koprinarov 2014, 770).

A key success factor for tourism, both economically and socially, is creating opportunities for encounters and interactions between locals and visitors. Wearing (2001, 57-58) emphasizes that the role of these

participants is paramount, particularly in forms of alternative tourism, because through their interactions they socially construct the meanings of objects (such as the natural environment or protected areas) and exchange perceptions and symbolism, mutually enriching their perspectives. Thus, the benefits manifest in enhanced value of the experience for visitors and, for locals, in cultural exchange and a sense of pride in their own heritage. Ribov (2014, 760) notes that the flow of tourists strengthens the connections between different communities around the world.

Interactions between service providers and visitors occur both face-to-face and in technologically mediated environments (Milwood & Crick 2021, 25). The technological infrastructure can be established through a web-based platform for managing communication and co-creation with users, incorporating online workspaces such as blogs, multimedia sharing, maps, and virtual worlds (Koprinarov 2014, 776). The development of social media further raises tourists' awareness of these opportunities, making them more active participants in the co-creation of tourism value (Giannopoulos et al. 2020, 4). Co-creation does not occur solely during the consumption of services but also before and after it (Pralhad & Ramaswamy 2004a, 5), while the tourist is not physically present in the destination.

An important aspect of the tourism experience is sharing it with others, whereby the visitor may be driven by internal motivations (pleasure or other personal interests, altruistic goals) as well as external motivations (forming friendships, receiving compliments, building reputation, or earning monetary benefits) (Buonincontri et al. 2017, 267). Tourism bloggers have been identified as the new, contemporary voices of tourism business (Koprinarov 2014, 777). Technology plays a crucial role in the co-creation of the tourism product, providing greater information, transparency, dynamism, and user orientation (Buonincontri et al. 2017, 265). Ovcharova (2020) emphasizes the importance of transparency for digital transformation, noting that the sharing of information is more valuable than its protection. Failure to recognize the role and benefits of

technology constitutes a major barrier to co-creation (Buonincontri et al. 2017, 267).

It should be noted that the technological environment facilitates cross-communication not only between users and service providers but also among the ecosystem’s agents in general, stimulating innovation and easing interactions and cooperation (Ovcharova 2020), because decision-making is not an instantaneous act but a prolonged, multi-stage group process, in which achieving consensus and anticipating outcomes can be supported by automation and software solutions (Spasova 2012, 3).

### Ecosystem governance of the destination

According to its governance structure, a destination ecosystem can be either product-oriented, based on the destination’s resources (Stokes 2008, 256), or market-oriented, based on tourist demand (Weaver 2014, 6). Depending on the presence or absence of dominance within the ecosystem, it can be managed using a community approach (without dominance) or a corporate approach (with a business or other organization as the dominant actor) (Selen & Ogulin 2015, 171). Selen and Ogulin (2015) associate market-oriented governance with the corporate approach, whereas product orientation – focusing on the balance between socio-cultural, economic, and environmental values and resources, i.e., sustainable development – is linked to the community approach, as presented in Table 1.3.

**Table 1.3.** Approaches to ecosystem governance (author’s elaboration).

<b>Ecosystem type</b>	<b>Basis</b>	<b>Governance approach</b>	<b>Presence of dominance</b>
product-oriented	available resources	community approach	no
market-oriented	tourist demand	corporate approach	yes

The community-based approach is common in tourism (Zehrer et al. 2014, 60), particularly in Europe, where a large proportion of tourism businesses consist of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Peters & Buhalis 2013, 92). Under this approach, individual businesses operate in a decentralized manner, and none holds administrative authority or dominant ownership within the destination, which necessitates that they align their goals, collaborate on common strategies, and pool their resources (Zehrer et al, 2014, 60). Intensified competition and pronounced globalization processes make organizing operations challenging for SMEs in tourism, requiring a new way of doing business – one that not only ensures market presence but also guarantees sustainable development and long-term competitiveness (Nikolaeva 2014). Self-governance of the destination, based on cooperation, has many advocates; however, it cannot be assumed that all destination agents are always willing to cooperate, as transaction costs and the presence or absence of social ties influence this (Selen & Ogulin 2015, 170).

Tourism SMEs require clear rules and support to conduct and develop their activities, which follows from several of their key characteristics (Nikolaeva 2014):

- they lack a clear vision for the development of their business;
- they generally do not have a strategic orientation toward acquiring new partners;
- they are primarily focused on economic objectives;
- they lack the capacity for individual negotiations with major tourism or marketing agencies and for participation in international tourism forums, and therefore rely on regional tourism centers for such engagements.

Supporting these tourism enterprises can make them more willing to participate in collaborative, community governance (Table 1.4.) by reducing transaction costs, providing access to various types of necessary knowledge, and facilitating the development of their business activities.

**Table 1.4.** Ways to support tourism SMEs for a community approach to ecosystem governance (author's elaboration).

<b>WAYS TO SUPPORT TOURISM SMEs FOR A COMMUNITY APPROACH TO ECOSYSTEM GOVERNANCE</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reducing transaction costs for cooperation.</li><li>• Encouraging and facilitating social ties.</li><li>• Clear rules for participation in collaborative activities.</li><li>• Communicated guidance for business development and creation of strategic partnerships.</li><li>• Steering toward setting social and environmental objectives alongside economic goals.</li><li>• Joint negotiations with strategic partners and joint marketing efforts.</li><li>• Transparency and accessibility of information.</li></ul>

At the same time, however, the classical approach to destination management through domination and hierarchical structures has its drawbacks. According to Ovcharova (2020), hierarchy hinders innovation because it centralizes the decision-making process and restricts access to certain agents and types of information. The community-based approach does not preclude the presence of leadership within the destination, which, as previously established, is not necessarily formal management but rather influence.

*Destination leadership* refers to the presence of one or more entities capable of influencing stakeholders by ensuring effective communication and coordinating joint decision-making or actions (Ginanjar, Riani & Aini 2024, 111). Tourism management requires specialized leadership because it involves a large number of participants, most of whom may not fully understand the complexity of this management (Ginanjar, Riani & Aini 2024, 107). According to Zehrer et al. (2014, 61), tourism organizations that possess or can develop key motivators for visiting a destination have the potential to become leaders of that destination. Assuming that the collective goal of agents in the destination is to attract tourists, these authors' argument aligns with the participation incentives in ecosystems proposed by Vos (2006) and discussed previously. By providing motivators for visiting the destination, a tourism organization

simultaneously encourages other agents to participate in the ecosystem, thereby securing its leadership position. Leadership then diffuses among the remaining participants, who accept this model as a means of achieving the destination's goals (Zehrer et al. 2014, 61).

Another way for an agent to acquire a leadership position is through brokerage, leveraging its ability to orchestrate complex networked connections (Cipollina & Presenza 2010). The skills required to articulate common interests, build relationships, coordinate negotiations, and foster cooperation are often attributed to DMOs (Halme 2001).

Models of PPP are receiving increasing attention in tourism management, where attracting more tourists generates not only financial benefits for businesses but also social benefits for the public sector (March & Wilkinson 2009, 456). March and Wilkinson (2009, 456) highlight three reasons for the public sector to engage in tourism promotion:

- revenue from increased employment and the attraction of new investments;
- supplementing the financial and managerial resources of the private sector (mainly composed of SMEs) to enable effective destination marketing;
- responsibility for vital elements of the tourist experience, such as cultural and historical sites, information centers, infrastructure, and waste management.

At the same time, Goodwin (2016, 22) criticizes the tourism industry, noting that no “other industry looks to government and taxpayer to fund its marketing,” referring to collective marketing practices in which tourism benefits from this type of PPP, placing the financial burden of destination marketing on national and local authorities.

The relevance of PPPs, however, is also confirmed by the need for joint governance that balances public and private interests. Nikolaeva (2019) observes that ownership in tourism is predominantly private, but dominant economic interests often displace social and environmental considerations, leading to destructive consequences; therefore, the preservation of natural and cultural heritage also requires societal commitment.

In recent years, there has been increasing discussion on *smart tourism* (Bhuiyan et al. 2022; Collado-Agudo, Herrero-Crespo & San Martín-Gutierrez 2023; Polese et al. 2018), driven by globalization, digitalization, and the hyperconnectivity of the tourism industry (Vargas-Sánchez 2017, 193). Smart tourism relies on harnessing the potential of advances in information technology to address key issues such as sustainability, universal accessibility, and innovation, while employing intelligence as the ability to understand and solve problems through knowledge (Vargas-Sánchez 2017, 195). However, the intelligence of a destination extends far beyond the mere application of information technologies, as it implies comprehensive managerial innovation based on the use of technology to strengthen the destination's competitiveness by promoting more efficient and sustainable use of resources and delivering a better visitor experience (Collado-Agudo, Herrero-Crespo & San Martín-Gutierrez 2023, 1). Smart tourism is not a new type of tourism, but rather a way of managing tourism intelligently – through the analysis of vast amounts of structured and unstructured information (*big data*) using technology – to support strategic planning, overall improvement of destination management, differentiation, and competitiveness (Vargas-Sánchez 2017, 195).

Smart tourism introduces new concepts such as the *smart tourism destination* and the *smart tourism business ecosystem* (STBE). Here again, the focus is not on a new organizational unit but on a new way of managing a familiar organizational entity – the destination as a business ecosystem. Vargas-Sánchez (2017, 196) proposes an STBE model that closely resembles Moore's original business ecosystem model but uses different names for the three levels and divides agents into subsectors, also called external forces, which influence the success of the destination (technological changes, research insights, changes in tourist demand, social change, policies and legal environment, competition, collaboration, and cooperation). This is not fundamentally new: the subsectors, which primarily describe influences on the ecosystem, do not categorically assign agents, and many agents may hold bordering positions or participate in more than one subsector. These

subsectors rather emphasize the role of knowledge, which, according to the author, must be acquired for effective ecosystem management.

Vargas-Sánchez (2017, 198) also compares the management of a “traditional tourism destination” with that of a smart tourism destination, and based on the characteristics he identifies for smart destinations – interconnectedness, co-creation, dynamics, complexity, and non-linearity – it can be inferred that he advocates an ecosystem-based approach to its management. The only explicitly new feature he mentions is the abundance of information available in real time, which raises the challenge of selecting relevant information (Vargas-Sánchez 2017, 198). Notably, smart destinations need to be managed using an ecosystem approach (Collado-Agudo, Herrero-Crespo & San Martín-Gutierrez 2023, 1), but there is no evidence that the ecosystem approach itself is what makes a destination smart.

Vargas-Sánchez (2017, 198-199) questions the need for centralized planning and coordination of the destination, e.g., the marketing functions of DMOs, as interventions in the ecosystem in the context of modern information technologies:

- because the tourism market is gradually shifting toward direct, customer-controlled connections, where intermediaries – and DMOs in particular – are increasingly bypassed;
- because DMOs maintain a collective brand without owning the product, which can marginalize small businesses in situations where information technology platforms can instead elevate them;
- because DMOs cannot provide sufficient information to the customer, who now has the ability to search for and access unbiased information on virtually anything using information technologies.

According to the author, DMOs should focus primarily on managing complexity and knowledge (Vargas-Sánchez 2017, 199). Other scholars support a similar view, although they do not specifically refer to STBEs. Vanhove (2022, 125) emphasizes that while marketing was a primary task of DMOs in the past, these organizations now focus mainly on uniting the stakeholders within the destination. Other literature sources indicate

that, in general, smart innovation in a destination requires the leadership of a public or semi-public institution, even though the private sector also participates (Collado-Agudo, Herrero-Crespo & San Martín-Gutierrez 2023, 2). The division of functions between information technologies and DMOs in a community decentralized approach to ecosystem governance of a destination with smart elements is presented in Table 1.5.

**Table 1.5.** Division of functions between DMOs and information technologies in a community decentralized approach to ecosystem governance of destinations with smart elements (author's elaboration).

<b>Functions of DMOs</b>	<b>Functions of information technologies</b>
managing complexity	joint marketing
managing knowledge	coordination of activities
creating institutional stability	facilitating consensus
	planning and modeling

### 1.3. CONCLUSIONS ON ECOSYSTEMS IN TOURISM AND ECOSYSTEM GOVERNANCE OF TOURIST DESTINATIONS

The concept of an ecosystem is widely used in both natural and management sciences. When applying it, careful attention must be paid to the context and objectives. While metaphors can be useful, it is inappropriate to draw a complete analogy between biology and business or to attempt to mimic nature in social or business structures. The parallel development of multiple socio-economic concepts of ecosystems can be confusing and may distract from the focus on the system being managed. This study adopts an approach to the ecosystem as a specific type of network rather than as a separate mode of social or business organization, thereby benefiting from the well-known and observable characteristics of networks in general.

Table 1.6. presents the distinguishing characteristics of a business ecosystem compared to other concepts. Its features, which should always be considered and monitored, include: complexity (including the butterfly effect), self-organization, interconnectedness and coevolution (including

symbiosis), dynamics and a specific life cycle, added value, co-creation, cooperation, and institutional stability.

**Table 1.6.** Comparison of the characteristics of the business ecosystem to other systems (author's elaboration).

Characteristic	Business ecosystem	Biological ecosystem	Business network	CAS	Supply chain	Cluster	Value network	Innovation network	Industrial network
participants both from production and consumption	✓	✓	✓	✓	o*	✓	✓	o*	o*
indirectly connected agents	✓	✓	✓	✓	o	✓	✓	✓	o
relationship dynamics; cooperation + competition	✓	✓	✓	✓	o**	o***	o**	✓	✓
mutual goals	✓	✓	✓	✓****	✓*****	✓	✓	✓	✓
co-evolution and self-maintenance	✓	✓	✓*6	✓*6	✓*6	✓*6	✓*6	✓*6	✓*6
planned and intentional action	✓	o	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
agents' intelligence	✓	o	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
innovation beyond mere survival	✓	o	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
competition to attract new members	✓	o	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
strict localization of the system	o	o	o	o	✓	✓	o	o	✓
power-exercising dominant agent	o	o	✓*7	o	✓	o	✓	✓	o
only linear relationships	o	o	o	o	✓	o	o	o	o
self-organization	✓	✓	o	✓	o	o	o	o	o
able to be managed in the classical sense	o	o	o	o	✓	o	o	o	o
spontaneously emerging	✓	✓	✓	✓*7	o	✓	o	✓	o
*only agents of production				*****clearly defined					
**only cooperation				*6 does not apply to the entire system					
***only competition				*7 possibly but not always					
****informal and adaptive									

An analysis of the specialized literature indicates that there are no established methods or toolkits for governing business ecosystems in general, or specifically in tourism. Nevertheless, certain guidelines for such governance can be derived from existing sources, based on various characteristics of business ecosystems, which can also be applied to the tourism context.

Regarding the structure of a business ecosystem, its boundaries should not be seen as fixed – they are dynamic and changeable. More important are the relationships among participants and their roles. As early as the 1990s, Moore proposed a model of business ecosystem structure, which has undergone certain refinements and specifications, such as in Vargas-Sánchez’s STBE model, but has largely remained unchallenged. However, Moore’s model visualizes the ecosystem from the perspective of an individual firm – a viewpoint that is insufficient for understanding and managing the complex interconnections and processes within the system.

The ecosystem model by Thomas and Autio is likewise difficult to operationalize in concrete managerial situations, as its starting point is again the individual firm. Various researchers, including Iansiti and Levien, den Hartigh and van Asseldonk, and more recently Hillebrand, have contributed to the classification of business ecosystem agents according to their roles, yet these roles are not integrated into Moore’s initial model. In particular, Hillebrand’s distinction between influencing and influenced agents may provide valuable guidance for incorporating roles into the ecosystem structure. Overall, the existing body of knowledge on the business ecosystem concept is fragmented and unclear. To enable its application in tourism as well as other sectors, a systematic and updated conceptualization is required.

The example of tourism broadens the understanding of the role of different agents within the ecosystem, allowing for a more specific categorization that systematizes the theoretical propositions of Iansiti and Levien, den Hartigh and van Asseldonk, Thomas and Autio (Table 1.7).

A business ecosystem cannot be deliberately created – it emerges spontaneously as a result of the complex web of relationships among

individual agents and the influences of the surrounding environment. Similarly, a business ecosystem cannot be managed in the classical sense, because there is no single agent that concentrates all power and exercises total control. What matters is not who manages, but the presence of leadership that supports agents in the co-creation of value.

A clearly identifiable challenge in business ecosystems is the unconscious participation of some of its agents. Therefore, the initial efforts of an ecosystem governance approach should focus on raising awareness among current and potential participants.

Ecosystem thinking and the governance approach derived from it are significant not only for business but also for society. This is because the very nature of a business ecosystem is neither purely social nor entirely economic, but rather socio-economic. Due to its broad scope, ecosystem governance contributes substantially to sustainable development across all dimensions:

- Socio-cultural dimension
  - Self-organization transforms into societal development.
  - It engages a wide range of stakeholders in value creation and decision-making processes.
  - It promotes social and cultural sustainability for the local population by empowering residents and providing them with direct access to other agents and resources.
  - It supports the preservation of cultural heritage, particularly within the PPP setting.
  
- Economic dimension
  - It builds competitiveness.
  - It facilitates socio-economic innovations.
  - It optimizes the use of resources through sharing and complementarity.
  - It supports the resilience of participating economic agents.

- Environmental dimension
  - It supports the preservation of natural heritage, particularly within the PPP setting.
  - It promotes regenerative concepts – in tourism and beyond.

**Table 1.7.** Classification of agents according to their roles in the ecosystem with examples from tourism (author's elaboration).

<b>Ecosystem role</b>	<b>Characteristics and functions</b>	<b>Agents of tourism</b>
keystone*	a few with strong influence, enabling the existence of the ecosystem	natural / cultural environment tourists tourist generating regions
niche player	the majority of agents, who contribute through specialization by producing products and components	SMEs locals
dominator*	attracts resources toward itself, but does not always act reciprocally	external investor local and central authorities
hub landlord*	facilitates connections between participants and serves as a platform for interactions	technology companies development projects
shaper*	seeks to focus the ecosystem around its own product	hotel tourist agency
follower	follows the shaper	SMEs
adaptor	develops agreed-upon complementary products, gaining the opportunity to learn and grow in the shadow of the dominator	related industries locals
reserving the right to play	keeps their options open for a later stage	tourist agencies tourist generating regions
broker*	does not focus solely on the own connections but also on those between other agents, recognizing the potential for coalitions	DMO research and development organizations education institutions local authorities
* potential to act as a central agent and locus of coordination		

Due to its complex and fragmented nature, tourism can be considered as an ecosystem, and an ecosystem approach can contribute to its more effective management and to addressing contemporary socio-economic changes such as the emergence of new destinations, intense competition, technological development, globalization, and the need for sustainability. This can occur at both the destination and service levels, with the present study focusing on the destination.

The destination embodies a tourism ecosystem, which is not strictly defined by a geographic location but rather represents a set of contextual factors shaping the experience, including the associated added value.

The tourism experience can be identified with what Moore terms the “total experience,” namely the combination of core and complementary products that contribute to the visitor’s holistic experience. An imperative in developing and delivering such a holistic product is the involvement of all agents contributing to its various components and the establishment of shared goals to generate added value. Many of these agents, however, are not part of the tourism industry and do not always recognize their role within the tourism ecosystem, including consumption agents, local residents, peripheral and related industries, and various institutions. Occasionally, even the attitudes of agents closer to the ecosystem’s core may reflect a lack of understanding of these roles.

Specific agents within the tourism business ecosystem are tourists and local residents. Tourists actively participate in the co-creation of the tourism service, interacting with the tourism business before, during, and after their visit, increasingly through the use of information technologies. Locals should not be overlooked, as their inclusion in ecosystem processes can contribute to the ecosystem’s legitimacy, enhance tourism sustainability, and strengthen social engagement.

A significant challenge in governing the tourism ecosystem is the large proportion of SMEs, with their specific needs. Supporting these tourism enterprises can make them more willing to participate in collaborative efforts under a community governance approach by reducing transaction

costs, providing access to various types of necessary knowledge, and facilitating the development of their business activities.

Public institutions have reasons to engage in the management of a destination in order to safeguard the public interest, while economic actors in tourism are motivated to form PPPs due to the shared costs and risks, particularly regarding destination marketing. PPPs establish a balance between economic and non-economic objectives and also have the potential to diversify sources of funding and improve the chances of securing them.

Between the two possible approaches to ecosystem management – corporate and community-driven – the community approach is more appropriate. This is due, on one hand, to the risks associated with corporate domination, and on the other hand, to the opportunities offered by the community approach for broad engagement of stakeholders in decision-making processes, including the local population, which is crucial both for the tourism product and for the sustainability of tourism.

There is no consensus on whether a DMO is necessary or whether the destination should be managed in a more democratic, community-driven manner. Technology increasingly plays a central role in managing the tourism ecosystem, through tools for processing and analyzing large volumes of information and by distributing knowledge more broadly among participants. This can democratize management processes, automate the steps leading to consensus, and free up DMO managerial resources from marketing tasks to focus on complexity and knowledge management.

The specification of ecosystem aspects continues in the following chapters, adding context related to health and recreational tourism, protected natural areas, and the two selected case studies.

# CHAPTER 2

## HEALTH AND RECREATIONAL TOURISM AND THEIR RELATION TO PROTECTED NATURE

Chapter two is dedicated to the theoretical study of health and recreational tourism. These types of tourism currently attract scientific interest, as they go hand in hand with many significant trends in the economy and society due to the expansion of tourism in the recreation sector and changes in tourist consumer interests. While health and recreational tourism represent a categorization based on the primary motivation for travel, they comprise various types of tourism depending on location and activities, largely encompassing *leisure tourism*. Moreover, some consumers derive health and recreational benefits from their visits even if this was not their conscious motivation for traveling. For these reasons, the study of health and recreational tourism provides value for many other types of tourism, as well as for other industries and destination management.

The health and recreational benefits of a tourist visit are often closely linked to nature and its cultural ecosystem services, especially in countries such as Bulgaria and Finland. For this reason, the connection between health and recreational tourism and nature in its pristine form is also discussed in this chapter, identifying suitable nature-based tourist destinations that can subsequently be studied and that most clearly highlight the socio-economic aspects in relation to the research problem at hand.

### 2.1. HEALTH AND RECREATIONAL TOURISM

Health and recreational tourism are rapidly growing (Zhong et al. 2021; Albuquerque et al. 2018) contemporary alternative forms of tourism

(Hristov 2011; Lück & Aquino 2021; Merdivenci & Karakaş 2020), driven by powerful trends such as the aging population (Ullah et al. 2021; Hojcska 2023; Georgiev & Vasileva 2009; Csrimaz & Pető 2015), increasing interest in and responsibility for personal health (Lindell et al. 2019; Merdivenci & Karakaş 2020; Varga & Csákvári 2019; Hjalager et al. 2011; Grénman & Rääkkönen 2015; Quintela, Costa & Correia 2016), stress associated with modern lifestyles (Cracknell et al. 2018; Cherian & Benfield 2018; Ahtiainen, Piirainen & Vehmas 2015; Liao et al. 2023; Lindell et al. 2019; Lück & Aquino 2021), and the boom in *nature-based tourism* (Hall & Page 2006; Kostova 2014; Lück & Aquino 2021; Winter et al. 2020, 2; Melly & Hanrahan 2020, 1). These trends are further facilitated by other factors, such as improvements in international transportation, the expansion of communication networks, and the seamless transfer of technological innovations between countries (Toksöz 2021).

In recent years, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, significant transformations have been observed in both tourist behavior and the approaches of enterprises involved in creating and offering tourism products (Nikolaeva 2014). Globalization and digitalization make life increasingly virtual, fast-paced, and mobile, leaving many people feeling like “trees without roots” (Hussain 2023, 2), while health issues have also become globalized, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hernandez Ramirez 2024, 60).

The shift toward wealthier societies and mature economies, especially in developed countries, redirects consumption from material goods toward intangible benefits, services, and experiences, e.g., travel and adrenaline-inducing extreme activities (Ribov 2014; Bell et al. 2007, 8), through which physical and mental rejuvenation is achieved through perceptions (Ribov 2014). Tourists increasingly demand high-quality leisure opportunities and the supporting services (Eagles, McCool & Haynes 2002, 30). As a result, there is a growing need for interaction among governments, companies, the third sector, and individuals through new models of broad cooperation aimed at sustainability and health (Hernandez Ramirez 2024).

## Essence and socio-economic characteristics of health tourism

The study of health tourism should begin with a definition of health. In the narrow sense, health is an objective and measurable indicator of an individual's physical condition, but more commonly used is the broader definition provided by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1948, which encompasses a balanced state of physical, mental, and social wellbeing, rather than merely the absence of disease (Grénman & Räikkönen 2015).

*Health tourism* is a type of tourism that utilizes resort-based health resources and therapeutic services for treatment, prevention, and recovery, while also satisfying recreational needs through the use of health-promoting resources, such as climate, mineral waters, and therapeutic mud, as well as the medical procedures developed on their basis (Mihaylov 2012). Health tourism serves as a general term for various travel activities aimed at improving health (Albuquerque et al. 2018; Quintela, Costa & Correia 2016). These range from invasive (Ahtiainen, Piirainen & Vehmas 2015; Langvinienė 2014; Deonarain & Rampersad 2024; Quintela, Costa & Correia 2016), therapeutic (Georgiev & Vasileva 2009; Mihaylov 2012; Merdivenci & Karakaş 2020; Hojcska 2023), and rehabilitative procedures (Wagenaar & Vaandrager (2018); Liao et al. 2023; Mihaylov 2012; Langvinienė 2014), typically associated with *medical tourism* (Voigt, Brown & Howat 2011; Lindell et al. 2019; Deonarain & Rampersad 2024; Hojcska 2023; Horváth 2023; Palanca 2023; Palkovics & Varga 2023; Toksöz 2021; Merdivenci & Karakaş 2020), to preventive (Chen, Prebensen, & Huan 2008; Grénman & Räikkönen 2015; Quintela, Costa & Correia 2016; Varga et al. 2018), rejuvenating, and relaxing activities (Quintela, Costa & Correia 2016; Albuquerque et al. 2018; Csrizmaz & Petó 2015; Liao et al. 2023; Wang et al. 2023; Yanakieva & Karadzhova 2020; Georgiev & Vasileva 2009), and even pampering experiences (Ahtiainen, Piirainen & Vehmas 2015; Grénman & Räikkönen 2015; Albuquerque et al. 2018; Langvinienė 2014), often referred to as *wellness tourism* or *wellbeing tourism* (Konu, Tuohino & Björk 2011; Grénman & Räikkönen 2015; Szymańska 2015; Albuquerque et al. 2018; Cavicchi et al. 2018; Smith & Puczkó 2014; Lindell et al. 2019; Davchev

2015). The spectrum of activities related to health tourism becomes evident when reviewing the main subtypes of health tourism:

- *balneological tourism* (Georgiev & Vasileva 2009)

This is a type of health tourism in which the main goal is treatment or recreation using mineral waters, including the provision of spa services – combining leisure with restorative procedures. Balneological tourism also involves mud therapy.

- *spa tourism* (Mihaylov 2012; Georgiev & Vasileva 2009)

There are several theories about the origin of the word “spa.” Some believe it comes from the name of the Belgian town Spa, where, since Roman times, mineral water has been used for therapeutic purposes. Another version holds that SPA is an acronym from the Latin “sanus pro aqua” – health through water. The Global Spa Association defines a spa as a discipline dedicated to enhancing overall well-being through a variety of professional services that promote the restoration of mind, body, and spirit. The main components of a spa are: nature, medicine, culture, sports, nutrition, and cosmetics. The health services offered by spa tourism can be grouped into several areas: hydrotherapy (prevention and water treatment with mineral, sea, and drinking water), manual therapy (manual or device-based massages), phytotherapy (treatment with herbs and plants), aromatherapy (treatment with scents and various inhalations), and chromotherapy (treatment with colors).

- *climatotherapy and climatic prophylaxis* (Mihaylov 2012)

Climatotherapy uses the combination of processes occurring in the atmosphere of a particular resort location at a given time, which are determined by meteorological elements. The meteorological factors affecting the human body include climate-active complexes through radiation, thermal, aerochemical, and electrostatic effects.

Climatic prophylaxis, as both a tourism motive and product structure, consists of two main types depending on the environment and the natural resources it offers: marine and mountain recreational tourism.

Marine recreational tourism is based on bioclimatic resources, with the beach serving as the main infrastructural component, safe and accessible, intended for recreation and tourism services. The primary preventive procedures include sunbathing, sea bathing, and aeroprophyllaxis. Sunbathing stimulates metabolism and the immune system, while sea bathing positively affects health through the temperature and chemical composition of the water. Aeroprophyllaxis, including air baths, complements the therapeutic effects of this type of tourism, benefiting from climatic factors such as temperature, humidity, and solar radiation.

Mountain recreational tourism is a type of health tourism based on bioclimatic resources, offering opportunities for recovery, active recreation, and sports. The mountain landscape and specific climatic characteristics – oxygen content, thermal conditions, intense solar radiation, and increased negative ionization – contribute to preventive health effects.

- *wellness tourism* (Mihaylov 2012; Konu, Tuohino & Björk 2011)

According to one definition, this is a preventive branch of health tourism, offering a variety of cosmetic, water-based, sports, and other relaxing and restorative procedures, performed by qualified personnel in a suitably equipped specialized facility. It is often associated with pleasure, luxury, and pampering, sometimes linked to the concept of a spa, with professionally administered treatments, but also with the transformation toward a healthier lifestyle.

- *wellbeing tourism* (Konu, Tuohino & Björk 2011; Hjalager et al. 2011; Huovinen & Jutila 2015, 68-70)

According to numerous studies, tourism in general has a positive impact on wellbeing, particularly in the context of wellbeing tourism. Wellbeing is linked to the concept of quality of life, which can be measured through both objective indicators (economic, social, environmental) and subjective indicators (happiness and satisfaction), and more recently it has also been associated with sustainable development. The beneficial effects of travel include, e.g., reduced stress, improved sleep quality, a

break from work-related concerns, and increased satisfaction. Some consider wellbeing a holistic state or a state of consciousness. The groups that benefit most from the health effects of wellbeing tourism include people with mobility and functional impairments, those with mental health challenges, or individuals undergoing rehabilitation after substance abuse. At the same time, these groups face a wide range of barriers that can prevent them from traveling, highlighting the need for accessibility in wellbeing tourism services.

- *preventive-recreational activities* (Mihaylov 2012)

Programs of this type of health tourism are aimed at reducing the negative effects of domestic and occupational environments on the normal functioning of the body, preserving and strengthening its protective capacities, and enhancing work performance.

- *medical tourism* (Albuquerque et al. 2018)

This is not merely a form of tourism focused on treating illnesses, but travel to another country with the purpose of accessing medical services. The motivation may be the affordable and competitive price of medical services in the destination, but very often it is driven by the opportunity for more timely and easier access to highly qualified and high-quality medical care compared to the traveller's country of residence. Medical tourism is facilitated by globalization, high connectivity, and widespread access to information in today's world.

Health tourism relies heavily on professional, qualified healthcare personnel, in addition to tourism staff (Ullah et al. 2021; Ahtiainen, Piirainen & Vehmas 2015; Liao et al. 2023), as well as on specialized facilities and infrastructure such as health centers and hospitals, rehabilitation centers, resorts, sports facilities, spa centers, and sanatoria (Ullah et al. 2021; Ahtiainen, Piirainen & Vehmas 2015; Liao et al. 2023; Bogomolova & Dovlatova 2019; Langvinienè 2014; Deonarain & Rampersad 2024; Mihaylov 2012; Lindell et al. 2019), along with innovative technological solutions (Palanca 2023; Ahtiainen, Piirainen & Vehmas 2015). These characteristics,

on the one hand, involve agents external to the tourism industry in service provision (Ullah et al. 2021; Zhong et al. 2021; Steckenbauer et al. 2018; Cracknell et al. 2018; Deonarain & Rampersad 2024; Palanca 2023), and on the other hand, contribute to the non-seasonal nature of health tourism activities (Scott, de Freitas & Matzarakiz 2009; Albuquerque et al. 2018; Ahtiainen, Piirainen & Vehmas 2015; Yanakieva & Karadzhova 2020; Merdivenci & Karakaş 2020). Furthermore, the literature identifies higher education institutions as providers of *wellbeing services* (Cavicchi et al. 2018). This role is emphasized in collaborations between academia and industry, supporting the sector through research activities and training that develop specific disciplinary skills for sectoral growth. Although a direct example of this in the context of health tourism has not been documented, a parallel can be drawn with recent research on the role of higher education institutions in the development of ecotourism (Mofokeng 2024, vi).

Despite its non-seasonal nature and the strong presence of built indoor facilities, health tourism relies heavily on natural resources (Zhong et al. 2021). These can serve as a basis for developing unique, geographically specific products aimed at establishing a distinctive market position and destination attractiveness, as well as providing a competitive advantage by offering experiences that cannot be replicated elsewhere (Smith & Puczkó 2008). Many characteristics of nature, such as landscape, climate, and water, have medically proven effects on human health and wellbeing (Smith & Diekmann 2017).

In Bulgaria, tourist centers and sanatoria are built around mineral springs and mud therapy (Yanakieva & Karadzhova 2020; Mihaylov 2012). In Poland, some wellness tourism products are based on the positive influence of the maritime climate, incorporated into various therapies (Lindell et al. 2019). In Hungary, health tourism typically relies on natural healing factors such as medicinal waters, mud, climate, or caves (Palkovics & Varga 2023). Merdivenci and Karakaş (2020) go further, emphasizing in the context of Turkish health tourism that countries with attractive destination characteristics – such as cultural and historical sites, beaches, political and

economic stability, hospitality, and high-quality services – are more likely to stand out in the competitive tourism market. According to Liao et al. (2023), most wellness tourists prefer destinations with more favourable climates and more attractive natural environments, such as forests, parks, water bodies, and coastal areas, compared to their usual place of residence. Medical tourism in South Africa is marketed as “surgery and safari” and “sea, sun, and surgery” (Deonarain & Rampersad 2024, 436).

Health tourism impacts the environment not only when directly implemented in nature, but the available management tools – such as land-use zoning, *carrying capacity* analysis, and *limits of acceptable change* (LAC) assessments – cover only the impacts of outdoor recreation (Ullah et al. 2021). The availability of suitable and sufficient infrastructure supports health tourism by reducing operational costs and expanding market opportunities (Ullah et al. 2021).

To ensure quality and safety, health tourism products and services must be *evidence-based*, and institutions related to health tourism should be accredited or certified, however, this is not always the case (Steckenbauer et al. 2018; Deonarain & Rampersad 2024; Horváth 2023). Health tourism is closely connected to legislation and regulations (Lindell et al. 2019; Hojcska 2023; Georgiev & Vasileva 2009), which underscores the influence of governmental authorities on its operation. This is particularly true for medical tourism, where both demand and supply depend on the legal framework and the availability of medical services not only in the destination country but also in the visitor’s home country (Deonarain & Rampersad 2024; Palanca 2023; Albuquerque et al. 2018). Health tourism services may be accessible through private or public funding – that is, self-financing or government subsidies – depending on national legislation (Tribe 2004; Mihaylov 2012; Davchev 2015; Lindell et al. 2019; Palkovics & Varga 2023; Hojcska 2023). In several countries, healthcare systems have introduced initiatives such as *nature prescriptions* (Tyrväinen et al. 2024, 56) or *green prescriptions* (Buckley & Cooper 2022, 4), yet in most cases, the benefits of tourism for wellbeing

are still perceived as personal and therefore paid for by the individual consumer (Buckley & Cooper 2022, 2).

Health tourism clients do not constitute a homogeneous group, which must be taken into account in destination management. A key distinction lies in the fact that clients seeking medical procedures within medical tourism usually act out of necessity, whereas those engaging in preventive or health-enhancing activities do so voluntarily (Grénman & Rääkkönen 2015). Ullah et al. (2021) identify three distinct segments:

- a youth segment, oriented towards *sports tourism*;
- a middle-aged segment, focused on health tourism products;
- and an elderly segment, oriented toward *retirement tourism*.

All three segments require collaboration between the tourism industry and various organizations external to it to attract these potential clients. People with temporary or permanent disabilities also form part of the health tourism clientele and require accessible opportunities (Merdivenci & Karakaş 2020; Toksöz 2021; Wagenaar & Vaandrager 2018).

### **Essence and socio-economic characteristics of recreational tourism**

*Recreational tourism* is defined in various ways. First, the literature – albeit conditionally and based on perceptions (McKercher 1996) – distinguishes between leisure time devoted to *recreation* and that devoted to *tourism*, which to some extent opposes these two concepts, even though they overlap (Hall & Page 2006; Tribe 2004; Buckley 2002, 76; McKercher 1996, 563). In this sense, recreation refers primarily to local behavior, often associated with outdoor activities and generally characterized by a non-commerciality (Hall & Page 2006). Tourism, on the other hand, is viewed through the lens of mobility, typically involving travel over long distances (domestic or international), overnight stays, and economic consumption (Hall & Page 2006; McKercher 1996). This distinction, however, increasingly contradicts new trends in tourism. In recent times, and especially after

the COVID-19 pandemic, *local (short-distance) tourism* has been gaining popularity (Nokkala 2023). With the growing interest in nature-based tourism (Hall & Page 2006; Kostova 2014; Lück & Aquino 2021), an expanding range of outdoor recreational practices is being integrated into tourism activities. Recreation has also been recognized as one of the main motivations for travel (Gjorgievski, Kozuharov & Nakovski 2013). Moreover, McKercher (1996, 563) notes that the distinction between tourism and recreation is partly rooted in the negative semantic connotations of the term *tourist* compared with related notions such as *traveller* or *visitor*. Such superficial separation between tourism and recreation does not serve the practical purposes of management (McKercher 1996; 563).

Secondly, recreational tourism is not strictly differentiated from health tourism (Hansen 2018; Csrizmaz & Pető 2015; Hjalager et al. 2011; Bogomolova & Dovlatova 2019; Yanakieva & Karadzova 2020), but rather encompasses certain overlapping activities organized around prevention and “*health for the healthy*” (Mihaylov 2012). Many of its subtypes, such as spa tourism, wellbeing tourism, and wellness tourism, are classified both as recreational and health tourism (Mihaylov 2012; Ahtiainen, Piirainen & Vehmas 2015; Varga & Csákvári 2019). This classification is also shaped by contemporary trends reflecting the growing interest in and responsibility for personal health (Grénman & Rääkkönen 2015).

Thirdly, the concept of recreational tourism is preferred on a regional basis, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in Slavic-language countries (Bogomolova & Dovlatova 2019; Csrizmaz & Pető 2015; Gjorgievski, Kozuharov & Nakovski 2013; Varga & Csákvári 2019; Mihaylov 2012), whereas linguistic and cultural particularities in other regions have favoured the adoption of the concepts of wellness tourism (Albuquerque et al. 2018; Chen, Prebensen & Huan 2008; Grénman & Rääkkönen 2015) and, more recently, wellbeing tourism (Lindell et al. 2019; Konu, Tuohino & Björk 2011; Hjalager et al. 2011). These concepts encompass similar characteristics but often lack a direct equivalent in the respective languages. In many languages, such as Finnish, there is only a

single term for wellbeing, without the possibility of distinguishing between wellness and wellbeing (Konu, Tuohino & Björk 2011). In a broader sense, *wellness* can also be understood as the absence of *illness* (Grénman & Rääkkönen 2015) and as the prevention of pathological conditions (Liao et al. 2023). Wagenaar and Vaandrager (2018), however, remind that there is no strict dichotomy between health and disease, particularly in relation to individuals with permanent disabilities. Wellbeing tourism and wellness tourism, similarly to recreational tourism, are associated with the establishment or restoration of balance between physical, mental, and social capacities (Mihaylov 2012; Bogomolova & Dovlatova 2019; Albuquerque et al. 2018; Ullah et al. 2021; Grénman & Rääkkönen 2015), although particularly in Bulgarian literature the social dimension in this context is often overlooked.

Recreational tourism offers numerous benefits for society and individuals, including improved mental and physical health, economic opportunities, and social cohesion (Fisher et al. 2019, 1). It relies heavily on natural resources, which are regarded as a primary source of experiences and wellbeing (Grénman & Rääkkönen 2015). At the same time, recreational tourism destinations, businesses, and products that involve *fixed capital assets* have limited capacity to adapt to climate change, whereas transportation services, tour operators, and tourists possess a greater degree of flexibility and can respond to climate change, for example, by altering the spatial, temporal, or activity-related aspects of tourism (Scott, de Freitas & Matzarakiz 2009).

*Natural recreational resources* exist independently of tourism activity and have inherent value in their original form, yet they are utilized by tourists to satisfy their recreational needs; these resources are complemented by *anthropogenic recreational resources*, specifically created for leisure purposes (Gjorgievski, Kozuharov & Nakovski 2013; Lee 2016). Infrastructure is also of paramount importance for recreational tourism, as it not only enables recreational activities but also defines the accessibility and safety of the destination (Lee 2016). To serve both locals

and visitors, accommodation, catering, transportation, and information services must be integrated into the recreational offering (Lee 2016).

Technology exerts a multifaceted influence on recreation, particularly outdoor leisure, in several ways (Winter et al. 2020, 4):

- access and transport, e.g., mountain bikes;
- comfort, e.g., lightweight equipment materials;
- safety, e.g., activity-support equipment;
- communication, e.g., smartphones and GPS;
- information, e.g., the internet.

Recreational tourism ranges from *adventure tourism*, encompassing, e.g., diving and climbing, through *active*, including skiing, snowshoeing, golf, horseback riding, running, and mountain biking, to *light, relaxing*, and *passive*, such as sensory walks, relaxation, or enjoying the view (Grénman & Rääkkönen 2015; Ahtiainen, Piirainen & Vehmas 2015; Zhong et al. 2021; Quintela, Costa & Correia 2018; Bell et al. 2007, 5), catering to clients with diverse abilities and interests. It has been observed that destinations based on a complex combination of resources, offering varied activities for different segments across different seasons, possess the greatest potential for recreational tourism (Gjorgievski, Kozuharov & Nakovski 2013). Another perspective regarding recreational tourism clients is that, for leisure travellers, recreation constitutes a primary activity, whereas for business travellers it is secondary (Gjorgievski, Kozuharov & Nakovski 2013). Furthermore, Hansen (2018) recognizes not only tourists but also *excursionists*, holiday property owners, and permanent residents as recreational clients, all utilizing the same infrastructure and services. The wide range of stakeholders involved in recreational activities, sharing the same resources and infrastructure, can give rise to conflicts, negative environmental impacts, and competition for scarce resources; therefore, strong communication and broad stakeholder involvement are recommended in the development and management of nature-based recreational tourism destinations (Derriks 2018; Bishop, Ólafsdóttir & Árnason (2022; Winter et al. 2020, 2). Decision-makers often lack clear

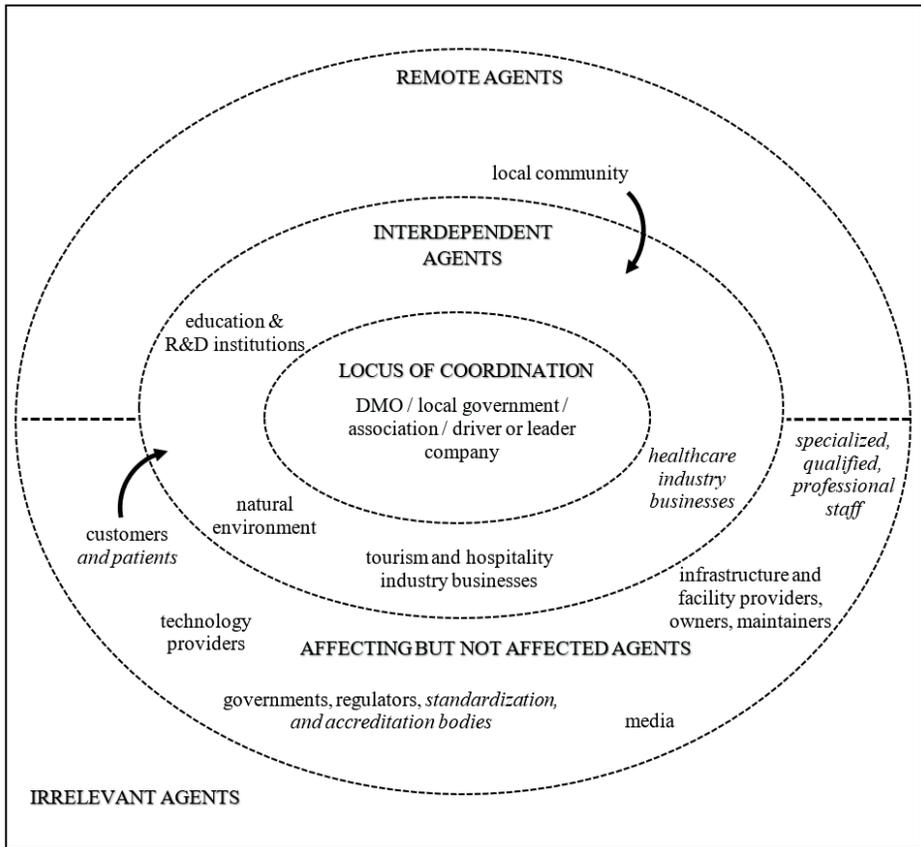
guidance on how and where to develop or promote recreational tourism opportunities, due to insufficient information on the preferences of local visitors and tourists (Fisher et al. 2019, 1).

### **Conceptual model of the destination ecosystem for health and recreational tourism**

In terms of strategic management, health tourism has demonstrated a significant role in the growth of destinations (Albuquerque et al. 2018; Steckenbauer et al. 2018). Regarding health and recreational tourism, the literature emphasizes the need to develop a comprehensive tourism product that serves a wide range of clients across different seasons, through cooperation and dialogue among all key stakeholders – both within and outside the tourism industry – within and around the destination, while aligning tourism activities with the sustainable use of natural resources. Furthermore, the non-seasonality of such tourism can potentially contribute to improving the socio-cultural and economic conditions of the encompassing areas (Albuquerque et al. 2018). Therefore, one approach to developing a comprehensive tourism offer and achieving the sustainability goals of a health and recreational tourism destination could be through ecosystem governance.

The first step of building the ecosystem governance model for a health and recreational tourism destination is the identification of the layers of the destination ecosystem, along with the agents and interrelationships associated with each layer. The construction of such a model begins with the adaptation of Moore’s business ecosystem model from an enterprise-oriented perspective to a destination-oriented perspective - a necessity already established previously. Subsequently, the agents of the destination ecosystem can be positioned within each layer using Hillebrand’s (2022) categorization of influencing and influenced, as well as Thomas and Autio’s (2012) concept of the locus of coordination. As a result, an initial theoretical conceptual model emerges, outlining the ecosystem of a health and recreational tourism destination (Figure 2.1).

**Figure 2.1.** Conceptual model of the destination ecosystem for health and recreational tourism (author's elaboration).



The boundaries of each ecosystem layer, marked with dashed lines, symbolize voluntary participation, non-contractual relationships, the flexible roles of agents, and the possibility of changing positions or moving to another layer. Many agents belong to the general tourism ecosystem, while those indicated in italics are specific to health and recreational tourism.

At the center is the locus of coordination, typically a DMO, local government, business association, or a larger, significant driving or leading company influential for the destination, possessing sufficient resources, capacity, and competencies to motivate, stimulate, and thereby coordinate participants in the destination ecosystem. Besides the mentioned examples, the locus of coordination can also be any other organization with

similar resources and capabilities, as noted earlier in Table 1.7. The locus of coordination must be aware of its position and manage the destination with soft power rather than domination, ensuring effective communication among agents and disseminating knowledge-based decision-making information throughout the destination.

The middle layer consists of interdependent agents. This is where cooptation is observed, balancing simultaneous cooperation and competition among agents. Typically, most tourism and hospitality businesses are located here, as well as the providers of health and health-related services, enabling the destination to offer health and recreational tourism services. Since both health and recreational tourism activities are closely linked to nature – which serves as their stage, primary resource, and competitive advantage for the destination – the natural environment itself is an important agent within this layer. It should be noted that nature not only influences the product but is also influenced by tourism activities, necessitating responsible practices and regulations to ensure environmentally sustainable tourism. Significant agents in this layer also include research and development organizations and educational institutions, which contribute to the ecosystem’s health by promoting innovation and facilitating interdisciplinary networking among participants.

In the outer layer of the ecosystem are agents that influence value but are not influenced by it. They possess substantial resources to activate, facilitate, hinder, or even dismantle the destination ecosystem and its health and recreational value, e.g., through regulations, legislation, standardization, accreditation of processes, products, and services; through the availability or absence of technological solutions that facilitate interaction among agents or between production agents and clients for treatments or other health-related interventions; through representation and exposure of the destination in conventional or social media; or through creating, providing, and maintaining infrastructure and facilities used in tourism, which do not always exist for the purpose of tourism and its health and recreational functions. These agents must be continuously

informed and reminded of their influence on the destination through good communication, with the less obvious benefits of their participation highlighted and revealed. Specialized personnel, present or absent in tourism but especially in healthcare, also impact the value created by the destination within this layer.

Customers also influence value – through their choice to visit the destination and their interactions with service providers and other clients. In the context of visits, treatment, and health recovery, customers can also be patients. An effort should be made to include customers in the middle layer of the ecosystem, as this would not only align with the contemporary perception of the customer as a co-creator but would also imply that clients actually receive the transformational benefits of health and recreational tourism. It is important to remember the heterogeneous nature of health and recreational tourism customers. Common characteristics of visitors include belonging to an aging society, being health-conscious, typically urbanized and stressed by daily life, technologically literate, highly mobile, and globalized. At the same time, they differ in terms of domestic/international origin, voluntary/involuntary participation, intention for invasive or non-invasive treatments, nature, capabilities, or holistic orientation, motivation for disease treatment or wellbeing improvement, engagement in sports, adventure, relaxation, or slowing down, etc.

Remote agents also belong to this outer layer. They are affected by tourism activities but have limited ability to influence them due to restricted resources. Locals are usually considered remote agents, but they should be brought closer to the center of the ecosystem to build a stronger destination identity and achieve multidimensional sustainability. This applies not only to residents as labour and beneficiaries of tourism. The local community uses the same resources and services as tourists for its own recreation and recovery, and thus can be considered a consumer segment.

Outside the ecosystem are irrelevant agents – those unwilling to cooperate or without the resources or interest to participate in the health and recreational tourism product. These may include parts of the tourism

and healthcare industries or other local actors with no connection to the destination ecosystem.

The *total product* of the destination can be successfully created and managed only through the conscious participation of all agents across the different layers of the ecosystem.

### **Health and recreational tourism in Bulgarian and Finnish contexts**

Bulgaria's main competitive advantages in health and recreational tourism are linked to its resources (Koprinarov 2014). The country possesses an abundance of natural resources that define its tourism and resort potential (Lazarov 2008, 34-35). A significant part of the territory is protected nature, including numerous mountain and coastal lakes, as well as mineral springs known for their therapeutic properties (Lazarov 2008, 34). More than 70% of Bulgaria's balneological potential consists of low-mineralization thermal waters, which is a rarity in Central and Northwestern Europe as well as in the Middle East (Mihaylov 2012, 3). Bulgaria ranks among the richest European countries in mineral waters and therapeutic mud (Lazarov 2008, 34). The natural factor is playing an increasingly significant role in national tourism, not only for sightseeing, entertainment, rural, hunting, fishing, and ecotourism, but also with regard to its recreational value (Lazarov 2008, 34). The country boasts excellent geographical and climatic conditions for both coastal and mountain recreational tourism (Koprinarov 2014).

The total recreational area of Bulgaria is estimated at around 40,000 sq. km, contributing to the country's position as an attractive tourist destination (Lazarov 2008, 34). However, much of this potential is still underutilized, with the exception of the Black Sea coast, which attracts significant interest from both domestic and international tourists (Lazarov 2008, 35). Coastal recreational tourism is the main tourism product in Bulgaria, and the primary resources for this type of tourism include the sea, beaches, and favourable climate (Mihaylov 2012). The combination of climatic and bioclimatic resources, such as a therapeutic

climate, extensive beaches, and clean, warm seawater, has established the Black Sea coast as a key recreational area of the country (Mihaylov 2012, 16).

Despite Bulgaria's tradition as a seaside tourism destination, in recent years – and even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic – problems have emerged, including a decline in foreign tourists, low competitiveness of the Bulgarian tourism product, lack of product differentiation, supply repeatedly exceeding demand, insufficient and inadequate infrastructure, a predominantly seasonal nature of tourism, and gaps in strategic tourism management (Nikolaeva 2019; Georgiev 2010, 86). Furthermore, climate change may negatively affect Bulgaria's status as a mass seaside tourism destination, but on the other hand, it could favour the development of other types of tourism, including recreational tourism in its broader sense (Nikolaeva 2019). This could benefit the country in terms of tourism sustainability, as the mass recreational product is primarily developed as an economic tool and tends to create imbalances in other dimensions of sustainability within the destination (Koprinarov 2014).

In the future, health tourism in Bulgaria could be strengthened by creating unique Bulgarian health tourism brands based on resorts and products established around geographically determined resources, such as herbs, honey, and healing mud (Mihaylov 2012, 17). Since the country's health and recreational resources have been recognized and utilized since ancient times (Mihaylov 2012, 9-11), and given the abundance of cultural monuments from various historical periods (Nikolaeva 2019), Bulgaria could also develop thematic health-recreational products linked, e.g., to the culture of the ancient Romans and especially the Thracians (Mihaylov 2012, 13).

Regarding health tourism, Bulgaria offers, for example, rehabilitation through balneology (Mihaylov 2012). Elements of spa, balneological, and wellness tourism are defined in the Tourism Act (2013/2023), but climatotherapy has not yet been established in legislation (Ministry of Tourism 2024). Specialists consider that climatotherapy has high potential for both domestic and international tourism and would be suitable, for instance,

for people recovering from COVID-19 (Petkova 2021). The idea of reviving climatotherapy – which was evidence-based, certified, and actively practiced during the socialist period – has recently been gaining increasing support, whereby initiatives such as the “Revival of Climatotherapy in Strandzha” committee (BTA 2021) and the Bulgarian Association for Climatotherapy and Health Tourism have been established (Ministry of Tourism 2024). The successful development of climatotherapy in tourism requires legislative changes and collaboration between the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Health to organize its marketing and subsidization (Petkova 2021; Ministry of Tourism 2024). Like other forms of health and recreational tourism, such as spa tourism (Georgiev & Vasileva 2009), climatotherapy can be successful and profitable only as part of a comprehensive tourism product designed to attract, retain, and bring tourists back to the respective destination (Petkova 2021; Ministry of Tourism 2024).

Finland, with its abundant natural resources, is renowned for the strong connection of its population to the environment and their ability to navigate and survive in nature independently, without the need for guides (Koistinen, Lehtinen & Nieminen 2021; Bell et al. 2007, 22). In Finland, the most sought-after experiences are enjoying nature, peace, and quiet, which attract people to rural and peripheral areas (Bell et al. 2007, 22). Three-quarters of Finland is covered by forests, and there are approximately 168 000 lakes (Juttila & Kassi 2022, 3). During the summer, the white nights can be observed, while in winter, the northern lights are observable (Juttila & Kassi 2022, 4). Finns breathe the cleanest air in Europe and belong to one of the seven countries worldwide that meet the WHO’s clean air criteria (YLE News 2024).

In Finland, health and recreational tourism are strongly linked to the benefits of nature and its resources (Konu, Tuohino & Björk 2011). Environmental factors make the country competitive and attractive as a destination for wellbeing tourism (Konu, Tuohino & Björk 2011). Finland’s recreational potential is also culturally conditioned: the wilderness is perceived as a challenge to humans, and overcoming this challenge leads

to spiritual catharsis, transformation, and ultimately, recreation (Hall & Page 2006, 313-316).

Wellbeing tourism in Finland is defined by the Finnish Tourist Board (currently Visit Finland) (Konu, Tuohino & Björk 2011, 13). Specific programs have been developed to promote its growth and health tourism is conceptually divided into medical tourism and wellbeing tourism according to its objectives (Grénman & Rääkkönen 2015, 14):

- The Finland Care program develops Finland as a destination for medical tourism.
- The Green Care concept emphasizes the role of nature and rural areas for health promotion.
- Wellbeing tourism, on the other hand, contributes not only to maintaining and improving health and wellbeing but also provides opportunities for enjoyment, entertainment, and pampering.
- The Finnrelax program includes elements of escape from routine, relaxation, tranquility in nature, as well as experiences of Finnish culture, including sauna and local cuisine.
- Another segment is Health and Fitness, which includes physical activity (not only the traditional swimming and fitness, but also golf, skiing, horseback riding, snowmobiling, and other outdoor activities) and Finnish wellness technologies.
- There is also a Pampering program, which includes traditional Finnish spa and beauty treatments and most closely aligns with the international understanding of wellness.

Since Finland has been ranked the happiest country in the world seven times (World Happiness Report 2024), in recent years the Masterclass in Happiness program has also been introduced (Visit Finland 2024) in the context of wellbeing tourism, highlighting not only the aspect of a healthy lifestyle but also the social dimension of health.

In practice, however, there is no clear distinction between health and recreational tourism in Finland. Many of the country's spa centers and hotels were originally established to provide rehabilitation services

for military veterans, but with the decline in this demand, they have shifted their focus to clients from the recreational sector and occupational health services (Grénman & Rääkkönen 2015, 11).

Perhaps the most prominent and universally recognized factor of health and recreational tourism in Finland is the fact that this is the home of sauna. Finland has a population of 5.5 million and more than three million saunas, and the country's sauna culture has been recognized by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage n.d.b). Sauna is associated with stress-relieving leisure time spent in nature and the countryside (Wellness Tourism n.d.).

A recent Finnish study highlights the health benefits of spending time in natural environments and their economic significance in reducing the increasingly high costs of healthcare (Tyrväinen et al. 2024). Focusing specifically on mental health, cardiovascular health, type 2 diabetes, respiratory health, and allergies – which are national health issues (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2024) and significant challenges for public health and the economy – the study provides evidence for the benefits of nature in reducing stress and improving mood, preventing obesity or overweight and type 2 diabetes, as well as contradictory but partially limited positive indications for asthma and allergies. Based on sample, modeled financial estimates, the combined potential economic benefit of nature for the medical treatment of depression, type 2 diabetes, and asthma is estimated between €139.4 million and €290.8 million annually, depending on differences in valuation methods. According to the researchers, however, the overall potential of nature's health benefits in Finland could be valued at up to €2.5 billion per year. The study does not mention tourism even once, but its role in this equation is evident. Such research is relevant to health and recreational tourism, as it raises public awareness of ways to prevent disease and restore health in tourist generating regions.

## 2.2. NATURE AS A MAJOR SOURCE OF HEALTH AND RECREATIONAL BENEFITS – HEALTH AND RECREATION AS CULTURAL ECOSYSTEM SERVICES

Nature-based tourism is growing and currently represents a significant sector of global tourism, which, according to some estimates, may account for around 20% of the worldwide tourism market (Silva, Silva & Vieira 2023, 1). A large share of health and recreational tourism activities are also nature-based. It is necessary to examine the relationship between nature and tourism, particularly in the context of health and recreational benefits.

The perception of nature has varied across time and across different parts of the world (Hall & Page 2006, 312-317):

- In many cultures, the wilderness has been seen as a hostile and dangerous place, in contrast to human habitats.
- The Bible contrasts the wilderness with paradise, portraying it as a cursed place of trials, but also as an opportunity for transformation and spiritual catharsis, which relates to recreation.
- In Eastern philosophies and religions, the understanding of nature is more positive, its aesthetics are recognized, and a balance between humans and nature is sought.

The value of nature can be anthropocentric or biocentric (Hall & Page 2006, 325):

- The *anthropocentric approach* assesses the potential benefits of direct human use of nature, placing social values above ecological ones and emphasizing recreation and aesthetics.
- The *biocentric approach* focuses on preserving the natural order as it is, but in most cases nature is still instrumentalized, with the focus again on the benefits it provides to humans. A distinct branch of the biocentric approach is *deep ecology*, according to which nature has intrinsic value, not merely because it meets human needs.

Approaches to understanding the value of nature reflect a historical tension. Both the natural and social sciences were initially hostile toward each other: economists were accused of destroying nature, while ecologists were viewed sceptically by economists for interfering with commerce (Hussain 2023, 2).

The concept of *ecosystem services* emphasizes the diverse benefits that ecosystems provide to humans, and its application can facilitate interaction and collaboration among scientists, managers, and other stakeholders (Chipev 2017, 11). Ecosystem services are understood as the contributions of biological ecosystems to human wellbeing, and they are typically categorized into three main groups (Nikolova et al. 2021, 19):

- *provisioning services* – food (biomass, water), materials (use of biomass and water for purposes other than food), energy (biomass-based energy sources, mechanical energy such as draught animals);
- *regulating and supporting services* – processing of waste, toxic substances, and other harmful compounds by forest biota and ecosystems; treatment of flows (such as controlling water and wind erosion, mitigating floods, and moderating temperature differences); maintenance of physical, chemical, and biological conditions (supporting pollinator populations, favorable habitats, natural enemies of pests, soil-decomposing organisms, forests as protection for stream quality, carbon sequestration for climate regulation);
- *cultural services* – physical, intellectual, spiritual, and symbolic interactions with living beings, ecosystems, and landscapes.

Cultural services have the highest potential for providing services from nature for recreation and tourism (Nikolova et al. 2021, 19). They encompass a variety of non-material benefits, including cultural and spiritual values, knowledge systems, educational values, inspiration, aesthetic values, social relationships, sense of place, cultural heritage values, opportunities for recreation, human health and wellbeing, as well as ecotourism (Pröbstl-

Haider 2015, 2). They can be understood as the interactions between ecological spaces and cultural and recreational practices, as well as the relationships established within these spaces (Silva, Silva & Vieira 2023, 15). Given that a cultural ecosystem service is likely to be strongly influenced by its location, its economic value is specific to the site (Iversen et al. 2023, 2).

Nature plays a key role as a primary source of health and recreational benefits for people (Iversen et al. 2023). Health and recreation are two of the most important cultural ecosystem services provided by nature to humanity. Nature contributes to human health and recreation in the following ways (Haluza, Schönbauer & Cervinka 2014):

- Nature offers a variety of opportunities for physical activity and sports, such as hiking, climbing, mountain biking, running, rowing, and others. These activities are an excellent way to improve physical fitness, strengthen muscles and the cardiovascular system, and reduce stress and tension.
- Spending time in nature has proven beneficial effects on mental health. It helps people relax, relieve stress and anxiety, and feel more satisfied.
- Natural environments can be used for recovery and treatment of illnesses or injuries. People who spend time in nature tend to recover faster and experience fewer health problems.
- Nature also provides a setting for social interaction and the formation of social bonds. Outdoor activities, such as picnics, camping, or sports games, can strengthen community ties and enhance overall quality of life.
- Nature offers unique educational and learning opportunities for people of all ages. Visitors can learn about different plant and animal species, ecological processes, and conservation practices, fostering environmental awareness and interest in sustainability.

All ecosystem services related to recreational industries are referred to as *recreational ecosystem services*; some of these services have a direct

impact by creating an environment suitable for recreational activities, while others indirectly influence various aspects of recreation (Nikolova et al. 2021, 19). Ecosystem services provided by soil, water, and climate create conditions for a wide range of recreational and tourism benefits, including climatotherapy, mud therapy, and balneotherapy (Nikolova et al. 2021, 20).

As a cultural ecosystem service, nature-based recreational tourism provides important revenue for regions where other industries are often in decline (Iversen et al. 2023, 1). Areas associated with recreation and health have traditionally included forests, coastlines, lakes and rivers, mountains, and other impressive landscapes, many of which are nowadays protected (Bell et al. 2007, 5). Parks and protected natural areas are recognized as important sources of ecosystem services for society (Taff et al. 2019, 1), although many tourists obtain benefits without necessarily visiting protected nature sites (Spalding, Burke & Fyall 2020, 126). Participation in nature-based activities is associated with emotional wellbeing, and experiences in protected areas can contribute to greater perceived happiness compared to indoor activities; even recalling natural experiences can promote positive affective states (Taff et al. 2019, 2). The pandemic has highlighted the significant role that protected areas play in human health and wellbeing, particularly after prolonged periods of enforced isolation (Spenceley et al. 2021, 108).

Globally, protected areas receive approximately eight million visits per year, generating around €570 billion in visitor expenditures (Winter et al. 2020, 2; Silva, Silva & Vieira 2023, 1), and their economic value solely in terms of visitor mental health is estimated at nearly €5.7 trillion annually, including €2 trillion from reduced healthcare costs and improved labour productivity (Buckley & Cooper 2022, 3). In Europe, 449 national parks, representing only a fraction of the continent's tens of thousands of protected areas, attract over 2 billion visitors, generating a total annual value of €14.5 billion (McGinlay et al. 2020, 1). It is not a coincidence that interest in visiting protected natural areas is steadily growing, and in some cases post-pandemic visitation has even surpassed pre-pandemic levels

(Spenceley et al. 2021, 110). Societal demands on protected areas are also increasing and diversifying, reflecting a growing awareness of the wide range of benefits they provide (McCool & Spenceley 2014, 1).

Nature-based experiences promote human health and wellbeing partly due to the influence of physical natural resources on affective states at multiple levels (Taff et al. 2019, 2). Natural settings that sharply contrast with the usual urban environment have greater potential to deliver the benefits of cultural ecosystem services (Taff et al. 2019, 2). Features of natural resources, such as tree shape and density or water clarity, can influence perceptions related to wellbeing (Taff et al. 2019, 2). Perceived stress relief is significantly greater when visiting an urban park compared to a city center, but forests provide the most substantial restorative effects (Taff et al. 2019, 2). Notably, natural areas are important not only for tourists but often are especially significant for locals – as sites for recreation and domestic tourism (Wendt, Sæþórsdóttir & Waage, 2022, 788). However, due to increasing urbanization, more people need to travel outside their immediate habitats to access natural areas and benefit from cultural ecosystem services. A recent study (UKK Institute 2023) indicates that movement in national parks and other state-managed natural areas in Finland, totaling 6.2 million visits, saved society €164 million in 2022 alone, by reducing morbidity and preserving the population's work capacity.

It can be argued that tourism depends on nature, and nature possesses both economic and non-economic value for tourism (Spalding, Burke & Fyall 2020, 126). Many cultural ecosystem services can only be delivered if people visit parks and protected areas through tourism opportunities (Taff et al. 2019, 1). However, the relationship between tourism and nature is not one-sided – nature also depends on tourism. This became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the collapse of tourism created economic challenges for destinations, leading to illegal poaching, fishing, and deforestation (Spalding, Burke & Fyall 2020, 126).

Touristic use inevitably brings various impacts on natural resources (Taff et al. 2019, 1). Recreational tourism affects natural resources by, for

example, reducing biodiversity through wildlife loss, causing soil erosion and trampling vegetation, and appropriating nature for the construction and maintenance of roads, trails, and paths (Taff et al. 2019, 2; Wolf, Croft & Green 2019, 1). The drastic reduction of visits to natural areas and the disruption of global supply chains during the pandemic highlighted a range of environmental benefits: numerous natural spaces showed signs of recovery, and carbon dioxide emissions decreased (Spalding, Burke & Fyall 2020, 126). As ecological impacts from tourism increase, the positive effects of visitor presence inevitably decline. Some tourists “vote with their feet,” choosing destinations with a positive reputation while actively avoiding problematic sites (Eagles, McCool & Haynes 2002, 33). The more attractive a natural site is, the more likely it is to degrade due to visitation, which in turn can reduce the quality of the experience and visitor satisfaction (Wolf, Croft & Green 2019, 2). This establishes the paradox between tourism use and nature conservation (Silva, Silva & Vieira 2023, 2). The recent increase in visits to protected areas, such as national parks, is associated with both deliberate and inadvertent visitor behaviour that may harm the natural resources supporting cultural ecosystem services related to wellbeing (Taff et al. 2019, 2). Some authors, however, note that attracting visitors can also protect a natural area from potentially more destructive land uses (Wolf, Croft & Green 2019, 1).

Visitor management in natural areas in ways that reduce ecological impacts is essential for the provision of cultural ecosystem services related to human health and wellbeing (Taff et al. 2019, 7). To mitigate tourism impacts, managers employ *direct management* through regulations and restrictions, as well as *indirect management*, most commonly in the form of communication and education; applying these strategies in combination yields the best results, although indirect management is often preferred, as it allows recreators to be active and make their own decisions regarding their behaviour in the natural environment (Taff et al. 2019, 7; Buckley 2002, 79; Wolf, Croft & Green 2019, 1). The types of visitor management are presented in Table 2.1. Research has shown that when visiting parks and protected

areas where visitors adhere to management strategies – even indirect ones, such as ethics and low-impact programs – they can experience higher levels of positive effects and, consequently, achieve greater provision of cultural ecosystem services (Taff et al. 2019, 8).

**Table 2.1.** Types of visitor management to mitigate negative tourism impacts (author’s elaboration).

Management type:	Direct	Indirect	Combined
Toolkit:	regulations, restrictions, bans	communication, education, ethics and low-impact programs	combination of the tools of direct and indirect visitor management
Implications:	may trigger societal opposition	encourages consumers’ activeness, initiative, and responsibility, their own decisions for responsible behaviour, and thus sustainability	best results – effective and lasting

Another aspect to consider is that protected areas, such as national parks, are a Western concept, but nature management and conservation can draw on the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples regarding the sustainable use of natural resources (Hall & Page 2006, 329). For example, in some cases, scientific knowledge is combined with the community’s traditional knowledge to assess and identify the ecosystem services of a particular area (Silva, Silva & Vieira 2023, 15).

High societal expectations for protected areas require management not only in terms of ecology and visitor flows but also in ensuring a broad range of benefits – on the one hand for human health and wellbeing, and on the other hand to support local livelihoods and realize economic potential, which demands institutional capacity and awareness (McCool & Spenceley 2014, 1). Scientific research plays an important role in all these activities and is therefore an essential

component of any capacity-building effort (McCool & Spenceley 2014, 2). The recent pandemic revealed the interconnectedness of different stakeholders and sectors, including protected areas, private enterprises, public health, governments, and NGOs, highlighting that recovery cannot be achieved by any single sector in isolation, and that collaboration is fundamental (Spenceley et al. 2021, 108).

### 2.3. TOURISM IN PROTECTED NATURAL AREAS

The idea of nature conservation and the establishment of protected areas is based on humanity's long-standing effort to preserve the most valuable specimens shaped by natural processes and evolution over millions of years, integrating the scientific, social, and cultural interests of society, and emerging as a response to the intensive development of industry and urbanization (Georgiev 2010, 8). Protected areas, established more than 2000 years ago in India for the conservation of natural resources and nearly 1000 years ago in Europe as hunting grounds for the elite, represent a cultural artifact with a universal idea, reflected in the traditions of communities from the Pacific to Africa (Eagles, McCool & Haynes 2002, 18).

Protected areas are a fundamental global strategy for nature conservation (Bushell & Bricker 2016, 1). Due to their strategic importance, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) recommends that every park has a management plan (Dudley 2008). This plan serves as a strategic tool for defining the park's policies and is comprehensive in nature, with one of its key topics being tourism management – mitigating negative impacts and enhancing opportunities – at a scope and level of detail appropriate to the objectives (Eagles, McCool & Haynes 2002, 55). The plan may vary in terms of its specific details depending on the goals and legal requirements, aiming to identify key features, establish objectives, and propose actions, while allowing flexibility to address unforeseen events; it serves as a guiding instrument for managers and stakeholders, promoting dialogue and adopting a holistic approach that

integrates diverse perspectives (Thomas & Middleton 2003). When applied effectively, it addresses both internal and external issues, promoting the overall management of the area, however, if the plan does not exist or is not being implemented, individual measures may be disconnected, leading to missed opportunities and irreversible damage to the area's resources and values (Thomas & Middleton 2003). It has been observed that while such plans are often strong in managing the park's natural resources, they are frequently weak in outlining tourism objectives and how these objectives should be achieved (Eagles, McCool & Haynes 2002, 55). IUCN assigns the managing organization of the protected area (*park authority*) the role of safeguarding the values for which the area was originally established, but this role also includes active management of tourism and visitors, sharing management responsibilities with tour operators, local communities, and visitors, as well as providing potential economic opportunities for tourism (Eagles, McCool & Haynes 2002, 56).

By 2020, approximately 17% of all land and around 8% of coastal and marine areas were under conservation measures (Silva, Silva & Vieira 2023, 2). Tourism and recreation have been considered part of the functions of protected areas since their inception, and in some cases, they were even a primary reason for the establishment of such areas (Yui 2014, 1; Franceschinis et al. 2022, 1). Protected areas have a special place in sustainable socio-economic and tourism development (Georgiev 2010, 83). Today, the use of these areas for tourism is also shaped by changing tourist needs related to health and recovery, which include a growing interest in specialized forms of tourism in calm and authentic natural setting (Kostova 2014, 832).

Protected areas were important tourist destinations even before the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing visitors to enjoy physical and mental relaxation as well as social wellbeing, and during the pandemic, they experienced a surge in demand due to domestic tourism, which increased their significance (Silva, Silva & Vieira 2023, 1-2). Changes in tourist behaviour were particularly strengthened after the pandemic, which

prompted many tourists to seek more spacious, less developed, and rural locations, such as national parks and nature reserves (Spalding, Burke & Fyall 2020, 127). The broader use of natural protected areas offers opportunities to reshape tourism with a lower number of visitors (Spalding, Burke & Fyall 2020, 127).

Advances in global communications and information technology allow many people to access vast amounts of information about protected areas, while park authorities can provide up-to-date, enhanced information directly to visitors at very low cost (Eagles, McCool & Haynes 2002, 30). This enables visitors to be well-informed about all aspects of the recreational experience and the management policies of the protected area (Eagles, McCool & Haynes 2002, 31), which can either facilitate or hinder that experience. However, many park authorities do not maintain adequate information online. Instead, private interests such as NGOs, hotel operators, and other tourism companies provide most of the online information, leaving park authorities with little control over it (Eagles, McCool & Haynes 2002, 31). Technology can support cooperation among different agents in the destination, for example by enabling cross-marketing of their services with those of the protected area itself, or by allowing visitors to broadcast their experiences online directly, reaching users worldwide (Eagles, McCool & Haynes 2002, 31).

Regarding visitors to protected areas, although they do not belong to a homogeneous consumer segment, they can be segmented according to criteria such as participation in certain activities or perceived benefits from the visit (Eagles, McCool & Haynes 2002, 34-35).

Buckley (2002, 79) notes that combining protected nature and tourism requires an ecosystem approach. Although the author gives this concept a different meaning – specifically, taking into account the biological ecosystem in and around the protected area – the approach he describes is about including a wide range of stakeholders, such as transportation, accommodation, and activity businesses in the park’s surroundings with supporting infrastructure, use of public and private land, as well as

park attractions as a combination in tourism products, and industrial and residential development near protected nature that significantly impacts conservation and tourism. According to the author, partnerships between park management and commercial tourism can provide benefits to both parties under certain conditions, but only when based on consent – that is, all parties can freely decide whether to participate.

### **Classification and tourist purposes of protected natural areas**

The IUCN has developed a classification of protected areas worldwide, which is used to categorize different types of protected areas based on their objectives and management approaches. The system of categories also supports and guides the development of national legislation for establishing national systems of protected areas in individual countries and for defining the main parameters of their management (Dudley 2008, 3).

The premise of determining the categories is the definition of a protected area: “a clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values” (Dudley 2008, 8).

The main goals of protected areas include (EUROPARC & IUCN 2000, 10):

- scientific research,
- wildlife conservation,
- preservation of species and genetic diversity,
- maintenance of ecological functions,
- protection of specific natural and cultural features,
- tourism and recreation,
- education,
- sustainable use of natural ecosystem resources,
- preservation of cultural and traditional characteristics.

At present, protected areas are being established with more complex and comprehensive objectives than in the past: conservation remains essential, but the current focus of management goals is increasingly shifting towards educational, scientific, and cultural objectives, the provision of ecosystem services, sustainable use of resources, health and recreation, quality of life for local communities, tourism development, economic dynamics, and adaptation to climate change (Silva, Silva & Vieira 2023, 2).

As follows from these objectives, the IUCN classification can also be applied in the context of tourism by determining whether tourism is appropriate for each category of protected area.

- **Category Ia** – *strict nature reserve* (Dudley 2008, 13)

Objectives: Preservation of natural processes and biodiversity without human interference; scientific research.

Characteristics: Nature reserves are usually limited in size.

Conditions for tourism: Tourism is generally not permitted in these areas; access is allowed only for scientific and research purposes, environmental monitoring, and education, due to strict restrictions on human activities.

- **Category Ib** – *wilderness area* (Duddley 2008, 14)

Objectives: To foster or restore biodiversity and evolution.

Characteristics: These are areas that can provide protection from the impacts of climate change and safeguard endangered species. In terms of their objectives, wilderness areas resemble strict nature reserves but are larger in size.

Conditions for tourism: Tourism, in the usual sense, is not applicable, as human visitation is kept to a minimum. Access is often limited to non-mechanized travel such as walking, skiing, or boating, offering a unique opportunity to experience wilderness in its untouched state. Wilderness areas lack modern infrastructure, although they may allow human activity insofar as it supports the cultural and spiritual values of indigenous peoples and their traditional, nature-based way of life.

- **Category II** – *national park* (Dudley 2008, 16-17)

Objectives: Conservation of ecosystem functioning and recreation.

Characteristics: Category II areas should be more strictly protected when the ecological functions and composition of native species are relatively intact. Surrounding landscapes may vary in their degree of consumptive or non-consumptive use but should ideally serve as buffers to the protected area. The commercialization of land and water within Category II areas presents challenges in many parts of the world, partly due to the political perception of resources being “locked away” in national parks, accompanied by growing pressure for increased recreational use. In recent years, plans have even been made in the United States for oil and gas extraction in several national parks (Wirth 2018).

It should also be noted that the concept of the national park emerged long before the international classification system (Dudley 2008, 11). While the names of other categories were chosen to describe their primary management objectives, many – but not all – national parks fall within this category. In many countries, national parks have been assigned to other categories, meaning that it is not the name but the character of the protected area that determines its management approach.

Conditions for tourism: National parks are managed in a way that contributes to the local economy by promoting educational and recreational tourism at a scale that does not compromise conservation effectiveness. Tourism is actively supported and encouraged, offering various activities for visitors such as hiking tours, educational visits, and organized excursions.

- **Category III** – *natural monument* (Dudley 2008, 17-18)

Objectives: Preservation of natural features.

Characteristics: Natural monuments often play a smaller but key ecological role within broader conservation objectives. Their area is usually limited to the specific location of the so-called monument.

Conditions for tourism: Natural monuments may offer unique natural formations or habitats that attract visitors because of their beauty and distinctiveness. Visits are often limited and controlled, but educational

programs for visitors may be provided. Natural monuments have high cultural or spiritual value, and permitting visitation or recreation can serve as an incentive for their conservation. Due to their limited size, they may constitute only a single element within the overall tourist experience.

- **Category IV** – *habitat or species management area* (Dudley 2008, 19-20)

Objectives: Conservation through active management measures.

Characteristics: These protected areas are managed at a level that ensures the maintenance, protection, and restoration of specific species and habitats – primarily through traditional means – and public education is widely encouraged as part of the management objectives. Management measures may include, for example, anti-poaching efforts, creation of artificial habitats, and supplementary feeding practices.

Conditions for tourism: These areas are generally used for scientific research and the conservation of habitats and species, thus tourism may be strictly limited and controlled.

- **Category V** – *protected landscape or seascape*, e.g. nature park or regional park (Dudley 2008, 20-21)

Objectives: Conservation of terrestrial or marine landscapes and recreation.

Characteristics: This category encompasses an indivisible, holistic terrestrial or marine area with a clear conservation plan, but usually also includes a range of economic activities. The main goal is to protect regions that have developed a distinctive and valuable ecological, biological, cultural, or scenic character. Unlike other categories, Category V allows surrounding communities to interact more with the area, contributing to its sustainable management and engaging with its natural and cultural heritage. Areas in this category should represent an integrated balance between people and nature and may support activities such as traditional agricultural and forestry systems, provided these ensure the ongoing protection or ecological restoration of the area.

Conditions for tourism: This is one of the most flexible types of protected areas. Hence, protected terrestrial or marine landscapes can accommodate contemporary development, such as tourism, while maintaining traditional management practices that support the sustainability of agro-biodiversity and aquatic biodiversity.

- **Category VI** – *protected area with sustainable use of natural resources* (Dudley 2008, 22-23)

Objectives: Sustainable use of natural ecosystems.

Characteristics: Although human involvement is a significant factor in the management of these protected areas, they are not intended for large-scale industrial production, and part of the area must remain in its natural state. Management should adapt to the diverse and growing range of interests arising from the production of sustainable natural resources. Category VI is suitable for extensive areas with low levels of human habitation, where human interaction has not had a transformative effect on surrounding ecosystems.

Conditions for tourism: Tourism can be promoted through the application of sustainable management methods and the development of tourism products and services.

Regarding the compatibility of tourism forms with the IUCN management categories of protected areas, it can be noted that while Category Ia is not suitable for any form of tourism, the other categories are suitable for various forms of ecotourism, and Category V also allows other forms of tourism (Eagles, McCool & Haynes 2002, 36).

In addition to this international classification, there are *biosphere reserves* (UNESCO n.d.b). They are models of sustainable development that combine habitat diversity conservation, sustainable use of natural resources, and ecological research. Biosphere reserves belong to the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere program. They permit tourism when it is aligned with sustainable development and also possess significant tourist appeal, benefiting from the internationally recognized UNESCO brand. Biosphere reserves remain under the jurisdiction of the country in which they are located and coordinate their activities solely in accordance with its legislation.

*Natura 2000* is an ecological network of protected sites in the European Union (EU), established to conserve natural habitats and species of significance to the EU; it allows certain forms of sustainable tourism, provided that such activities do not threaten the conservation objectives of the sites (European Commission n.d.).

*Ramsar sites* are wetlands of international importance designated under the Ramsar Convention, with their primary goal being the conservation of biodiversity and ecosystem services (Ramsar – The Convention on Wetlands 2024). They also permit tourism and recreation, as long as these activities are compatible with the sustainable management of the sites (Rana n.d.).

There are also numerous other international classifications, programs, and agreements for protected natural areas (Georgiev 2010, 22-57), which are not addressed in this study due to their weaker connection to tourism.

The partnership between tourism and protected areas is not new and has always been based on balancing economic development with the protection and conservation of protected areas, which requires compromise in achieving both objectives (Silva, Silva & Vieira 2023, 2). In many cases, the tourism sector plays a significant role in nature conservation, including generating economic and social benefits and supporting local livelihoods, and contributes to changing attitudes regarding biodiversity conservation and environmentally responsible business practices (Bushell & Bricker 2016, 1). However, without fully accounting for the ecological and social consequences of tourism, conservation can often be effectively replaced by economic development (Silva, Silva & Vieira 2023, 3), and the economic benefits can easily flow out of the destination, remaining inaccessible to the local population (Bushell & Bricker 2016, 9). This is a real threat, as data show that only 21% of protected areas worldwide have established and functioning management practices (Bushell & Bricker 2016, 1).

There are also positive examples: particularly in Europe, there are numerous protected natural areas that are even inhabited, where human activities such as accommodation, restaurants, and recreational activities are aligned with biodiversity conservation (Silva, Silva & Vieira 2023, 2).

Co-management of protected areas together with local communities supports community interests in terms of capacity building, employment, empowerment, and recognition of traditional knowledge in site protection (Bushell & Bricker 2016, 12).

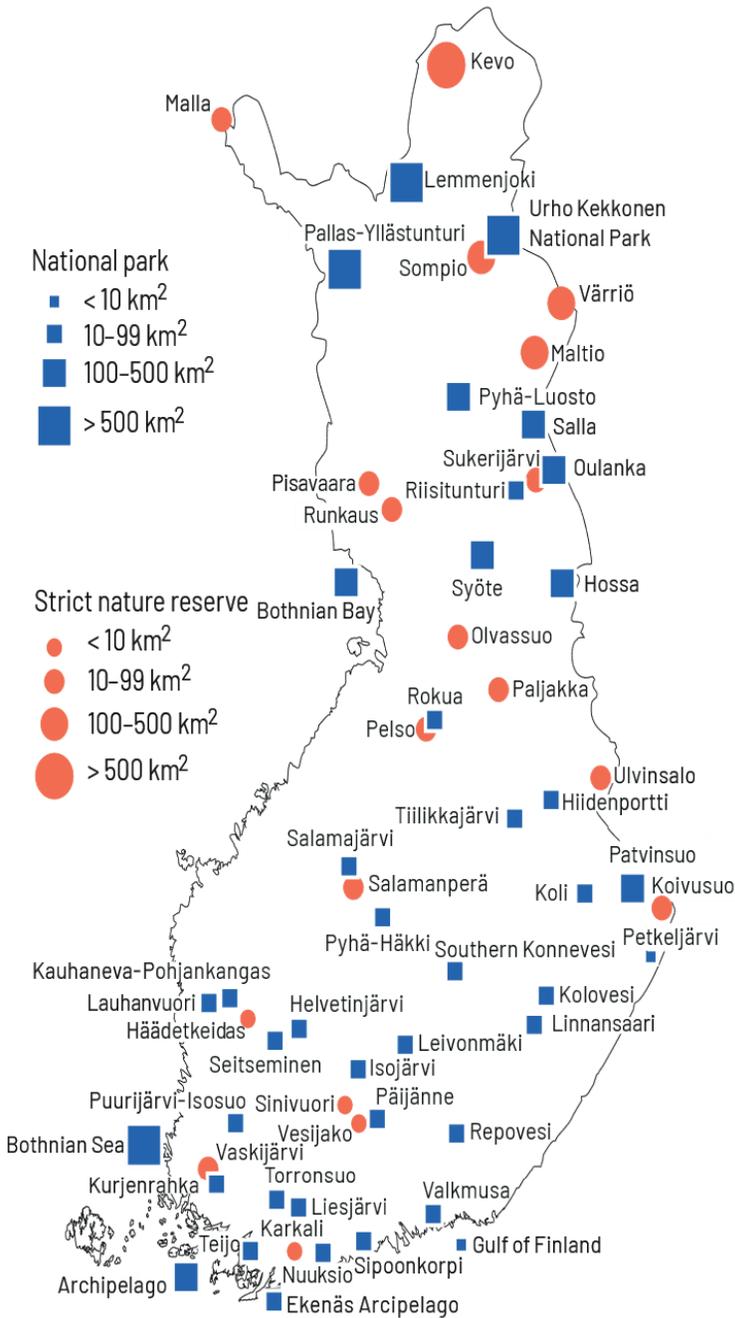
Tourism development is especially important for remote protected areas, such as many national parks in Europe, because due to their geographical remoteness, lack of effective political and economic control over key decisions regarding welfare, economic connections, and migration flows, as well as limited innovation and state intervention, these areas suffer from their peripherality (Armaitiene, Bertuzyte & Vaskaitis 2014, 330, 332). New initiatives are emerging to develop them as innovative tourism destinations and to leverage the recognized health benefits of local natural resources, requiring, e.g., the development of health tourism instead of just generally nature-based tourism (Armaitiene, Bertuzyte & Vaskaitis 2014, 330). In such remote areas, there is a shortage of health promotion services and certified specialists, but elements such as clean air and water-based activities per se constitute health services (Armaitiene, Bertuzyte & Vaskaitis 2014, 334).

### **Protected natural areas in Finland – types and tourism purposes**

The Ministry of the Environment (n.d.g) of Finland notes that, in addition to protecting the diversity of species and habitat types, protected natural areas also focus on preserving the national landscape, cultural heritage, and recreational and camping sites. Finland adheres to the international classification of protected areas by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), as well as to other major international frameworks and agreements for nature conservation.

The most common protected natural areas in Finland are nature reserves and national parks, which form the framework of the national nature conservation network (Ministry of the Environment n.d.c), as presented on Figure 2.2.

**Figure 2.2.** Network of national parks and nature reserves in Finland as of 1 January 2024 (Statistics Finland 2024).



Nature reserves (Category Ia) are primarily closed to the public. Access requires written permission, granted only for scientific purposes. However, some nature reserves have marked trails for public use. In the nature reserves of Northern Finland (Lapland), indigenous residents have usage rights related to traditional natural activities, such as reindeer herding. A nature reserve can only be established on land owned by the state.

National parks (Category II) are the main type of protected area in Finland relevant to tourism. In addition, many tourist destinations are organized near or in connection with national parks, especially in the northern part of the country. National parks aim to preserve Finland's most valuable natural features, their biota and various habitats, as well as special landscape characteristics. National parks are maintained in as pristine state as possible and are open to the public. Most national parks offer a good variety of guided tours and tourism services, and some have visitor centers. Each national park is established by a special law and only on state-owned land. Its area must be at least 1,000 hectares at the time of establishment.

In Northern Finland (Lapland), 12 wilderness areas (Category Ib) have been established (Ministry of the Environment n.d.j). Their purpose is to preserve the wilderness character of the areas, maintain the culture of the indigenous Sámi people, and promote multifaceted use of nature. The construction of permanent roads and mining in wilderness areas is only permitted with government authorization. Forests are preserved in their natural state. Approved management and use plans exist for all wilderness areas in Finland.

Trees, groups of trees, rocks, and other natural formations can be protected as natural monuments, Category III (Ministry of the Environment n.d.f), e.g., due to their beauty, rarity, scenic value, or scientific significance. The municipality decides on the protection of a natural monument located on private land based on an application or the consent of the landowner. The protection decision is made by the municipal council.

In Finland, there are also other protected areas, such as national and regional landscape management zones (Ministry of the Environment n.d.b), Ramsar-designated wetlands (Ministry of the Environment n.d.i), national urban parks (Ministry of the Environment n.d.d), as well as an extensive network of Natura 2000 sites totaling 5 million hectares (Ministry of the Environment n.d.e).

In Finland, it is also possible to protect private land (Ministry of the Environment n.d.h). A private landowner whose property is included in the national nature conservation program or the Natura 2000 network can either sell it to the state at a fair price or protect it as a private protected area in exchange for compensation. Recreational use of the area largely remains unchanged in both cases. There are approximately 7800 protected natural areas located on private land in Finland. The decision to establish a nature reserve is final and recorded in the property register. An area can also be protected for a fixed period, such as 20 years, but such an agreement does not confer the status of a protected area.

Finland has two UNESCO biosphere reserves: North Karelia, established in 1992, and the Archipelago, established in 1994 (Ministry of the Environment n.d.a). Finnish legislation does not formally define a biosphere reserve, allowing flexibility in its management and funding opportunities.

In Finland, every man's right, nowadays "everyone's right" (Yle News 2023), guarantees public access to nature for activities such as walking, picking berries and mushrooms, and using natural areas for recreation, regardless of land ownership (National Parks n.d.; Bell et al. 2007, 5). This right is deeply rooted in Finnish culture and plays a vital role in promoting the connection with nature. However, these rights are accompanied by serious responsibilities, such as mutual respect for nature, people, and property (Luontoon n.d.). The tradition of outdoor recreation in Finland is built on this right (Buckley & Cooper 2022, 5).

Regarding protected areas such as national parks and nature reserves, everyone's right is generally respected but is subject to specific restrictions, e.g., in national parks, activities such as tourism and berry

picking are usually permitted, whereas camping and making fires are restricted to designated zones to protect sensitive ecosystems (Luontoon n.d.). Special provisions for protected areas are described in the Finnish Environmental Protection Act (527/2014), ensuring a balance between public access and conservation.

### **History and modern management of Finland's national parks**

The first national parks in Finland were established in 1938 as protected areas on state-owned land. They were intended for all citizens and were primarily created in scenic areas that already had some tourism infrastructure (Puhakka 2008, 49). Describing the early development of Finnish national parks, Perttula (2006, 19) notes that nature began to be viewed as a national cultural heritage and as a resource for recreation, economic activity, and scientific development. Puhakka (2008, 47-48) also points out that Finnish national parks have had a dual role – conservation and tourism and recreation – from the very beginning of their existence, although the understanding of recreational and tourism objectives has evolved over time due to cultural and historical changes.

The first national park in Central Finland was established in 1956. According to Perttula (2006, 20-22), by 1970 the network of national parks was considered insufficient and regionally unrepresentative, which led to further expansion and a search for effective management models. Initially, there were few regulations on how to manage a national park and what services to offer the public. In the 1970s, there was a shift from creating strict nature reserves to establishing national parks, which were seen not only as beneficial for nature but also for societal well-being and recreation. In the early 1980s, Finland adopted a national park management model similar to that in the United States, requiring a management plan for each park, including the harmonization of conservation and recreational objectives (Perttula 2006, 25). This model resulted in well-established strategic management and responsible

practices, providing benefits not only in nature conservation but also for regional development and tourism. The interaction between conservation and tourism became closer during the 1990s, as the tourism role of national parks increased due to changes in conservation and tourism priorities (Puhakka 2008, 49). Puhakka (2008, 50) points out that the newest national parks in Finland have been established on areas that were already protected, for example under the Natura 2000 program, which has contributed to low opposition to such initiatives.

Currently, Finland has 41 national parks (National Parks 2023), and most of the country's significant tourist destinations are located in their immediate vicinity (Puhakka 2008, 47). The national parks are managed by Metsähallitus, a state enterprise responsible for the administration of state-owned lands and waters, which constitute about one-third of Finland's territory, in a manner that maximizes benefits for Finnish society (Metsähallitus n.d.a). Metsähallitus identifies as one of its tasks the use, management, and protection of these areas, aiming at the sustainable reconciliation of the "different goals of owners, clients, and other stakeholders" (Metsähallitus n.d.c), which includes the concept of sustainability. The comprehensiveness of Metsähallitus' responsibilities, particularly in relation to tourism, is linked to the many topics and processes within the organization's activities (Table 2.2.).

Typical services provided by Metsähallitus to national park visitors include marked hiking trails, nature trails, campfire and camping sites, shelters, cabins, and visitor services (National Parks 2023). To maintain visitor satisfaction, Metsähallitus complements its own services by fostering a network of enterprises and organizations that, through cooperation agreements, provide services in each park and are committed to the principles of sustainable nature tourism as part of these agreements (Metsähallitus n.d.b).

**Table 2.2.** Themes and processes in Metsähallitus activities defined by the organization itself (adapted from Metsähallitus 2024)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expert services</li> <li>• Protection of interests</li> <li>• Wildlife supervision</li> <li>• Nature restoration and management, including habitats for game and fish</li> <li>• Preparation of land-use and care plans</li> <li>• Permits for mining and land resources; mineral exploration or gold panning</li> <li>• Training</li> <li>• Legal negotiations / consultations</li> <li>• <b>Nature conservation, protected areas, or maintenance of cultural heritage*</b></li> <li>• Issues related to land-use management and coordination</li> <li>• <b>Marketing cooperation*</b></li> <li>• <b>Tourism and tourism industry development*</b></li> <li>• Processes of stakeholder involvement in Metsähallitus planning and decision-making (advisory boards, <b>natural resource planning*</b>, <b>care and use planning*</b>, <b>contract-based cooperation*</b>, public negotiations)</li> <li>• Management on behalf of owners</li> <li>• Forestry or nature management services, transport, maintenance, etc.</li> <li>• Game or fisheries management</li> <li>• <b>Outdoor recreation, leisure, and wellbeing*</b></li> <li>• Research, development, and innovation (including project cooperation)</li> <li>• Management of shared client relations</li> <li>• Private and regional data measurement</li> <li>• Issues related to environmental permits or impact assessments, and contracts for environmental subsidies</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>*directly related to tourism</i></p>
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The increase in visitor numbers to national parks is a long-term trend that predates COVID-19 (Metsähallitus 2022; Konu et al. 2021). While the role of traditional livelihoods and primary production, such as forestry and agriculture, is decreasing, tourism is becoming an important tool for regional development in the northern peripheral areas, with rising economic and political expectations (Puhakka 2008, 47). Peripheral regions are compelled to develop a wider range of livelihoods and new ways to use nature, with nature-based tourism becoming a key instrument for regional development, especially in Northern Finland (Puhakka 2008, 49).

Finns are generally willing to travel an average of 380 km from their homes to a natural area, but national parks in Lapland are 800–1000 km from the capital, where the majority of the population resides (Bell et al. 2007, 22), which increases the importance of closer natural sites and newly established national parks.

The growth in visitor numbers is unevenly distributed, being strongest in Northern Finland, particularly around major tourist destinations and routes, which is due to the availability of better-developed services in national parks and their surroundings (Puhakka 2008, 49).

In Finland, the understanding of a national park is not as an articulation of untouched wilderness but as a space shaped by historical and social practices, linked to national identity as much as to physical nature, since nature is a space of cultural ideas and norms (Puhakka 2008, 48). This understanding closely ties national parks to cultural ecosystem services. Nature conservation is recognized as a public activity, and nature is culturally defined as worthy of protection (Puhakka 2008, 48), which forms the basis for a direct relationship between people and nature.

Although recreation in national parks is free for visitors, based on the traditional everyone's right, it often generates significant benefits for the local and regional economy, fostering positive attitudes and support for the establishment of national parks (Puhakka 2008, 50). According to Metsähallitus calculations, a national park provides a return of €10 to the local community for every euro invested, and its economic benefit nearly doubles if the park is part of a broader tourism destination (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2020, 14).

The fact that management must accommodate the precondition of free access means, however, that restrictive management measures, such as limiting the number of visitors in a given area or implementing entrance fees to control visitor numbers, are not feasible. More acceptable measures are softer actions, such as providing information to visitors, installing signage, and organizing guided tours (Bell et al. 2007, 28).

## **Protected natural areas in Bulgaria – history, types, management and tourism purposes**

Nature conservation in Bulgaria has deep roots and a long-standing tradition (Georgiev 2010, 58). The idea of areas untouched by human activity emerged at the beginning of the 20th century as an alternative to concessions and intensive exploitation of the centuries-old Rila Monastery forests. Early conservation initiatives were launched by individual scientists or societies, but they largely remained without results. A significant stage in the development of the conservation movement in Bulgaria was the establishment in 1929 of the Union for the Protection of Nature, which undertook practical initiatives to safeguard the country's natural wealth. In 1933, the first nature reserve, Gorna Elenitsa–Silkosia in Strandzha, was declared, and in 1934, the first national park in Bulgaria and the Balkans, Vitosha, was established. In 1936, the Native Nature Protection Decree-Law was signed, defining the types of protected natural areas and providing a stable legal foundation regulating the management and conservation of these territories. Over the years, numerous parks and reserves have been established in Bulgaria according to varying criteria and with diverse management regimes (ranging from the absence of regulations to very strict regimes), which have not always met international standards (Georgiev 2010, 59).

Tourism and recreational logic has been integrated into Bulgarian nature conservation from the very beginning. The aforementioned law established restrictions to ensure the effective protection of flora and fauna in protected areas, but it allowed the construction of public and accessible tourist and ski lodges and shelters (Georgiev 2010, 59). According to the formulated goals and tasks for parks and reserves, *people's parks* (nowadays national parks) were declared in areas distinguished by high natural diversity and easy accessibility for outings and visits, and their purpose was to cultivate love and care for nature and to encourage the population to engage in more frequent excursions (Georgiev 2010, 59). Management of protected areas in Bulgaria also included the possibility of involving pre-

selected members from organizations such as the Bulgarian Tourist Union and the Youth Tourist Union (Georgiev 2010, 59). The definition of a people's park at this early stage differed somewhat from this of a national park in countries with longer traditions in nature conservation: in Bulgaria, the emphasis was on recreational activity, whereas in other countries the focus was more on scientific and conservation value (Georgiev 2010, 59).

Reserves preserved nature in its pristine state for scientific purposes and did not allow tourist activities. However, after the adoption of the Native Nature Protection Decree-Law, no area was declared a reserve until the end of World War II, and the focus shifted to other types of protected areas – natural-historical sites, natural monuments, and especially people's parks, reflecting global trends (Georgiev 2010, 62).

After September 9, 1944, when the socialist regime came into power, Bulgaria underwent a complete transformation of its socio-economic and political system – the economy was fully nationalized, and large-scale industry was isolated from the industrially developed countries (Georgiev 2010, 63). The chaotic nature of these processes and the lack of competence caused severe damage not only to society but also to nature: air, water, and soil were polluted; timber consumption exceeded sustainable levels, disrupting not only the forests' reproductive capacity but also their functions as regulators of the water balance, main producers of oxygen, and as climate-forming, protective, and recreational factors (Georgiev 2010, 63).

In the early years after 1944, little attention was paid to the development of nature conservation (Georgiev 2010, 63). In 1960, a Decree for the Protection of Native Nature was published, which detailed the types of protected areas and emphasized their long-term importance for scientific research and recreation, which finally introduced some order into the system of protected natural sites and formulated their main tasks, distinguishing strictly conservation-oriented areas from those intended for recreation (Georgiev 2010, 63-64). Following the adoption of the decree, the network of reserves continued to develop, with a significant portion being small in size, affecting the dynamics of natural processes; some of these

reserves were located in highly anthropogenized areas with uncontrolled tourist flows and, in some cases, illegal construction (Georgiev 2010, 64).

The subsequent regulations allowed numerous weaknesses regarding nature conservation and created an imbalance between the functions of protected areas, mainly in favour of tourism, permitting construction, for example of restaurants and hotels for domestic and international tourism, in all categories of protected natural sites except for reserves (Georgiev 2010, 65). In 1973, the Pirin People's Park was expanded, emphasizing its importance for tourism development, which quickly led to the construction of ski slopes and sports facilities and negative changes to the natural environment, but at the same time, functional zones (reserve, tourist, buffer) were delineated for the first time (Georgiev 2010, 65). The bids of Vitosha to host the Winter Olympic Games in 1992 and 1994 created numerous problems related to plans for massive development and disruption of the integrity of some of the reserves, and the rejection of these bids can be regarded as saving the mountain (Georgiev 2010, 66).

Among the growing network of national parks, it is worth noting the establishment of Strandzha People's Park on 24 January 1995, which is considered one of the greatest achievements of the nature conservation community in Bulgaria; the park encompasses all five reserves in the mountain and numerous protected sites and natural landmarks, representing the largest protected area in Bulgaria (Georgiev 2010, 66). Yet to this day it does not have an adopted management plan.

As a result of years of efforts by conservation specialists and organized public discussions and expert councils, a new Protected Areas Act was adopted in 1998 (Georgiev 2010, 66-67), which, in accordance with the criteria of IUCN (Georgiev 2010, 81), defines the following types of protected areas:

- Reserves, Category Ia (Georgiev 2010, 67-72; Georgiev & Stoilova 2006, 34) – for the preservation of biodiversity and scientific research. Bulgaria has 55 reserves, 26 of which are located within national and nature parks. They face significant challenges such

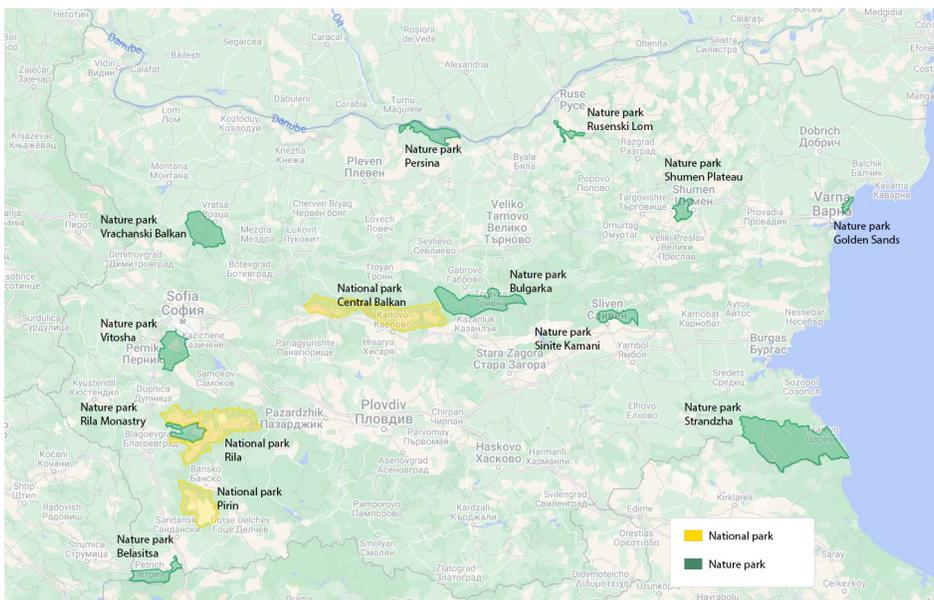
as poaching, uncontrolled movement, herb collection, and other violations by tourists.

- National parks, Category II (Georgiev 2010, 72-74; Georgiev & Stoilova 2006, 35-36) – these areas do not include inhabited settlements; they encompass natural ecosystems with high diversity of plant and animal species and habitats, with characteristic landscapes and abiotic features. In addition to maintaining biodiversity and protecting wildlife, they are managed to provide conditions for tourism development and environmentally sustainable livelihoods for local populations. Bulgaria has three national parks – Rila, Pirin, and Central Balkan – each with an adopted management plan.
- Natural monuments, Category III (Georgiev 2010, 79-80) – distinctive or remarkable abiotic features of exceptional value due to their rarity, representativeness, aesthetic quality, or scientific and cultural significance. Activities that could disrupt their natural state or reduce their aesthetic value are prohibited.
- Managed reserves, Category IV (Georgiev 2010, 77; Georgiev & Stoilova 2006, 38) – ecosystems containing rare or threatened wild plant and animal species and their habitats. The objectives of managed reserves do not include tourism and recreation. Bulgaria has 35 managed reserves, which are especially important for wetlands and small forest reserves.
- Nature parks, Category V (Georgiev 2010, 75-77; Georgiev & Stoilova 2006, 37) – areas encompassing diverse ecosystems with a wide variety of plant and animal species and their habitats, as well as characteristic abiotic landscapes. Nature parks are managed to preserve biodiversity, support scientific, educational, and recreational activities, enable sustainable use of renewable natural resources while maintaining traditional livelihoods, and provide conditions for tourism development. They may include settlements and resorts, as well as environmentally non-polluting production activities. Bulgaria has 11 nature parks (Figure 2.3.).

- Protected sites, Category VI (Georgiev 2010, 77-78; Georgiev & Stoilova 2006, 39) – areas with remarkable landscapes, including those resulting from human–nature interactions. Their objectives include biodiversity conservation, scientific research, educational activities, and tourism.

More than 5% of Bulgaria's territory is protected. Currently, the country has 1057 protected areas, including 3 national parks, 11 nature parks, 55 reserves, 35 managed reserves, over 490 protected sites, more than 360 natural monuments, and 102 protected sites (Vasileva 2013). In terms of land coverage, 43% of Bulgaria's protected areas are nature parks, and 30% are national parks (Georgiev 2010, 89), making these the most extensive types of protected areas in the country (Figure 2.3.). All protected areas, except for Categories Ia and IV, allow various forms of tourism, although the scale and intensity of these activities must comply with sustainability requirements (Georgiev 2010, 91). Among Bulgaria's protected areas, national and nature parks are the most significant for tourism (Vasileva 2013).

**Figure 2.3.** National and nature parks in Bulgaria (author's elaboration with the help of Google My Maps application).



Bulgaria also has 11 Ramsar sites, which do not exclude tourism activities (Ministry of Environment and Water 2024c). Additionally, the country has a wide network of Natura 2000 protected zones, covering nearly 4 million hectares of land and almost 3,000 sq. km of water (Dineva n.d., 17-18).

Regarding biosphere reserves, they are not defined as a separate category under Bulgarian legislation: the state or interested citizens can submit a nomination to UNESCO for the designation of a biosphere reserve, and the international organization evaluates whether the proposed area meets the criteria for inclusion in the World Network of Biosphere Reserves (Ministry of Environment and Water 2024b). Currently, Bulgaria has four biosphere reserves complying with the Seville Strategy – Uzunbudzhak in Strandzha, Srebarna, Chervenata Stena, and Central Balkan – while older-style reserves were removed from the list following a revision (Ministry of Environment and Water 2024b).

According to the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria (1991/2005, art. 35), every citizen has the right to move freely within the territory of the country, unless this right is explicitly restricted by law. Within protected areas, restrictions apply only to reserves and managed reserves, where public access is permitted only along designated trails. National parks, reserves, and managed reserves are exclusively state-owned (Ministry of Environment and Water 2024a), which allows the state to impose stricter protection regimes on these territories. In contrast, nature parks and protected sites may include various forms of ownership (Ministry of Environment and Water 2024a), meaning that conservation and public access regulations depend on the specific landowners. Today, the most important instruments for nature conservation in Bulgaria are the Act on Protected Areas, the Ministry of Environment and Water, and international cooperation, including Bulgaria's participation in initiatives and programs such as Natura 2000, the Ramsar Convention, the World Heritage Convention, and UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme (Vasileva 2013).

Many of the protected areas attract considerable tourist interest and play a key role in tourism, as the preserved natural environment significantly increases their attractiveness compared to the surrounding areas affected by human activity (Vasileva 2013). The existence of protected natural areas and the designation of tourism goals within them do not on their own develop tourism but merely make it possible. Notably, there are management obstacles to integrating Bulgarian nature into the tourism product and achieving sustainability. As Nikolaeva (2019) notes, Bulgaria possesses numerous natural and cultural sites of both national and global significance, with strong potential for tourism, which nevertheless remain inaccessible to visitors due to the lack of adequate and sufficient infrastructure. Kostova (2014, 837) addresses the issue of the ineffective use of EU funds intended for rural tourism development, including nature-based tourism, due to entrepreneurs' lack of project management skills and insufficient support from state and local authorities. She also identifies serious deficiencies in the coordination among the actors forming the tourism product, as well as in the relationships between government, local authorities, and entrepreneurs (Kostova 2014, 842). Georgiev (2010, 86) points out that many Bulgarian seaside and mountain resorts suffer from overconstruction, which paradoxically occurs in parallel with the declared pursuit of sustainable, nature-based tourism products. In Bulgarian society, there are also widespread misconceptions that all types of construction and economic activity in protected natural areas are strictly prohibited (Georgiev 2010, 90) – a misunderstanding that pits conservation activities against tourism. In reality, these speculations overlook the fact that sustainable development, which is one of the main objectives of protected areas, has a threefold character – not only ecological but also social and economic.

The practice of nature management in Bulgaria exhibits hybrid characteristics of both the former Eastern Bloc and Mediterranean countries, displaying the typical challenges found in each region. The area influenced by the legacy of the socialist era faces challenges related to the

restitution of forest lands to former owners, the depopulation of rural areas, the lack of adequate infrastructure or controlled access to natural sites, as well as the absence of many prerequisites for more intensive tourism use, whereby the most common management measures are restrictive ones – especially rules and regulations, as well as prohibitions – although public acceptance of such measures appears rather weak (Bell et al, 2007, 28-29). In the Mediterranean context, timber production is not as significant, thus, one of the main supplementary uses of forests is tourism, which requires landscapes of high aesthetic quality and entails additional demands such as fire prevention, the provision of recreational infrastructure, and the rehabilitation of heavily used areas, however, in most cases, there is no independent planning or monitoring of recreation and tourism in natural environments (Bell et al. 2007, 29).

### **Comparison of the manifestations of health and recreational tourism in Bulgaria and Finland and the prerequisites of the natural environment**

The manifestations of health and recreational tourism in Bulgaria and Finland differ, but they share a strong focus on natural resources. While in countries like Türkiye, medical tourism relies on the professionalism of healthcare personnel and established facilities such as hospitals and clinics where treatments are carried out, and in Hungary, Poland, and the Baltic countries, recreation largely depends on facilities and infrastructure like spa centers and sanatoria, Bulgaria and Finland primarily rely on the direct therapeutic and recreational benefits of tourists' interaction with nature. In Bulgaria, health and curative tourism are more prominent, whereas in Finland, health is more about its maintenance and improvement through wellbeing tourism. Finland has a more clearly defined plan for the deliberate development of health-related types of tourism. Both countries can draw valuable lessons from each other.

The following SWOT analysis (Table 2.3.) summarizes and compares the characteristics of Finland and Bulgaria in the context of developing health and recreational tourism, with one clarification: the analysis does not separate the external from the internal environment, as the tool traditionally requires; rather, strengths and weaknesses are treated as given conditions, while opportunities and threats represent unrealized positive and negative potential that could influence the development of these types of tourism.

Regarding the role of protected natural areas, in Finland the local population is actively involved in nature conservation through practices that foster responsibility, such as initiatives to protect private land, thereby reducing public opposition to conservation and aligning it with different forms of use, for example for health and recreation in tourism. Park management is centralized through Metsähallitus, which ensures the presence of a unified management model without considerable gaps – for instance, every park has a management plan. This also harmonizes park objectives for nature conservation and recreation, and enables systematic monitoring of visitor numbers and the economic effects of tourism in protected areas. Through its various functions, Metsähallitus plays an important role as an agent in the tourism ecosystem, including promoting principles of sustainability for tourism in natural environments.

In Bulgaria, the idea of protecting nature and using it for recreational purposes is not new, but it lacks a solid ideological foundation and tradition, having developed chaotically and spontaneously at different historical stages. Public responsibility has not been intentionally cultivated and was even systematically undermined – for example, during the socialist period, when the economy was fully nationalized and public initiative was removed. As a result, people often disregard established rules, do not respect the protective status of natural areas, and engage in illegal construction within protected territories. Additionally, Bulgaria is characterized by formally restrictive management with weak actual enforcement, lack of visitor monitoring, and overall weak nature management.

**Table 2.3.** SWOT analysis of Bulgaria and Finland for developing health and recreational tourism (author's elaboration).

<b>Strengths</b>		<b>Weaknesses</b>	
<b>BULGARIA</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sea and mountains</li> <li>• therapeutic mineral springs</li> <li>• thermal waters</li> <li>• therapeutic mud</li> <li>• therapeutic climate</li> <li>• herbs and honey</li> <li>• long-standing health and recreational traditions</li> </ul>	<b>BULGARIA</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• overconstruction in resorts</li> <li>• illegal construction in protected natural areas</li> <li>• seasonality of tourism activity</li> <li>• inadequate and insufficient infrastructure</li> <li>• tourism oversupply</li> <li>• lack of tourism product diversification</li> <li>• lack of coordination between institutions</li> <li>• lack of coordination among the agents shaping the tourism product</li> </ul>
<b>FINLAND</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• peace and tranquility in nature and remote areas</li> <li>• forests and lakes</li> <li>• white nights</li> <li>• northern lights</li> <li>• Europe's cleanest air</li> <li>• wide access to nature according to everyone's right</li> <li>• strong strategic management of tourism</li> </ul>	<b>FINLAND</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack of evidence-based products for use in health and recreation tourism</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b>		<b>Threats</b>	
<b>BULGARIA</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• climatotherapy tourism</li> <li>• themes related to Romans and Thracians</li> <li>• development of unique geographically-based health tourism brands</li> <li>• climate change</li> <li>• tourism as one of the main uses of forests</li> </ul>	<b>BULGARIA</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• climate change</li> <li>• inappropriate management</li> <li>• gaps in legislation</li> <li>• inefficient utilization of EU funds for tourism development</li> <li>• misconceptions and lack of understanding regarding the protected status of nature</li> <li>• depopulation of remote regions</li> </ul>
<b>FINLAND</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the extremity of nature as a challenge leading to transformation</li> <li>• the happiest nation</li> <li>• sauna tradition</li> <li>• population's connection with nature</li> <li>• introduction of green prescriptions and other nature-related methods in healthcare and social care</li> <li>• climate change</li> </ul>	<b>FINLAND</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• inability to impose access restrictions in certain areas due to everyone's right</li> <li>• climate change</li> </ul>

## 2.4. CONCLUSIONS REGARDING HEALTH AND RECREATIONAL TOURISM AND THEIR RELATION TO PROTECTED NATURAL AREAS

The presented review of scientific literature on health and recreational tourism highlights the need for a more precise definition of health and recreational tourism, encompassing all possible subtypes along the spectrum. While such a definition falls beyond the scope of the current study, it is necessary for future research. There are three main reasons underpinning this need:

- A more precise definition of the different health-oriented types of tourism could lead to the diversification of destinations, enhancing their competitiveness.
- Defining these types could result in higher customer satisfaction by providing more accurate information on the health benefits offered at the destination, thereby setting more realistic expectations.
- It could provide a foundation for developing a more specific management toolkit for each health-oriented subtype of tourism, which is currently lacking.

It has been observed that health and recreational tourism are not merely tourism categories defined by the primary travel motive, which can vary between necessity and desire. Some visitors receive health-recreational benefits without being aware of them or without these being the purpose of their trip, while business tourists can combine the main objective of their visit with achieving recreational benefits. Therefore, defining the health and recreational opportunities at a destination and subsequently managing them appropriately can be seen as a responsible act to maximize these health-recreational benefits.

A more precise definition and distinction between health and recreational tourism would also provide guidance on how the derived conceptual model of a destination ecosystem might change if only one of these types of tourism is developed at a destination, and which agents and interactions are specific to each type. Some differences are apparent

– for example, in health tourism, the visitors may be either patients or clients, while in recreational tourism, they are strictly clients. However, a clearer differentiation of the concepts of health and recreational tourism is expected to reveal additional characteristics that are currently not visible.

The relationship between health and recreational tourism and sustainability is complex. The impact of these types of tourism cannot be categorized as solely positive, even though they are primarily forms of alternative tourism, nor can it be concluded that their effects are purely negative. The management of health and recreational tourism must take into account their wide-ranging impacts to maximize benefits while maintaining the balance of sustainability.

Health and recreational tourism can have negative effects on the natural environment, such as reducing biodiversity, causing soil erosion and trampling of vegetation, occupying large areas for activities, and generating carbon dioxide emissions, among others. Paradoxically, through their visits, recreational tourists diminish the environmental benefits that initially attracted them. The ecological – and potentially social – impacts of tourism can be mitigated through visitor management, which may be direct, indirect, or a combination of both. The relationship between tourism and the environment is not one-way: just as tourism depends on nature to provide cultural ecosystem services, nature also benefits from tourism by preventing more harmful land uses, such as poaching, deforestation, and other exploitative practices. Health and recreational tourism affect the natural environment regardless of whether activities take place directly in nature or in specially constructed facilities. While there are numerous management tools for outdoor recreation, more indicators for the environmental impacts of built facilities and related activities need to be developed.

The non-seasonal nature of health tourism is generally understood as a sustainable practice, balancing tourist flows throughout the year and generating various economic benefits. However, if off-season tourism relies on indoor facilities and procedures, it can compromise ecological sustainability. The comfort and luxury offered by wellness and spa centers

are achieved through extensive use of raw materials and energy, as well as occupation of natural areas.

Tourism accessibility can only be socially achieved by understanding and differentiating customer segments. In environmental sense, appropriate and sufficient infrastructure, on the one hand, occupies natural areas, but on the other hand, concentrates visitors in designated locations. Economically, it reduces costs and increases market opportunities for the destination, while many facilities can serve dual functions for both tourists and locals, creating economic synergy. In terms of social sustainability, appropriate infrastructure contributes to safety as well. Green prescriptions are a practice that can be partly applied in tourism, carrying economic value through healthcare savings and social value by enhancing public health and wellbeing.

The distinction between tourism and recreation is largely semantic. From a practical management perspective, it is useful only if it helps to recognize and avoid potential conflicts between different groups of recreational users – locals and tourists. Such an increase in social sustainability can be achieved by involving a wide range of stakeholders in the planning and development of tourism.

From an environmental perspective, climate change is a factor that cannot be avoided. Even if tourism activity cannot entirely remove its influence on these changes, the opposite relation also exists: tourism must adapt to climate change to ensure its own sustainability. Health and recreational destinations, businesses, and products tied to fixed capital assets are unable to adapt successfully to climate change, which in the future could have catastrophic effects not only for tourism but also for other related industries and activities it supports, such as health services, local service level, infrastructure, and nature conservation. This is especially true for nature-based destinations that rely on specific natural effects and resources for their existence. Even when most activities and procedures are conducted indoors, the literature review has shown that other characteristics of the destination surrounding the facilities play an

important role in visitors' choice of a health or recreational destination. Of course, simultaneously, climate change could benefit other destinations where conditions were previously less favourable, but these destinations must also invest in climate adaptation.

Another aspect of sustainability is that supplementing natural resources with anthropogenic ones can not only extend visitor stays and increase destination's competitiveness but also reduce pressure on the carrying capacity of natural areas. In some destinations, this can also help overcome seasonality.

Technological development cannot be ignored either. Environmentally, new technologies provide sustainable and durable materials; socially, technology enhances safety and awareness; economically, it improves the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of tourism operations.

The distinction between anthropocentric, biocentric, and deep ecological approaches to valuing nature demonstrates how socially constructed the significance people attribute to nature is, which in turn shapes attitudes toward its use and protection. Adopting deep ecology perspectives could imply excluding nature as an agent in the tourism ecosystem or even as a factor of health and recreational tourism, potentially leading to neglect of natural issues and a lack of any kind of management approach. Conversely, the anthropocentric approach does not meet contemporary sustainability requirements. Instead, this study adopts a biocentric approach, directing the discussion both to the benefits of using nature for health and recreation and to the need for its conservation through appropriate management. Achieving this balance is crucial for ensuring the sustainability not only of economic activities related to health and recreational industries, including tourism, but also for the survival and social development of human civilization.

In contemporary society, nature is primarily perceived through its benefits, especially regarding health and recreation, though this has not always been the case. In this sense, the development of health and recreational tourism is particularly relevant currently, given today's societal

understanding of nature and health. It can be said that now is the “right moment” to develop these forms of tourism.

The concept of ecosystem services is inherently multidisciplinary, making its understanding imperative for applying an ecosystem approach to the management of health and recreational tourism. The role of tourism management is thus framed in terms of ensuring the benefits of ecosystem services, rather than focusing solely on economic or environmental gains. It should be emphasized, however, that while these are “ecosystem” services and the governance approach is termed “ecosystemic,” however, this is only a linguistic coincidence, not a direct link. Whereas ecosystem services are literally grounded in biological ecosystems, it has already been established in this study that the ecosystem governance approach uses a metaphor.

The concept of ecosystem services involves multiple stakeholders in terms of the benefits provided by nature, while also clearly explaining the connection between nature-based tourism and health and recreation. Recreational ecosystem services, as a subgroup of cultural ecosystem services, play a central role here. Specifying and measuring these services can support destination management, but the following characteristics must be taken into account:

- Some cultural ecosystem services directly affect recreation by creating an environment suitable for recreational activities, while others indirectly influence specific aspects of recreation.
- For the most part, cultural ecosystem services are location-dependent and vary across destinations. They also rely on local culture and indigenous knowledge, which management should draw upon.
- The receipt of cultural ecosystem services is based not only on objective experiences but also on visitors’ perceptions.

Protected natural areas contribute significantly to ecosystem services, and it can even be argued that, in many cases, nature is preserved precisely for its recreational benefits. There is evidence that the role of recreation has accompanied the conservation of nature since the very

inception of the idea. Recreational benefits also generate considerable economic gains: through visitor numbers and spending, as well as through savings in healthcare. The benefits of protected nature are high because it is preserved in its original state. Moreover, many protected areas are located in remote, peripheral regions that provide recreational benefits through open space, low population density, authenticity, cleanliness, and tranquillity, even in the absence of specialized health personnel.

A specific tool for managing protected areas is the management plan, which includes tourism objectives and the balance between these and other planned activities; however, in most protected areas, such a plan or practical management actions are lacking.

From the review of protected area management categories, it can be concluded that IUCN categories II and V, which include national and nature parks, are the most compatible and provide the greatest opportunities for developing tourism activities. However, these two categories require an ecosystem governance approach in different ways and for specific purposes.

Category V allows a very broad spectrum of tourism activities within its boundaries, provided they are compatible with the rest of the objectives of the park. Category II, on the other hand, can benefit from an ecosystem governance approach if it integrates adjacent areas and services located outside the strictly protected territory into its tourism offerings (Table 2.4.). This approach is consciously applied in Finland, where many major tourist destinations are focused on national parks, even though most tourism services and infrastructure are located outside the park.

Furthermore, these two categories are not as strictly protected nature as others, and include relatively large areas with a diversity of natural and anthropogenic features and interactions. It has been established that destinations with complex resources have the greatest potential for developing recreational tourism, as the natural and cultural assets of the destination complement the experience of health-oriented tourists. Other types of protected areas outside the IUCN classification can also

contribute to tourism development – for example, biosphere reserves – by supplementing tourism offerings or providing marketing advantages through layering of protection statuses.

**Table 2.4.** Application of the ecosystem governance approach for tourism in protected areas in categories II and V (author’s elaboration).

<b>Category II (national park)</b>	<b>Category V (nature park)</b>
Most of the tourism services and infrastructure are located outside the park’s territory.	A combination of diverse objectives and sectors, including tourism.
An ecosystem approach for incorporating supplementary areas and services into the tourism offering,	An ecosystem approach for involving the full range of interacting stakeholders to harmonize objectives within the park area.

While national parks are the most common protected areas in Finland, nature parks are more prevalent in Bulgaria. Destinations associated with such protected areas should be the focus of research on health and recreational tourism, because their high potential and benefits for health and recreation are likely to highlight the significant socio-economic aspects linked to the development of these types of tourism.

Manifestations of health and recreational tourism differ between Bulgaria and Finland, yet in both countries there is a strong emphasis on natural resources. In Bulgaria, health and therapeutic tourism predominate, whereas in Finland, wellness tourism – focused on maintaining and improving health – is better developed. Finland stands out for its strong sense of public responsibility, clearly articulated development strategy, and effective management in both nature conservation and tourism. In contrast, management in Bulgaria tends to be formal and restrictive, with limited actual control, lack of monitoring, and weak public commitment.

# CHAPTER 3

## COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TWO DESTINATIONS – SOUTHERN KONNEVESI AND STRANDZHA

### 3.1. ORGANIZATION AND METHODOLOGY OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

#### **Choice of destinations**

The destinations selected for the empirical study are Southern Konnevesi (Finland) and Strandzha (Bulgaria).

Partly, the choice is a *convenience sample*, as the researcher has personal connections with these destinations: currently living and have previously worked in the one, and possessing a vacation property and family ties in the other. This selection makes the study easier to manage and more feasible, e.g., by controlling logistics and costs, and it supports the success of local-level contacts.

However, Yin (2018) emphasizes that a sample chosen solely for convenience may compromise the validity of the findings and their generalizability. For this reason, arguments supporting the appropriateness of the selected destinations were sought and found in the literature review presented in Chapter I and Chapter II. For example, it was established that nature, particularly within protected areas, provides the greatest health benefits for travellers, which justifies the selection of these destinations as *extreme cases*, especially suitable for highlighting specific qualities or phenomena (Nyimbili & Nyimbili 2024).

It was also determined that the most suitable categories of protected areas for tourism development are IUCN categories II and V. These are precisely the categories of the protected areas into which Strandzha (a Category V nature park) and Southern Konnevesi (a Category II national

park) fall. Moreover, these are the most common types of protected zones in the respective countries, making the selected destinations a *sample of typical cases* (Nyimbili & Nyimbili 2024).

The peripheral and remote character of the destinations also influenced their selection, as such areas have the greatest need for tourism development as a powerful, and often the only, tool for regional development. Regarding ecosystem governance, these are areas where there is no dominant actor in tourism exerting authority over other agents. These characteristics were also identified as important for the study through the theoretical review, thus the selection of destinations can partly be categorized as a *theoretically based and criterion-based sample* (Nyimbili & Nyimbili 2024).

Taken together, these arguments make the selection of destinations for the study a *mixed purposive sample*, combining different sampling strategies to achieve the desired sample in line with the research objectives (Nyimbili & Nyimbili 2024).

### **Data collection**

The data for the two case studies in the empirical research were collected using several methods within a *qualitative methodology*.

In the first stage of the study, a *document analysis* was conducted on strategic documents, regulations and policies, project documents, and news regarding tourism in the selected destinations, in order to reveal the management models applied in the studied territories, as well as other phenomena. Document analysis reviews, evaluates, and interprets textual, visual, or auditory data from documents to develop empirical knowledge (Bowen 2009). Documents can be considered social facts, created, disseminated, and used within social frameworks (Atkinson & Coffey 1997, as cited in Bowen 2009) without the intervention of the researcher (Bowen 2009). From this perspective arise the inherent characteristics of document analysis, which justify its selection as a research method for this study, namely efficiency, accessibility, and relative objectivity.

Document analysis also provides time efficiency in using *secondary data*. The documents used are relatively easily accessible and do not require permission for use. Moreover, document analysis relies not only on official publications, such as journals, newspapers, brochures, and reports, but also on a considerable number of unofficial records, such as agendas, diaries, letters, program proposals, projects, and application forms (Bowen 2009). In the case of Strandzha Nature Park, this makes it possible to analyze versions of the management plan, which has never been adopted since the park's establishment.

Some authors (Armstrong 2022; Bowen 2009) note that document analysis can also be used as a means of data triangulation alongside other qualitative methods to reduce potential bias. The evaluation of documents is carried out based on relevance, authenticity and credibility, level of completeness, balance of details, original purpose, and target audience.

The objectives of using document analysis can be summarized as:

- providing the context in which the studied phenomenon occurs,
- supplying additional data for examining the social origins and development of processes.

In the case of Southern Konnevesi, the method of *participant observation* was partially used in conjunction with document analysis, as the researcher retrospectively drew on information and non-public documents from their work related to tourism development in the destination during the period 2016–2018. This helped triangulate the information obtained from primary data, overcoming potential researcher bias and subjectivity, thereby essentially ensuring the *validity* of the results (Fusch & Ness 2015).

In the subsequent stage of the study, *semi-structured expert interviews* were conducted to collect *primary data*, complementing the information from document analysis. These interviews revealed informal relationships between agents in the ecosystem, confirmed theoretical information at the empirical level, and exposed the attitudes of different agents toward the development and management of tourism, as well as toward the topic of health and recreation in tourism. The expertise of the

interviewees in this study was determined by their position (Patton 2002) within the destination's tourism activity, e.g., managerial positions in public, private, or third sector organizations.

Although some authors, such as Chengelova (2016, 11), argue that the semi-structured interview is a “methodological compromise between the two extreme levels of standardization” and “an epistemological bridge between quantitative and qualitative methods,” in this study, the collected information is explicitly qualitative, and the choice of this form of interview was motivated by the need for flexibility between confirming theoretical concepts and discovering new, unexpected information. Conducting semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders – such as local authorities, tourism operators, nature conservation organizations, and community representatives – provides qualitative insights into the perceived management approaches and the challenges of implementing the ecosystem approach.

It can be stated that, regarding their structured aspect, the interviews were *theoretically guided*. For this purpose, an indicative interview outline was prepared based on aspects from the literature review and document analysis, similar for both destinations (**Appendix 1**), intended to serve as a framework for the conversation. However, it did not limit the interviewees' initiative to highlight aspects not included in the outline, nor the researcher's ability to ask follow-up questions. Moreover, the questions in the questionnaire were adapted to the specific position of the interviewee, so as not to challenge respondents with unfamiliar terminology. The researcher's experience in working with different sectors was particularly useful here, as it was recognized that, e.g., entrepreneurs and public administrators, or conservationists and the tourism industry, do not always “speak the same language.”

The interviews were recorded *verbatim* in text form, using a method similar to stenographic transcription, relying on the researcher's journalistic technical experience. No audiovisual recording equipment was used, since it is well-known that in many cases interviewees do not consent to being

recorded, which could affect their willingness to participate (Chengelova 2016, 77). No predetermined target number of interviews was set; interviews were conducted until *data saturation* was reached, i.e., until new interviewees no longer contributed additional topics or aspects beyond the already collected information.

### **Characteristics of the interviews – Strandzha**

Selection of experts for interviews: Initially, experts were selected based on document analysis and other indications from the internet, as well as from the official website of Strandzha Nature Park, according to the researcher’s judgment of their relevance, a purposive sampling (Nyimbili & Nyimbili 2024). During the interviews, additional suitable experts for potential interviews were identified using the *snowball sampling* technique (Nyimbili & Nyimbili 2024), based on recommendations or mentions by other interviewees.

Contact and informed consent: Contact with each selected expert was established according to the available contact information – via email, phone, or in person. Experts were informed about the purpose of the study, the rationale for their selection for the interview, the indicative duration of the interview, information storage and usage practices, and confidentiality procedures. Convenient times, locations, and modes for conducting the interviews were also discussed with them. The empirical research in Strandzha was characterized by exceptional interest and commitment by the selected experts, with all contacted experts having agreed to participate. Only one targeted expert could not be reached. Notably, face-to-face meetings and phone calls were more effective for recruiting experts, and such approaches had to be used for some experts initially attempted to be contacted by email. Another characteristic of the Strandzha experts was their ability to respond quickly to the interview invitation and participate almost immediately, despite the research being conducted during the active tourism season. The metadata of the interviews conducted in Strandzha are described in detail in **Appendix 2**.

## **Characteristics of the interviews – Southern Konnevesi**

Selection of experts for the interviews: Initially, experts were selected based on the researcher's in-depth knowledge of the area and on the judgment of their relevance, a purposive sampling (Nyimbili & Nyimbili 2024). During the course of the interviews, additional suitable experts for potential interviews were identified using the snowball sampling technique (Nyimbili & Nyimbili 2024), based on recommendations or mentions by other interviewees.

Contact and informed consent: Contact with each selected expert was established according to the available contact information – via email, phone, or in person. Experts were informed about the purpose of the study, the rationale for their selection for the interview, the indicative duration of the interview, data storage and usage practices, and confidentiality procedures. Convenient times, locations, and modes for conducting the interviews were also discussed with them. Although the empirical research in Southern Konnevesi was conducted outside the peak tourism season, it was characterized by low interest and commitment among the selected experts. This might be explained by the fact that the area has been the focus of numerous studies and tourism development activities in recent years, which has resulted in participant apathy towards research and development measures. One targeted expert could not be contacted, two were unable to find a suitable time to participate, and another two questioned their own expertise on the topic and preferred not to participate. It should be noted that digital communication channels played an important role both in scheduling and conducting the interviews. In some cases, these channels made the interviews possible, especially when coordinating schedules, and in other cases they were a means to overcome the distance between interviewer and interviewee. This was also facilitated by the high technological readiness of experts in Finland. Another characteristic of the Southern Konnevesi experts was their inability to respond promptly to interview invitations, which necessitated long advance notice and reminders, contributing to the extended duration

of the data collection process. The metadata of the interviews conducted in Southern Konnevesi are described in detail in **Appendix 2**.

### **Data analysis**

The study relies entirely on *qualitative analysis*, aiming to uncover the significance and interconnections between textual passages, without, e.g., conducting frequency analysis of phrases (Armstrong 2022; Bowen 2009). The primary method employed was *template analysis* as a form of *thematic analysis* (Tabari, King & Egan 2020). For this purpose, initial general categories were formulated, based on themes derived from the literature review and part of the empirical data. This initial template was subsequently revised iteratively, considering the collected data in their entirety to ensure that all significant themes were captured.

Tabari, King, and Egan (2020, 199) point out that template analysis, which is frequently used for analyzing interview data in management sciences, is a general form of thematic analysis, which, unlike methodologically specific forms, is not tied to particular methodological commitments, such as those required by grounded theory or interpretative phenomenological analysis, and can therefore be used flexibly for a wide range of research purposes. In addition, parts of the document analysis were presented narratively (Armstrong 2022), to describe the case studies in their various aspects.

The two cases are integrated into a *comparative case study*, aiming to extract insights not only for each individual case but also regarding general principles and good practices, as well as to integrate theory and practice. As noted in a recent study in the context of lifelong learning policies (do Amaral 2022, 41-44), comparative case studies are used in contemporary science to address the paradox between the uniqueness of each case and the need for comparability of results, particularly in conditions of internationalization and globalization. Although one interviewee initially expressed doubts about the applicability of good practices from one context to another, globalization creates namely a

shared socio-economic framework that not only makes distant practices applicable but, in some cases, even crucial for the survival and development of individual societies, economies, and destinations. Comparative case studies offer the hope that common solutions can be found for shared problems, such as those related to sustainable development.

## 3.2. CASE SOUTHERN KONNEVESI

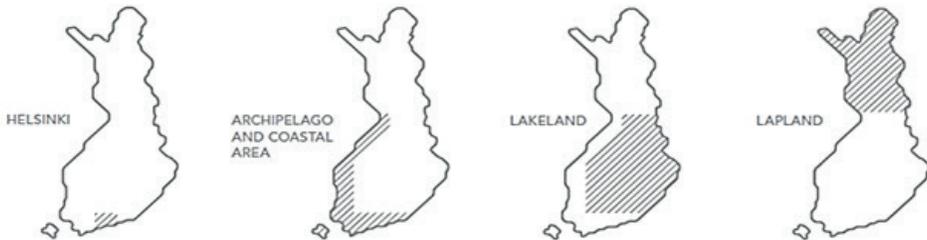
### 3.2.1. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DESTINATION

Southern Konnevesi National Park was established in 2014 (Act on the Southern Konnevesi National Park 661/2014) as Finland's 38th national park, located in a rural, remote region in middle Finland. Its modest size of only 15.44 sq. km does not diminish the value of its rich flora and fauna, nor the diversity of its landscapes. During discussions about whether it should be designated as a strict nature reserve or a national park, it was explicitly considered that the park should serve tourism purposes (Yle 2013). In Central Finland, Southern Konnevesi was the fifth established national park (Nykänen 2018). Since then, the number of national parks in the province has decreased to four due to administrative changes (Väänänen 2021). In the other province to which it belongs, Northern Savonia, there are two national parks (National Parks 2023). Since 2015, the park has consistently been the most visited in both provinces, according to annual visitor statistics (Keränen & Mikkola 2016; Luontoon 2023; Luontoon 2024).

The case of Southern Konnevesi National Park is significant due to the systematic and strategically planned way tourism has been developed around this new national park, through cooperation and broad stakeholder involvement. Unlike national parks that have existed for decades and need to adapt their tourism functions to the sustainability requirements of the present day, this destination in the heart of Finland had the unique opportunity to develop tourism from scratch, using well-structured planning and embedding responsibility and sustainability principles at its core.

Southern Konnevesi as a destination is characterized by multiple layers of opposing duality. Geographically, Southern Konnevesi is part of Finnish Lakeland, which also constitutes one of the four geographic management units of Visit Finland, the national organization for tourism marketing and promotion (Figure 3.1.).

**Figure 3.1.** The four geographical management units of Visit Finland, one of which is the Lakeland region (Visit Finland n.d.).



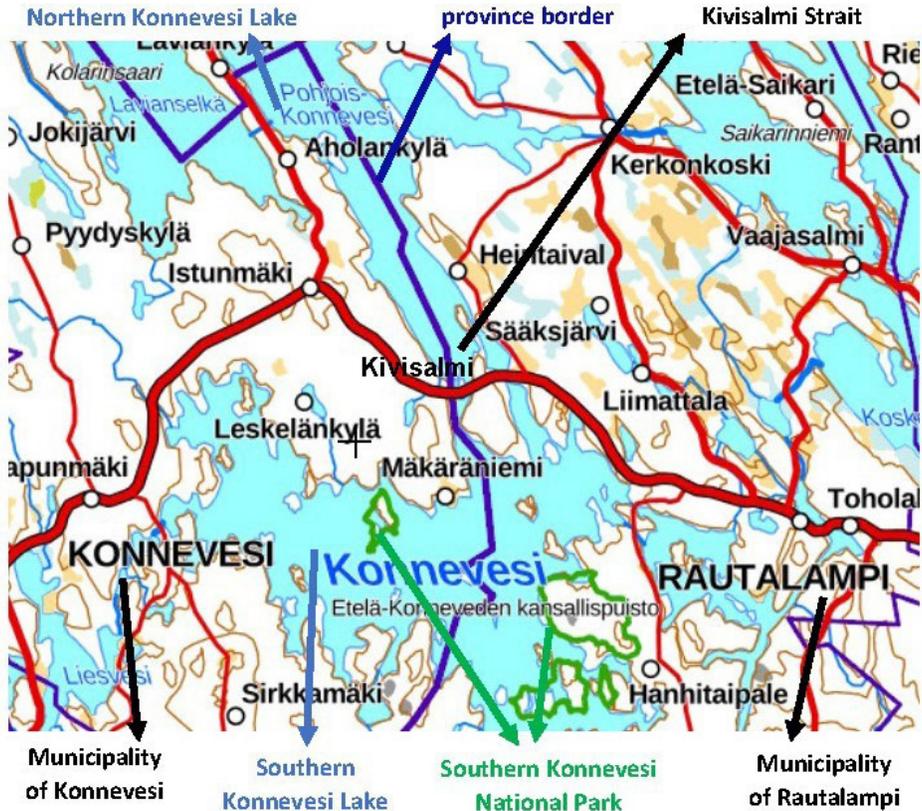
The national park carries the name of Konnevesi, Finland's 23rd largest lake (Sisä-Savon luonnonystävät ry n.d.), which has two distinct parts: Southern and Northern Konnevesi (Figure 3.2.). On its eastern side, the park offers opportunities for hiking across rocky hill landscapes and old forests in its continental section, whereas on the western side, it is situated on a lake archipelago, suitable for water-based activities. Notably, the national park is named after the lake, not the municipality of Konnevesi, although this coincidence brings undeniable benefits to the municipality's image.

Administratively, the national park is located at the border of two municipalities – Rautalampi and Konnevesi – and two regions, Northern Savonia and Central Finland (Figure 3.2.), whose institutions are responsible for its management, together with Metsähallitus. This leads to a diversity of often opposing models of maintenance, financing, and development.

It should be noted that historically, Konnevesi separated and became independent first from the parish of Rautalampi in 1919, and then from the municipality of Rautalampi in 1922, due to long and difficult journeys to the church and insufficient benefits for residents from municipal taxes (Niskanen 1976; Kärkkäinen 1976). Since then, the municipalities have been

involved in a multifaceted neighbour rivalry, which was further escalated by the presence of a third administrative entity – Metsähallitus, entering the region’s administrative scene in the context of the newly established shared national park.

Figure 3.2. Map of Southern Konnevesi (adapted from outdoor recreation map service Retkikartta.fi).



Culturally, the area of the national park also belongs to two distinct zones. Central Finland is associated with the Tavastians – tribes that historically inhabited the region – although there is only a weak Tavastian identity preserved today. Northern Savonia strongly identifies with the Savonians and places high value on their culture. These differences, almost invisible to visitors, especially international ones, nowadays rely to some extent on stereotypes but can influence cooperation between operators from the two regions. Savonians are perceived as talkative and socially

indirect (Nupponen 2011), so it is believed that one should be careful when communicating or negotiating with them. Tavastians, on the other hand, are considered prudent, reliable, enterprising, and persistent (Junttila 2003).

Being on the border between two municipalities, two regions, and two cultural zones can, in the worst case, mean that neither side automatically assumes responsibility for the development of the national park, but in the best case, both sides perceive Southern Konnevesi as “our national park.”

### 3.2.2. INITIAL STAGE OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT – FROM THE CREATION OF THE NATIONAL PARK TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

#### **Destination formation**

Unlike many other Finnish national parks, Southern Konnevesi had no prior history as a recreational area, so all infrastructure and services had to be developed after the park’s establishment. Like all protected areas in Finland, Southern Konnevesi National Park is managed by Metsähallitus, the state enterprise that provides marked hiking trails, campfire sites, shelters, and customer services. The park does not rely on its own staff; instead, functions are centralized at the regional and national levels.

Metsähallitus supplements its services by maintaining a network of companies that, through cooperation agreements, offer services in the park and adhere to the principles of sustainable nature-based tourism. Metsähallitus contributes its own values, for example regarding sustainability and collaboration, through these cooperation agreements with tourism operators, while also enhancing the resources and investments of small provincial municipalities for tourism infrastructure and applying its well-established responsible practices in the area.

Southern Konnevesi was created as a contemporary national park with the potential to break the stereotype of national parks as forested areas suited solely for hiking, mainly because Metsähallitus owns only the land, not the adjacent waters. The archipelago part of the park is presumed to have greater potential for service provision, guided activities,

and economic tourism activity in general, as it is less accessible than the continental part.

Although natural assets were available before the park's creation, preliminary research shows that nature-based tourism entrepreneurship was minimal prior to the park's establishment and required a boost in terms of collaboration, infrastructure, and competence development (Municipality of Rautalampi 2015).

From the outset, it was recognized that Metsähallitus' Care and Use Plan (Itkonen et al. 2016), focused strictly on the park's boundaries and primarily on nature conservation, was insufficient as a basis for tourism development. Instead, targeted strategic activity was needed in the spirit of cooperation and through defining shared goals to realize the region's economic potential (Municipality of Rautalampi 2015). In Southern Konnevesi, the overall picture was considered – not just the national park, but the broader tourism destination, particularly referencing the data highlighted in Chapter II and well-known in Finland that the return on investment in national parks is significantly higher when they are part of a broader destination.

There are additional reasons to consider the wider area and to develop a broader tourism network:

- Most tourism services in Southern Konnevesi are located or take place outside the national park, such as cottage accommodation, restaurants, cruises, paddling, and fishing. Without high-quality short-term accommodation, local tourism can rely only on day trips and excursions into nature. In addition, the national park does not include the water areas.
- In the areas of the two main municipalities, there are other valuable natural sites in addition to the national park, such as the Seven Rapid Route and the Häähniinmäki excursion area, which complement its tourism offering.
- The landscapes are equally valuable and beautiful throughout the area, and all of them can be used for tourism; however, the

difference lies in land ownership, since national parks can only be established on state-owned land.

- The municipalities strive to maintain their decision-making role in the development and management of tourism in their region.

Developing a broader, unified destination means that the existing opposing duality needs to be neutralized. However, some disagreement is apparent even regarding the name and brand of the destination. Although the name of the national park is legally established, some refer to it using various unofficial forms: Konnevesi National Park, Rautalampi National Park, Rautalampi – Konnevesi National Park, Rautalampi – Southern Konnevesi National Park, Enonniemi – Southern Konnevesi, or the Kalaja Area. It is perceived that the name Southern Konnevesi gives unequal marketing benefits to the adjacent municipality, which is not mentioned. A tourism enterprise association, Visit Kalaja, was created in an unsuccessful attempt to give the broader destination a different name and satisfy those who did not wish to identify with the national park's name. Notably, no operator has managed to exert enough influence or value to make the broader destination gravitate around its alternative brand proposal. Over time, most of the dissenting voices were left outside the collaboration patterns.

Tourism development in the destination has followed a more planned approach through the preparation of the first Master Plan for Nature Tourism Development (Anttila 2016) and investment plan for the destination. The master plan, as a strategic instrument, has enabled targeted and responsible development of the destination by setting common objectives, identifying key stakeholders, and allocating responsibilities, even though the ecosystem governance approach is nowhere explicitly mentioned as a method or tool. Various local and regional groups were included in the tourism planning process – entrepreneurs, employees of public and private structures, as well as private individuals, the third sector through rural associations, sports, cultural, and nature conservation associations representing residents, as well as schools, research institutes, etc. (Municipality of Rautalampi 2015).

Simply having a master plan for tourism development, however, is not sufficient for establishing effective tourism governance in the destination, and cooperation is not yet a well-established practice. Broad networking and support of the ecosystem are needed, ultimately to eliminate stereotypes and encourage consensus, on the one hand, among tourism stakeholders, and on the other, between tourism and the rest of the local community.

### **Projectification and public initiative**

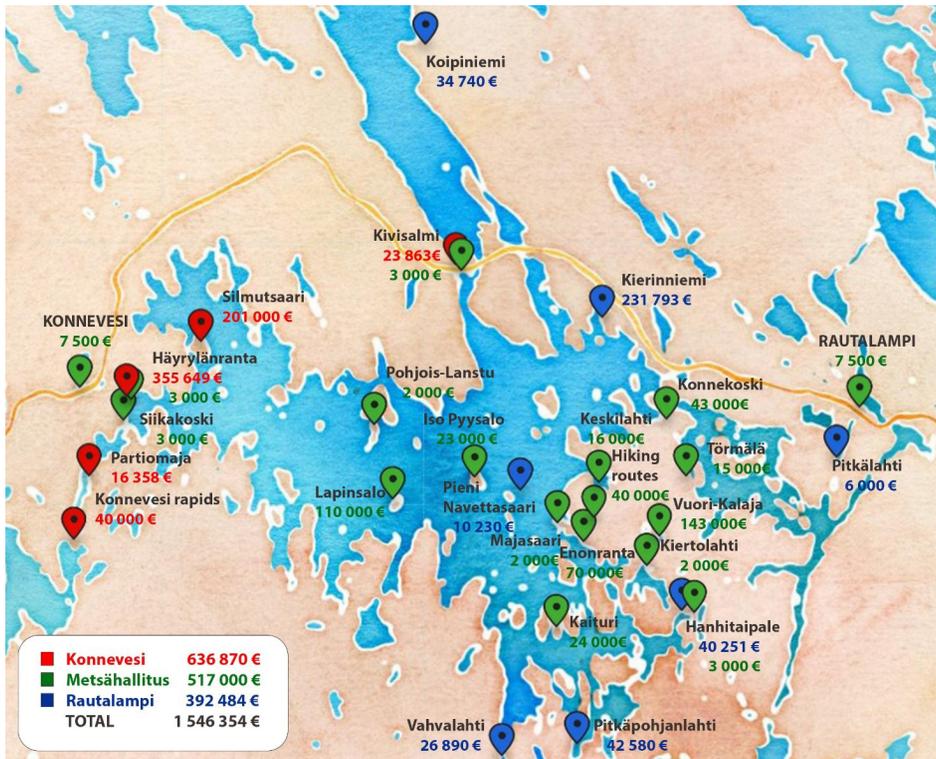
Tourism development in the first years following the establishment of the national park has been carried out through a series of planning and investment projects derived from the master plan. The most significant development projects are as follows:

- Rautalampi – Konnevesi Nature Tourism Coordination Project, 2015–2018. This joint project comprised 22 separate work packages, ranging from networking, development of the nature tourism service chain, and establishment of collaboration models (for tourist information centers, expansion of official water routes; with educational institutions, potential farm-based accommodation providers, water resource owners, and landowners) to initiate subsequent projects.
- Intriguing Landscape Project, 2016–2018. Running parallelly with the coordination project, this project aimed to enhance local competence in tourism through training, seminars, benchmarking visits, and unified regional promotion at exhibitions, in brochures, and publications.

The investment projects undertaken by the two municipalities and Metsähallitus have complemented each other in creating a unified image of the region and sustainable-quality infrastructure, each operating within the specific jurisdiction of its administrator: Konnevesi and Rautalampi have developed facilities around the park, while Metsähallitus has overseen infrastructure development within the park boundaries (Figure 3.3.). Infrastructure development serves as a premise of recreational tourism in

the area, ensuring accessibility and safety. Facilities around the national park provide the basis for more responsible and extended stays while minimizing negative impacts on nature. In addition, cultural sustainability has been considered, as local history and tradition have been interpreted in elements of the infrastructure.

**Figure 3.3.** Public investments in infrastructure in Southern Konnevesi, 2015–2018 (author’s elaboration, created in the Padlet application and based on information from the Rautalampi-Konnevesi Nature Tourism Coordination Project).



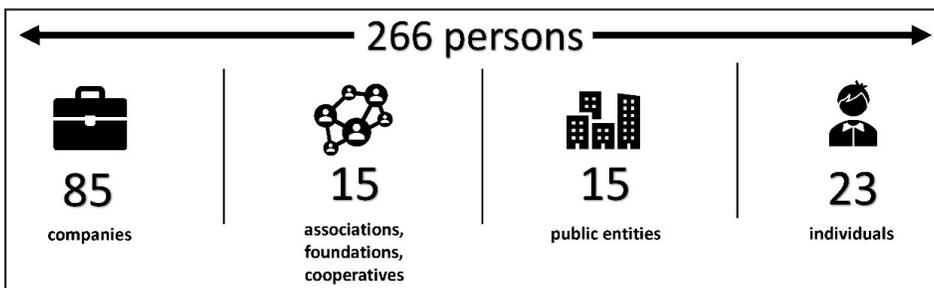
The total value of all development projects in this initial stage amounted to approximately €2.5 million, nearly 60% of which came from public funds. This would not have been possible without the cooperation between the two municipalities and Metsähallitus, as well as the strong connections of these organizations with regional and national funding institutions. Moreover, the projects serve as a forum for meetings and collaboration among all participants in the tourism sector.

The main objective of the development projects has been to build tourism cooperation within the destination. Equally involved in the activities have been stakeholders from the core and neighbouring municipalities, companies, institutions, associations, as well as individuals, accommodation providers, activity organizers, transport services, restaurants, museums, galleries, media platforms, etc. (Figure 3.4.). The participants represented ten municipalities in Central Finland, seven in Northern Savonia, and three additional locations (Bliznakova 2018).

From the perspective of the goals of sustainable tourism, it has been particularly important to include individuals, who are not particularly affiliated with organizations:

- to inform locals about tourism development and give them opportunities to participate in decision-making,
- to encourage entrepreneurial values and unlock the entrepreneurial potential through increased competence and social capital,
- to create a foundation for authentic, community-based services in the destination.

**Figure 3.4.** Cooperation network established by the Intriguing Landscape project, 2016–2018 (Bliznakova 2018).



### Public-private partnerships

Public-private partnerships have been used to increase service efficiency. Both entrances to the national park – Törmäla Holiday and Training Centre and Häyrylänranta Harbor – serve as examples this. Since 2017, the

Törmäla Centre, which is privately owned and located on the continental side of the park, has been clearing snow along the forest road leading to the park to make the trails accessible in winter. The road is not under the jurisdiction of Metsähallitus, so this activity complements the park's services. Metsähallitus, in turn, communicates the road conditions effectively through its own channels. Häyrylänranta Harbor is the park entrance on the archipelago side. It is owned by the municipality of Konnevesi, which, at the creation of the national park, concessioned it to three enterprises: one responsible for harbor and camping services, another operating a restaurant with catering service, and a third running a cruise company. The division of functions was made according to the companies' expertise, but they have still needed to cooperate with each other and with the municipality for event organization, obtaining environmental certifications, and marketing. For example, in 2018 the harbor received the Roope Sustainable Harbor certificate as a joint achievement in this PPP.

### **Development of competencies**

Efforts to build tourism competencies in Southern Konnevesi have primarily been project-based, including thematic training, seminars, and benchmarking visits.

Training has been based on the participants' expressed and communicated needs, focusing mainly on digital marketing. Through these trainings, local participants have not only explored the potential of digital tools for tourism but also established connections with the tourism technology industry, adding to the periphery of the ecosystem. Other areas addressed in the training and seminars have included sustainability and ecological certification, which have informed tourism participants about opportunities for concrete responsible actions. The seminars have connected both internal and external participants to the destination, representing tourism services as well as tourism suppliers.

Benchmarking visits have been crucial for building cooperation in the new destination. By visiting successful domestic (Koli, Sea Lapland)

and international destinations (Iceland, Bavarian Forest), participants have worked intensively to network with each other and with national and international partners, while also becoming aware of their own role in tourism in terms of service provision, competitiveness, destination organization, and more.

### **Joint marketing**

In the early years of development, in the absence of a DMO, marketing efforts have been coordinated either by public actors – the municipalities, Metsähallitus – or by their development projects, and can be described as joint marketing of the tourism participants. The aim has been to promote a culture of cooperation, by which, in future, these participants could conduct marketing activities without direct intervention by public authorities.

Some of the planned marketing materials, such as weekly programs, brochures, and publications, have not required a high degree of cooperation during preparation, only a shared willingness. As a result, however, they have presented the destination as consistent and logically organized. Other marketing measures, for example the production, piloting, and packaging of tourism products and participation in tourism fairs, has required close and direct interaction among the participants.

### **Coopetition between one-person enterprises**

At the establishment of the national park, existing service providers have not been well acquainted with each other and considered each other as competitors. Cooperation between such service providers, previously unthinkable, has gradually emerged – partly as a result of networking activities, but also due to increasing demand. Most of the existing and emerging companies are small, one-person lifestyle-oriented enterprises with limited time and equipment.

Paddling, one of the most popular activities in Southern Konnevesi, provides an example of coopetition. Several companies offer paddling

activities or rent paddling equipment, but each has very limited capacity. Since customers explore services online, the companies compete through digital visibility. However, during the high season, the same companies join efforts to serve larger groups or refer customers to another operator located closer to the client, in order to minimize operational costs and environmental impact. Moreover, these companies often provide additional activities besides paddling, such as hiking, fishing, diving, and more, so in other situations they complement each other's service chain rather than competing. A similar model of co-competition is observed among companies engaged in guided fishing activities.

### **Results from the initial development stage and existing challenges**

As a result of the development activities, the foundations of the destination have been established. Regarding infrastructure, this has been achieved through a consistent style and quality, ensuring physical and cultural accessibility as well as safety in tourism. Improved accessibility to tourism services has also been facilitated through joint marketing by participants and their increased presence on digital tourism platforms. Local interest in the tourism business has emerged, promoting participation and entrepreneurship: ten new tourism-related enterprises were established in Rautalampi and Konnevesi during 2016–2018 (Hyvärinen, Bliznakova & Kauvosaari 2018); companies from neighboring municipalities expanded their services into the national park area; and the tourism and business expertise of the companies increased. Short service chains have been created. By the end of 2018, tourism participants reported an average of five to twenty new partners, primarily based on mutual trust rather than contractual agreements (Bliznakova 2018).

As a consequence of these initial efforts in tourism development, the duality of the region has been recognized as an advantage. Opportunities for public funding have increased manifold, allowing applications in two different provinces. Local tourists began to arrive from two regional centers – Jyväskylä (Central Finland) and Kuopio (Northern Savonia).

However, strategic tourism development efforts were interrupted, first by the conclusion of the large-scale development projects, and later by global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the subsequent wave of inflation.

By the end of 2018, the first phase of the implementation of the Master Plan for Nature Tourism Development concluded. By that time, some goals, such as the annual number of visitors, had been clearly exceeded; for instance, 30,000 visitors were expected across the entire destination by 2020, yet this number was already reached in 2018 for the national park alone. Many measures outlined in the master plan, however, remained unfulfilled. At this stage, it was clear that strategic development needed to continue, and the plan required updating, which occurred almost two years later (Tulla 2020). In the updated plan, ecosystem governance plays an equally important role, though it continues to remain unrecognized as a formal approach. Tourism struggles to recover from the prolonged crisis, leaving some of the plan's measures partially unimplemented.

During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, Southern Konnevesi does not appear as a unified destination. Metsähallitus maintains core services and official communication channels for the national park, as well as the network of enterprises according to its own cooperation agreements. Visit Konnevesi is a tourism marketing platform for Konnevesi, based on a PPP, but is currently effectively operated by the municipality, while Rautalampi maintains similar functions on the other side, focused strongly on the national park. Especially in tourism marketing (through regional tourism marketing organizations, participation in trade fairs, etc.), regional boundaries remain largely insurmountable.

Despite rapid development and achievements, in the first years Southern Konnevesi faced strong criticism for the inability to self-organize into a tourism association or another DMO capable of consistently coordinating tourism in the region and taking responsibility for marketing and sales. While the need for coordination is undeniable, it is also worth considering the broader picture – the absence of formal contractual

relationships and dominance allows participants to enter and exit the ecosystem depending on the creation of shared value.

### 3.2.3. CURRENT STATE OF THE DESTINATION ACCORDING TO THE THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE CONDUCTED INTERVIEWS

#### **Thematic area: Attitudes towards tourism and the development of health and recreational tourism in the destination**

The themes and subthemes related to the thematic area are summarized in Table 3.1.

- **Theme: Basis for tourism development in the destination**

Respondents expressed two different views on what underpins tourism in Southern Konnevesi (Table A3.1.). According to a large portion of them, natural resources constitute the main prerequisite for local tourism opportunities. Another group of interviewees believes that tourism is based on anthropogenic factors, such as people, their willingness to develop tourism, and the services they design and offer. The national park serves as a link between these two separate paradigms, mitigating their opposing nature and uniting the goals of nature conservation and tourism (Table A3.2.).

In the statements, it is noticeable that not all respondents use Southern Konnevesi as the main focus of discussion. Some address only topics related to one of the municipalities, while for others Southern Konnevesi is considered an integral part of the region, with its resources and tourism potential. Interestingly, only Central Finland is mentioned as a region, whereas there are no similar references to Southern Konnevesi as part of Northern Savonia's tourism offer. Comparisons with Lapland are also strongly present. Although the two areas are seemingly compared based on their natural features, in the tourism context, the parallels with Lapland express the hope that Southern Konnevesi could be just as successful as the national tourism's leader.

**Table 3.1.** Structure of the thematic area “Attitudes towards tourism and the development of health and recreational tourism in the destination” – Southern Konnevesi (author’s elaboration).

Thematic area	Theme	Subtheme		
		Level 1	Level 2	
Attitudes towards tourism and the development of health and recreational tourism in the destination	Basis for tourism development in the destination	Natural and anthropogenic factors for tourism in Southern Konnevesi	Natural factors as leading for tourism	
			Anthropogenic factors as leading for tourism	
		Significance and role of the national park in tourism in Southern Konnevesi	The national park as a fundamental factor for tourism	
			The national park as supporting factor for tourism	
			Tourism and nature conservation hand in hand in the national park	
		Potential of the destination for developing health and recreational tourism	Basis for developing health and recreational tourism	Physical activity and adventure activities for recreation
	Natural assets for recreation			
	Motor noise as a source or inhibitor of recreational benefits			
	Opportunity for theming and profiling of local tourism			
	Wellbeing as a trend			
	Elements of the destination’s USP		Profiling is problematic and a competitive advantage within the region or country is lacking	
			Established elements of the USP support the development of health and recreational tourism	
			Health and recreational tourism can form the destination’s USP	
	Significance of evidence-based health and recreational benefits and the official status of the destination in relation to health and recreational tourism			Recreational value of the national park
				Need for scientifically proven health benefits from visiting the destination
		Need for certified tourism products or destination certifications		
	Role of services in recreational tourism		What constitutes a tourism service for achieving recreational benefits	
			What recreational services are offered in tourism	

Nature as a resource is viewed as something unique that cannot be built or artificially created by humans, and it is emphasized that this same nature would not have been so well preserved if the area was not remote and economically underdeveloped. Water resources are highlighted as extremely important, mentioning not only the lake surrounding the core territory of the national park but also other natural tourism sites not directly connected to it. The recreational value of nature is also suggested. Those supporting the importance of the anthropological factor emphasize that the mere presence of natural resources alone cannot ensure tourism, which they perceive as a socio-economic phenomenon. Other prerequisites are considered crucial, such as economic support, entrepreneurial will, local community approval, the presence of competencies to develop and conduct activities, infrastructure, and consumer behaviour.

The respondents perceive the existence of the national park positively but view its significance for tourism development along a spectrum – from being a foundational element for the destination to allowing tourism to coexist alongside nature conservation. The marketing benefits of the park for tourism and its unifying role between the differing or even opposing characteristics of the two municipalities are emphasized. However, the mere existence of the national park does not guarantee tourism; rather, it represents a potential that tourism can take advantage of.

Beyond the discussed subthemes related to the foundation for tourism development, the interviewees also commented on the significance of tourism for regional development:

*“Let’s think about our municipalities. What else could possibly be developed here besides tourism? We must hold on to tourism – It sustains and develops us.”*

In the interviews, a clear distinction was made between facts and wishful thinking, and there was a visible effort to remain fact-based. Nevertheless, almost all respondents, even when agreeing to participate in the study, emphasized that they were presenting only their personal

perspective and frequently used expressions such as “*I personally think*” or “*in my opinion.*” One of the respondents articulated this attitude as follows:

*“I need to think about what tourism in Southern Konnevesi is really based on, not what I wish it was based on.”*

- **Theme: potential of the destination for developing health and recreational tourism**

During the interviews, respondents were asked to comment on the potential of the destination for developing health and recreational tourism (Table A3.3.). Most respondents did not distinguish between health and recreational tourism, discussing them instead as overlapping forms or orientations of tourism. Only one respondent found it necessary to define the difference at the beginning of their answer:

*“Health tourism is healing, based on specific interventions, whereas wellbeing tourism is more general and focused on prevention.”*

It should be noted that in the Finnish language, the concept of recreational tourism sounds somewhat unnatural and requires additional clarification. A related concept more commonly used in Finnish tourism is wellbeing tourism, which was mentioned by several respondents.

As in the previous theme, respondents emphasized that natural assets are the main prerequisite - and, moreover, highlighted that in Southern Konnevesi, they fully meet even the highest standards regarding cleanliness, tranquillity, and the opportunity for people to reconnect with nature. Rural and nature-based tourism therefore overlap with recreational tourism.

Wellbeing and the recreational benefits derived from nature can be achieved through physical activity and experiences that can also be perceived as adventurous – particularly by international visitors or those for whom such activities are not part of daily life. It was also noted that this potential is not always recognized from within but sometimes needs to be pointed out by outsiders who remind locals of the area’s valuable qualities. On the other hand, local operators follow current trends and are aware

of their potential to offer wellbeing to stressed, fast-paced urban people seeking peace and safety.

Again, the importance of available services and entrepreneurship was raised – both as prerequisites for the existence of tourism and for realizing its recreational benefits. These themes will be explored in more detail later.

An interesting discussion emerged regarding the influence of motor vehicles such as motorcycles and motorboats. From an ecological perspective, they pollute the environment not only through carbon emissions but also through noise. From a social perspective, however, the presence of motorboats on the lake enhances perceived safety, as visitors feel reassured that help is available if needed. Culturally, Konnevesi has long-standing traditions in motor sports that can be used in recreational tourism, highlighting the region's authentic characteristics. Moreover, the entire Central Finland region is traditionally associated with hosting a stage of the World Rally Championship – the largest annual event in Northern Europe – which has a substantial impact on tourism and the economy of every municipality in the region. For example, the 73rd edition of the rally in 2024 generated €20 million in regional revenue, €15.2 million of which came directly from tourism; 70% of attendees were non-local, and 3% were international visitors (Secto Rally Finland 2024). With such results, the rally is a major tourism factor in the region, although it faces some criticism from environmentally oriented tourists and operators.

Motorcycling was also mentioned as an example of an activity not directly related to nature but usable for recreation. Another such aspect is the social interaction that occurs during tourism experiences, involving tourists, service staff, and locals, which can also contribute to wellbeing.

Health and recreational tourism emerged in the interviews as a new topic – one not yet publicly discussed in the destination but potentially valuable for the future thematic positioning and profiling of tourism. This aspect will also be elaborated later.

Regarding the potential for health and recreational tourism, many respondents spontaneously discussed the destination's *unique selling*

*proposition* (USP), expressing three main and significantly different viewpoints (Table A3.4.). Concerns were raised that, despite its potential, health and recreational tourism in Southern Konnevesi would be based on the same types of resources that dominate many Finnish destinations.

Conversely, the close link between nature-based tourism, which is well established throughout Central Finland, and recreational tourism means that there is no need to identify entirely new competitive advantages; existing strengths can be emphasized more strategically and in a new light. Since neither Central Finland nor most of the country has yet focused on health and recreational tourism, positioning the destination as one associated with health, recreation, and wellbeing could itself become a competitive advantage, even if the underlying resources are similar. The potential role of scientific research in developing health and recreational tourism was also mentioned.

- **Theme: Significance of evidence-based health and recreational benefits and the official status of the destination in relation to health and recreational tourism**

The respondents' opinions are not unanimous but tend to lean toward rejecting the importance of scientific evidence for health and recreational benefits, certifications, and the formal designation of the destination as significant factors for tourism (Table A3.5.). This attitude stems not only from the incomparability between different certification schemes, the temporary nature of scientific evidence, and the inherently individual and predominantly subjective character of health and recreational benefits, but also from Finnish culture, which is highly informal and does not consider status as a guarantee of practical qualities.

The only status that respondents identified as somewhat relevant for tourism is that of the national park, which is internationally recognizable and carries the promise of a quality experience. However, it was emphasized that the national park holds greater significance for nature conservation than for tourism. According to the respondents, nature is equally valuable and awe-inspiring both inside and outside the park's boundaries, at least at present.

- **Theme: Role of services in recreational tourism**

This topic was discussed from two perspectives: what constitutes a tourism service aimed at achieving recreational benefits, and what types of recreational tourism services are currently offered in the area (Table A3.6.).

Respondents' views reveal that recreational tourism requires guided or instructed activities in order to maximize recreational benefits. In some cases, the mere presence of an instructor or guide can enhance the sense of safety – an important prerequisite for rest and recovery. Guided activities also help to concentrate visitors in appropriate tourism areas, preventing harm to the natural environment. Furthermore, guided services generate revenue, thus contributing to the destination's economic sustainability.

At the same time, respondents pointed out that recreational tourism services, although economically beneficial, do not generate substantial profits to serve as a main line of business, since they belong to the domain of alternative tourism and cater to customers with specific interests. The topic of side entrepreneurial activities in tourism in the Southern Konnevesi area will be further elaborated later in the discussion. Here, however, it is important to note that spontaneous and authentic encounters with locals also contribute significantly to visitors' sense of wellbeing.

Although profiling Southern Konnevesi, or, more broadly, Central Finland, as a destination for recreational tourism or wellbeing tourism has not yet been realized, there are early signs of strategic direction toward such development. Individual recreational services already exist and are being offered. They represent a starting point for the systematic development of this type of tourism, but they need to be integrated with other tourism services in order to achieve success. This requires synchronizing operational schedules and building connections between different types of operators across various sectors. Respondents emphasized that the development of recreational tourism involves numerous actors from outside the tourism sector as well. These external operators contribute to ensuring the quality of the service, while also benefiting economically from tourism-related activities.

## **Thematic area: Characteristics and roles of tourism ecosystem agents in the destination and their interconnections**

The themes and subthemes related to the thematic area are summarized in Table 3.2.

- **Theme: Cooperation**

The theme of cooperation is integrative for the interviews conducted on tourism development in Southern Konnevesi. It permeates all the examined topics, particularly regarding the relationships between agents, and therefore cannot be separated as an independent theme. In this section, only one distinctive subtheme related to collaboration is presented, namely the benefits of cooperation and the associated costs (Table A3.7.).

Respondents' statements support the business ecosystem literature, according to which, for some ecosystem agents – especially smaller ones – the transactional costs of cooperation can be excessively high and inhibitory. These costs can sometimes have a direct monetary dimension, while in other cases they are indirect, such as unmet expectations or wasted time, which demotivates the agent from future cooperation. Another inhibitory effect on cooperation is individual pricing, which can raise the price of a packaged tourism product and make it unsellable.

It is noted that at the local level, expectations from collaboration in tourism development are high, which can easily lead to doubt and disappointment:

*“There is cooperation in words, but I don't know if it really exists.”*

Some respondents attribute the lack of collaboration to cultural characteristics:

*“There is no trust in the power of cooperation. That's a Finnish trait.”*

The broader the perspective a respondent has on tourism cooperation, including experience from other destinations, the more positively they evaluate the level of cooperation in Southern Konnevesi:

*“In Southern Konnevesi, entrepreneurs are very active.”*

**Table 3.2.** Structure of the thematic area “Characteristics and roles of tourism ecosystem agents in the destination and their interconnections” – Southern Konnevesi (author’s elaboration).

Thematic area	Theme	Subtheme	
		Level 1	Level 2
Characteristics and roles of tourism ecosystem agents in the destination and their interconnections	Cooperation		Benefits and costs of cooperation
	Entrepreneurial activity in destination’s tourism	Characteristics of tourism entrepreneurship in the destination	Sufficiency of entrepreneurial activity
			Tourism entrepreneurship as a side activity
			Entrepreneurs’ awareness of other entrepreneurial activity in the destination
			Reciprocity of cooperation
		Interconnections of entrepreneurs with other agents	Entrepreneur-to-entrepreneur connections
			Entrepreneur-to-client connections
	Enterprise as a leader or dominator of the ecosystem	Expected and observed impacts on the ecosystem from the presence of a lead enterprise	Potential advantages and risks of corporate approach to ecosystem governance
			Experience from the activities of a lead enterprise in other destinations
	Role of the third sector in destination’s tourism		Opportunities to complement the tourism offering
			Example of developing and coordinating a tourism site by the third sector
			Lack of resources to perform a role in tourism
	Role of the local community in destination’s tourism		Locals as a source of local knowledge for recreational transformation
			Productization of local identity and lifestyle
			Attitude of the local population towards tourism
	Role and characteristics of tourism customers	Characteristics of tourism customers in Southern Konnevesi	International customers
			Domestic customers – and what Finns pay for
			Paying customers
			Customers of the health and recreational product
		Interactions of tourism customers in Southern Konnevesi	Customer-to-enterprise
Customer-to-customer			
Holiday residents-to-region			
Foreign tourists-to-locals			

Thematic area	Theme	Subtheme	
		Level 1	Level 2
	Cooperation with bloggers		
	Involvement of agents external to the region or tourism		Inclusion of municipalities outside the national park core in the destination's tourism
			Inclusion of external operators from outside the area and tourism sector in the destination's tourism
	Cooperation of the destination with institutions		Improving infrastructure in cooperation with government institutions
			Legislation and regulations
	Establishing common goals for the destination's ecosystem	Common goals of the destination	The national park as a common denominator in the destination
			The same companies serving on both sides
			Need for a common platform for communication and coordination of the municipalities
			Divergent interests of the municipalities
		Impact of crises and global challenges	Advantages over other destinations
			Negative impacts of crises
			Need for sustainability

- **Theme: Entrepreneurial activity in destination's tourism**

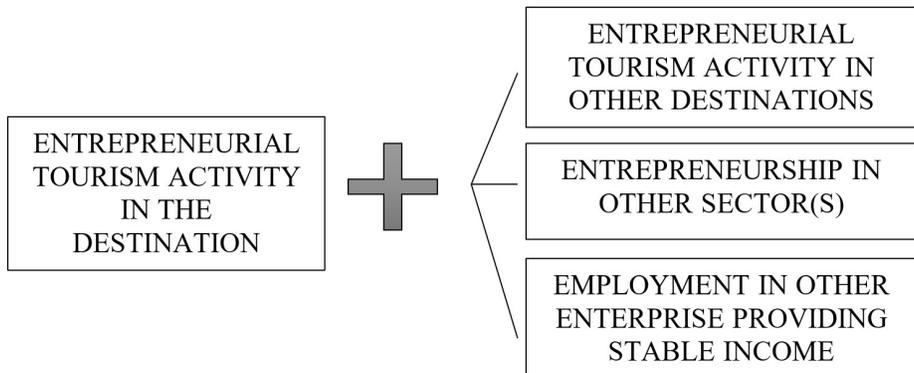
Entrepreneurship was a widely discussed topic in the conducted interviews. It is examined both in terms of its characteristic features (Table A3.8.) and in terms of entrepreneurs' interrelationships with other agents in the ecosystem (Table A3.9.).

Tourism entrepreneurship in the destination is perceived as insufficient – a topic presented in this section mainly regarding Rautalampi, though it is also referenced in many other parts of the findings.

The overall content of the interviews supports one respondent's claim that entrepreneurship in Rautalampi has declined and is insufficient – with significantly fewer mentions of this municipality, its region, and the businesses operating there.

Respondents' views align with the literature and previous observations that tourism entrepreneurship is based on one-person enterprises or microbusinesses, often operating as a side activity or aimed at maintaining a particular lifestyle – so-called lifestyle enterprises. Tourism activity in remote and rural areas such as Southern Konnevesi is insufficiently profitable and does not serve large customer flows when confined to a single destination. In general, the entrepreneur has three options: to operate in more than one destination, if the nature of their activity allows it; to conduct another type of entrepreneurial activity that complements tourism; to be employed in a permanent job in another enterprise that ensures stable income while engaging in lifestyle tourism entrepreneurial activities during the active season (Figure 3.5.).

**Figure 3.5.** Possible combinations of entrepreneurial tourism activity in the destination with other activities ensuring sufficient profitability (author's elaboration).



On the one hand, the low-profit nature of tourism is an alarming phenomenon that poses a risk to the existence of the destination as a whole. On the other hand, the multifaceted activities of entrepreneurs and their combination of different roles provide connections between tourism in the destination and other sectors as well as other tourism regions, so it should not be viewed solely as a negative aspect.

Much of the content of this theme revolves around the discussion of cooperation factors in tourism entrepreneurship in Southern Konnevesi

(Figure 3.6.). The main obstacle to establishing contacts and forming service chains in Southern Konnevesi's tourism is the low awareness of entrepreneurs about the activities of other enterprises. Although networking and cooperation meetings in tourism are organized by the municipalities, only a small portion of entrepreneurs participate. This can be explained, e.g., by a lack of understanding of the benefits of these meetings or of enterprises' own contribution to tourism as a whole. The topic of forums for tourism operators will be explored further in the findings.

Another barrier to connectivity and cooperation among enterprises is misunderstandings or differences in perceptions of cooperation. A key prerequisite for sustainable cooperation is the principle of reciprocity, but for many entrepreneurs, cooperation only means economic benefits from directing additional clients from other businesses to their own without reciprocating in kind. A good example of reciprocity is the cooperation contracts of Metsähallitus, which are not merely a means of collecting fees by the state but they provide concrete value in return.

Another prerequisite for cooperation is the pressure of demand towards diversifying and optimizing activities, specifically economic consumption, which motivates connectedness among enterprises. Awareness of market niches also plays a role, as it can be influenced both by demand and by the withdrawal of certain service providers from the market.

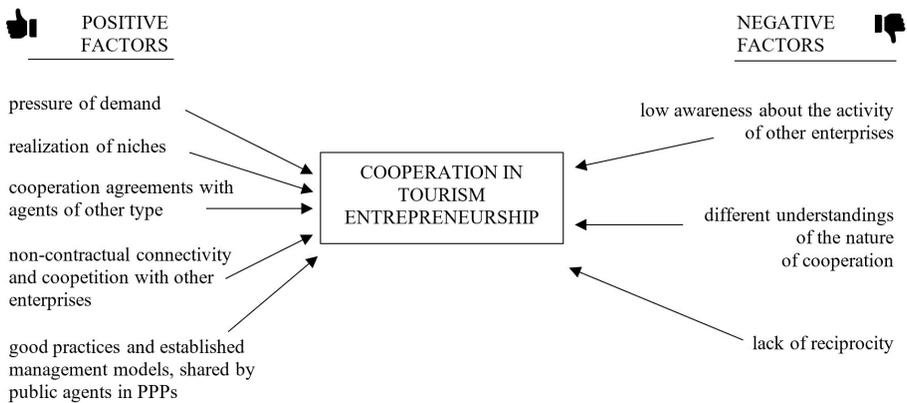
Patterns are observed in both contractual relationships among entrepreneurs – especially with other ecosystem agents – and informal cooperation, mainly of the entrepreneur-to-entrepreneur type. Non-contractual connectivity also allows for non-linear dynamics in the relationships between enterprises, which forms the basis for cooptation. In respondents' answers, competition is mentioned alongside cooperation, but its influence is mostly seen as negative. When an entrepreneur's own capacity is insufficient or the client requires additional services, cross-marketing or even recommendations of competitors' services become necessary.

PPPs are well established in the destination as a means of ensuring tourism on public territory – such as the national park or the harbor – by

providing services that are not the responsibility of public agents, but from which they can derive benefits for regional development. Furthermore, PPPs serve as a means to motivate and develop the tourism business alongside public agents who possess experience and established management models, potentially leading to the strengthening of the respective competencies of the enterprises.

In entrepreneur-to-customer relationships, it is observed that this type of interaction in Southern Konnevesi is used to consolidate service quality and as a marketing channel. However, this understanding is still far from fully involving the customer as a co-creator of the tourism service, which would unlock the full potential of the interaction.

**Figure 3.6.** Factors of cooperation in tourism entrepreneurship (author's elaboration).



- **Theme: Enterprise as a leader or dominator of the ecosystem**

From the literature, it is known that one agent type in the ecosystem is the dominator, which may or may not coincide with its locus of coordination. When such a coincidence exists, corporate approach to ecosystem governance is present, representing one of the two main approaches. The interviewees' statements support this literature (Table A3.10.).

Respondents' input indicates that, in Southern Konnevesi, there is no logical leader on the entrepreneurial side – a company large enough with the resources and competencies to coordinate tourism. The hope is to attract an external actor. Although interviewees acknowledged that this is *“one possible solution,”* the prospect of a leading or even dominating business-sector agent is often presented as a panacea for tourism in Southern Konnevesi, particularly by the public sector, although the risks of excessive dominance, intensified competition, or insufficient commitment of such an operator to the area are recognized. Interestingly, no local entrepreneurs expressed similar hope.

In the current geopolitical context, there is especially strong distrust toward foreign investors, who might not share Finnish societal values, such as a high appreciation for nature and commitment to sustainable development, or who might have hidden agenda detrimental to the region.

A hotel-type accommodation provider is primarily sought as a leading enterprise, as it would not be in direct competition with existing ecosystem agents, since such an accommodation type is currently absent and would have a complementary function. The large available capacity of cottages does not serve the national park because the cottages are rented for weekly stays, not short-term visits.

A specific example was also mentioned regarding the leading role of a hotel chain in another popular nature destination in Finland, where investment in a new hotel changed the behaviour of cottage owners, who adapted to the new ecosystem conditions. This is seen as a kind of butterfly effect, since it was neither a planned nor intended outcome.

- **Theme: Role of the third sector in destination's tourism**

In Finland, there exists an active third sector and a well-established tradition of volunteering. Nowadays, with decreasing public resources and insufficient profitability of tourism activities, hopes are placed on supplementing services through the third sector, especially via rural associations (Table A3.11.). Moreover, involving such agents in

the tourism ecosystem would also ensure encounters between visitors and the local population, represented by these associations, which adds authenticity to the tourism product and provides a higher level of customer satisfaction. The main challenge is that the active members of society engaged in volunteering are aging, while the younger generation faces other demands of working life, which demotivates and passivizes them regarding volunteer activities.

This section does not go into detail but only briefly mentions another type of third sector's participation in tourism, namely in the management and coordination of the destination. A particular example here is the development and coordination of the Häähniinmäki excursion area as a separate nature tourism site yet connected to Southern Konnevesi. The high activeness, vision, and commitment of several associations involved in outdoor activities have led to the creation of an exceptionally attractive and coherent recreational site, coordinated entirely by operators from the third sector. The possibility of coordinating Southern Konnevesi through an association representing the tourism business is discussed further in the findings.

- **Theme: Role of the local community in destination's tourism**

In the information collected from the interviews, the local population of Southern Konnevesi is discussed almost exclusively from the perspective of its use as a resource of tourism (Table A3.12.). Locals are seen as a source of local knowledge and skills, which can have a recreational and transformative effect on visitors. The calmness of provincial and rural life can be used for recovery from daily stress. Events organized in the villages bring locals and tourists together.

On the other hand, the statements emphasize that this potential is largely unrealized, as encounters with the local population and their way of life are not commercialized. Interestingly, the underutilization of local identity in Central Finland is discussed, but there is no mention of leveraging the colorful Savonian identity.

Missing from the discussion about the role of the local community are aspects such as the impact of tourism on locals, the willingness of locals to engage in tourism, or potential local opposition to tourism. The only mention of these topics is purely theoretical and not specific to Southern Konnevesi. Ten years after the establishment of the national park, it is high time to assess whether tourism is causing any negative effects on local life or whether its development is proceeding in alignment with principles of socio-cultural sustainability.

- **Theme: Role and characteristics of tourism customers**

The tourism customers in the destination are discussed both in terms of their characteristics (Table A3.13.) and the interactions in which they are involved (Table A3.14.).

Immediately after the establishment of the national park, there has been a lively debate about whether investment in international tourism was warranted and whether the prerequisites for it existed at all. This is mainly due to the predominantly domestic character of tourism in Finland – not only in Central Finland and Northern Savonia but everywhere except Helsinki and Lapland. However, the respondents' statements provide evidence of the interest in and the presence of international tourism in the destination. It is primarily based on European tourists who share the nature-related values and have a common understanding of Finland as a destination. Visitors from more distant origin, such as the Arab countries and the USA, are also present, but the pandemic has interrupted the influx of Asian tourists, which Finland had been strategically targeting, and geopolitical circumstances have disrupted connections with Russia.

Regarding domestic tourism, there is a belief that Finnish tourists do not pay for domestic tourism services. This is logically influenced by their experience and self-sufficiency in nature, but the claim is not entirely accurate. One reason for the lack of indications of the use of services by domestic tourists is that they rarely display distinguishing features separating them from local residents – their status as tourists can only be determined

through surveys or feedback collection. Concerning accommodation, the distance from home to the destination is decisive, which for Finns is naturally shorter, allowing at least some to make day trips. It should also be noted that there are service points that Finns cannot easily avoid using, such as gas stations or grocery stores. However, these are often overlooked as tourism's contributions to the local economy because the operators are not considered part of the tourism sector. For the destination, it is vital to engage them in tourism cooperation as ecosystem agents, which begins with their awareness of their role in tourism.

Regarding interactions between tourism customers and various ecosystem agents, the information gathered is limited but provides some indications. At least theoretically, some respondents recognize that customers should be involved in co-creating the tourism product, although there is no practical evidence that this occurs in the destination. A positive indication is that there are no reported conflicts between different groups of customers using the same tourism infrastructure. It should be noted that in the case of the Seven Rapid Route, speculations about potential conflicts between paddlers and fishermen have been discussed in the past.

A potential conflict is indicated regarding foreign visitors and locals due to the misunderstanding of the culturally established everyone's right, with attempts to manage this through visitor communication strategies. Vacation homeowners, i.e., seasonal residents, are described through their symbiotic relationship with the region: the area provides them with recreational benefits linked to nature, and their presence contributes economically to the region. It is well known that both Konnevesi and Rautalampi double their population in summer precisely due to the presence of these seasonal residents.

- **Theme: Cooperation with bloggers**

The topic of the role of bloggers in tourism is both interesting and relevant. They are not professional media representatives, and their competencies in communication and tourism may vary. Bloggers can be

considered both a special type of customer and important partners in tourism. By recognizing their significance for tourism, they are enabled to direct their activities in a more responsible manner. One respondent with experience in this area shared their views on the role of bloggers and their interaction with the destination and tourists:

*“Bloggers are partners of tourism. In some cases, there is no information available about a place or service, and a blog post is the first communication on the matter. It is the blogger’s responsibility not to portray the place in an overly negative light. I would not write about a place that I do not recommend visiting. Blog posts influence tourists – whether they choose the destination, which sites they visit, how they approach them, where they park. Some bloggers want to receive tourist services for free, but I am not one of them.”*

- **Theme: Involvement of agents external to the region or tourism**

An important aspect of viewing the destination as an ecosystem is the existence of cross-sectoral links and the participation of agents based on principles not tied to a specific location (Table A3.15.).

Respondents noted that surrounding municipalities are also important for the destination, even if parts of the national park are not located within them. On the one hand, these municipalities face similar challenges in their regional development; on the other hand, they can provide additional tourism sites and activities for visitors. A good example is the Häähniinmäki excursion area and part of the Seven Rapid Route, which are located in Hankasalmi. Together with Äänekoski and Laukaa, marketing campaigns and pilot tourism products have been created in the recent past, whereas Suonenjoki and Hankasalmi can enhance the accessibility of the destination through the presence of railway stations. Pooling resources from nearby municipalities also has an economic rationale.

For health and recreational tourism to exist, professional competencies related to healthcare, wellness, and other recreational fields are needed. Smooth and undisrupted service chains require the involvement of various service providers as well as sales representatives. Destination’s

enterprises must also be technologically equipped, and they in turn have their own suppliers depending on their activities. Conversely, local tourism can act as a provider of events not directly related to tourism but generating significant revenue for it, such as the rally. Municipal or regional boundaries are irrelevant and imperceptible to tourists. The main concern is what value the destination can generate for these external agents to attract them. This aspect should also be considered in the discussion of attracting a lead agent to the ecosystem.

- **Theme: Cooperation of the destination with institutions**

Some aspects of developing and conducting tourism activities depend on legislation, state regulations, and state funding, making public institutions active participants in the destination's tourism (Table A3.16.). However, difficulties arise because it is challenging to direct these institutions toward a specific region to engage with or invest in.

A concrete example is the recent mapping of Lake Southern Konnevesi, which was a goal of the master plan and included in the Nature Tourism Coordination Project, however, during its three years of operation, the project failed to agree upon such mapping (Hyvärinen, Bliznakova & Kauvosaari 2018). The mapping was finally implemented in the autumn of 2024, and the interviews reveal that identifying the key decision-making figures happened largely by chance.

Another aspect raised by respondents concerns the regulations related to tourism activities in Finland, which can have a restrictive effect on tourism entrepreneurship in general or on the development of innovative health and recreational tourism concepts. Examples include informal and authentic encounters with locals or the use of wild herbs for cooking and consumption. Excessive regulation of society and the operational environment in Finnish public life is critically referred to as "*Finland of rules*." A particularly pressing issue is the value-added tax (VAT), which was increased by the Finnish government in 2024, and is expected to negatively affect the consumption of services (Teivainen 2024).

- **Theme: Establishing common goals for the destination's ecosystem**

What maintains the integrity of the ecosystem are the shared goals of the agents within it. The interviews indicate that the national park represents the only common denominator for the destination, but in the ten years since its establishment, there have been no other objectives or factors uniting the two separate municipalities or the tourism operators within them (Table A3.17.). One obvious shared goal should be the provision of high-quality service and customer satisfaction, since visitors do not perceive administrative boundaries. However, this goal can only be realized if individual agents cease to view each other as competitors or adversaries. In other words, they must prioritize the customer above themselves.

The discussion continues with the topic of asymmetrical advantages, which Konnevesi as a municipality receives due to the park's name. Despite some concrete collaborative actions, the municipalities still compete with each other, at least in marketing. This represents a form of co-competition that should be acknowledged and transformed from a weakness into a strength.

In other cases, national parks have served as unifying factors for destinations with complex structures, but in the case of Southern Konnevesi, the park has not completely eliminated dualities and conflicts; rather, it has sometimes provided a basis for additional tensions. Developing common themes in tourism, e.g., a focus on health and recreational services, could offer a new opportunity to unify goals, namely one which could be productized. Utilizing the water resources, which are more prominent in Konnevesi but also exist in Rautalampi, could serve as the foundation for a shared health and recreational tourism product.

The issue of unity and shared goals among ecosystem agents was well summarized by one respondent:

*"With a little effort, we managed to become and remain a popular destination. But growth cannot continue if we do not do anything about it. Everyone is focused on competing instead of rolling up their sleeves and developing tourism together."*

Another perspective on the potential for uniting agents and establishing shared goals comes from global crises and challenges, which affect the entire destination and all ecosystem agents. Literature on business ecosystems in tourism emphasizes that innovations and sustainable development, as challenges, require mobilization of resources from multiple agents and help define their common objectives. The interviews confirm this, while also highlighting additional global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and heightened geopolitical tensions (Table A3.18.).

An interesting aspect is that respondents acknowledge not only the negative impacts and threats of global challenges but also the opportunities to extract competitive advantage from them, which can also serve to unite agents. There is a contemporary concern about environmental degradation, and some respondents link this to a potential reduction in the destination's attractiveness.

The need for sustainable development is acknowledged, though the responses provide only theoretical guidance on what "should" be done, without evidence of concrete sustainable practices at present. Building sustainability is associated, on one hand, with limiting anthropogenic activities, such as infrastructure development or motorized transport, and on the other hand, with innovations and high-tech solutions. The latter requires incorporating agents related to scientific research, technology, construction, and other sectors indirectly connected to the destination and tourism industry into the tourism ecosystem.

**Thematic area: Tourism products and packaging in the destination**

The themes and subthemes related to this thematic area are summarized in Table 3.3.

**Table 3.3.** Structure of the thematic area “Tourism products and packaging in the destination” – Southern Konnevesi (author’s elaboration).

Thematic area	Theme	Subtheme
Tourism products and packaging in the destination	Products missing from the destination’s tourism offering	Missing and underdeveloped products
		Need for continuous renewal and improvement
		Lack of hotel accommodation
	Length of stay in the destination	Too short length of stay
		Ways to extend the length of stay
	Destination accessibility	
	Need for productization of tourism experiences	Tourism seasonality
		Customer flow
		Significance of productization
	Need for packaging of the tourism product	Packaging individual services into a holistic product
		Possible approaches to packaging and sales
	Destination marketing	Joint marketing
		The need for information on tourism services
		Marketing platforms of the municipalities
		Marketing of the national park
		National outdoor recreation information service (platform)

- **Theme: Products missing from the destination’s tourism offering**

The interview data reveal specific gaps or underdeveloped areas in the destination’s tourism offering (Table A3.19.). Various reasons explain these discrepancies (Figure 3.7.). In some cases, the absence of a product stems from a mismatch between the readiness to offer a service and the supporting infrastructure, e.g., horseback riding trails. In other instances, the product is promoted but insufficiently supplied, as in the case of sauna experiences. Sometimes, customer behaviour is not well researched, preventing needs from being met, e.g., nature-based excursionists, often criticized for not generating economic value, may not be offered services they would actually use.

In other situations, a product exists on the basis of available infrastructure prerequisites, but its potential is not fully exploited, e.g.,

camping at Häyrylännranta Harbour. Another challenge is that some services exist but are not packaged in an appropriate entity or communicated effectively, making them hard to discover. There is also a recognized need for continuous improvement and updating of products to maintain customer interest and meet constantly evolving preferences.

However, one aspect stands out clearly: the lack of hotel accommodation (Table A3.20.). Despite the large capacity of holiday cottages, they cannot serve the tens of thousands of park visitors and other nature tourists because they are suited for family stays and are typically rented weekly rather than for short-term stays.

**Figure 3.7.** Discrepancies in tourism supply (author's elaboration).

- ① Availability of infrastructure, lack of service
- ② Availability of a service, lack of infrastructure
- ③ Availability of a service, lack of marketing
- ④ Availability of a service, lack of integration with related services to promote consumption
- ⑤ Presence of a consumer need, lack of a service to satisfy it
- ⑥ Availability of a service, lack of updates on it over time

Hotel accommodation could contribute to tourism development in several ways. First, it would make it possible to accommodate groups of 40-50 individuals arriving together for organized visits. At present, such groups are served in Southern Konnevesi, e.g., by cruises and restaurants, but only as day visitors, precisely because the lack of suitable place for overnight stays. Secondly, a hotel would provide short-term accommodation for visitors motivated specifically by a visit to the national park, various events, or those passing through the area in transit, e.g., on their way north to Lapland or Northern Norway. For such visitors, cottage accommodation is unsuitable in terms of length of stay, capacity, location, available services, among other factors. Thirdly, not all nature tourists seek a “survival in nature” experience associated with tent camping; after the contact with

nature, many would like to quickly return to their usual comfort and sleep in clean sheets at a hotel. A comparison with Koli National Park, which also holds the official status of a national landscape, serves as a reminder that building a hotel in a remote nature destination should not be considered an impossible task.

- **Theme: Length of stay in the destination**

From the opinions expressed so far, it is already indirectly evident that one of the main challenges of the tourism product in Southern Konnevesi is how to encourage day visitors engaged in nature excursions to stay overnight in the destination, which would in turn boost the use of local services. This picture is further complemented by respondents' views on the duration of tourist stays (Table A3.21.). According to some, the problem lies not only in the lack of suitable accommodation but also in the limited diversity of activity services, which should be further developed. Possible solutions to overcome this challenge and extend visitors' stays could include attracting more caravan travellers, who are not dependent on existing accommodation facilities; developing and diversifying lodging services; and improving the packaging and sales channels of the services already available.

- **Theme: Destination accessibility**

An important aspect of any destination's tourism product is its accessibility, which makes visitation, and thus consumption, possible. Several respondents reflected on this theme (Table A3.22.).

At present, Southern Konnevesi is primarily accessible to those traveling by car, since there are no railway lines crossing the area and public bus transport is poorly available – reaching only the municipal centers but not the entrances of the national park or other nearby nature sites. As previously noted, Hankasalmi and Suonenjoki could be involved in cooperation to attract travellers arriving by rail, yet the distance between the stations and the starting points of health and recreational tourism activities still needs to be bridged in some way.

This need for accessibility underlines the importance of infrastructure and transport services for the successful operation of tourism. Accessibility also contributes to a sense of safety, which itself provides recreational benefits. Another related issue is that many travellers heading north already pass through or near the region, yet it remains a challenge to encourage them to stop and rest specifically in Southern Konnevesi.

Perhaps the most critical aspect of accessibility at present is the connection between the regional centers, Jyväskylä and Kuopio, and the national park. In the past, several transport solutions were piloted (Hyvärinen, Bliznakova & Kauvosaari 2018), but they were eventually dismissed as unprofitable or unsustainable. However, in the summer of 2025, a pilot project on accessibility, managed by the regional tourism organization Visit Jyväskylä Region, has planned to promote transport connections from Jyväskylä to the national parks of the region. The plan includes two round-trip routes to Southern Konnevesi with 4-5 hours of stay in the park: Jyväskylä – Hotel Revontuli (Hankasalmi) – Törmälä Center (Rautalampi) and Jyväskylä – Spa Hotel Peurunka (Laukaa) – Häyrylänranta Harbor (Konnevesi) (Kotilainen 2025). This initiative represents not only a significant attempt to improve accessibility but also a step toward overcoming the duality between the two municipalities, since the regional project would cross the administrative border and bring visitors from Central Finland into Northern Savonia. Notably, this would also be the first bus connection linking nearby hotels directly with the national park. Although the intentions for this pilot were mentioned during the interviews, its specific parameters became clear only later, after the empirical study was completed.

- **Theme: Need for productization of tourism experiences**

There is an evident dissonance between statements about the uniqueness of the destination and those about the lack of tourism revenue it generates. One respondent, for example, describes local tourism as “...*the unique experiences in Konnevesi...*”.

At the same time, unrealistic expectations are observed regarding the profitability of tourism and the return on investments in the national park, compared to what Finnish nature tourism statistics tend to promise:

*“In Rautalampi, the financial resources invested in the national park have not been returned many times over, as is often said to be the case for national parks in general.”*

To ensure returns and income from tourism, visits and experiences must be transformed into concrete tourism products through the process of productization (Table A3.23.). Productization involves the design of the service, pricing, promotion, purchasing channels, and the connection with other related products. Through productization, it becomes possible to overcome seasonality, secure a steady flow of clients, stimulate consumption and longer stays, enhance accessibility and safety, create added value for consumers, and ultimately drive business growth.

Without productization, there may well be excellent natural preconditions, such as a beautiful autumn foliage or picturesque lakeshores, but these alone do not generate a consistent flow of visitors at that particular time of year, nor do they motivate tourists to engage in activities such as cycling and related services around the lake.

- **Theme: Need for packaging of the tourism product**

One specific need related to the productization of the tourism service is its packaging. Respondents associated with Southern Konnevesi believe that good packaging and ensuring the subsequent marketability of the tourism service would help overcome many of the challenges facing tourism development (Table A3.24.).

The statements support the literature on health and recreational tourism, which suggests that the choice of a health or recreational visit is linked to the overall attractiveness of the destination, with its emblematic attractions, accommodation and food as basic tourism services, as well as associated products that capture added value. However, the respondents' statements also include a caution that packaging must be logical and well-founded.

There are different ways in which tourism services can be combined and presented as a unified whole, requiring different degree of cooperation (Figure 3.8.). An easy method, used in the past for packaging tourism services, is the weekly calendar. In essence, the weekly calendar is a marketing tool that presents the schedule for guaranteed / scheduled tourism activities over a certain period, such as the summer season, autumn, or winter vacation week. This is not classical packaging, where logically connected products are sold as a bundle for joint consumption by a single customer, but the weekly calendar rather synchronizes the implementation of tourism activities so that they do not compete, presents the diversity of activities in the destination, and also facilitates their purchase.

**Figure 3.8.** Forms of packaging the tourism product according to the level of cooperation required (author's elaboration).



Another form of packaging, which does not necessarily require a high level of cooperation, is a common digital platform for selling tourism services, where the customer can select and add all desired services to a common shopping cart. Such modern, flexible platforms, as opposed to classical reservation systems, exist and are known to the tourism operators in Southern Konnevesi, but at present they are not in use.

A form of packaging that requires more active involvement and formal partnership is the sale of tourism services of the destination through a travel agency or another actively packaging agent within the ecosystem, such as a transport company.

- **Theme: Destination marketing**

Another important aspect of productizing tourism services is their marketing communication and promotion (Table A3.25.). Respondents unanimously agree that tourism marketing should be jointly conducted to achieve maximum results by combining the resources of very small operators. Cooperation with the regional tourism organization in Central Finland, Visit Jyväskylä Region, contributes to marketing efforts but does not eliminate the need for focused marketing of Southern Konnevesi. Moreover, this type of paid cooperation does not translate directly into sales, especially since Visit Jyväskylä Region has no sales functions. Overall, tourism communication in the region is assessed as insufficient, and even basic information that cannot be specifically considered marketing – such as opening hours and prices – is often missing. Such information is available only to those familiar with the area, who are unlikely to be tourists. For the neighbouring region of Northern Savonia, no information on this topic was obtained at all.

Regarding the marketing of the national park, it is so constant and well-functioning that some interviewees believe the growth in park visitation occurs naturally rather than as a result of marketing. A key feature of the marketing communication of Metsähallitus is that it has both focused and national dimensions.

A recent innovation in Metsähallitus's information services, which also has marketing parameters, is the launch of a national outdoor recreation information service at the end of 2024, integrating previous services such as the Retkikartta outdoor recreation map service, the website Luontoon.fi with information on Metsähallitus-managed natural sites, as well as other sources, including the Lipas sports facility map service and the Finnish Outdoor Association's information on ski slopes and other routes and facilities. The new database combines information on recreational sites maintained by various public and third-sector operators, which itself supports the ecosystem model and helps users greatly. Only privately managed sites and facilities are excluded from the platform, which is publicly funded – a common operational principle in Finland.

In the absence of a representative tourism organization of the destination, the marketing of Southern Konnevesi as a destination falls on the municipalities, which have not been able to coordinate the task among themselves. As a result, marketing of the destination as a whole is practically nonexistent. Individual municipal tourism platforms are still underdeveloped, and a suitable model for coordination and economic logic for their operation is being sought. The losers in this situation are the tourism enterprises, whose messages remain poorly communicated to potential clients and disconnected from the destination as a whole.

**Thematic area: Tourism management and adopted management approaches in the destination**

The themes and subthemes related to this topic area are summarized in Table 3.4.

**Table 3.4.** Structure of the thematic area “Tourism management and adopted management approaches in the destination” – Southern Konnevesi (author’s elaboration).

Thematic area	Theme	Subtheme
Tourism management and adopted management approaches in the destination	Approaches to destination management	Possible organizations for destination management
		Public governance
		Community approach of ecosystem governance
	Toolkit for tourism management	Strategic plans
		Data-driven management
		Subsidiaries
		Development projects
		Communication instruments for visitor management
		Forums for wide stakeholder involvement in tourism
	Challenges to destination’s ecosystem governance	Need of competencies for tourism, health, recreation, and governance
		Resources for governance
		Awareness about the division of roles in the ecosystem

- **Theme: Approaches to destination management**

The exposition of this theme begins with the definition of tourism management spontaneously given by one of the respondents:

*“The essence of tourism coordination is marketing activity and the deepening of cooperation.”*

In the statements of the interviewees (Table A3.26.), it is noticeable that a large part of them equate tourism management precisely with destination marketing. This is a narrow understanding that does not correspond to the latest literature on destination management, which states that in the high-tech modern society, a DMO can leave marketing processes to marketing platforms and focus on building cooperation by communicating common values and goals and strengthening the competencies of the ecosystem agents.

Respondents list multiple forms of organization as potential for establishing a DMO, and it seems that the specific form is not important, but the presence of a representative organization is. The attempt to form the Visit Kalaja association proved unsuccessful. The multitude of organizations sharing tourism management and coordination functions confuses tourism operators, and they hope for the emergence of a single representative organization to bring clarity to the processes. On the one hand, some respondents indicate that they would accept an external organization managing tourism, but on the other hand, they do not have positive experience from, e.g., the regional tourism organization defending their interests.

The greatest hopes are placed on the municipalities, which, in principle, take care of the common interests of the region, but the dualism between them must be overcome. The municipalities themselves have somewhat accepted tourism management as their future role, but developing a separate business sector such as tourism is not among their tasks, so as a guarantee they want to see active entrepreneurship, so they have something to manage or govern, and for ensuring the proper direction of regional development. They would prefer tourism to be coordinated by

business in the form of a lead enterprise, but, as already established, such an enterprise is missing.

In all statements, regardless of whether they lean toward business-led or public management, the idea of a community approach to ecosystem governance is evident, where there is no dominator, decisions are made jointly, and the widest possible range of stakeholders are involved. This aligns with the literature on tourism ecosystems, where the community approach is suggested as appropriate in cases where the destination consists of numerous small operators facing large-scale and even global challenges.

- **Theme: Toolkit for tourism management**

Respondents mention various tools that are used or should be used for managing different aspects of tourism in the destination (Table A3.27.). Of primary importance is the existence of a strategic plan for tourism development. Even considering the differences, unclear common goals, and dualism in the destination in practice, the master plan provides at least the broad lines of joint development over a time horizon and also serves as a basis for initiating development projects. Recent crises and the overachievement of goals in the first period of master plan's implementation have necessitated its update. The plan is also significant as a communication tool for synchronizing actions among those working in tourism and other sectors.

Regarding data-driven management, Metsähallitus has well-established practices for achieving its own objectives, but tourism operators need more information for successful decision-making. Providing data that supports management has the potential to transform the destination into a STBE, but Southern Konnevesi is still far from such an achievement, as there is no organization to establish practices for collecting, storing, and sharing data, even when it comes to basic tourism statistics.

A good practice from the Municipality of Konnevesi is the segmentation of management through subsidiaries, which perform different functions according to their structure. Although none of the existing subsidiaries currently performs the tasks of a DMO, the principle could in the future be adapted for the specific goals of tourism.

Regarding visitor management in the national park, theory is confirmed: in Finland, restrictions are difficult to enforce due to everyone's right, so management relies mainly on communication tools. Metsähallitus continuously develops its communication toolkit for visitors, one of the newest materials being the Outdoor Etiquette. It should be noted that Metsähallitus' practices and tools are applied nationally, not only in individual parks.

Respondents indicate that an important tool for tourism development has been the already completed development projects. Through projects, the destination has received additional human and financial resources, new ideas, and active efforts toward building a shared will. Although many specific achievements of projects fade with time, the common language among participating tourism actors was observed during the current research. A limitation of projects is their ephemerality. After a projectless period and a decline in enthusiasm for tourism, the municipalities are currently planning new joint projects.

Projects provide one possible forum for bringing stakeholders together in tourism, but respondents also mention other existing practices. Particularly interesting is a recent pilot project in Rautalampi aimed at involving the local population in municipal activities; it would be extremely interesting to observe similar efforts in the future, specifically in tourism.

Municipalities and inter-municipal economic development organizations also take care of consulting enterprises on tourism topics. At the same time, however, tourism management activity between the two municipalities appears uncoordinated, which contributes to the increasingly noticeable split of the destination into two separate parts. Dividing the destination into smaller and more manageable parts could also be an adaptation of the ecosystem to external crises and influences, but to maintain the whole, management coordination between the separate parts must remain strong, which in this case cannot be claimed.

- **Theme: Challenges to destination's ecosystem governance**

The challenges shared in the interviews that can be linked to the ecosystemic nature of destination management relate to the development

of competencies, the provision of resources, and the awareness of the roles of different agents within the ecosystem (Table A3.28.). The need to develop competencies – both for conducting tourism activities and for entrepreneurship, particularly in health and recreational tourism, as well as for tourism management – is best recognized by the municipalities, placing them in a suitable position to become the locus of coordination of the ecosystem. Awareness of management needs and of one’s own role, along with possessing experience and competence in communication and coordination, represents one side of the role of the locus of coordination, but resources are also necessary. These, however, constitute another serious challenge for tourism governance in the destination. The lack of temporal, human, and especially financial resources also explains the absence of a representative tourism organization in the destination. Another challenge, typical of the complexity of an ecosystem, is the unrecognized role of some agents, especially but not exclusively those on the periphery.

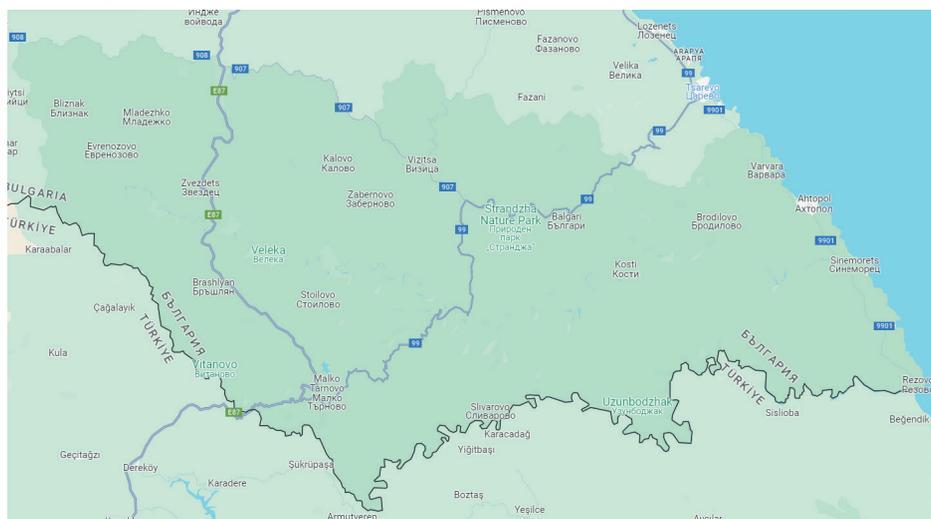
### 3.3. CASE STRANDZHA

#### 3.3.1. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DESTINATION

##### **Strandzha Nature Park**

Strandzha Nature Park (Figure 3.9.) is located in southeastern Bulgaria and represents the largest nature park in the country, covering 1% of its total territory (Assenova 2012). It includes five nature reserves, 13 protected areas, 17 natural monuments, two towns, and 19 villages (Georgiev 2010). The park was established by a decision of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria on January 24, 1995, as a people’s park, and was reclassified as a nature park in 2000 (Georgiev 2010). It is recognized as an area of national, regional, and European significance and priority according to various indicators of biodiversity and landscape value (Chorbadzhiyska 2012).

**Figure 3.9.** Map of Strandzha Nature Park (adapted from Google Maps application).



In socio-economic terms, the main functions of the area are agricultural and recreational; other forms of traditional livelihood include forestry, the extraction of facing materials, and marine fishing (Georgiev 2010). There is a trend of depopulation, driven both by the border location and the rural character of the area. This trend, on the one hand, is undesirable due to its negative socio-economic impacts, but on the other hand, it contributes to the improvement of environmental components (Georgiev 2010). Marine and recreational tourism are typical for the coastal zones of the park, whereas efforts are being made to establish rural tourism in the interior (Georgiev 2010).

### **Lack of a management plan for the nature park**

Despite the IUCN recommendation that all protected areas should have a management plan, Strandzha Nature Park has operated for three decades since its establishment without an approved management plan, due to opposing ecological, economic, and political interests. As one rare study on tourism management in the park concludes, “maybe the problem is that environmental protection and tourism development are very often seen as opposed development strategies” (Assenova 2012, 61).

The preparation of the management plan for Strandzha Nature Park was initially assigned to the Bulgarian-Swiss Biodiversity Conservation Programme, later transformed into the Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation (BBF), under the mandate of the Ministry of Environment and Water (MOEW). The work began in 1999, and the plan was submitted to MOEW in 2005. From the plan's motivation letter, it is clear that the submitted draft had already been aligned with the requirements of the National Forest Administration (NFA) and was adjusted to meet the requirements of the municipalities. The expert group that drafted the plan expressed disagreement with some of the recommendations and statements "concerning fundamental assumptions of the developed plan" (Bulgarian-Swiss Biodiversity Conservation Programme 2005, 2), hinting at a possible conflict already at this early stage.

The introduction to the plan presents a historical perspective on the park's development. The basis for developing the management plan was effective management in accordance with European standards for the management of the relevant type of protected areas. The preparation process is described transparently. A broad participation approach was adopted, including working groups on biodiversity and forest management, tourism, cultural-historical heritage, and agriculture, as well as seminars, a consultative group representing various institutions, and a survey on local attitudes toward the park.

The objectives of the plan are formulated as follows:

- a holistic strategy for the management of the park according to its specific characteristics,
- the initiation of a database for monitoring the park's key elements,
- the plan as a prerequisite for financing the development initiatives described within it.

A key feature of the plan is described as "an attempt to implement integrated management of the territory by including all stakeholders, individuals, and institutions in its management and administration" (Bulgarian-Swiss Biodiversity Conservation Programme 2005, 12).

The plan consists of five chapters. The first, “Description and initial assessment of the territory of Strandzha Nature Park”, includes information on the legal and administrative status of the park, its operational environment, and its structure in terms of nature conservation, functions, and ownership. This chapter continues with an assessment of the park’s potential, including a detailed description of biotic and abiotic, cultural, and socio-economic factors. In this initial assessment, tourism is considered both directly and indirectly. Indirectly, the park’s conservation value determines its significant tourism potential from the perspective of cultural ecosystem services and visitor attractiveness. Directly, tourism-related issues are reflected in the socio-economic assessment, where socio-economic processes are examined in terms of their sustainability and compatibility with the park’s protective status. Furthermore, attention is drawn to the lack of funding and qualified human resources, insufficient awareness of the park’s status and benefits, imperfect management structures and coordination practices, poaching and treasure hunting, and inadequate infrastructure and provision of tourism services, particularly in the interior. On the other hand, the preserved material and spiritual culture, the establishment of rural and ecotourism, increased environmental awareness, and the growing appreciation of the park among locals are seen as prerequisites for positive change. The vision for the park’s development presents it as “an attractive destination for tourism with a developed, integrated tourism product,” as well as “an environment generating income through sustainable use and conservation of nature” and “a setting for cooperation and partnership” (Bulgarian-Swiss Biodiversity Conservation Programme 2005, 6).

The second chapter, “Ideal and operational objectives”, sets out six general and 21 specific long-term objectives, defined in accordance with the management goals for protected areas under the Act on Protected Areas. Thirty-two factors are identified, 19 of which constrain and 13 of which facilitate the long-term objectives, with opportunities to mitigate negative impacts. These factors are both natural and anthropogenic, and both internal and external to the park. Additionally, 39 operational objectives

and strategies for their achievement are defined, including territorial zoning, programs, projects, and tasks.

The third chapter, “Zoning, regimes, conditions, standards, and recommendations for activity implementation”, presents zoning as a tool for achieving the long-term and operational objectives. The following zones are defined:

- strict protection zone,
- limited human interaction zone,
- zone for restoring the natural character of disturbed ecosystems and sustainable development,
- specialized tourism zone,
- specialized infrastructure zone.

Each zone is described in terms of its management objectives, forms of ownership, responsible individuals and institutions, resource use methods, construction regulations, visitor access, capacity, and scientific activity. The tourism zone includes existing and planned trails, tourist centers, and facilities for tourism and recreation outside the settlements. Its goal is to diversify opportunities for recreation and tourism without harming nature. Key considerations for this zone include directing tourist flows toward less sensitive areas and balancing the coastal and interior segments of the park.

Among the proposed measures for achieving the plan’s long-term objectives in the fourth chapter, “Programs, projects, and tasks”, those of particular interest to the present study are measures related to the development of environmentally sustainable tourism and the corresponding infrastructure, the revival of environmentally sustainable forms of traditional livelihoods of local residents, such as agriculture and forestry, support for local entrepreneurship, the preservation and interpretation of cultural and historical heritage, the development of partnerships, and the raising of awareness regarding the park’s goals and benefits.

The fifth chapter, “Monitoring the implementation of the management plan”, provides for regular reviews and an assessment of the achievement of objectives and tasks. It stipulates that annual reports on the implementation

of the plan should be submitted to NFA and the Advisory Council of the park's directorate; every four years, a broad public discussion of the plan's implementation should be initiated, organized by MoEW. Indicators and timelines for achieving the objectives are specified. A procedure is proposed for revising the plan during its final year of validity.

The draft plan remains relevant, as it is the only publicly available document serving as evidence of efforts toward strategic management of the park. Its authenticity is confirmed by its presence on the official websites of Strandzha Nature Park and BBF. While it is not a specific strategic document on tourism, it comprehensively addresses all areas and aspects of park management in a highly balanced manner, particularly considering that it was developed by conservationists. Since it emphasizes broad participation of stakeholders in the management of the park, the document is aimed at a wide target audience, though its substantial length of 294 pages may deter the general reader.

Following this draft plan, several other versions were developed in attempts to establish park management, but they were neither preserved nor published and, unfortunately, cannot be analyzed. Subsequent versions would have provided a temporal perspective on the plan's development and grounds for analyzing potential factors impeding its adoption.

The development of the nature park during the period 2010-2024 has been periodically reflected in national and regional media, as well as on the websites of stakeholders, such as environmental and other NGOs. Predating sources were not found. Although the factual information in these sources is largely triangulated among them and with the management plan, their tone often varies from strongly optimistic to extremely pessimistic. News reports are typically highly selective and uneven regarding the level of detail. The content relies mainly on dystopian scenarios, provocative tone, and satirical means, using expressions such as "the normative document goes into the trash," "regulatory carousel" (Kostadinova 2020), "irreversible impacts" (EuroNatur Stiftung 2014), "catastrophic changes," "the battle for Strandzha," "the invasion of nature continues," "massive

deforestation,” “the desecration is irreversible” (Dzhordzheva 2012), and “three ministries scratching their heads” (Mediapool 2014), portraying businesses and municipalities as villains (News.bg 2023; Kostadinova 2020; Dzhordzheva 2012), and state authorities as incompetent and highly bureaucratic (Kostadinova 2020; Mediapool 2014; Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation 2014).

The documents reviewed highlight the main conflicts faced by the management plan, namely construction in the coastal zone, where local residents and businesses do not identify with the park (Standart 2023; Radev 2021; Goranova 2021; Kostadinova 2020; Tsarevo.info 2014; Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation 2014; Novinite.com 2010), and the utilization of forests in the interior, where residents face limited economic opportunities and may resort to illegal logging (Ivanova 2024; Standart 2023; Dzhordzheva 2012), as well as the main opponents of the plan, Tsarevo Municipality (Kostadinova 2020; Tsarevo.info 2016; EuroNatur Stiftung 2014; Mediapool 2014; Dzhordzheva 2012; Novinite.com 2010; BNT News 2010; Burgas24 2010) and, to a much lesser extent, Malko Tarnovo Municipality (Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation 2014). It is, however, evident that even the park directorate at one point opposed the adoption of the plan in the form in which it was presented (Burgas24 2010). Among the key problems facing the nature park are the lack of awareness among the local population regarding nature conservation and the future of Strandzha (Ivanova 2024; Tsarevo.info 2016), the underdeveloped infrastructure and economy in the interior (Vladkova 2012), and the structural disproportion between the coast and the interior (Dzhordzheva 2012). At the national level, the absence of an approved management plan appears to be more of a widespread practice than an isolated case, as seven of the eleven nature parks in Bulgaria lack an approved or up-to-date plan (News.bg 2023). The adoption procedures are most often deliberately prolonged due to objections over minor technical details (Dzhordzheva 2012), which reduce the documents’ timeliness (News.bg 2023) and primarily benefit the construction sector (Kostadinova 2020).

To some extent, the information presented in the news reports is contradictory, as if the entire dialogue between stakeholders was conducted through the media. The evolving discourse around the adoption or rejection of the management plan (For the nature 2010; BNT News 2010; Burgas24 2010), influenced by the shifting perspectives of stakeholders, highlights the power dynamics in the decision-making process. While some sources present potential for refining and ultimately adopting the plan (24 chasa 2021; Novinite.com 2010; Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation 2014), others suggest creating a new plan to address significantly changed conditions (Kostadinova 2020; Ivanova 2024). The claim that the draft management plan was developed solely through desk research (Kostadinova 2020) contradicts statements made within the plan itself. Furthermore, the withdrawal of the initial preparatory organization, BBF (Kostadinova 2020; Goranova 2021), leaves unclear who currently leads the planning process (Ivanova 2024). Contradictions also exist regarding certain side aspects. Illegal logging in the interior is described, on the one hand, as uncontrollable due to insufficient personnel in the park directorate (Ivanova 2024), and on the other hand, as practically impossible due to strict oversight by the same directorate and intensive monitoring by environmental NGOs (Standart 2023). Concerns over an alleged ban on all construction within the park (Standart 2023) contradict the zoning procedure presented in the management plan draft.

The news reports also contain some subtle positive messages. The park has partially overcome the absence of a management plan, and certain development measures have been implemented, such as new routes (Dzhordzheva 2012), youth education programs (Ivanova 2024), and development projects (Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation 2014; Dzhordzheva 2012). The park was established to achieve sustainability, for “the economic development of the region” and for “the preservation of nature and local culture” (Vladkova 2012).

## **UNESCO recognitions**

The significance of the area has also been recognized by UNESCO. Strandzha is known for its cultural heritage, with the tradition of fire-dancing (*nestinarstvo*) included in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Assenova 2012; UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage n.d.a). A biosphere park has been established under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme, focusing on the Uzunbudzhak Nature Reserve (UNESCO n.d.a). Initially, the biosphere park was intended to encompass the entire Strandzha Nature Park (Dzhordzheva 2012; Trasevo.info 2016), but its final boundaries were reduced due to Tsarevo's refusal to join, including instead the entirety of Malko Tarnovo Municipality (Zelena Stranja 2022).

## **Resort status**

The Strandzha area is home to numerous climatic resorts, officially categorized as such by a decision of the Council of Ministers under the Health Act (Council of Ministers 2012). The town of Malko Tarnovo is classified as a local mountain climatic resort. The towns of Tsarevo and Ahtopol are climatic seaside resorts of national significance, while the villages of Lozenets and Sinemorets in Tsarevo Municipality hold local significance as climatic resorts. This verifies the presence of established climatic health and recreational resources in Strandzha that could be utilized for tourism. However, resort status does not guarantee actual tourism activity. The basis for granting this status is explained in the Ordinance on Resort Resources, Resort Areas, and Resorts (Ministry of Public Health and Social Care 1987), but bioclimatic resources are more generally defined and, as a result, less protected compared to resources such as mineral water or therapeutic mud.

The significance and contribution of resort status to tourism are unclear, also according to the Tourism Act (2013/2023, ch. 4, art. 56a), which addresses only national resorts and does not provide concrete

measures for regulating or utilizing them. Resort status represents a kind of normative link between the Health Act and the Tourism Act. However, the Tourism Act recognizes as health tourism only “balneotherapy, spa, wellness, and medical tourism”, while, e.g., mountain, rural, eco-, adventure, and sports tourism are left out of it, and other forms, such as climatotherapy tourism, are not mentioned at all (Tourism Act 2013/2023, ch. 1, art. 2).

This leaves some places designated as resorts, including those in Strandzha, with a status that cannot be effectively realized.

### **Belonging to the Southeastern Region**

Territorially, Strandzha belongs to the Southeastern Region of Bulgaria, and strategic objectives for tourism development are outlined in the Integrated Territorial Development Strategy for the Southeastern Region for the 2021–2027 programming period (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works 2022). The Southeastern region is a large administrative-territorial unit encompassing the provinces of Burgas, Sliven, Stara Zagora, and Yambol.

According to the strategy, tourism is a strategic objective of regional development. Nearly half of Bulgaria’s mass tourism takes place in the Burgas Province (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works 2022, 150). The strategy foresees diversifying the regional tourism product, which is primarily based on seaside tourism, through “active inclusion of the rich natural and cultural values of the region’s hinterland” (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works 2022, 151). Health and recreational tourism are not directly prioritized in the strategy, but other objectives, such as improving cultural and sports infrastructure, provide “access to the region’s cultural and natural heritage” (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works 2022, 154). This infrastructure serves both the local population and tourist flows.

The strategy also aims to improve transport connectivity and accessibility, noting that “the Strandzha area has an insufficient road

network compared to other parts of the country,” and envisions the construction of a four-lane road connecting municipal centers with the provincial capital, Burgas, along the Burgas – Malko Tarnovo Border Checkpoint route (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works 2022, 157). Tourism-related aspects are also embedded in the strategy’s educational goals, which could help cultivate an adequate workforce for the sector.

### **Belonging to the Burgas Black Sea Coast Tourism Region**

Bulgaria is divided into nine tourism regions (Fig. 3.10.), and according to this classification, Strandzha belongs to the Burgas Black Sea Coast Tourism Region, which is further subdivided into the Burgas Black Sea Coast and Strandzha Black Sea Coast subregions. The main objective of Bulgaria’s Tourism Zoning Concept is to support the marketing of individual regions and their tourism products by distinguishing them from one another. The working classification of tourism types in the Tourism Zoning Concept adheres to the definition of health tourism in the Tourism Act (Ministry of Tourism 2015, 29), and health tourism is not listed as a priority for the Burgas Region. However, seaside and mountain tourism include recreational subtypes. The primary specialization of the Burgas Black Sea Coast Tourism Region is seaside and cultural tourism, while the extended specialization encompasses seaside recreational, cultural, adventure, eco, rural, religious, pilgrimage, as well as all forms of health tourism (Ministry of Tourism 2015, 57). From a strategic and marketing perspective, this provides a supporting basis for developing health and recreational tourism in Strandzha.

For the management of a tourism region, the Tourism Act (2013/2023, ch. 3, art. 17) provides for a *Tourism Region Management Organization* (TRMO), which unites at least four municipalities and is tasked with marketing, strategic planning, project implementation, maintaining a tourism database, developing competencies, and supporting certification. Efforts to establish a TRMO for the Burgas Black Sea Coast Tourism Region began

in the autumn of 2016 (Flagman 2016), but the organization was formally established only in 2018 (Burgas24 2018). Strandzha is well represented in the TRMO, as the mayors of Malko Tarnovo and Tsarevo are among the seven members of its board.

**Figure 3.10.** Tourism regions in Bulgaria (adapted from Ministry of Tourism 2015, 53).



The Marketing Strategy of the Burgas Black Sea Coast Tourism Region for the period 2021-2024 provides detailed information not only on the marketing objectives of the region but also on the overall state and management of tourism. It reveals that the entire region needs stronger partnerships and development of year-round tourism (Burgas Black Sea Coast Tourism Region n.d., 8). The tourism sector faces key challenges such as dependence on seasonal revenues, high taxation, frequent legislative changes, shortage of qualified personnel, and limited access to financing, while investments in innovation and research are almost entirely neglected (Burgas Black Sea Coast Tourism Region n.d., 71). SMEs rarely participate in professional associations, mainly due to the lack of trust in the protection of their interests; links with tourist information centers are limited, and cooperation with local authorities is

weak – only a small share of tourism companies have engaged in joint initiatives on sector-relevant issues (Burgas Black Sea Coast Tourism Region n.d., 72). Tourism enterprises and stakeholders lack the will to work together and to reach consensus on regional development (Burgas Black Sea Coast Tourism Region n.d., 157). The state is subject to high expectations but also criticism, as strategic documents are often prepared pro forma, without the participation of businesses, making them inadequate and difficult to apply (Burgas Black Sea Coast Tourism Region n.d., 157).

Companies identify several key factors for tourism development in the region, including the training and qualification of staff, infrastructure improvement, improvement of service quality, regional promotion, and effective marketing policies, while as main weaknesses they identify poor infrastructure, seasonality, staff shortages, overconstruction, and depopulation (Burgas Black Sea Coast Tourism Region n.d., 72). The underdeveloped tourism infrastructure pushes inland municipalities without access to the sea to the periphery of tourism demand, putting them at risk of being left behind (Burgas Black Sea Coast Tourism Region n.d., 73).

Visitors report overall satisfaction with their travel experiences: domestic tourists value nature, hospitality, and safety, while foreign tourists appreciate local cuisine; both groups criticize the lack of entertainment, service quality, and cleanliness, with infrastructure being the most frequently mentioned problem; nevertheless, they are ready to revisit the region and recommend it to others (Burgas Black Sea Coast Tourism Region n.d., 73).

The strategy proposes that the region's USP should be based on the combination of sea and mountain, where seaside tourism serves as the core product complemented by alternative forms of tourism. It is expected that such a composite product would increase visitor satisfaction, extend the active season, and improve tourism profitability (Burgas Black Sea Coast Tourism Region n.d., 156). The strategy identifies the TRMO as a

mediator between the state and the business sector in addressing the most significant and complex challenges.

Regarding health and recreational tourism, the strategy contains several relevant references within its stated development objectives for the tourism region, though some inconsistencies can be observed. Recreational tourism is identified in specific objectives and sub-objectives as *seaside and camping recreational tourism*, with the considered area of Strandzha being Tsarevo Municipality. However, there are also mentions of *cultural tourism* emphasizing recreation in the sense of physical and mental restoration, which implies a broader understanding of the concept of recreation. In this context, the objective includes inland municipalities such as Malko Tarnovo and Sredets.

Health tourism is entirely allocated to areas outside Strandzha and is defined inconsistently – always including balneological and spa tourism, sometimes medical, sometimes therapeutic, while the terms wellness and wellbeing tourism appear to be used interchangeably. Other types of tourism, such as equestrian, rural, cycling, hiking, pilgrimage, ecological, and adventure, are not conceptually linked to health and recreation in the document, despite also contributing to physical and psychological restoration.

It should also be noted that the resort status, which applies to many settlements in the region, is not mentioned in the strategy at all. This omission creates the impression of insufficient understanding of health and recreational tourism for the purposes of their development and management. The document provides little guidance to the destinations within the region on what these forms of tourism actually entail or how they should be approached as development objectives.

The strategy also reviews the tourism strategies of individual constituent municipalities (Burgas Black Sea Coast Tourism Region n.d., 7). Concerning Malko Tarnovo, it highlights forest and river resources and the potential for cultural, entertainment, educational, religious, ecological, rural, fishing, sports, vacation, balneo, and spa tourism, yet the concepts

of health and recreation are notably bypassed (Burgas Black Sea Coast Tourism Region n.d., 10). As for Tsarevo, the municipality declares ambitions not only for the growth of existing mass tourism but also for independence as a destination on international markets. However, an inconsistency is evident, as the same document also refers to the development of “sustainable forms of tourism” and cooperation with other municipalities (Burgas Black Sea Coast Tourism Region n.d., 13). The strategic measures of both municipalities are examined based on their inclusion in the marketing strategy of the Burgas Black Sea Coast Tourism Region, yet no timely programmatic or strategic document on tourism was identified for either of them.

### 3.3.2. CURRENT STATE OF THE DESTINATION ACCORDING TO THE THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE CONDUCTED INTERVIEWS

#### **Thematic area: Attitudes towards tourism and the development of health and recreational tourism in the destination**

The topics and subtopics related to the thematic area are summarized in Table 3.5.

- **Theme: Scepticism about the destination**

Despite the presence of tourism potential and the activities of individual operators, according to some respondents Strandzha cannot really be considered a destination, and tourism is not seen as a serious or stable business sector:

*“Tourism? Hardly.”*

*“The place is not a tourism destination at all.”*

*“I have no idea what Strandzha’s focus is supposed to be.”*

**Table 3.5.** Structure of the thematic area “Attitudes towards tourism and the development of health and recreational tourism in the destination” – Strandzha (author’s elaboration).

Thematic area	Theme	Subtheme	
		Level 1	Level 2
Attitudes towards tourism and the development of health and recreational tourism in the destination	Scepticism about the destination		
	Basis for tourism development in the destination	Natural and anthropogenic factors for tourism in Strandzha	Natural factors as leading for tourism
			Cultural factors as leading for tourism
			Combination of nature and culture for recreational benefits
		Significance and role of the nature park and the biosphere park for tourism in Strandzha	Significance of nature-protective functions
			The link between nature conservation and tourism
			Lack of significance of the nature park and negative implications
			Presence of UNESCO biosphere park
	Potential of the destination for developing health and recreational tourism	Basis for developing health and recreational tourism	Cleanliness
			Quiet and tranquillity
			Clean air and climatotherapy
			Pure mineral waters and spa
			Clean local food and herbs
			Physical activity
			The combination of sea and mountain
			Forest recreational resources
		Recreational value of the nature park	
		Demand for health and recreation matching Strandzha's resources	
	Significance of evidence-basedness, certification, and official status in relation to health and recreational tourism		Old research and recognition
			Documented and observed practical health and recreational benefits
		Merely formal existence of labels and statuses	
		Unavailability of products to be certified	
		Need for certification	

- **Theme: Basis for tourism development in the destination**

Respondents identified both natural and anthropogenic factors as the basis for tourism development in Strandzha (Table A3.29.). The nature of Strandzha is contrasted with large cities and industrial areas, which determines its recreational impact. Anthropogenic factors of particular significance include cultural-historical landmarks and traditions that intertwine elements from different eras, Christianity, paganism, and mysticism. The legacy of the Thracians is highly valued, forming a foundation for the later cultural development of the region. Cultural and natural factors are perceived by most interviewees as an inseparable, even unique, combination directly linked to recreation. Culture has evolved over time through the interpretation of natural resource, e.g., chapels are often built at sites with springs, while both cultural and natural resources are today used to facilitate recreation. Mysticism occupies a special place in the responses, as it is an important aspect of Bulgarian life and also contributes to leisure and restoration.

Another aspect of the factors shaping tourism in Strandzha is the presence of a nature park and a UNESCO biosphere park (Table A3.30.). On the one hand, nature protection is considered important for preservation, particularly in the face of established negative impacts from human activity. On the other hand, the categories of nature parks and biosphere parks allow for only a limited level of protection, which cannot effectively prevent negative processes. Respondents also expressed disappointment at the lack of development and maintenance of infrastructure in the park in line with conservation goals. Consequently, the park statuses have primarily symbolic or image value for the destination. However, this potential is not leveraged in Strandzha: Bulgarian tourists are generally uninterested in formal status and focus instead on the substantive experience, while foreign tourists tend to visit the destination sporadically rather than systematically. Awareness of the protective statuses and their significance, particularly that of the biosphere park, is extremely low among both visitors and tourism professionals in Strandzha.

- **Theme: Potential of the destination for developing health and recreational tourism**

Respondents spoke very actively about Strandzha's potential for the development of health and recreational tourism. At the same time, however, this potential remains largely unrealized:

*"Strandzha is the place for recreational tourism in my view, but many people underestimate it both as a region and in terms of its effects on the body."*

*"There is great potential for health and recreation, but we need to be honest about what it is based on."*

The respondents identified the cleanliness of the natural environment as the most important prerequisite for developing health and recreational tourism, which is linked to the presence and potential utilization of a variety of health and recreational resources: quiet, air, water, food, and herbs (Table A3.31.). A widely discussed topic was the air in Strandzha, which is not only clean but also considered to have therapeutic effects due to the specific climate. In the past, the air was used for climatotherapy, and a pulmonary hospital operated in Malko Tarnovo. The status of Malko Tarnovo as a climatic resort was also discussed in the context of climatic resources, the lack of awareness about them, and the underutilization of their potential. Clean air is universally accessible, but on its own it is insufficient to attract visitors; products must be developed and tourism businesses initiated. As noted in Chapter two, there is currently an initiative to revive climatotherapy in Strandzha.

Water is another resource whose health and recreational potential depends on a combination of cleanliness and other characteristics. Of particular importance are the mineral springs in the village of Mladezhko, which, as a health resource, are distinguished from water used for spa procedures for leisure purposes. A key factor for achieving tranquillity is the weak mobile network connectivity, which distinguishes the visit to Strandzha from everyday life. The calming effect of the recreational experience is perceived as a factor positioning Strandzha's tourism as alternative, as it is not sought by all visitors.

In addition to cleanliness and the specific characteristics associated with natural resources, other factors mentioned for the development of health and recreational tourism include physical activity, the sea-mountain combination, and forests. In rare cases, the potential for health and recreational tourism was also linked to the presence of the nature park.

Respondents in Strandzha did not discuss elements of the USP, but they did address growing demand in the context of health and recreational tourism (Table A3.32.). This demand is related to contemporary trends of greater awareness and concern for personal health, as well as increased daily stress. A particularly strong catalyst for the demand for health and recreation is the experience gained during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Theme: Significance of evidence-basedness, certification, and official status in relation to health and recreational tourism**

The topic of evidence-based benefits of tourism products in Strandzha was discussed with respect to several aspects: past recognitions and studies, documentation and monitoring of practical manifestations, the formality and limited practical value of statuses and certifications, the lack of suitable products for certification, and the need for research and certification. These aspects were discussed in the context of climatotherapy and climatic resorts, healing waters, the nature park, organic foods, and the destination's quality and sustainability brand (Table A3.33.).

According to the theory discussed in Chapter two, health tourism should be based on scientifically proven and certified products and health benefits, which provide added value, enhance destination recognition, and build trust. Strandzha has a historical status of a climatic resort. Climatic resorts still exist in the region today, but their presence is largely unknown, because the status has little practical implications. Respondents suspected that specific studies on the benefits of air quality exist, but these are not available to local operators and therefore cannot be utilized. Some questioned whether the climatic factors might have changed over

time, making these studies outdated, although the air's cleanliness remains indisputable due to the absence of industry.

Although scepticism about “*shamanic tales*” was expressed, respondents again emphasized the importance of the experiential and practical evidence of benefits, in contrast to status, which in many cases exists only formally. Equally important are the testimonies of those who have visited the destination and experienced health improvements or even relocated to the area for its health benefits. These evidences are not systematically collected and must be seen “*with one's own eyes*” and transmitted by word of mouth. This applies particularly to Bulgarian visitors, who are disillusioned by the many formal statuses that are practically ineffective. An exception is organic foods, which are reportedly sought based on certification, although such production is lacking in Strandzha. On the other hand, respondents believe that entrepreneurship and the creation of health and recreational tourism products could be supported by the existence of a certification methodology.

### **Thematic area: Characteristics and roles of tourism ecosystem agents in the destination and their interconnections**

The themes and subthemes related to the topic are summarized in Table 3.6.

- **Theme: Conflicts between agents of the ecosystem**

In the study of Strandzha as a destination, the topic of conflicts is integrative, particularly concerning the characteristics and roles of ecosystem agents and their interrelationships, but it is also indicated across all other thematic areas. Conflict in Strandzha is highly pronounced. It is not merely a dualism but multilayered and complex, as if the entire destination ecosystem is built upon conflicts, which, paradoxically, are what sustain its integrity.

**Table 3.6.** Structure of the thematic area “Characteristics and roles of tourism ecosystem agents in the destination and their interconnections” – Strandzha (author’s elaboration).

Thematic area	Theme	Subtheme	
		Level 1	Level 2
Characteristics and roles of tourism ecosystem agents in the destination and their interconnections	Conflicts between the agents of the ecosystem		
	Entrepreneurial activity in destination's tourism		Entrepreneurship as a challenge
			Tourism entrepreneurship as a side activity
			Aspects of the service
			Good examples of entrepreneurship
			Activities with growth in entrepreneurship
			Overlapping roles between public organizations and business
			Lack of local cooperation
			Interactions between businesses and the nature park
	Dominator in the ecosystem	The construction sector as a dominant actor in the tourism ecosystem	Relationship of municipal authorities with construction sector
			Intensive construction
			Foreign investors
			Examples from other destinations
	Role of the third sector in destination's tourism		BACHT
			Tourism society “Green Strandzha”
			Tourism society “Nasam-Natam”
			SPNHH “Brashlyan”
			Attempts to establish local regional development association
	Role of the municipalities in destination's tourism	Role of Tsarevo Municipality	
		Perceptions of the role of the Municipality of Malko Tarnovo in Strandzha's tourism	Negative opinions
			Positive opinions
Municipality's self-assessment			
Role of local community in destination's tourism		Strandzha residents as a closed community	
		Local attitudes toward nature protection	
		Local attitudes toward health tourism	
		Contribution of newcomers to tourism	
		Locals as a source of local/traditional knowledge	

Thematic area	Theme	Subtheme		
		Level 1	Level 2	
	Role and characteristics of tourism customers		Domestic tourists	
			International tourists	
			Visitor interests and motives	
			Regular customers	
	Involvement of agents external to the region or tourism sector		Inclusion of other municipalities in the destination	
			Links to tour operators	
			Health specialists	
			Links to educational institutions	
			Cross-border cooperation	
			Other agents outside the tourism sector	
	Interaction between tourism and state institutions		Unstable political climate	
			Poor synchronization among state institutions and legal gaps	
			Interaction with state institutions	
			Lack of government action	
	Establishing common goals for the destination's ecosystem	Destination's common goals	Divergent municipal goals	
			Lack of trust	
			Formula for unification	
			Tourism goals at the regional level	
		Advantages over other destinations in times of crises and global challenges		Pandemic
				Climate change
Natural degradation, logging				
Threats to the destination related to crises and global challenges			Pandemic	
			Climate change	
			Natural degradation, logging	
			Other negative environmental impacts	
			Social sustainability issues	
Need for sustainability			Ecological sustainability	
	Cultural sustainability			
	Visitor demand for sustainability			

It may sound paradoxical, but in many cases the different types of agents and individual operators involved in tourism are “agreeing not to agree” and thus only sharing the attitude that each of them is right while the

others are wrong, and that everyone is on their own, surviving amid a sense of helplessness:

*“It’s a big struggle, but I don’t care anymore, I’m used to it.”*

*“In Bulgaria, we rely on a miracle. That’s not by chance that we’re in Strandzha, here we namely hope that a miracle will happen for us.”*

*“Everyone does whatever they want. We also do whatever we want and don’t ask anyone for permission, but we do it properly, otherwise it gets very complicated.”*

*“I’m so disappointed with everything that’s happening. If all the efforts we put in here were applied in a more normal country...”*

- **Theme: Entrepreneurial activity in destination’s tourism**

Entrepreneurial activity in Strandzha’s tourism sector was discussed in terms of multiple aspects, most of which concern its character and current state; links between enterprises or entrepreneurs and other ecosystem agents were rarely mentioned (Table A3.34.). Entrepreneurship is viewed as a challenge not suited for everyone. Variable conditions and the specific difficulties of small settlements explain the low level of private initiative.

For many operators, tourism entrepreneurship is a side activity – not because it is unprofitable, but due to the two faces of the same issue, namely depopulation. Even those running successful businesses are often unwilling to live permanently in the area, while the lack of residents limits the availability of labour, constraining business expansion.

Entrepreneurs invest in active and personalized customer service, often participating directly in customer interactions. They focus on offering services that can be delivered at a high quality rather than providing a broad spectrum at any cost. Two concrete examples emerge from interviews: a spa hotel in Mladezhko and a guesthouse in the Kachul area. Despite their differences in scale, both are characterized by bold investment, persistence, and proactivity. Accommodation and dining have been highlighted as growing sectors, particularly in the inland areas, driven not by nature- or health-focused tourists but by military

and border police patrols as business tourists, especially in the town of Malko Tarnovo.

Regarding guided services, roles overlap between private businesses and public organizations, including the park directorate and municipal tourist information centers. Public organizations provide guides due to insufficient private offerings or inadequate local services, but lack of role planning may undermine private initiative through competition under unequal conditions.

Interviews indicate that local cooperation among businesses is largely absent, reflecting misunderstanding of its meaning, scope, and goals, as well as mistrust. Examples of short service chains and cross-recommendations exist, but these are exceptions rather than the rule.

Interactions between tourism entrepreneurship and the nature park are marked by the lack of respect not only for nature but also for other human activities in the region. Increasingly, park territories are being exploited unlawfully. Construction and ecologically unfriendly activities in accommodation represent one side of this issue, while competition among guides, as an activity not bound in specific locations, drives the creation of unregulated routes that violate zoning and property regulations. In addition, marine tourism businesses and their clients generally do not perceive a connection to the park, reflecting a semantic divide: “beach” versus “park,” as the latter is primarily understood as forest and mountain.

- **Theme: Dominator in the ecosystem**

Interviews indicate a strong dominance of the construction sector over the tourism ecosystem in Strandzha, a phenomenon also observed in other attractive destinations in Bulgaria (Table A3.35.). Intensive construction of both hotels and residential buildings is noted, particularly affecting the municipality of Tsarevo and the coastal area.

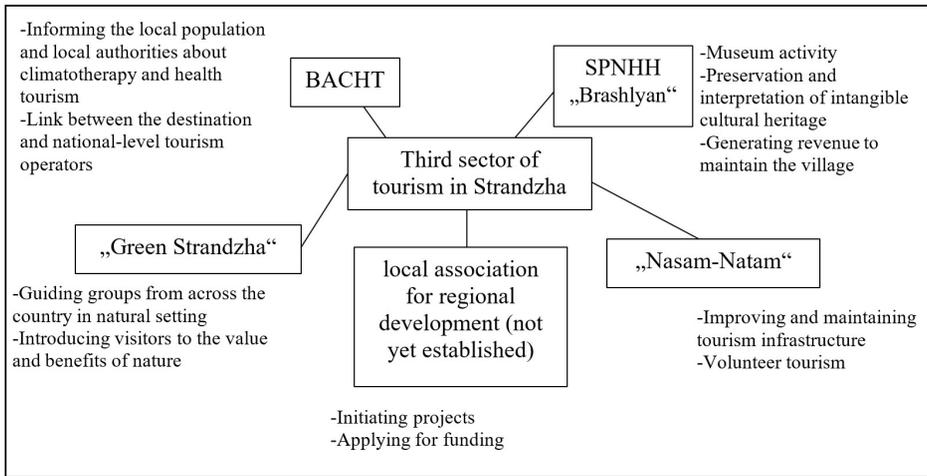
The strong lobby of the construction sector, supported by Tsarevo Municipality, indirectly impacts the entire tourism ecosystem in Strandzha. Due to a decades-long conflict between the Tsarevo Urban Development Plan and the management plan attempts for the nature park, no plan has

been adopted, and the park is effectively unmanaged. This has created conditions for numerous irresponsible practices, such as illegal logging, the creation of unregulated trails, pollution, and other environmental degradation – not only along the coast but also in the mountainous interior of the park, where tourism relies on natural and cultural-historical resources that are now endangered. Foreign investors appear interested only in profit, taking no responsibility for their projects, leaving unfinished “ghost” concrete structures that dominate the landscape. Interviews also cite an example from another destination, Sveti Vlas, where hotel construction has altered natural conditions and effectively hinders the use of climatic resources.

- **Theme: Role of the third sector in destination’s tourism**

Strandzha has an active third sector related to tourism, with five main organizations mentioned in interviews: the Bulgarian Association for Climatotherapy and Health Tourism (BACHT), the tourism society “Green Strandzha,” the tourism society “Nasam-Natam” (freely translating to “*Here and there*”), the Society for the Preservation of Natural and Historical Heritage (SPNHH) “Brashlyan,” and the potential establishment of a local association for regional development (Table A3.36.). The third sector’s activity is perceived as complementary to the other two sectors, particularly given the insufficient support by state institutions. While the roles of these organizations do not overlap and all have significant potential to contribute to the destination’s tourism (Figure 3.11.), this alone does not guarantee partnerships or coordination of activities. Interviews highlight similarities in interests between BACHT and “Green Strandzha,” and between SPNHH and “Nasam-Natam,” but without concrete forms of cooperation.

**Figure 3.11.** Roles of the main representatives of the third sector in the destination (author's elaboration).



Operators from other sectors also commented on the activities of the third sector. Overall, the opinions are very sharp and conflictual. The same organization is praised by some and criticized by others. Any action involving financial transactions is interpreted as profit-seeking and perceived negatively, although some organizations have established good practices of separating their commercial from non-commercial activities. The only fully local association, SPNHH, suffers from a shortage of human resources, for which a solution is currently being sought.

- **Theme: Role of the municipalities in destination’s tourism**

The role of Tsarevo Municipality was discussed in connection with the domination of the destination’s ecosystem. Its only mention in another context concerns the poor coordination of tourism:

*“There is no organization in tourism. The municipality doesn’t ask, ‘Do you need anything?’ and if you tell them something, you might get yourself into trouble.”*

The role of the Malko Tarnovo Municipality, as the main representative of the public sector in the inland area, is perceived contradictory. According to some, the municipality does not do enough to develop tourism; according to other tourism operators, they receive support only from the municipality;

and according to the municipal representatives themselves, the municipality is an “*external factor for the tourism system*” and powerless due to weak connections with state authorities and lack of investment (Table A3.37.).

- **Theme: Role of the local community in destination’s tourism**

Whether this is planned or not, the local community plays a significant role in tourism in Strandzha. Respondents addressed topics such as the local population as a closed community, the role of so-called “newcomers” (i.e., recent settlers), attitudes toward nature conservation and health tourism, as well as the locals as a source of local and traditional knowledge (Table A3.38.).

It is suggested that the local population, historically accustomed to living within a restricted area, does not easily accept new people and ideas. This may partly explain the presence of multiple conflicts and the lack of coordination and cooperation.

Statements regarding local attitudes toward nature conservation are contradictory: some respondents claim that locals do not understand the essence of protected areas and perceive them negatively, while others assert that the nature park is respected locally. Regarding health tourism, respondents indicated that locals associate it with business opportunities and welcome the concept.

The residents of Strandzha are primary sources of knowledge about the health and recreational benefits of nature, which, in the absence of formal research and documentation, is based on traditional, folk, and local knowledge. This role should not be overlooked, as theory suggests it can contribute to building sustainability.

There is also a particular group of residents, new Strandzha settlers, who have recently moved to the area. Attitudes toward them are overwhelmingly positive because they counteract depopulation and bring investments. Unsurprisingly, many of them are entrepreneurially minded, as alternative livelihoods in the area are limited. Specifically regarding tourism, their perspective, combining insider and outsider viewpoints, has the potential to present the destination to visitors in the best possible light.

- **Theme: Role and characteristics of tourism customers**

The aspects related to tourism customers, as discussed in the interviews, can generally be divided into domestic tourists, international tourists, the interests and motivations for visiting Strandzha, and the share of regular customers (Table A3.39.).

Bulgarian tourists are the main consumers of health and recreational tourism, largely because many foreign visitors are unaware of the specific health and recreational resources of Strandzha. Some respondents noted the large number of elderly visitors, a group expected to grow in the future. This segment is also considered a target audience for health and recreational tourism due to the health issues they commonly face. Other domestic tourist groups characteristic of Strandzha include residents of the capital who combine their visit with a stay in Sunny Beach, as well as visitors intrigued by Strandzha as a new destination. Visits by prominent public figures are a source of pride and hope for increased visibility of the destination in communication channels.

Most international visits to Strandzha are not intentional or planned, yet they remain a widely discussed topic. Three main groups stand out: mixed couples of Bulgarians and foreigners, foreigners who have previously lived in Bulgaria or those who come for scientific purposes. Additionally, two groups of foreign visitors arrive by chance: those in transit across the border and those who accidentally discover Strandzha's attractions, for example through the internet. The nationalities of visitors are not limited to traditional or established markets for Bulgaria, such as former Soviet republics, Eastern, Central, and Western Europe, but extend to distant countries in Asia as well. Visitors from Türkiye and the Middle East are also desired, though there is no concrete data on their visits. Foreign tourists are oriented toward sustainable activities and sometimes travel with a specific purpose. They could convey these positive messages to locals and domestic tourists if encounters and cultural exchange are encouraged. Moreover, foreign visitors support sustainability in the area by balancing seasonal demand – traveling outside the peak periods

for Bulgarian tourists – and actively consuming services due to their experience-oriented focus.

Regarding regular clients, perceptions vary: some respondents note predominantly first-time visitors, while others highlight a significant number of returning and regular tourists.

In discussions on visitor interests and motivations, special interests emerge that make tourism, especially in the interior of Strandzha, distinctly alternative. Recreational visits in the interior include hobbies such as fishing. There are also indications of occasional volunteer tourism, which can contribute to destination sustainability not only by addressing resource gaps but also by fostering interactions between locals and tourists, resulting in cultural exchange and increased awareness of the role of visitors within the tourism ecosystem.

- **Theme: Involvement of agents external to the region or tourism sector**

The participation of agents external to the region or tourism in the destination ecosystem is discussed in the interviews in relation to the territorial scope of the nature park, connections with tour operators, the need for healthcare specialists for health tourism, support from educational institutions for tourism development, cross-border cooperation, and the involvement of actors from other sectors (Table A3.40.).

Regarding which municipalities are included in the destination, the boundaries of the nature park are somewhat relevant, as municipalities can be divided into those formally included in its management and others participating in tourism due to the logic of the overall tourism product rather than their territorial affiliation with the park. A major problem in defining such categories is the lack of a management plan for the park and related conflicts, which result in the park having no clearly defined boundaries. This leads to considerable inaccuracies in understanding the park. For example, some respondents list up to four municipalities as part of the park, whereas documentary evidence exists only for Malko Tarnovo and Tsarevo. If the focus is specifically on health tourism, municipalities may be added to the

destination based on observed interest and visitor flows for health reasons, e.g., the village of Pismenovo in the municipality of Primorsko, which was mentioned in the interviews.

With regard to connections between the destination and tour operators, such links exist but are weak. Most are not based on established contractual relationships, so in many cases there is little information or local coordination regarding externally organized tourist visits, especially by foreign visitors. The interviews indicate that tour operators are usually based in Sofia, Sunny Beach, and potentially Türkiye. In the context of health tourism, it is noted that tour operators are ready to manage sales once such a product is developed.

A specific professional group mentioned in the interviews in relation to the potential development of health tourism is healthcare specialists. Some respondents argue that their absence limits the area's potential for this type of tourism, while others believe that developing contacts with healthcare specialists and establishing a process to steer clients or patients to the appropriate service or procedure at the national level would suffice. The issue of labour shortages in the destination is addressed further in the exposition.

The role of educational institutions in the destination's tourism is also highlighted. The "Prof. Dr. Assen Zlatarov" University in Burgas is identified as a potential partner. This is logical because the university represents higher education at the regional level and provides training in both tourism and medicine (Burgas State University "Prof. Dr. Assen Zlatarov" 2025). Educational institutions are mentioned as partners for supplying the necessary workforce and for developing a comprehensive health tourism product.

One of Strandzha's notable characteristics is its location along the border with Türkiye, which naturally enables cross-border cooperation. Moreover, as the mountain spans both countries, a broader, transboundary area could be established. Partnership with Türkiye could be particularly beneficial for health tourism, as respondents noted the neighbouring

country's specialization and experience in this field, from which good practices could be drawn.

Other non-tourism sector operators considered important for tourism, as mentioned by respondents, include the postal service and banks, the latter of which in Malko Tarnovo was closed in the spring of 2024.

- **Theme: Interaction between tourism and state institutions**

The actions of the state regarding tourism in Strandzha and its interactions with agents in the tourism ecosystem are perceived as highly negative (Table A3.41.). The discussion highlights the country's unstable political climate and frequent changes of government, which hinder timely decision-making. Poor coordination between various state institutions and gaps in tourism legislation are criticized. Interactions with state institutions are generally undesired and minimized, and when they do occur, they are described as a "*struggle*." According to many respondents, the state does not just do too little for tourism and regional development – it does "*nothing*"; there is a lack of long-term vision, sustainability, and accountability to society.

- **Theme: Establishing common goals for the destination's ecosystem**

As previously noted, there are no established common goals in Strandzha, which was highlighted by numerous respondents. They also indicated reasons for this and provided guidance on what is required to achieve local unification (Table A3.42.). The role of the municipalities is emphasized – differences in local-level goals are partly due to individual and unsynchronized objectives set by the separate municipalities. Trust among operators is also lacking, with profit repeatedly mentioned as a self-serving motive, portrayed negatively and contrasted with voluntary initiatives. It should be remembered, however, that tourism is a socio-economic, not merely a social phenomenon, which requires economic outcomes.

Regarding local unification, it initially requires at least some practical experience – one should not expect the establishment of shared will

and goals to occur automatically; deliberate steps are necessary. Good practices, the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders, persistence and patience, continuity, and actively seeking points of contact and shared values all contribute to building common goals.

Interestingly, Strandzha's affiliation with the Burgas Black Sea Coast Tourism Region was not mentioned in any of the interviews. The only reference to Burgas in relation to tourism goals was the emphasis on the lack of common goals.

Referring to insights from the literature review, monitoring sustainability, crises, and global challenges is important, as they are factors contributing to the common goals of the ecosystem (Tables A3.43., A3.44., A3.45.).

Some respondents are convinced that certain global challenges facing humanity provide Strandzha with a competitive advantage as a destination, while others are concerned about the strong impacts of these same challenges. For example, the recent pandemic increased interest in rural areas, nature, and a healthy lifestyle, leading to a boom not only in visits but also in construction and renovation of vacation properties. On the other hand, this has resulted in a significant volume of construction waste, which the municipality is not prepared to manage in an environmentally sustainable way. Additionally, some businesses reported lower consumption as a consequence of the pandemic.

While other destinations are losing significant tourism resources as a result of climate change, some respondents are convinced that this phenomenon cannot stop or alter the air currents that form the basis for climatotherapy. In contrast, others express doubts, noting that the climate is a delicate balance among multiple factors, some of which have changed dramatically in recent times, leading, e.g., to significant shifts in the seasons. The active tourism season is also shifting due to climate change. The warm season has moved toward September, creating a mismatch between the vacation window and optimal atmospheric conditions for summer tourism, further shortening the active season.

Illegal logging in Strandzha is a pressing issue, which was also addressed in the interviews. In the absence of effective control, deforestation leads not only to the loss of biodiversity and the aesthetic value of nature, which are crucial both for conservation itself and for the destination's tourist appeal, but also to life- and health-threatening disasters, e.g. the September 2023 flood, which heavily affected Tsarevo, destroying infrastructure and claiming human lives (Georgiev 2023). Despite the serious and negative nature of the phenomenon, discussions about logging also reveal optimism related to Strandzha's high regenerative potential, which still preserves much of its natural environment. Economic activity, pollution, and overconstruction are also mentioned in connection with the lack of ecological sustainability.

Depopulation of the interior is not the only observed deficit in social sustainability. Social responsibility is also lacking in regional development and tourism processes along the coast, where in some places locals have been displaced by tourists and foreign settlers, accommodated by new construction. Human health, in general, is also insufficiently considered.

The need for sustainability is not well understood by respondents. A few comments point to an awareness of the importance of nature as a consequence of its gradual disappearance, and culturally, to examples from other destinations where mass tourism and the commodification of traditions have led to a loss of authenticity. The interviews also indicate that visitors generally do not raise the issue of sustainability, which may reduce local operators' motivation to develop it.

Despite differences in respondents' views, there is evidence of dialogue, shared observations, and common concerns. Thus, topics related to sustainability, crises, and global challenges can serve as icebreakers among conflicted ecosystem agents and as a starting point for discussions about common goals.

### **Thematic area: Tourism products and packaging in the destination**

The themes and subthemes related to this thematic area are summarized in Table 3.7.

**Table 3.7.** Structure of the thematic area “Tourism products and packaging in the destination” – Strandzha (author’s elaboration).

Thematic area	Theme	Subtheme	
		Level 1	Level 2
Tourism products and packaging in the destination	Missing or underdeveloped products in the destination's tourism offering	Missing tourism-related products in the destination	Missing basic tourism services
			Missing services to support tourism
		Mismatch between accommodation supply and demand	
	Length of stay in the destination		The sea as the main motivation for visits
			Lack of services and infrastructure
	Destination accessibility		Transport infrastructure
			Tourism infrastructure
	Need for productization of tourism experiences		Separate elements that need to be combined into a tourism product
			Examples of tourism products
			Seasonality
	Need for packaging of the tourism product		Observed gaps in tourism product packaging
			Recommendations for packaging
	Subsidization of climatotherapy for health tourism	Aspects of subsidizing climatotherapy for health tourism	
	Lack of workforce in the destination's tourism sector		Aging population
			Lack of suitable living conditions for young people
			Difficulties in attracting and retaining staff
			Emigration
Lack of qualification and specialization			
Integration and qualification of minorities			
Personal stories of starting work in Strandzha			

Thematic area	Theme	Subtheme	
		Level 1	Level 2
	Destination marketing		Insufficient marketing communication
			Year-round tourism as a marketing theme
			Word-of-mouth marketing
			Cross-marketing and referrals
			Joint marketing
			Destination marketing through individual businesses' visibility on social media
			Use of international booking platforms
			Promotion through virtual tourism
			Promotion through tourism fairs

- **Theme: Missing or underdeveloped products in the destination's tourism offering**

Significant deficiencies related to the tourism product are indicated in the interviews (Table A3.46.). On the one hand, basic tourism services such as souvenir sales and guiding services are missing, while on the other, tourism activities are further hindered by the absence of complementary and supporting services such as laundry and cleaning.

The situation regarding accommodation in the inland area is extremely complex (Table A3.47.). A large part of the accommodation supply consists of old houses adapted for tourism purposes, motivated by the presence of border police and military personnel, which ensures longer-term use by one and the same client. This aspect is discussed separately later. At the same time, tourists oriented toward activities such as hiking or visits to cultural and historical sites need budget accommodation. Groups must be accommodated in individual rooms located within the same property or in the close proximity. This implies that hotel accommodation would be appropriate, but, for instance, staying in a spa hotel is not affordable for this market segment.

Entire houses are offered for rent, but they are often too expensive and large for individual visitors or families, and renting them for a single night is economically unfeasible for entrepreneurs. It has also been observed that some hotel and motel accommodation providers have reoriented towards serving military and border police personnel, thus overcoming the weekend occupancy peaks and the seasonality. The lack of coordination between accommodation supply and demand, as well as the failure to listen to the needs of consumers in the long term, have the potential to cause significant losses by demotivating nature-based and recreational tourists from visiting the destination.

- **Theme: Length of stay in the destination**

The length of stay is determined by the dominance of the seaside tourism product and the lack of services, maintenance, and infrastructure in the inland area (Table A3.48.). The stay duration in the coastal zone is longer than in the interior, while seaside tourists make short excursions to the mountain part, where there are numerous attractions suitable even for a longer stay – but the problem is how to retain tourists. Attractions alone cannot achieve this. There must be activities where tourists can spend their time, along with related services that make the experience fulfilling and memorable, yet such opportunities are missing. In addition, the lack of infrastructure and the poor condition of existing facilities in the inland area discourage visitors and reduce the recreational benefits of their visits.

- **Theme: Destination accessibility**

Accessibility to and within the destination is among the most widely discussed topics in the interviews, serving as an integrative theme for the study, as opinions related to accessibility can be found across nearly all other themes. Two main perspectives are represented – transport infrastructure and tourism infrastructure (Table A3.49.).

Regarding road infrastructure, the problems are long-standing. The underdeveloped road network is attributed to Strandzha's past as a border zone, where free movement was restricted. Transport infrastructure is

identified as a prerequisite for both tourism entrepreneurship and visitor satisfaction. Its condition is poor not only in the inland areas of Strandzha but, to a lesser extent, also along the coast. At the time of data collection, positive news emerged that the project for a four-lane road between Burgas and the Malko Tarnovo Border Checkpoint, included in the Integrated Territorial Strategy for the Development of the Southeastern Region, would be implemented – something that respondents noted with hope. However, the improvement of road infrastructure is also associated with concern about the possible loss of the scenic quality of the route, which currently contributes to the overall tourist experience.

As for tourist routes, the nature park offers extensive opportunities for hiking and cycling for different visitor groups, but the challenge lies in how the trail network can be maintained given the lack of resources. Another identified problem is maintaining order and cleanliness along natural sites and trails, which is considered the responsibility of every visitor. It is also noted that some of the routes were designed to be used only in guided activities, which is viewed negatively: once again, opportunities for generating tourism-related income and profit are perceived as something undesirable and almost sinful.

The development and maintenance of roads in Strandzha is the responsibility of the state, while the upkeep of trails, routes, and related facilities falls under the management of the nature park, which is, of course, also state-run. Respondents emphasize that these state tasks are not being fulfilled, forcing locals involved in tourism and NGOs to fill the gaps without regulation or coordination.

- **Theme: Need for productization of tourism experiences**

As previously established, the resources available for health and recreational tourism – or for any type of tourism – as such are insufficient to realize the destination’s potential, but productization is required. The interviewees in Strandzha discussed certain existing factors and individual tourism services that need to be combined and integrated into a coherent product. They also provided examples of well-functioning products and

opportunities for overcoming seasonality through productization (Table A3.50).

Regarding health and recreational tourism, one direction of development concerns spa and balneotourism. The area already features such tourism products, concentrated mainly around hotel facilities and spa infrastructure. This represents a form of strong productization based on large-scale investments, conceptually distinct from recreational tourism forms that simply focus on “*going out to breathe fresh air.*” Another development pathway is climatotherapy, which is not merely about breathing clean air, but rather a product with an established logic and historical continuity – successfully utilized in the past and tracing its tradition back to the Thracian period. The distinction lies in the accessibility and gratuitousness of air as a resource for entrepreneurship, versus the product as a combination of core and augmented benefits – the *total product* in Moore’s terms – for which the tourist would be willing to pay.

A third possibility for health and recreational tourism involves long-distance routes, which cannot be completed within a day trip and typically combine accommodation, food, and guiding services. Such a product already exists in Strandzha, namely Tour Strandzha.

An important message conveyed by the respondents is that productization helps to overcome seasonality, which is particularly pronounced: the seaside tourism product relies on only two months of high season. Climatotherapy, hiking and cycling routes, events, and festivals extend or completely transcend the tourism season, while indoor recreational activities – such as spa services – are fully independent of seasonality but require substantial investment.

- **Theme: Need for packaging of the tourism product**

It is precisely the packaging – the joint presentation of tourism services as a comprehensive product – that creates added value to the experience and develops tourism. However, this concept is not clear to all respondents in Strandzha:

*"I have no idea what a comprehensive product is."*

The packaging of the tourism product in Strandzha is weakly implemented, with responses mainly focused on identifying gaps and suggesting what needs to be done (Table A3.51.). It is emphasized that the existing services are not synchronized, and there is no readiness for concrete cooperation among their providers. The task of combining sea, mountains, and culture appears even more complex, although it is precisely this integration that could provide the greatest benefits for recreation. In theory, respondents understand that everything should be connected to maintain tourist interest for longer periods and justify the price paid, but no examples, practices, or tools for achieving product packaging were shared.

The respondents' statements reinforce the theory reviewed in this study, according to which the health or recreational product alone is insufficient, and other features and experiential opportunities in the destination are important for tourists' choice. The health and recreational tourism product can be the focus of the destination, but complementary products provide its competitive advantage and resilience in the face of unexpected crises and obstacles.

- **Theme: Subsidization of climatotherapy for health tourism**

A specific economic aspect of the health tourism product is the subsidization of procedures (Table A3.52.). This can only be regulated through an ecosystem approach, as it requires the involvement of agents both outside the tourism sector and beyond the destination area itself. This primarily concerns domestic tourism: it is not possible to influence other countries to send their citizens for climate therapy in Bulgaria under a subsidized scheme. On the other hand, the destination can take advantage of the existence of such policies elsewhere and attract clients accordingly.

The issue mainly relates to state responsibilities regarding legislation and the regulation of healthcare activities, as well as the subsequent task of informing healthcare professionals about the opportunity to refer patients to climatotherapy. A national subsidy scheme would bring benefits not only

to a single destination but also on a national scale. Therefore, BACHT has an important role to play in lobbying for such policies, while educational and research institutions could contribute by producing studies on the health benefits and potential healthcare cost savings resulting from the use of climatotherapy – following the Finnish example.

It should be emphasized that this does not entail the creation of an entirely new operational model but rather the revival and modernization of a model that existed in the past. However, some respondents expressed doubts about the availability of sufficient funding for such activities in contemporary conditions.

- **Theme: Lack of workforce in the destination’s tourism sector**

The growing shortage of workforce in tourism negatively affects the possibilities for developing and maintaining the tourism product. Although this is not a problem specific to Strandzha, its effects are amplified there by the ongoing depopulation processes. The interviewees actively discussed the issue, touching upon the aging population, the absence of young people willing to engage in the sector, the outflow of qualified workers abroad, the difficulties in finding and retaining staff, the lack of professional skills, the obstacles to integrating and training minority groups, and even sharing their own professional experiences (Table A3.53.).

The local population, already identified as the bearer of traditional and place-based knowledge, is aging, while there is no continuity from the younger generation. This results not only in a quantitative decline in population or available tourism workforce but also poses a threat to the preservation of Strandzha’s culture and traditions, which are among the key elements of its tourism identity. However, there are no mechanisms in place to attract and retain young people in the area, given the extremely low level of basic living conditions and lack of essential services.

Entrepreneurs face difficulties in finding employees and are often forced to perform much of the work themselves. There is also a risk that the staff already attracted may move elsewhere, especially abroad, if better conditions are found. Among the remaining locals, a lack of ambition is

observed; many belong to the Roma minority and require not only vocational training but also broader social integration measures. The region remains largely unknown or is associated with substandard living and working conditions, deterring potential newcomers and fresh labour inflows.

On the other hand, Strandzha has exceeded the expectations of some individuals who, for various reasons, have started working in tourism-related positions in the area. Collecting and sharing such personal success stories in the future could help mitigate the labour shortage. It is also essential to provide opportunities for vocational education in cooperation with educational institutions, as already mentioned, which could support both the upskilling of local residents and the attraction of qualified professionals from elsewhere.

- **Theme: Destination marketing**

Marketing was addressed in the interviews, yet there are very few indications of actual marketing communication, while guidelines and recommendations prevail (Table A3.54.). The respondents' statements reveal the overall insufficiency of marketing communication, which not only fails to inspire consumers to visit or engage in consumption but also maintains low general awareness of the destination. A need for *educational marketing* related to the cultural-historical and natural components of Strandzha's tourism was identified.

Concrete ideas for marketing content, however, are not lacking. The theme of year-round tourism could not only enhance the sustainability of tourism in Strandzha but also serve as a foundation for consistency in marketing messages. Respondents report that *word-of-mouth marketing* remains the most used and effective method – an unsurprising finding in the context of limited financial resources among businesses and a lack of consumer trust.

*Cross-marketing* between entrepreneurs for client referrals is not widely practiced. *Joint marketing* is both considered desirable and perceived as the only way to achieve visibility and return on marketing investments. Municipalities and the state are viewed as necessary partners in such

efforts due to the limited financial capacity and narrow communication channels of local enterprises; however, previous public–private marketing initiatives have not met expectations.

According to respondents, joint marketing is particularly important for shaping the health and recreational profile of the destination. In the absence of unified efforts, entrepreneurs share health-related messages individually through their own social media channels. Another desired marketing measure requiring cooperation is participation in tourism fairs and exhibitions.

Regarding digitalization, a project involving the Municipality of Malko Tarnovo was mentioned, aimed at developing virtual tourism as a means to raise awareness of the destination. Meanwhile, global booking platforms were discussed negatively, being perceived as attracting “*random visitors*,” while their potential for enhancing global visibility and awareness – not only of individual establishments but of the destination as a whole – tends to be overlooked.

### **Thematic area: Tourism management and adopted management approaches in the destination**

The themes and subthemes related to this thematic area are summarized in Table 3.8.

- **Theme: Public governance of the destination**

From the analysis so far, it is evident that joint, coordinated management of tourism in the destination is lacking. Given the presence of numerous small-scale operators with limited resources, a community governance approach would be justified; however, no indications of such an approach were found in the interviews. A community governance approach supposes a certain level of trust and dialogue among the ecosystem agents, which are absent in this case. Since there is no leading enterprise with tourism interests either, the only remaining option is public governance. In the case of Strandzha, this can be described as a particular type of

community management, as it is not carried out by a single entity but by several organizations: the Municipality of Malko Tarnovo, the Municipality of Tsarevo, and the Directorate of Strandzha Nature Park (Table A3.55).

**Table 3.8.** Structure of the thematic area “Tourism management and adopted management approaches in the destination” – Strandzha (author’s elaboration).

Thematic area	Theme	Subtheme	
		Level 1	Level 2
Tourism management and adopted management approaches in the destination	Public governance of the destination		Aspects of lack of coordination
			Aspects of municipal governance
			Aspects of nature park management
	Toolkit for tourism management	Absence of a management plan for the nature park	Reasons for the absence of an adopted management plan
			Arguments for the necessity of a management plan
			Arguments against the necessity of a management plan
			Information and guidelines for planning a new management plan
		Toolkit for tourism management	Strategic plans
			Development projects
			Digital platforms
	Challenges to the ecosystem governance		Need for competencies
			Lack of funding
			Butterfly effect of the presence of military and border police
	The link between tourism and regional development in Strandzha		Tourism for regional development
			Regional development for tourism
			Lack of regional development as a prerequisite for certain tourism resources

When discussing management, the interviewees once again emphasize the lack of coordination. Tourism management is characterized as uncoordinated, uncontrolled, and “*left to run its course,*” though some argue that coordination is unnecessary, as each municipality and the park have their own goals and priorities. From the perspective of local operators,

who are well acquainted with the numerous points of intersection, shared resources, and causal relationships between the park and the two municipalities regarding tourism, nature conservation, regional development, and especially sustainability, such statements can only be interpreted as a conscious attempt to oversimplify the existing complexity.

Regarding municipal governance, both practical aspects, such as the concentration of tourism activity in the tourist information center, and principled considerations are highlighted. Disappointment is expressed over the passivity of the population established during the socialist period, which may explain the weak private initiative for entrepreneurship and investment and the population's excessive reliance on local and state authorities. Reflections are also shared on the current transitional, transformative period for society, with municipal governance presented as a balancing force between opposing positions.

The management of the nature park, which should be exercised by the park directorate, is described as a jungle of bureaucracy, where individual institutions exercise authority without the knowledge of others, without any synchronization, and without informing the directorate of their intentions. This, combined with the absence of an approved management plan and the minimal funding, significantly formalizes the work of the personnel assigned to the park, undermines the list of dozens of tasks of the directorate, and questions the meaning of its very existence. External respondents describe the park's management as incompetent, contradictory, weak, and even lazy, yet arguably no one could manage effectively under such conditions – without guidance or instruments, the mission is impossible.

- **Theme: Toolkit for tourism management**

The analysis so far indicates that tourism management in Strandzha is weakly implemented. A related aspect is the scarcity of tools identified in the interviews on which this management could be based. In this context, the absence of a management plan for the park has been specifically examined (Table A3.56.), along with information on other strategic plans for

tourism in Strandzha, the use of development projects, and digital platforms (Table A3.57).

The reasons pointed out for the absence of a management plan for the nature park include conflicts of interest concerning its coastal areas, which can be linked to tourism through construction, a lack of management expertise within the park directorate, and the current volatile political climate in Bulgaria. Some respondents argue that such a plan is necessary to initiate development processes within the park and to prevent unsustainable overconstruction practices in Tsarevo. Others, however, contend that nothing depends on the management plan – neither project financing, coordination between municipalities, nor unification of the tourism sector. The statement that there is no unified national concept for tourism should also be noted, as the current national concept was discussed at the beginning of the case study. This misconception may be due to a local or individual lack of awareness of national measures for tourism development.

The interviews also provide information on current plans to renew or rewrite the management plan in another attempt at approval. According to respondents, the MOEW is responsible for the assignment and funding, while implementation will be carried out by a private firm with a broad range of experts. Concerns were expressed that stakeholder involvement might remain weak and insufficient to make the plan fully responsive to local needs and realities. Some suggest that the plan should not be drafted from scratch but should retain still-relevant sections from previous versions, while allowing for permissible compromises with Tsarevo Urban Development Plan to prevent the continuation of past conflicts and maximize the likelihood of plan approval.

As mentioned, no up-to-date municipal strategies or programs for tourism were identified by the document analysis. Furthermore, none of the respondents mentioned any. One strategy associated with tourism in Strandzha was discovered during field visits. It serves as a development plan for tourism accessibility and is prepared by Tourist society “Nasam-

Natam”. Its full content was not available for analysis, but interviews indicate that both municipalities support its implementation, signaling the presence of shared will.

Regarding the use of development projects, respondents’ views were consistent across the public, private, and third sectors. They perceive the application procedures and implementation conditions of projects as excessively difficult and not worth the effort. This assessment may stem partly from the lack of experience and routine among local organizations and partly from an objective mismatch between state criteria and actual operational conditions.

Concerning digital platforms used in tourism management, there is a dissonance between the approach of creating local platforms and this of using existing national, aggregative platforms. This difference is not insurmountable, as existing thematic platforms could be integrated into new comprehensive local platforms. A noteworthy private initiative is the relatively new platform [malko-tarnovo.com](http://malko-tarnovo.com), which, through content marketing and strong visual presentation, has the potential to serve as a platform for joint marketing and enhanced dialogue among tourism operators, alleviating the burden on public governance and aligning with the theory of ecosystem governance of the destination.

Data-driven governance is a method used by the state and increasingly implemented through digitalization, including in tourism, where the Unified Tourism Information System was introduced in 2019. Accommodation providers, for instance, are required to submit operational information digitally. However, interviews reveal disagreement with this practice, as it does not align with the capabilities and preparedness of local community representatives in tourism, particularly elderly actors, and may discourage them from participating in tourism activities.

- **Theme: Challenges to the ecosystem governance**

The specific challenges to establishing ecosystem governance in Strandzha relate to the strong need for competencies in tourism and related activities, the lack of funding for tourism development, as well as a

particular case illustrating the butterfly effect linked to a new segment of tourism customers in the destination (Table A3.58.).

As previously established, one of the soft-power methods of ecosystem governance is the development of competencies among the various agents, which supports both service quality and the awareness of shared goals. Respondents from Strandzha reported that the retraining measures offered by the Employment Bureau are not sufficiently communicated to be discoverable, and moreover, there is no mechanism to motivate the local population to participate. Entrepreneurs also expressed their willingness to train staff themselves on the job. Responsibility was highlighted as the most important competency. Existing tourism entrepreneurs do not independently recognize the need to enhance their competencies, e.g., in marketing and advertising, and perceive training as an external intervention in the management of their business. Regarding qualifications and competencies in tourism, a strong tendency toward individualism and reluctance to accept external influences was observed, which hinders the establishment of a common language and shared goals as the basis for ecosystem governance.

Regarding tourism financing, the gaps are largely due to the weak utilization of projects as a development tool. Expectations are focused on state budget financing and private investors, but these remain unmet due to a lack of awareness among peripheral agents of their role and contribution to the ecosystem, as well as the absence of proposed value in exchange for investments within the highly fragmented environment of the destination.

A specific case concerns the presence of army and border police personnel in Strandzha, linked to the increased migrant wave along the EU's external border over the past decade. The deployment of soldier and police patrols from the country's interior to the border with Türkiye can be seen as an example of the butterfly effect within the destination's complex system, since this type of business visitor affects the behaviour of tourism supply agents in ways that are not pre-planned and cannot be fully predicted. This,

in turn, influences tourism consumption in other segments associated with the so-called “traditional tourist,” linked to leisure and recreation. Many respondents mentioned different aspects of this case. On the one hand, the presence of police and military personnel has motivated numerous property owners in the area, particularly in Malko Tarnovo, to engage in accommodation services or legalize previously gray-market operations. Furthermore, the presence of the army and police creates a sense of security despite the presence of migrants in the region.

On the other hand, however, national security is being ensured at the expense of blocking accommodation capacity in the area, particularly for group lodging, as local accommodation providers have begun to prefer the secure and regular income from deployed personnel over recreational tourists, whose presence must be actively attracted and retained and whose visits vary greatly across days of the week and seasons. There are also accommodation providers who are not interested in serving this type of customers, but they are often located elsewhere than the town of Malko Tarnovo.

Some respondents expressed a degree of incomprehension regarding the state’s failure to utilize its own facilities to carry out its activities, instead relying on private tourism initiatives. The case has not yet been studied in detail, but it could potentially lead to changes in recreational tourists’ consumption patterns and withdrawal from the destination, evidence of which is indicated by other cases where accommodation providers have prioritized a new segment over the traditional one:

*“For four consecutive years, we hosted the staff of a TV program. We shot ourselves in the foot by turning away regular clients.”*

Since the destination functions as an ecosystem, no action, however isolated it may seem, occurs without repercussions among its agents. Therefore, such cases must be thoroughly studied, documented, and openly discussed within the destination.

- **Theme: The link between tourism and regional development in Strandzha**

The conducted interviews strongly emphasized the connection between tourism and regional development in Strandzha (Table A3.59.). According to some respondents, tourism represents the only viable development opportunity for the region, where there is no clearly expressed investment readiness to develop other economic or industrial sectors. In this context, the potential for health and recreational tourism is specifically highlighted, grounded in the existing resources of the area. Some of these resources have been preserved precisely because of the region's historical underdevelopment and isolation. Other respondents, however, do not see opportunities for tourism development unless the general living conditions and infrastructure in the region are first improved. This presents a “chicken or the egg” paradox, where, instead of simultaneously and integrally developing all aspects of regional development, including tourism, a mutual waiting effect may occur, e.g., between the development of transport infrastructure and investment in tourism facilities, potentially delaying regional development and exacerbating depopulation overall.

### **3.4. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CASES AND GUIDELINES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CASE DESTINATIONS**

In both destinations, the combination of natural and anthropogenic factors creates favorable conditions for the development of health and recreational tourism. In Southern Konnevesi, the region's rich natural diversity underpins its potential for recreation, wellness, and wellbeing tourism, whereas Strandzha offers a considerably broader range of significant natural resources, providing the foundation for the development of multiple forms of health and recreational tourism.

The anthropogenic factors in Southern Konnevesi are primarily manifested through the entrepreneurial initiative of the local population. Although the area possesses cultural and historical heritage, its originality

and authenticity present challenges for its effective integration into tourism products. In contrast, the anthropological resources in Strandzha encompass both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, traditional and local knowledge, and authenticity, all of which can be leveraged for the development of innovative tourism products – successful examples of which have already been observed.

Regarding protected areas, in Southern Konnevesi the role of environmental protection and the significance of the national park for the existence of tourism are clearly recognized. In Strandzha, however, although natural resources are viewed as valuable assets, there is no strong sense of commitment to their conservation. Nature tends to be perceived as an inexhaustible given, while the nature park is often regarded as an externally imposed formal status rather than an integrated element of local identity and values.

The opportunity for profiling Southern Konnevesi as a recreational destination is viewed as a potential source of competitive advantage and a distinctive brand compared to other Finnish destinations with similar resources, since health and recreation are seen as an underutilized mechanism for tourism specialization. However, the destination currently lacks scientifically validated or certified products and sites in this field. In this respect, Strandzha holds a considerable advantage, as it can position itself as a health and recreational destination based on its marine and mineral spring waters, as well as climatic resources with potential for scientific validation and officially recognized resort statuses. The overlapping designations of nature park and biosphere park may further strengthen its competitive position, particularly in the inland, mountainous part of the destination, as these statuses themselves serve as indicators of the quality and balance between the natural and cultural resources in the area. Such recognition could be especially appealing to international visitors, for whom these categories of protected nature represent evidence and a guarantee of quality.

In Southern Konnevesi, recreational benefits can be achieved through physical activity, an adventurous spirit, and the pursuit of one's

own physical and mental limits – characteristic typical of Finnish and Arctic destinations. What both Southern Konnevesi and Strandzha share are the elements of silence, tranquillity, cleanliness, and remoteness from urban life, all of which are conditioned by their rural and peripheral character and by their lagging economic and industrial development. In Strandzha, the means of achieving recreational benefits are typically less physically demanding and are associated with strengthening the visitor's connection through faith, mysticism, traditions, disconnection from daily connectivity patterns, learning, and discovery.

In Southern Konnevesi, the availability of services and guided activities supports the realization of recreational benefits, whereas in Strandzha the role of the local population is emphasized in sharing local knowledge and traditions related to achieving health and recreational outcomes. The two destinations could draw on each other's examples to optimize their approaches: Southern Konnevesi could better integrate local people and their traditional knowledge into tourism processes, e.g., through guided sauna experiences or wild herb and berry gathering, while Strandzha could strive to transform the otherwise generic encounters between visitors and locals into structured tourism business opportunities.

In terms of cooperation, in Southern Konnevesi it is sought at multiple levels, yet building the necessary relationships and models takes time in order to reduce transactional costs and enhance the tangible benefits of cooperation. A key challenge to fostering cooperation lies in the low awareness of the activities of potential partners. In Strandzha, however, conflicts, mistrust, a sense of self-sufficiency, and overreliance on one's own righteousness inhibit the development of cooperative relations.

Entrepreneurial activity in Southern Konnevesi is actively supported through consulting, funding, public-private partnerships, and other initiatives, some of which are well-established national practices, while others depend on the will and activeness of local authorities and the organization of the administration. Nevertheless, the low profitability of tourism in this newly established destination, operating under conditions of strong seasonality

and fluctuating visitor flows, prevents tourism from becoming a primary source of livelihood for entrepreneurs. In contrast, in Strandzha, private initiative is desired and welcomed but not purposefully developed. Moreover, Bulgaria still carries the historical legacy of socialist-era practices that fostered passivity among the population and total dependence on state initiatives. As in Southern Konnevesi, tourism is not the main activity for local entrepreneurs in Strandzha, but here the main reason lies in the reluctance to reside permanently in the area.

The two destinations share similarities regarding the role of the third sector in tourism: in both, there are isolated examples of third-sector organizations initiating and sustaining tourism activities, namely, the Hähniinmäki excursion area near Southern Konnevesi and the village of Brashlyan in Strandzha. Both destinations are also beginning to feel the impact of the strong global trend of population aging, which diverts a significant portion of the resources of associations and societies. Strandzha, however, displays a more diverse landscape of third-sector actors, some of whom maintain valuable national-level connections that can be leveraged both to advocate for local issues at the national level and to import and adapt good practices from other regions.

In both Strandzha and Southern Konnevesi, the establishment of a representative tourism business association would significantly contribute to the development of community-led ecosystem governance. However, the creation of such an association requires a degree of goal alignment that has not yet been achieved in either destination.

The opposite of community governance is corporate governance, which is viewed with great optimism in Southern Konnevesi. Efforts are being made to attract major investors, e.g., for hotel accommodation, who could also assume responsibility for managing the tourism ecosystem, even at the cost of dominance. However, the involvement of such an actor would inevitably raise questions about the extent of its commitment to the area and about the potential conflict between the complex goals of sustainability and a narrow focus on economic outcomes. In this context, Strandzha provides

an illustrative example of dominance – by the construction sector, which is partly linked to tourism activities. At present, this dominance appears insurmountable and has led to both ecological and social unsustainability, as well as intense local conflicts. On the other hand, Strandzha also hosts large-scale investors in hotel facilities and operations, yet these actors have shown neither interest nor readiness to engage in the comprehensive management of tourism in the destination.

Regarding tourism demand, in Southern Konnevesi there is clear interest in attracting international visitors, though little planning on how this could be achieved. The foreign visitors who do come typically arrive by chance or as isolated cases, since the area maintains limited contacts with tour operators. Southern Konnevesi remains largely unknown as a destination, though many visitors are drawn by the better-known Lakeland area to which it belongs. Transit travellers moving between the Baltic and Arctic regions also represent a significant segment that could be more effectively targeted for *stopover* visits.

In Strandzha, the study found no concrete goals for attracting foreign tourists; some entrepreneurs are, in fact, completely uninterested in this segment. As in Southern Konnevesi, such visitors arrive sporadically and by coincidence. Strandzha, too, is little known in international markets, but due to its recognized importance for biodiversity, it attracts groups of special-interest tourists from abroad. While some businesses maintain links with tour operators, these relationships rarely generate regular visitor flows; instead, tour operators occasionally include Strandzha as a supplementary element in their itineraries. Transit travel is also typical due to the proximity to the national border, and this form of mobility should be harnessed more effectively to serve local tourism objectives.

When it comes to domestic tourism, the two destinations differ significantly. In Southern Konnevesi, domestic visitors are undervalued, as they most often visit the area for day trips in nature, using local resources without necessarily contributing to tourism revenues. In contrast, domestic tourists in Strandzha are highly valued as the core market segment. They

are drawn to the region for its novelty as a once-inaccessible destination and for its distance from large cities and urbanized life. Both Strandzha and Southern Konnevesi should pursue targeted diversification of their visitor segments, which could enhance overall resilience and, more specifically, help mitigate the seasonality of tourism.

Both destinations would benefit from stronger engagement of external actors – geographically and sectorally – within their tourism ecosystems. Building connections with neighbouring municipalities could help complement existing offerings and pool scarce resources; this process is more advanced at this stage in Southern Konnevesi. To strengthen their profiles as health and recreation destinations, both regions, but particularly Strandzha, should attract specialists from the fields of health care and wellness. This would be especially relevant if health tourism products were to be offered in the future as state-subsidized health interventions rather than merely as market-driven experiences.

Given the growing influence of factors such as modern technologies, digitalization, and the pervasive connectivity of everyday life, the destinations' relationships with technology providers are crucial, yet currently underdeveloped. Although the recreational appeal of both destinations partly relies on disconnecting visitors from their daily digital routines, access to information, trip planning and management, and the sharing of experiences must be enabled within a technological framework. Moreover, digital platforms could facilitate more effective destination management through improved information flow and could assist in packaging tourism products, even in the absence of optimal cooperation among local operators.

Regarding the interactions with state institutions, Southern Konnevesi, as a remote region, is not among the priorities of the state, yet there is a general sense of fairness in the distribution of resources in Finland. However, excessive regulation of the operational environment and frequent legislative changes discourage entrepreneurial initiative and create uncertainty. In Strandzha, by contrast, local operators perceive the

region as ignored, neglected, and its problems as underestimated. There is a lack of coordination in communication and work not only between the local and state levels but also among individual state institutions. State activities, e.g., in the area of national security protection, interfere with local tourism without consideration of the consequences. At the same time, the destination's hopes for developing climatotherapy and health tourism remain unfulfilled without state support for establishing a legal framework and subsidizing such activities. There are also numerous other examples of inconsistencies.

Of particular interest is the state management of protected natural areas in both destinations. The Finnish state enterprise Metsähallitus manages Southern Konnevesi National Park in a centralized way, applying established and proven practices from its extensive national experience. The national park does not have its own personnel, yet customer service, communication and marketing channels, a network of enterprises operating under the principles of sustainable development, as well as support through statistical data and informational materials for visitor management are all provided. In contrast, Strandzha Nature Park has its own administration and staff within the park boundaries, but they have no real authority. In general, Bulgaria lacks established models and widely disseminated good practices for the management of nature parks or protected areas in general. Poor practices, however, are widespread: Strandzha is not the only nature park in the country without an approved management plan, while the heavy administrative procedures typically benefit the construction sector. Visitor management in Southern Konnevesi, as in Finland as a whole, is exercised mainly through communication tools, since restrictions cannot be applied due to the traditional everyone's right to access to nature. In Strandzha, however, combined management is needed – using communication materials to build the right attitudes toward nature and a sense of responsibility among visitors, but also introducing restrictions that are effectively enforced. At present, the weak public awareness, especially among locals, of the value of nature, combined with

a cultural tendency towards non-compliance with rules and poor control within the park, allows the systematic destruction of Strandzha's valuable natural assets.

As for common goals, Southern Konnevesi has such objectives, despite the operators' doubts: nature-based recreational tourism, attracting investors for hotel accommodation, and improving the business climate. What is lacking is consistency and coordination in pursuing these goals. Joint marketing and a health and recreational profile of tourism, based, e.g., on the historical Rautalampi water route, on wellbeing through water-based activities and procedures, or on glacial period narratives, could serve as an additional unifying theme for the destination. Sustainability, too, could function as a unifying goal; however, its development and maintenance should not be left solely to Metsähallitus or be limited to the territory of the national park.

Strandzha has not yet reached similar level of tourism ecosystem governance – common goals are absent, individual interests and actions prevail, and different stands are even deliberately maintained as part of the power game. This uncompromising stance slows down the pace of destination development. In Strandzha also, joint tourism marketing appears as the most obvious common ground for different operators, while the health and recreational profile of tourism could become a unifying theme between the sea and the mountains. The motifs of Thracian, Roman, and Christian heritage could further strengthen this profile, creating distinctiveness and competitive advantage for the destination. Sustainability could also serve as a unifying goal if perceived as a shared effort of the local population to counter the increasingly negative ecological and social impacts – an effort to manage their collective destiny rather than a response to external trends. The category of protection of the nature park is particularly suitable as a foundation for developing sustainability objectives.

In both destinations, a complex tourism product should be developed by taking into account all critical elements: core and supplementary services, infrastructure and facilities, marketing, continuous innovation,

and alignment with consumer needs. It is crucial to find ways to overcome tourism seasonality. This seems a more feasible task in Strandzha, where the large and diverse territory and relatively small differences in weather conditions across seasons allow for a wide range of tourism activities and for achieving health and recreational benefits in open air, while at the same time ensuring visitor safety.

Regarding tourism management processes, the data indicate more deliberate efforts to establish stable tourism governance in Southern Konnevesi. There have been attempts to manage tourism using a community approach through self-organization within an association, as well as via municipal public administration. An optimal management model has not yet been established, but it has been actively sought. Tourism is based on comprehensive strategic planning and efforts to create a forum for broad stakeholder involvement. A key management instrument is development projects, which not only provide temporal, financial, human, and conceptual resources but also serve as a platform for maintaining dialogue among stakeholders. In the future, opportunities should be sought for new projects that allow the expansion of developmental activities and the maintenance of shared objectives within the destination. The creation of a database and a model for collecting and analyzing tourism statistics would contribute to the effective management of Southern Konnevesi.

In Strandzha, no attempts at joint destination management are observed, and each state, local, public, or private organization operates according to its own capacity and jurisdiction, attempting to survive independently. This inevitably leads to resource shortages, conflicts over any common issue, and a departure from sustainability principles at a time when their influence is crucial. There are no current or approved strategic plans regarding tourism development, with the most pressing need being a management plan for the nature park, which would synchronize nature conservation with economic and social development, including tourism activities. Forums for dialogue and stakeholder alignment are absent; the only attempts are isolated meetings organized by the Bulgarian Association

for Climatotherapy and Health Tourism concerning climatotherapy. Development projects, which triggered the initial momentum in tourism development in Southern Konnevesi, could serve as an effective tool for tourism management in Strandzha as well, but competencies for their design and implementation must first be developed.

In the context of both destinations, management is fragmented, with individual organizations responsible for specific components, but there is no integrated approach covering overall development. In a situation without a clearly defined leader, ecosystem governance is not merely a desirable strategy but the only possible form of coordination. For a tourism model to be sustainable, not only environmentally but also socially and economically, strategic management is required to ensure alignment among participants, shared values, and coordinated action toward a common goal. The absence of such an approach leads to missed opportunities, especially amid dynamic changes such as those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the increased interest in nature and rural areas, as well as the potential of climatotherapy as a method for recovery, could be more effectively capitalized upon in tourism through strategic management. In its absence, processes remain reactive rather than proactive, resulting in delays in policy implementation and adaptation to new realities. In this context, knowledge exchange among ecosystem agents is a critical factor – without effective communication and coordination mechanisms, anticipation and timely actions become impossible.

### **3.5. PROCESS OF ESTABLISHING ECOSYSTEM GOVERNANCE**

Tourism in the studied destinations – as in any destination – functions as an ecosystem due to its complexity: the presence of interconnected agents with a shared fate, numerous non-linear and often informal relationships, participation of agents from other sectors and geographical locations, common complex goals, and a multi-layered product. This necessitates that destination management aligns with its inherent nature;

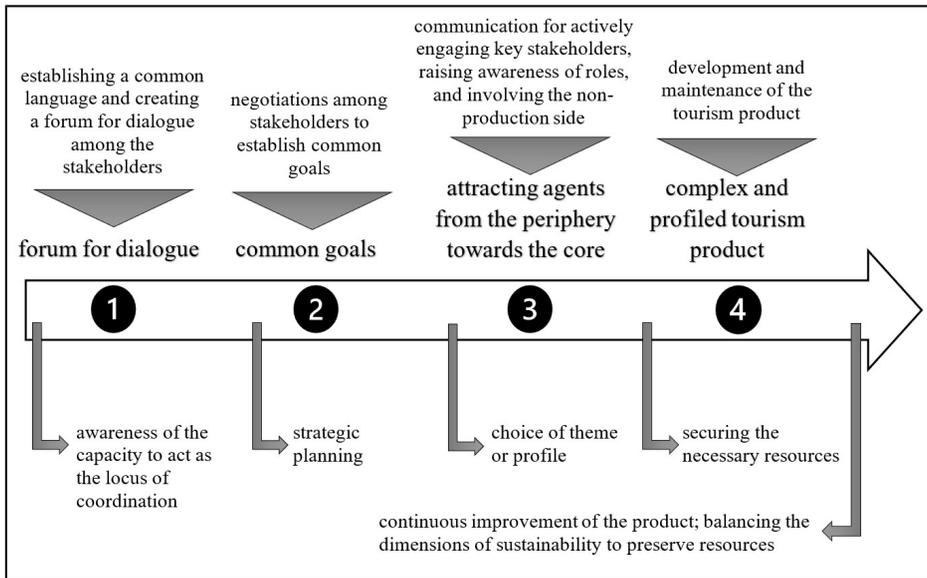
ecosystem governance is required. Health and recreational tourism are particularly suitable examples for understanding this concept due to their strong links with other sectors, such as the need for experts from the health and recreation sector, infrastructure, legislative measures, etc. Based on the research conducted, four stages can be identified for establishing ecosystem governance in a destination, with transitions between them also requiring specific actions (Figure 3.12.).

Even before the initiation of the first formal stage, the process begins with the recognition of capacity, available resources, and competencies necessary for an organization to assume the role of locus of coordination. In a destination with numerous small-scale operators, this locus of coordination at the outset is often logically the municipality, motivated by the idea of strengthening regional development.

In the first stage, a common language must be developed and a forum created for broad stakeholder engagement and dialogue. General topics related to opportunities and values are discussed, as many stakeholders may not yet be committed to tourism activities. In the subsequent intermediate stage, strategic planning must be organized, and the boundaries of tourism defined.

The next stage involves the establishment of shared goals and cooperation among different operators, testing new models of operation. Those who do not agree with the rules, values, and goals and attempt to assert individual dominance typically exit the ecosystem as irrelevant agents unable to provide added value. In accordance with the shared goals and recognized available resources, a profile or thematic focus around which the destination is organized is formed, e.g., health and recreational tourism. The needs for partners from outside the area and the tourism sector are assessed, including potential involvement of state institutions, infrastructure and technology providers, media partners, and others.

**Figure 3.12.** Stages in the process of establishing ecosystem governance in the destination (author's elaboration).



In the third stage, an effort should be made, through strong communication, to help these key partners, along with customers and the local population, recognize their roles and engage with the destination's tourism – that is, to bring them closer to the core of the ecosystem. This makes it possible to secure the necessary resources for the development of tourism in the destination. In the fourth stage, the complex tourism product is formed, which is subsequently maintained and continuously improved. Special attention must be paid to establishing and maintaining a balance between the dimensions of sustainability to preserve the destination's resources, which are mobilized for tourism through the complex and labour-intensive process described above.

It should be noted that, in very rare cases, a destination possesses all the necessary financial, temporal, human, and intellectual resources for this process in advance. Therefore, development projects constitute a highly suitable and effective tool. Agents within the ecosystem must equip themselves with patience and build a vision for sequential progress in the process described, even though individual concrete tools for

development, such as projects and plans, do not cover the process from start to finish.

### 3.6. MAIN CONCLUSIONS FROM THE CASE STUDIES

Empirical research on specific destinations indicates that ecosystem destination governance can focus managerial efforts at the strategic level when concrete objectives are set, such as the development of health and recreational tourism, the establishment of a distinctive destination profile to achieve a competitive advantage, and the attainment of sustainability.

Despite differences in the context of the studied destinations regarding location, socio-cultural, and economic characteristics, the template thematic analysis demonstrates that most of the themes reflecting characteristics, successes, and challenges related to destination management are common. This provides a basis for conceptualizing ecosystem governance (Table 3.9).

At the same time, there are aspects present in one destination but absent in the other, as well as themes that are similar in nature but differ in direction or content between the two destinations. These aspects form the foundation for the potential of these destinations to learn from each other, apply good practices, and avoid mistakes that have already occurred elsewhere.

The current stage of development of the studied destinations allows for the conceptualization of the process of establishing ecosystem governance, but not for the stages and measures of the daily ecosystem governance of the destination.

**Table 3.9.** Comparison of thematic areas and themes of template analysis from the studied destinations (author's elaboration).

<b>SOUTHERN KONNEVESI</b>	<b>STRANDZHA</b>
<b>Attitudes towards tourism and the development of health and recreational tourism in the destination</b>	<b>Attitudes towards tourism and the development of health and recreational tourism in the destination</b>
	<b>Scepticism about the destination</b>
Basis for tourism development in the destination	Basis for tourism development in the destination
Potential of the destination for developing health and recreational tourism	Potential of the destination for developing health and recreational tourism
Significance of evidence-based health and recreational benefits and the official status of the destination in relation to health and recreational tourism	Significance of evidence-basedness, certification, and official status in relation to health and recreational tourism
<b>Role of services in recreational tourism</b>	
<b>Characteristics and roles of tourism ecosystem agents in the destination and their interconnections</b>	<b>Characteristics and roles of tourism ecosystem agents in the destination and their interconnections</b>
<b>Cooperation</b>	<b>Conflicts between the agents of the ecosystem</b>
Entrepreneurial activity in destination's tourism	Entrepreneurial activity in destination's tourism
<b>Enterprise as a leader or dominator of the ecosystem</b>	<b>Dominator in the ecosystem</b>
Role of the third sector in destination's tourism	Role of the third sector in destination's tourism
	<b>Role of the municipalities in destination's tourism</b>
Role of the local community in destination's tourism	Role of the local community in destination's tourism
Role and characteristics of tourism customers	Role and characteristics of tourism customers
<b>Cooperation with bloggers</b>	
Involvement of agents external to the region or tourism	Involvement of agents external to the region or tourism
Cooperation of the destination with institutions	Interaction between tourism and state institutions
Establishing common goals for the destination's ecosystem	Establishing common goals for the destination's ecosystem

<b>Tourism products and packaging in the destination</b>	<b>Tourism products and packaging in the destination</b>
Products missing from the destination's tourism offering	Missing or underdeveloped products in the destination's tourism offering
Length of stay in the destination	Length of stay in the destination
Destination accessibility	Destination accessibility
Need for productization of tourism experiences	Need for productization of tourism experiences
Need for packaging of the tourism product	Need for packaging of the tourism product
	Subsidization of climatotherapy for health tourism
	Lack of workforce in the destination's tourism sector
Destination marketing	Destination marketing
<b>Tourism management and adopted management approaches in the destination</b>	<b>Tourism management and adopted management approaches in the destination</b>
	Public governance of the destination
Approaches to destination management	
Toolkit for tourism management	Toolkit for tourism management
Challenges to destination's ecosystem governance	Challenges to destination's ecosystem governance
	The link between tourism and regional development in Strandzha
<i>Common themes are indicated in black, those present in one destination but absent in the other are shown in red, and similar themes that differ in direction or content are marked in blue.</i>	

# DISCUSSION

This monograph is dedicated to the study of the socio-economic aspects of ecosystem governance for the development of health and recreational tourism in two destinations in Bulgaria and Finland. The ecosystem approach to tourism development, and in particular to health and recreational tourism, brings tangible benefits to the destination. Recognizing the existence of ecosystems and adopting an ecosystem approach optimizes invested managerial efforts. The successful governance of a tourism ecosystem depends on a detailed understanding of both its functionality and its constituent elements and roles.

The study has derived recommendations for establishing ecosystem governance in a destination, contributing both to theoretical discussions and to practical management tools. The results are largely applicable not only to health and recreational tourism but also to other types of tourism. This can be achieved, for example, by modifying, adding, or excluding specific agents in the conceptual model of the destination as an ecosystem according to the type of tourism under consideration. The practices and examples described in the empirical research can also be taken into account and widely applied.

This study produced a range of **results**. A model of the tourism destination ecosystem was presented in the context of health and recreational tourism development. The model identifies the different types of participants in the ecosystem and their roles, as well as the key social and economic aspects that must be considered in an ecosystem approach to governing health and recreational tourism. A primary toolkit

for ecosystem governance was developed based on the example of the studied destinations. Recommendations were provided concerning specific social and economic aspects of tourism management in the investigated destinations, along with good practices that can be applied in other contexts or cross-sectorally. The process of establishing ecosystem governance in the destination was also described, including its sequential stages.

The **recommendations for future research** derived from this study encompass several directions. First, there is a need for experiments, observations, and piloting of specific tools for ecosystem governance. Equally important is the empirical investigation and conceptualization of the interrelationships among ecosystem agents in tourism, particularly those at the periphery, including analyses of influences stemming from the butterfly effect. Additional efforts should focus on better understanding and supporting the awareness of agents located at the ecosystem's periphery. Another key direction is the pursuit of more precise definitions and distinctions among health-oriented forms of tourism.

Research on cultural ecosystem services could make a significant contribution, particularly by developing models and tools for their measurement, thereby enhancing the understanding of the relationship between health and nature. Conceptually and practically, it is also necessary to integrate the ecosystem approach with innovative tourism approaches, such as regenerative tourism, to strengthen sustainability. Separate attention should be given to empirical studies of ecosystem governance measures and processes in destinations that are more advanced in their development than those presented in this study. Finally, comparative research aimed at identifying and implementing good practices in ecosystem governance across different destinations would be particularly valuable.

The **degree of scientific novelty** of this study lies primarily in its expansion of existing theories of business ecosystems through their application to the field of health and recreational tourism. Furthermore, the research introduces concrete practices and management tools applicable to the governance of tourist destinations.

The scientific product of the study has been designed to serve multiple categories of users – both within academia and in practical contexts. **For researchers and academic institutions**, it provides a solid foundation for further investigation, as well as opportunities to develop new concepts and models in tourism, management, and the social and economic sciences. Academic communities may also integrate the findings into curricula on tourism, sociology, and economics, using them as examples of an innovative governance approach. A practical implementation of this knowledge transfer has already been achieved: elements of the research were incorporated into the Destination Management course at the JAMK University of Applied Sciences (Jyväskylä, Finland) during the spring semester of 2025.

**Local and regional governing bodies** can also derive significant benefits from the study's findings. The results provide concrete guidelines for improving management practices and support the targeted development of tourism, for instance by emphasizing the health and recreational segment. This, in turn, contributes to better planning and sustainable destination development, generating a direct positive impact on local communities.

**Non-governmental organizations** engaged in environmental protection and tourism development can use the findings as a well-founded basis for campaigns, projects, and advocacy efforts aimed at promoting sustainable management. The scientific evidence underscores the need for an integrated approach that takes into account not only the natural, but also the social and economic dimensions of tourism.

As far as **practical application** is concerned, the developed destination governance model for health and recreational tourism can serve as a foundation for new policies, strategies, and managerial decisions at the local, regional, and national levels. Furthermore, the recommendations and findings of the study represent a valuable resource for training sessions, seminars, and workshops aimed at enhancing the capacity of managing authorities, local communities, and tourism operators. The models and recommendations elaborated in the research can be applied in practice through the creation of destination management plans, which include

strategic guidelines for integrating the ecosystem governance approach into destination management. The pilot implementation of the proposed models in the two studied destinations – Southern Konnevesi (Finland) and Strandzha (Bulgaria) – could be coordinated with the support of local authorities and tourism operators through pilot projects testing the governance model in real-world conditions. Preliminary interest in such implementation has already been expressed by local authorities in both destinations.

The results of the study will also be integrated into university curricula related to tourism and management – a process already underway in the Tourism Management degree programme at Jamk University of Applied Sciences. Additionally, training seminars and workshops for local authorities and tourism operators on the implementation of the governance recommendations for health and recreational tourism can be organized as part of relevant development projects.

The **scientific product was assessed** through several key methods and platforms to ensure the effectiveness of the developed theoretical and practical results and their applicability in practice. The process involved **both verification and validation** measures. The main findings of the research were presented at national and international conferences, where expert and scholarly feedback was obtained through discussions. The results also underwent a process of peer review and critical evaluation, further strengthening their scientific credibility and practical relevance.

The **scientific and practical contributions** of the study highlight both its theoretical and applied significance. From a scientific perspective, the research enriches the concept of the ecosystem approach in tourism by exploring its potential application in health and recreational tourism. A model of interconnections among stakeholders in the tourism ecosystem has been developed, outlining the characteristics and roles of individual agents within the tourism destination. The practical contributions of the study are linked to specific guidelines for improving management practices and policies. The research supports the creation of more effective regulatory and managerial frameworks for the development of health tourism in protected areas of Bulgaria and Finland, identifying good practices and the

conditions for their implementation. Based on a comparative analysis of the two countries, the study systematizes the challenges and opportunities for developing health and recreational tourism in protected areas, providing a valuable foundation for future management decisions. As a result, concrete recommendations have been proposed to enhance the management of tourist destinations, particularly those directly associated with protected areas and the development of health-recreational products.

The implementation of the ecosystem governance approach is expected to improve working conditions for local communities and foster their more active participation in the decision-making of tourism destinations. The study provides recommendations and guidelines that support the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), thereby integrating environmental conservation with the economic and social well-being of local communities. The research specifically supports several SDGs outlined in the UN 2030 Agenda (Table D.1.).

**Table D.1.** Contributions of the study to the Sustainable Development Goals of Agenda 2030 (author's elaboration, using the goal icons provided by UN).

SDG	Contributions of the study
	The development of health and recreational tourism promotes the physical and mental well-being of visitors, providing opportunities for leisure and rehabilitation in a natural environment.
	Integrating tourism into protected areas creates new jobs and stimulates the local economy, while simultaneously promoting responsible practices in the sector.
	Tourism management in the context of protected natural areas requires the conservation of biodiversity and the sustainable use of natural resources, contributing both to the preservation of nature in protected areas and to the potential benefits derived from the cultural ecosystem services of nature. In both studied destinations, there is a combination of terrestrial and aquatic resources.
	
	The study emphasizes the importance of collaboration among various stakeholders – local communities, tourism operators, non-governmental organizations, and government institutions – for effective management and sustainable development of tourism.

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# APPENDIX 1

## INDICATIVE OUTLINE OF THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

1. Interviewee background: Tell me about yourself. / Since when do you hold this position? / What is your connection with tourism? / Do you have other positions related to tourism?
2. Tell me about the activity of the organization in which you work. What is the connection of the organization with Southern Konnevesi / Strandzha? Do you have cooperation partners there?
3. Is there health / recreational tourism in Finland / Bulgaria and what is it based on?
4. Is there potential for health / recreational tourism in Southern Konnevesi / Strandzha and what is it based on? (benefits, nature, motives, themes)
5. How can or how should, in your opinion, the complex product of health / recreational tourism in Southern Konnevesi / Strandzha be built? Who should participate in its composition? Who would be its potential clients?
6. How, in your opinion, should health / recreational tourism be managed in Southern Konnevesi / Strandzha or more generally in a tourist destination (based on a protected area)?
7. What does the future of Southern Konnevesi / Strandzha look like, in your opinion, in terms of tourism? What and how should be developed?
8. To eliminate possible gaps: What else would you like to say on the issue?

# APPENDIX 2

## METADATA OF THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

### **Interviews conducted in Strandzha**

Timeframe of the study: 19–29 June 2024

Total interviews conducted (Table A2.1.): 18

Language of interviews: Bulgarian

Face-to-face interview locations (Figure. A2.1.): Varna (2 interviews), Malko Tarnovo (11 interviews), Tsarevo (1 interview), Mladezhko (1 interview), Brashlyan (1 interview), Gramatikovo (1 interview), Burgas (1 interview)

Remote interviews conducted: by phone (1 interview)

Channels used to arrange interviews: email, phone, in person

Declined interviews: 0

Unsuccessful contact or no response to interview invitation: 1

Planned interview duration: 60 minutes

Maximum interview duration: 105 minutes

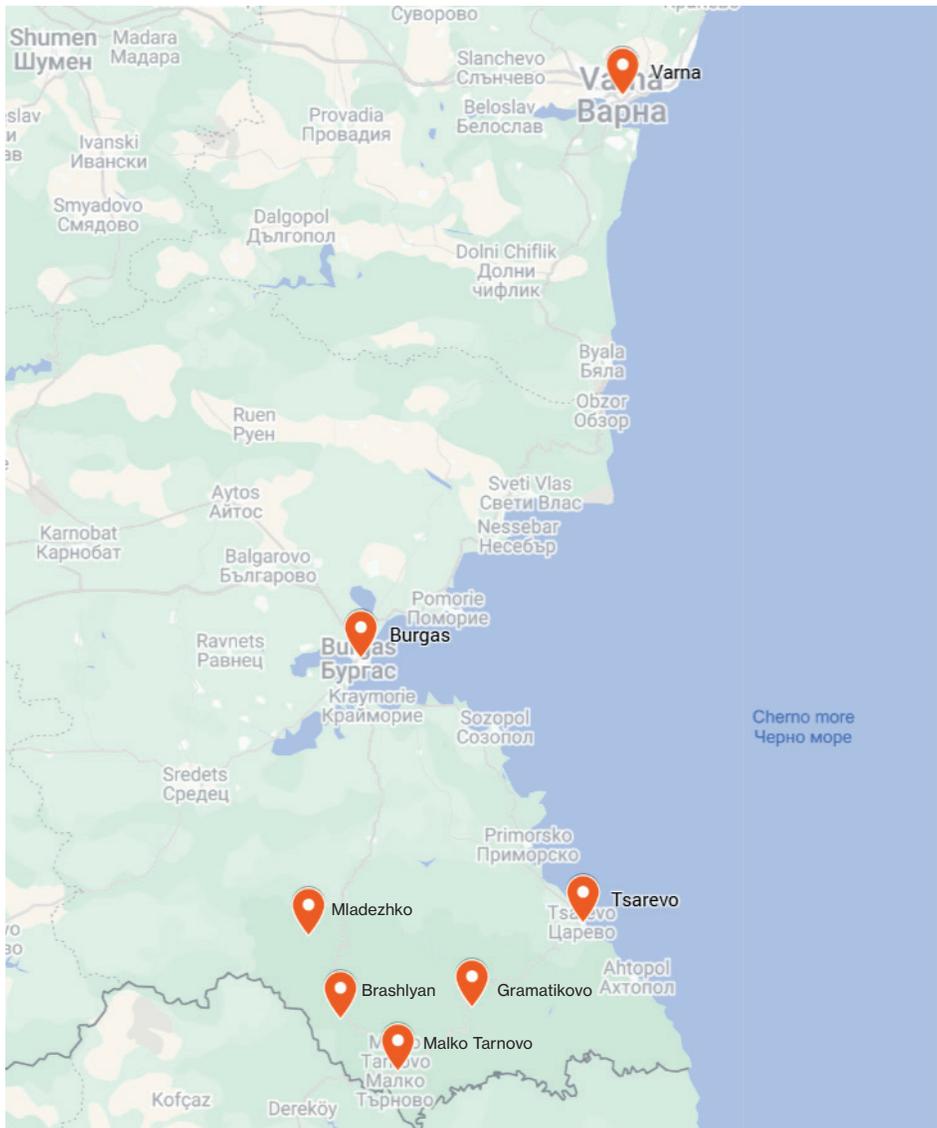
Minimum interview duration: 20 minutes

Average interview duration: 58 minutes

**Table A2.1.** Expert interviews conducted on Strandzha (author's elaboration).

<b>N°</b>	<b>Expert's position</b>	<b>Interview date</b>	<b>Interview duration (min)</b>
1	NGO representative, health tourism	19.6.2024	60
2	NGO representative, cultural tourism	19.6.2024	60
3	representative of local authorities or administration	24.6.2024	60
4	representative of local authorities or administration	24.6.2024	105
5	representative of the management of protected nature	24.6.2024	70
6	representative of the management of protected nature	24.6.2024	30
7	tourist guide	24.6.2024	20
8	representative of local authorities or administration	25.6.2024	20
9	accommodation provider	25.6.2024	80
10	туристически гид	25.6.2024	20
11	restauranteur	25.6.2024	90
12	private investor in construction	25.6.2024	30
13	tourist guide	25.6.2024	90
14	accommodation provider	26.6.2024	60
15	accommodation provider	26.6.2024	60
16	accommodation provider	27.6.2024	75
17	NGO representative, nature trails and infrastructure	27.6.2024	40
18	NGO representative, rural tourism	29.6.2024	75

**Figure A2.1.** Locations of face-to-face interviews from the empirical study in Strandzha (author's elaboration, developed with the help of Google My Maps application).



## **Interviews conducted in Southern Konnevesi**

Time frame of the study: 30.8.–19.11.2024

Total interviews conducted (Table A2.2.): 13

Languages of the interviews: Finnish (12 interviews), English (1 interview)

Locations of face-to-face interviews (Figure A2.2.): Konnevesi (5 interviews), Rautalampi (1 interview), Jyväskylä (1 interview)

Remote interviews conducted: Microsoft Teams (6 interviews)

Channels for arranging interviews: email, in person, Microsoft Teams, Messenger, LinkedIn

Declined interviews: 4

Unsuccessful contact or no response to interview invitation: 1

Planned duration of interview: 60 min

Maximum duration of interview: 90 min

Minimum duration of interview: 30 min

Average duration of interview: 62 min



# APPENDIX 3

## QUOTES FROM THE CONDUCTED INTERVIEWS ACCORDING TO THE TOPICS OF THE TEMPLATE ANALYSIS

### Analysis of the interviews from Southern Konnevesi

**Table A3.1.** Natural and anthropogenic factors for tourism in Southern Konnevesi (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Natural factors as leading for tourism	<i>"The key assets for tourism are the landscape and the value of nature. We simply have them — they cannot be built."</i>
	<i>"Tourism in Konnevesi is based on the waters, the nature, the silence, and the tranquillity. Working life today is so fast-paced, and people are looking for ways to escape it."</i>
	<i>"The main tourism advantage of Central Finland is its nature. The lakes and the pristine waters are especially important to me."</i>
	<i>"For me, the greatest treasure of Southern Konnevesi is its labyrinth-like lake, even though the water resource itself is not part of the national park."</i>
	<i>"Our tourism product is focusing on water areas far away from the built environment."</i>
	<i>"Konnevesi has all the possible elements for tourism, and the national park is like a diamond. The Rapid Route is becoming more and more popular — not only among domestic tourists but also international visitors have started to show interest."</i>
	<i>"People often say that the waters here are like those in Lapland. The lake is truly one of a kind."</i>
	<i>"Southern Konnevesi is like a miniature Lapland in the heart of Finland."</i>
	<i>"Konnevesi is like Lapland — but without the mosquitoes, and much easier to reach."</i>
	<i>"Tourism in Southern Konnevesi is based on the fact that Konnevesi and Rautalampi were historically distant from industrial and agricultural development. Thanks to that, a relatively large area has remained naturally preserved — which made its protection possible."</i>
Anthropogenic factors as leading for tourism	<i>"Tourism in Konnevesi is largely based on nature, but there has also been investment in quality villas and in the Häyrylänranta Harbor, which welcomes tourists, campers, and boaters. I believe that events are becoming increasingly important as well. The owners of holiday homes, who visit regularly, are also an essential part of tourism."</i>
	<i>"Another question is whether there are sufficient resources to develop tourism. The local population and its level of activity are the foundation for tourism."</i>
	<i>"Tourism in Southern Konnevesi is based on enterprises. Metsähallitus maintains the park's infrastructure and trails, but the services are provided by the businesses."</i>
	<i>"Tourism in Central Finland is based on people. It is people who create the structures and generate the activity. That is why tourism needs knowledgeable, capable, and genuinely interested individuals."</i>

**Table A3.2.** Significance and role of the national park in tourism in Southern Konnevesi (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
National park as a fundamental factor for tourism	<i>"No one ever talked about tourism here before the national park was established. The cottages were there, but I don't even know how people used to find them. There were no cruises, and the rapids were privately owned and inaccessible. You'd hardly ever see anyone paddling a kayak on the lake. Everything we have now is thanks to the national park."</i>
	<i>"Tourism in Southern Konnevesi is generally based on nature, but business became possible because of the national park. The lake itself didn't change when the park was created — people simply discovered it then."</i>
National park as a supporting factor for tourism	<i>"The national park helps. Through it, marketing is more effective, and the infrastructure has improved."</i>
	<i>"On the Rautalampi side, tourism is, of course, based on the national park and its hiking trails, while in Konnevesi, the water element prevails. It's a good balance — if only we could make better use of it."</i>
Tourism and nature protection hand in hand in the national park	<i>"In the concept of the national park, tourism plays an important role alongside recreational use by citizens. There are also more strictly protected areas. In national parks, tourism and nature conservation are not in conflict..."</i>

**Table A3.3.** Basis for developing health and recreational tourism in the destination (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Physical activity and adventure activities for recreation	<i>"I agree that Central Finland has great potential to develop health and recreational tourism with a focus on wellbeing. The main opportunities lie in active tourism during both summer and winter seasons. In winter, it could be based on skiing and other snow adventures, and in summer — on cycling, hiking, rafting, and other outdoor and adventure-oriented activities."</i>
	<i>"We could revive the old cycling routes. We already have a nice frisbee golf course, tennis courts, and ski tracks. But to develop health and recreational services, we need enterprises — and to call it tourism, we must also have accommodation."</i>
	<i>"Sports and physical activity bring recreational benefits: swimming excursions, hiking, cycling, paddling..."</i>
Nature resources for recreation	<i>"A specialist once came to us through a project and explained: 'You have so much nature here, such peace and quiet!' Nature gives you strength. So why couldn't this happen right here?"</i>
	<i>"Southern Konnevesi has the potential! The absence of noise, the minimal impact of urban surroundings and of humans in general, the calmness of nature — they all have an almost therapeutic effect. Your mood changes when you're out in nature."</i>
	<i>"There is potential to develop health and recreational tourism. As a business, it's still in its infancy, but there are entrepreneurs who have started offering silence as a product — an escape from the fast-paced everyday life, forest visits, berry picking, good food. A lifestyle that supports recovery is offered on a business-to-business basis."</i>

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
	<p>“Wellbeing tourism is closely linked to nature-based and rural tourism. Nature itself is a source of wellbeing, while the countryside and the village are the opposites of city life.”</p> <p>“Clean air, clean water, mushrooms, and wild berries...”</p> <p>“Southern Konnevesi certainly has potential for health and recreational tourism precisely because of its nature. But I’m not the kind of person to organize wellbeing services — I’m not one of those who hug trees. Maybe that sounds like a cliché, but I mean physical and mental improvement, whatever it is they aim for. When I visit the forest with clients, I stop to brew coffee over an open fire and enjoy the beautiful surroundings. Could that also be considered wellbeing?”</p>
<p>Motor noise as a source or inhibitor of recreational benefits</p>	<p>“The rocky character of the lake’s waters is a gift from nature. It makes it harder for motorboats to navigate. It’s a pity the lake is now going to be mapped. A few small boats don’t disturb anyone, but jet skis and yachts are only a loss for the national park.”</p> <p>“The lake landscape itself — and simply moving on the water — brings recreational benefits. Motorboats create noise, but on the other hand, they also bring a sense of security: you know you’re not alone in the wilderness.”</p> <p>“And just think how much motorcycling reduces stress! In Konnevesi, we have traditions in motorcycling that we could use. I don’t think it contradicts the national park, although some believe it pollutes and harms nature.”</p> <p>“The rally is important for Central Finland and brings significant revenue — but of course, not everyone is interested in it.”</p>
<p>Opportunity for theming and profiling of local tourism</p>	<p>“Specializing in health and recreational tourism is an opportunity. Everything starts with the business idea and the entrepreneur’s determination. There will also be a need for external operators. The municipality’s role is to generate ideas and provide support. A thematic project could also be created.”</p> <p>“Whether Southern Konnevesi develops as a health and recreational tourism destination depends on the entrepreneurs’ enthusiasm, not on the natural conditions.”</p> <p>“The connection between nature-based tourism and health is an idea we can use. It’s wonderful to talk about these things — this discussion opened my eyes and gave me completely new thoughts.”</p>
<p>Wellbeing as a trend</p>	<p>“Yes, Southern Konnevesi has very strong prerequisites for developing health and recreational tourism. Wellbeing is a lasting trend. Stress and security threats are increasing. People need to feel safe and calm, to breathe clean air, far from the noise. In that sense, Southern Konnevesi meets the highest standards in Finland.”</p>

**Table A3.4.** Elements of the destination's USP (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Specialization is problematic, and there is no competitive advantage within the region or the country	<i>"If we talk about international tourism, can Central Finland — or a part of it — be so valuable that it's worth coming here from abroad in search of wellbeing? Central Finland should be considered as a whole."</i>
	<i>"Southern Konnevesi is a lively area, full of operators, but what sets it apart from any other place in terms of wellbeing tourism? Nature-based tourism, sauna, lakes, local food, focus on the local and authentic — that's at the core of the tourism offering."</i>
	<i>"The problem is how to market nature and its impact in Southern Konnevesi against all the other destinations in Finland. In practice, we don't really stand out."</i>
The established elements of the USP support the development of health and recreational tourism	<i>"Central Finland is not specifically specialized in wellbeing tourism; rather, wellbeing is connected to nature-based tourism and the use of water resources."</i>
	<i>"The USP of Central Finland includes national parks, nature, water-based nature, events, wellbeing, forest activities such as forest yoga and forest bathing, as well as the region's status as a sauna destination."</i>
	<i>"The sauna culture can be a basis for developing health and recreational tourism. There is a regional working group for the sauna region, which is a branch of the Central Finland Tourism Committee. Saunas are also part of the tourism strategy. The World Sauna Forum, though a business event, attracts visitors seeking wellbeing."</i>
	<i>"Sauna culture, quiet walks, yoga, and various types of fishing can be developed as wellbeing products that help guests relax and reconnect with themselves."</i>
	<i>"Southern Konnevesi has a varied terrain and tourism services connected to it. Some nature tourists appreciate the opportunity to use services — for example, to buy a cooked meal for an excursion instead of taking supermarket food."</i>
	<i>"Konnevesi's advantage lies in the name of the national park and the presence of the lake."</i>
Health and recreational tourism could become the destination's USP	<i>"Health and recreational tourism is an idea that could be developed as a competitive advantage. Cooperation could also be developed in this area with the University of Jyväskylä, which has a research station in Konnevesi."</i>
	<i>"Regarding wellbeing tourism, we have to start from scratch, but this could be a USP — why and how we are different. We need enough provision of these services and strong marketing to attract a flow of customers."</i>
	<i>"Certification of health products in tourism would be something new, which could be used as a competitive advantage."</i>

**Table A3.5.** Significance of proven health and recreational benefits and official destination status (author’s elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Recreational value of the national park	<p><i>“Cruise clients are not directly interested in the national park. They are interested in nature and the lake as a whole.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“The national park does not add value to tourism. It’s good that we protect nature, but what difference does it make whether you’re on a marked trail in the park, if everyone has the right to be anywhere in nature? I personally take clients to my private property near the park to avoid encounters with other visitors. For foreigners, it might matter that they were specifically in the park, but in terms of recreation, the experience can be had elsewhere. In the future, however, national parks may become the only places for forest experiences due to mass logging.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“The national park is an internationally recognized brand. People know what to expect when they visit it. There was great nature here before the park was established, but now there are proper trails and infrastructure, and the area’s visibility has increased. Previously, the park’s nature served only locals, and now it serves tourists as well.”</i></p>
The need for scientifically proven health benefits from visiting the destination	<p><i>“The objective effects of nature on health are not well studied in science. But you don’t need a dissertation to notice benefits like relaxation and improved mood. It’s amazing how sick or elderly people change by the farm experience — even those with dementia become more talkative.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“If we speak specifically about proven benefits from nature, today someone can measure something that might not be there next year.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“Silence is appreciated by both foreigners and Finns. They say, ‘It’s so quiet here, I sleep so well.’ The question is how to productize silence. There was a project measuring decibels. How do we differentiate ourselves from other quiet places? Do we have a basis to sell silence?”</i></p>
	<p><i>“Health benefits are well known and are used in serving special groups, such as people with disabilities.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“The area does not rely on studied health effects, but it is known that nature generally supports health and recovery, and that is our strongest resource in tourism.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“Research on nature’s effects on health exists worldwide. Do we need to prove separately that Southern Konnevesi provides health and recreational benefits? What if the results show it’s not the cleanest place, but second cleanest? In the end, the benefits of nature are a subjective experience.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“In Kinkomaa, Central Finland, there used to be a pulmonary hospital, where it was believed that the pine forests improved the condition of tuberculosis patients. But even that is not used in tourism.”</i></p>
The need for certified tourism products or destination certificates	<p><i>“Certificates can help a little, but they are not the main factor in influencing tourists. What matters more is how we present the experience to meet individual needs. After all, health, recreation, and wellbeing are very individual and subjective for each guest, so the message must be adapted.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“For foreign visitors, the label signals that this is a valued or safe destination.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“There is enough demand for health and recreational products even without certification. That would be important for some international partners if we start handling large volumes of tourists. Within Finland, however, it is not important.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“Certificates, quality systems, and even star ratings in tourism cannot be compared with each other, so they are of little use.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“It seems like everything nowadays has to be certified! There’s a Forest Bathing Association in the USA that certifies this type of service, but it’s not an official body and cannot require certification. How does a certificate help guides? Why would someone from abroad tell me how to organize my excursion? Forest bathing does not require a diploma; it’s not psychotherapy. Perhaps this certification could attract more American clients.”</i></p>

**Table A3.6.** Role of services in recreational tourism (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
<p>What constitutes a tourism service aimed at providing recreational benefits?</p>	<p><i>“Developing wellbeing tourism would mean placing a clearer emphasis on services, which makes sense from an economic perspective. Various activities with an instructor, forest yoga... Southern Konnevesi could become a wellness national park. Guided activities benefit nature, and they also provide a sense of security. Especially international tourists feel safe, without worrying about getting lost in the wilderness.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“To achieve the benefits of recreation, it's not enough to be surrounded by nature — it has to be experiential, with something interesting to do.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“To attain wellbeing, people need a guide, a service that helps them break from their routine. Someone has to tell them to breathe deeply and smell the wind, to learn what is happening in nature, and how to listen to their own body.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“These are not mainstream products that generate large revenues for individual entrepreneurs, so they are more suitable for local families to offer as meetings and authentic experiences with the local community.”</i></p>
<p>What recreational services are offered in tourism?</p>	<p><i>“Wellbeing tourism can be seen in the activities of enterprises throughout Central Finland — for example, at Peurunka Spa, and in numerous rural tourism companies. Jyväskylä has also branded itself as a sports city. This is part of the tourism strategy and is applied in practice by the businesses.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“There is no need for spa centers. Traditional Finnish villas and the lakeshore, combined with activities, attract foreign tourists.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“Forest bathing is a Japanese concept from the 1980s. Maybe I'm imagining it, but I think I was among the first to start using the concept in Finland. Similar recreational services exist under other names as well.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“We have a farm. We started by renting out one room, now we have two. We built an additional wing. We participated in a project called ‘Green Care,’ and that's how it all began. We planned visits for elderly people, those with reduced mobility, and other special groups. The Green Care concept is interesting and brings benefits to people who need care. If they are placed in an institution, their autonomy and activity decrease. It is important for society that these people retain the ability to live at home and maintain social contacts.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“Soon, the so-called ‘Nature Energy Center’ will open. It will offer high-quality services to clients from Central Europe. In the future, it will impact many other tourism and service businesses. Its construction involved design, construction, and electrical service companies as well...”</i></p>
	<p><i>“Many local wellness services do not serve tourists. First, there are long booking queues, and second, they go on vacation exactly during the peak season. I mean reflexology, Kalevala manual therapy, and even hair salons.”</i></p>

**Table A3.7.** Benefits and costs of collaboration (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Benefits and costs of cooperation	<i>"Visit Finland maintains the Data Hub platform, where a few services from Konnevesi can be found, but hardly any tourist discovers them there. Cooperation with Visit Jyväskylä Region is very expensive. The current cooperation agreement with Metsähallitus comes with an annual fee — another fixed cost. I used to use the Mobile Pay platform for payments, but they also started charging a monthly fee. A small business has many expenses here and there, while the revenue isn't enough."</i>
	<i>"I didn't get any orders just by being present on different platforms. I tried to create packages with a travel agency, but their operations didn't take off. I was also part of a project with a group of entrepreneurs, but that was just money wasted. Their focus was fishing, and forest bathing was only a supplementary product in a general package."</i>
	<i>"Cooperation is necessary. Sometimes we gather with other sole entrepreneurs and divide activities — some handle archery, some paddling, others cycling. The problem is that sometimes some of them charge too high a price, and there's no way to include them in the joint package. I help when I can, even if it doesn't bring me profit, but I also shouldn't be left with only expenses."</i>
	<i>"Metsähallitus has very good cooperation with the municipalities. Through their development and investment projects, the infrastructure and information boards were designed in a consistent style and cover a large area around the park."</i>

**Table A3.8.** Characteristics of tourism entrepreneurship in the destination (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Sufficiency of entrepreneurial activity	<i>"In Rautalampi, tourism entrepreneurship has declined. There isn't even a network that systematically takes advantage of the national park area. There is a lack of courage to run a business, even on a small scale."</i>
Tourism entrepreneurship as a side activity	<i>"There are no entrepreneurs who make a living entirely from tourism. Many of them pursue tourism alongside their main activity."</i>
	<i>"A rural tourism enterprise is illogical and unprofitable. Usually, income comes from elsewhere — from farming or forestry — while tourism is often voluntary."</i>
	<i>"I practice tourism activities in my free time. Most of the time, I work elsewhere. I focus on tourism during the peak season."</i>
	<i>"Initially, I bought the vessel for personal use, but later the national park was established, and there was a need to take people out on the lake."</i>
	<i>"The enterprise operates in many locations across Central Finland and Lapland. We don't have a permanent base in the national parks because construction isn't allowed, and demand is low. We also operate in connection with events and projects when they are related to nature in some way."</i>
	<i>"The forest bathing service is not in high demand. Occasionally, I help colleagues as a supplementary service. Sometimes I work as a guide for paddling excursions. All of this is an ancillary activity alongside my main work. I don't actively advertise. I'm interested in it and could take on more of such activities. I was more active before COVID-19; afterwards, I stopped actively advertising on social media and in the municipal calendar. I no longer sell through the digital platform either."</i>

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Entrepreneurs' awareness of other entrepreneurial activities in the destination	<i>"There are many good individual tourism enterprises in the municipality, but they don't know about each other, and there are no service chains or packaged tourist products."</i>
	<i>"Entrepreneurs often say that they don't know each other and don't know what others offer."</i>
	<i>"Not everyone attends meetings or participates in Teams groups. There isn't information about all services and businesses, although if you ask, someone will usually tell you."</i>
Reciprocity in cooperation	<i>"When I organize an excursion, I don't take my clients to accommodation facilities, but to tents. However, I do take clients of hotels to the park when they request it."</i>
	<i>"When the hotel is full, they refer clients to us, and we sell them meat from the farm."</i>
	<i>"Everyone has to give something, not just receive."</i>

**Table A3.9.** Interconnections of entrepreneurs with other agents (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Entrepreneur-to-entrepreneur connections	<i>"The best cooperation is the voluntary kind. For example, two companies teamed up to offer a hunting course for women."</i>
	<i>"Cooperation is fundamental in tourism. Many enterprises are small and need complementary services to keep the customer satisfied. But cooperation is quite variable, and there is still a lot of work to make it stable. Some do not see its benefits. The euro is the best guide."</i>
	<i>"A tourism product starts with cooperation, by exploring demand and supply. Unfortunately, most entrepreneurs compete, and the main competitor is always the neighbour. They need to consider how best to respond to demand."</i>
	<i>"True competition is rare. Even if two companies offer similar services, one doesn't come at the expense of the other — they complement each other."</i>
	<i>"Partnerships should be sought near the business, so that if your own capacity is insufficient, you can get help from the network, even from similar businesses."</i>
	<i>"Joint marketing and referrals are currently rare forms of cooperation."</i>
	<i>"When accommodating clients, we recommend other services — cruises, paddling, but mostly restaurants. The area actually has an exceptionally diverse selection of summer restaurants, all located in beautiful natural settings."</i>
Entrepreneur-to-client connections	<i>"I have excellent cooperation with other entrepreneurs offering paddling, as well as with the locations where I operate, like Häyrylännranta and the Rapid Route. One colleague no longer offers paddling due to health reasons, and now I supplement his products. I also order food for client excursions from local restaurants and catering services, for example from Törmälä."</i>
	<i>"Visitor interactions with service providers are important. They create memories and impressions, and also provide opportunities to recommend additional services — your own or partners'. They also create a sense of security."</i>
PPP	<i>"We don't just rent equipment. Our service always includes selecting the right equipment and the appropriate route for the client."</i>
	<i>"In cooperation agreements with Metsähallitus, enterprises commit to sustainable tourism principles and gain the right to use the park logo and sell official park-branded products. They receive materials on Outdoor Etiquette and sustainable tourism instructions."</i>
	<i>"Kellankosken voima is a subsidiary of the Konnevesi municipality with the right to trade with external clients. It owns the rapids and has a PPP with a private company offering services related to the Seven Rapid Route."</i>

**Table A3.10.** Expected and observed impacts of a lead enterprise on the ecosystem (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Potential advantages and risks of corporate ecosystem governance	<i>"There is no leading enterprise to bring together the services of Southern Konnevesi."</i>
	<i>"In Rautalampi, there is no leading enterprise around which small operators could develop tourism activity. Such a business could be in accommodation, which would encourage visitors to stay longer."</i>
	<i>"A key company could build other tourism activities around itself and help with marketing, but there is a risk that large players might dominate and create a vacuum around themselves, taking business away from the smaller operators. Balance is important."</i>
	<i>"One possible solution for tourism management would be to attract a leading enterprise while allowing smaller businesses to exist and grow. However, the risk is fierce competition. Especially if the leading company is foreign, the activity might focus solely on profit, without attention to the development of the region."</i>
Experience from the operations of a leading enterprise in other destinations	<i>"In Southern Konnevesi, it's not possible to host large groups or organize major events due to the lack of accommodation capacity. In another park destination — Koli — villa owners started offering short-stay accommodation after a second hotel was built in the destination."</i>

**Table A3.11.** Role of the third sector in destination's tourism (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Opportunities to complement the tourism offering	<i>"Village associations can also be business partners, helping with transport or accommodation when needed, in exchange for monetary compensation or other benefits. They know the area best and can add depth to the tourism product. When a guide knows the region well, it gives authenticity to the experience, and tourists appreciate getting more than they expected."</i>
	<i>"Village associations play a huge role in tourism, complementing the offerings of tourism enterprises and presenting villages as picturesque. For example, they can organize village tours. Every local resident acts as a business card for Konnevesi when meeting visitors."</i>
Example of developing and coordinating a tourism facility in the third sector	<i>"Häähniinmäki is a natural area that should also be considered part of the destination. Its development is overseen by associations that can serve as an example with regard to their activity."</i>
Lack of resources to fulfill a role in tourism	<i>"The members of the village association are, so to speak, veterans. There is a lack of new ideas, and activity is fading. If there were more engagement in the future, the association could organize events, reopen the currently overgrown village routes with themes from local history, and mark them. But not with the current resources!"</i>

**Table A3.12.** Role of the local population in destination's tourism (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Locals as a source of local knowledge for recreational transformation	<i>"Encounters with locals and their culture are interesting for visitors – for example, retirees can be included. This is a form of recreation, and visitors can gain local knowledge and skills."</i>
Productization of local identity and lifestyle	<i>"The local population plays an important role in shaping the tourist experience. For instance, events organized in villages are not just for locals. However, rural life is not yet commercialized or productized."</i>
	<i>"Authentic encounters in Central Finland are hard to achieve because the region lacks a clearly expressed identity, such as a distinct dialect, and it's difficult to create a likeable image of the typical resident of Central Finland."</i>
The locals' attitude toward tourism	<i>"A central factor is the attitude of the local population and the municipality toward tourism. For example, regarding inclusivity, tourism companies are concerned about how locals might react to LGBTQ+ visitors."</i>

**Table A3.13.** Characteristics of tourism customers in Southern Konnevesi (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
International clients	<i>"It's absolute madness to think that the Rapid Route is only interesting to Finnish visitors. Right now, we even have a delegation from Oman fishing there. We also get many clients from the US and Central Europe."</i>
	<i>"Last summer, 11-12 different nationalities visited us: Spaniards, Swiss, Germans, Brits, Italians, Czechs, Dutch... I don't remember them all."</i>
	<i>"Before COVID-19, together with Visit Finland, we introduced the area to Chinese tourists. There was a boom in Asian visitors, but it was stopped by the pandemic."</i>
	<i>"Foreigners ask: 'How dare you go out in nature?' For them, it can feel scary, risky."</i>
	<i>"Even though it's not planned this way, most of our nature-based tourism services are purchased by foreigners."</i>
Domestic tourists – and what do Finns pay for?	<i>"Those who come camping only generate benefits for the local shop."</i>
	<i>"The national park is an easy destination for a day trip from major cities, allowing visitors to have nature experiences. It's different from a week-long trek in Lapland. Even day trips without overnight stays are tourism, because they are experiences away from home."</i>
	<i>"Finns don't pay for Finnish services."</i>
	<i>"Finnish nature tourists are often criticized for not using services, but the truth is they are not recognized as tourists when they do use them."</i>
	<i>"Even those who go for a walk in the park and seem not to use tourism services still contribute economically to the area. The benefit goes to grocery stores and gas stations."</i>

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Paying customers	<i>"We accommodate cyclists, motorcyclists, participants in various events, and families."</i>
	<i>"Whether an event like the rally brings paying customers depends on us. We need to organize it so that the customer enjoys themselves and stays longer. The key question is how to get such customers to return."</i>
Clients of the health and recreational product	<i>"Our wellbeing-related products are mainly sold to companies organizing recreational days for their staff and to groups celebrating bachelor and bachelorette parties."</i>
	<i>"A potential customer group is the elderly, whose number is increasing. They are interested in recreation and wellbeing, want to maintain mobility and stay active, and participate in cultural activities, which also benefits their wellbeing. This is an economically attractive segment. They can help balance the seasons and have the financial means to travel, especially those coming from Asia."</i>
	<i>"Wellbeing products are most marketable to corporate clients, and during the peak season, also to individual visitors."</i>

**Table A3.14.** Interactions of tourism customers in Southern Konnevesi (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Client-enterprise	<i>"The product needs to be developed in co-creation with the clients, talking to them and asking for honest feedback, finding out what should be done differently."</i>
Client-client	<i>"There haven't been conflicts between paddlers and anglers on the Rapid Route. Client feedback has been extremely positive."</i>
Vacation residents-region	<i>"Second-home owners are important for the vitality of the village. They come attracted by the peace and the opportunity for nature-based recreation, but their presence helps keep the villages alive."</i>
Foreign tourists-local population	<i>"We have materials in English, but foreign visitors don't always find our channels. Everyone's right creates the impression of excessive freedom, and foreigners are not familiar with the concept of a 'quiet backyard.' When they move through nature without a guide, it can be problematic because social sustainability is compromised."</i>

**Table A3.15.** Involvement of external agents in the region or tourism (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Involving municipalities outside the core of the national park in the destination's tourism	<i>"Tourism cooperation could expand beyond Konnevesi and Rautalampi – to Äänekoski, Hankasalmi, Laukaa, with whom we occasionally collaborate. We're all facing the same challenges."</i>
	<i>"Rautalampi, Konnevesi, and what was the third one? Hankasalmi! Because it's also on the lakeshore."</i>
Involving operators external to the region and the tourism sector in the destination's tourism	<i>"I don't know if it's possible to establish cooperation with operators outside the destination. Do we have anything to offer them?"</i>
	<i>"The initiative should come from private businesses. The economic development company has a supporting role. External partners are also needed, for example, travel agencies."</i>
	<i>"It's important to involve all kinds of operators from different sectors: healthcare, wellness, industry, technology, and if it were up to me – even fast-food kiosks. How does 'burger tour and cruise in Southern Konnevesi National Park' sound?"</i>
	<i>"Last summer we organized an event as part of the rally in partnership with the National Motorsport Association. Such organizations, even though they don't operate in tourism, bring tens of thousands of visitors and provide global visibility for our destination. This is a good example of the involvement of multiple businesses and the third sector."</i>
	<i>"Whether the destination has strictly defined geographic boundaries has its pros and cons. On one hand, it's easier if you know who is part of the network. On the other hand, clients are willing to travel further for a particular experience."</i>
	<i>"Suppliers backing the tourism businesses should also be included."</i>
	<i>"Participation in the destination doesn't depend on location, but on what we can offer. The municipality doesn't have many businesses providing activities. Cooperation with travel agencies and tech companies is welcome. Only a few businesses collaborate with international travel agencies."</i>

**Table A3.16.** Destination's collaboration with institutions (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Improving infrastructure in cooperation with public authorities	<i>„The mapping of the lake was arranged somewhat by chance while negotiating another project with the Finnish Transport Infrastructure Agency. We simply identified the key public officials who could make decisions on such matters. They allocated €1.5 million from the state budget to us, which is not much for the state but significant for our municipality. With the new map, more vessels can navigate the lake safely."</i>
	<i>„The Finnish Transport Infrastructure Agency is mapping the lake. Waterway markings will improve, and in the future, Southern Konnevesi will be accessible even for private boats. Safety will improve significantly."</i>
	<i>„Infrastructure is needed. The tourism product depends on Metsähallitus in this regard."</i>

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Legislation and regulation	<i>„The use of wild herbs is increasing. People are also interested in locally produced food. But is the concept of a ‘local host’ even allowed in Finland’s highly regulated environment? Should I dare to offer breakfast cooked at home to clients? Sometimes it is easier to ask for forgiveness afterwards than permission beforehand.“</i>
	<i>„Every Finnish government ostensibly aims to promote entrepreneurship, yet excessive regulations stifle entrepreneurial spirit.“</i>
	<i>„The formation of the tourism product does not end with services offered by entrepreneurs. Funding is needed, and adequate legislation is required. For example, VAT levels directly affect pricing.“</i>

**Table A3.17.** Common goals in the destination (author’s elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
The national park as a common denominator in the destination	<i>“Whether Southern Konnevesi appears as a unified destination depends on where information is drawn from. Different organizations present the area in different ways, and the municipalities promote only their own half. The park itself is unified, and Metsähallitus takes care of it. Especially when visitors move on the water, the boundaries are invisible.”</i>
Same enterprises serving both sides	<i>“Geographically, Southern Konnevesi is a small area. It differs in terrain between the Konnevesi side and the Rautalampi side. From a business perspective, the same tourism enterprises serve the entire area. From the visitors’ point of view, there is no difference between the two sides of the park; the destination feels the same. There are also much larger parks with multiple centers, more complex as destinations than this one.”</i>
Need for a common platform for communication and coordination of the municipalities	<i>“It would be great if I could say that Southern Konnevesi is a unified destination, but at the moment it is not. This is an area for development. From time to time, we meet with the Rautalampi municipality to discuss certain issues, but a new project would be a good platform for this. However, this time the activity needs to be long-term.”</i>
Divergent interests of municipalities	<i>“Rautalampi promotes the actual park because the hiking trails are there. In Konnevesi, we talk about the ‘landscape of the national park’ because the waters are not included in the national park.”</i>
	<i>“The national park is shared, but the tourism destination is not, because there is no common idea. Both municipalities operate in their own bubble.”</i>
	<i>“Unfortunately, municipal boundaries are noticeable in how people talk about it. The Konnevesi municipality receives all the benefits from promoting the park as its own. The word ‘Southern’ before ‘Konnevesi’ is often omitted.”</i>
	<i>“In my opinion, the idea of a unified destination has not been realized at the necessary scale. Both municipalities promote according to their own interests. But this is not only about the municipalities; tourism enterprises are involved as well.”</i>

**Table A3.18.** Influence of crises and global challenges (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Advantages over other destinations	<i>"Norway and Iceland are destinations for professional-level fishing, but in recent years the quality of the fish there has deteriorated. Due to hot summers, this is being observed in many places. Here, the climate is more favorable."</i>
	<i>"Climate change brings 'heat refugees,' and in the future, destinations in Northern Europe will become increasingly popular for summer tourism."</i>
	<i>"A father and daughter visited us from Madrid. They had found us online. They just wanted to escape the heat. Back home, it had been 35 degrees Celsius all summer without interruption."</i>
	<i>"Many of the clients who come for fishing on the Rapids Route used to be interested in such fishing in Russia, but now they cannot go there."</i>
Negative impacts of crises	<i>"After the pandemic, people travel very little."</i>
	<i>"The war in Ukraine has affected the economy. Municipalities do not have funds for work with the elderly and rehabilitation."</i>
	<i>"Still, Konnevesi is a unique place – a guardian of the forests and waters, as they say. Storm Asta took care of the forests, but the waters are still there."</i>
Need for sustainability	<i>"You cannot think only about growth. Sustainability is also needed to preserve natural areas and to continue attracting visitors' interest."</i>
	<i>"With regard to sustainability, the trails in the national park are already worn out and not as attractive. Tourist activity can be intensified in the lake area – there is no wear there, and the structures related to boating are in good condition."</i>
	<i>"Tourism in the area should develop in an ecological direction: self-powered movement, minimal infrastructure, but effective through the use of technology, solar energy, wind energy, lighting, the possibility to charge phones in nature, pumping water for the sauna, air exchange in the villa, and facilities for drying the clothing of water excursionists."</i>
	<i>"The inclusion of the local population in tourism offerings contributes to sustainability, promoting Finnish culture and creating economic opportunities and cultural exchange for locals."</i>

**Table A3.19.** Missing and underdeveloped tourism products (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Missing and poorly developed products	<i>"There is a need for horse trekking routes."</i>
	<i>"Central Finland has been proclaimed a sauna province, but this claim is not yet convincing. It is not easy to find sauna services, and the nature tourist gladly visits the sauna as part of the recreational experience."</i>
	<i>"Some nature visitors would happily use services, but they are not well packaged and there is a lack of information about them. For example, moving cars from the start to the end of a trail could be an important service."</i>
	<i>"At Häyrylänranta, the camping product could be further developed."</i>
Need for continuous renewal and improvement	<i>"Ten years have passed since the park was established. We are at a plateau of development, and a decline will soon begin. Something new must be invented; perhaps products focused on wellbeing could attract new clients and revenues. Products need to be updated and developed according to customer desires."</i>

**Table A3.20.** Lack of hotel accommodation (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Lack of hotel accommodation	<i>"Although we have a large capacity for cottage accommodation and program services, there is no hotel base and no capacity to accommodate groups."</i>
	<i>"Accommodation is a problem. It stops the groups."</i>
	<i>"There aren't many places here for overnight stays."</i>
	<i>"Nature tourists like to sleep between the sheets."</i>
	<i>"From the peaks of Kalaja, the view is the same as in Koli, but how come Koli has two hotels, and here there isn't a single one?"</i>

**Table A3.21.** Length of stay in the destination (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Too short length of stay	<i>"We have many day-trippers, but how can we get them to stay longer?"</i>
	<i>"Short stays of half a day or one day are a challenge. We need to encourage clients to spend the night here. There must be a reason to stay, for example more activities and attractions."</i>
Ways to extend the length of stay	<i>"There need to be meaningful products that can be easily purchased, without the client spending the whole day on Google or making phone calls. There is a need for a travel agency that can package and sell the products. Better-packaged products would increase the length of stay."</i>
	<i>"People traveling with caravans spend more time in the destination."</i>
	<i>"To keep tourists longer, there must be many more interesting activities. For example, a cycling tour around the lake with overnight stays at different places. This way, the individual services would be connected."</i>
	<i>"The short stay is partly due to the lack of accommodation options."</i>

**Table A3.22.** Aspects of destination accessibility (author's elaboration)

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Aspects of destination accessibility	<i>"Central Finland is dense with national parks, but the location is problematic. Those traveling by car from the southern part of Finland tend to drive past. The profile needs to be raised, and the accessibility of the parks needs to be improved. From Jyväskylä, it is difficult to reach the parks. For a tourist, more than an hour's drive feels 'far away.' Moreover, the park alone is not enough. Where will you stay? This can be especially important for international tourists."</i>
	<i>"The destination is located in such a way that travellers heading to Lapland can stop and spend the night halfway."</i>
	<i>"Törmälä and Häyrylänranta as park gates are very important. They provide a safe starting point for nature excursions."</i>
	<i>"In Southern Konnevesi, the structures — piers, trails, shelters — are well-marked and designed with accessibility in mind. For some, these structures also create a sense of safety."</i>
	<i>"Through the project, packages will be developed that include transportation and will be sold via a transport services platform."</i>
	<i>"From Suonenjoki, we can bring tourists to the national park."</i>
	<i>"We built a 3 km accessible trail to complement the national park routes and connect them with the services of the municipal center, including those related to health and wellbeing. It serves both tourists and locals."</i>

**Table A3.23.** Aspects of tourism product development (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Tourism seasonality	<i>"The tourist season is clearly defined. Everything ends when the school year begins. Events could help extend the season."</i>
	<i>"We hope to extend the summer season. We are also working on activating the winter season."</i>
	<i>"Tourism marketing should focus on extending the season. The summer season is very short, but there is potential in other seasons too — the fall foliage, dark autumn evenings, the frozen winter lake. Only spring is problematic because of the slush."</i>
	<i>"However, accommodation will not improve before year-round products are developed. Now the destination is mainly summer-oriented. It's the classic 'chicken or the egg' question."</i>
	<i>"Sauna culture is important regardless of the season."</i>
Customer flow	<i>"For tourism to be profitable, there must be a constant flow of customers. If, for example, I organize an excursion to a cave in the national park, I have to go there in advance to ensure safety, I have to prepare. These are costs, time, and dozens of kilometres driven, which I cannot include in the price. It's different if I go there regularly with clients."</i>
Significance of productization	<i>"When services are offered, people use them."</i>
	<i>"Southern Konnevesi is based on water resources, and much of the park would remain inaccessible and unseen without the services — cruises, SUP boarding, and rental of water sports equipment."</i>
	<i>"I would like to see more program services in tourism activities. They exist, but they need to be better productized and marketed. Nobody has the time to play detective."</i>
	<i>"Southern Konnevesi needs a greater variety of services. For example, Häähniämäki does not offer water activities because the lake there is very small, but it has cycling routes. It is geographically close enough to be included in an excursion to the national park. This helps extend the stay."</i>
	<i>"The supply of tourism services is improving all the time. Häähniämäki is a good example — it offers accommodation, hiking trails, and cycling. Visitors seeking nature experiences visit both the national park and Häähniämäki. One does not come at the expense of the other."</i>
	<i>"The importance of service productization must be recognized. It lies in creating added value for customers and business growth."</i>

**Table A3.24.** Aspects of tourism product packaging (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Packaging individual services into a holistic product	<i>"The products of health and recreational tourism should be packaged and marketed together with the elements of Central Finland's USP. The challenge is that similar products in the Helsinki region and in Lapland are offered as additions to iconic attractions. Our logic must be different."</i>
	<i>"The health and recreational product is easier to sell as part of a package, together with accommodation and food."</i>
	<i>"There should be main and complementary products. From an economic point of view, it is logical to seek added value."</i>
	<i>"Packaging more than one national park in Central Finland into a single product would be unnatural — they are all in different directions."</i>
Possible approaches to packaging and sales	<i>"In the past, tourism services were presented through weekly programs. That was good, because selling activities only on the basis of individual offers is not enough."</i>
	<i>"There is no common platform for selling the tourism product. Packaging it also requires cooperation."</i>
	<i>"Next summer, we will pilot packages with the railway company connected to the national park. We need such forms of cooperation."</i>
	<i>"In the near future, we will negotiate with a specific travel agency representing Central Finland, and we hope they will take on the sales of products from Southern Konnevesi."</i>

**Table A3.25.** Aspects of destination marketing (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Joint marketing	<i>"Southern Konnevesi competes with better-known destinations for customers, such as Ivalojoki River, Lake Saimaa, and Linnansaari National Park, which belong to the same category of water-based nature tourism destinations. Marketing works on recognizability, but it takes time. Joint marketing accelerates the process when all resources are harnessed together."</i>
	<i>"Marketing cooperation in Central Finland's tourism is very important because individual entrepreneurs don't have enough resources for it. But there is an enormous amount of work to be done to achieve it."</i>
	<i>"The strength of Visit Jyväskylä Region lies in marketing, but sales are missing."</i>
	<i>"Marketing should be joint, aimed at 'our Southern Konnevesi,' and not left to individual entrepreneurs."</i>
Need for information about tourism services	<i>"The weak point of tourism in Central Finland, especially regarding nature excursions, is the lack of information about services — for example, opening hours and prices. As a visitor, you need to know the area well."</i>
	<i>"When there is more information, there are fewer unrealistic expectations, and that adds to wellbeing. Care must be taken not to create a false impression. For instance, one might wonder whether some videos show only the best places and moments. The platform matters a lot for that — YouTube versus TikTok, for example."</i>

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Marketing platforms of municipalities	<p><i>"The municipalities have no joint marketing. We diverged when it came time to decide on a shared marketing platform for tourism. Konnevesi began promoting based on a business-driven model, while Rautalampi wanted to keep the platform piloted in previous projects but failed for financial reasons."</i></p>
	<p><i>"At one event organized by projects, I got the idea for a joint platform and immediately reserved a group of domains. We built the website Visit Konnevesi, but after the pandemic plans changed, and we had to sell it to the municipality for a symbolic price. The site also had a Facebook page, which is now no longer updated."</i></p>
	<p><i>"Visit Konnevesi is a digital platform serving tourism marketing. It began as a private project, but later the domain was transferred to the municipality. In the future, it will be developed as a business card of Konnevesi, focusing on visual appeal, and will be managed by the local economic development company."</i></p>
	<p><i>"The blog complements tourism marketing and is sometimes indexed much better than publicly maintained platforms."</i></p>
Marketing of the national park	<p><i>"Metsähallitus maintains the park's communication. Metsähallitus channels have many followers across the country and can strengthen the region's visibility. The Instagram account luuntoon.fi has 128,000 followers. On Facebook, Southern Konnevesi National Park has its own page."</i></p>
	<p><i>"The national park exists there, and it attracts visitors even without marketing efforts. But the services need to be promoted to be discovered."</i></p>
National outdoor recreation information service (platform)	<p><i>"The platform managed by Metsähallitus will be launched at the end of 2024 and will include descriptions of recreational sites and routes. Only places that are private property will not be featured. The information is synchronized with the requirements of travel agencies and cycling centers so it can be used effectively."</i></p>
	<p><i>"The Luuntoon.fi website is being updated and will soon have an app. It is being developed in cooperation between Metsähallitus, the sports facilities service Lipas, and the Finnish Outdoor Association and will serve as a national outdoor recreation database. It will make it easier for users to find all possible sites from one shared database. In Southern Konnevesi this is particularly important, as there are many shelters, piers, and other structures not managed by Metsähallitus but by the respective municipality. The database will serve both locals and tourists equally. It does not compete with blogs like Retkipaikka. Stories still have their readers, and blog information is not regularly updated."</i></p>

**Table A3.26.** Possible approaches to destination management (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Possible organizations for destination management	<p><i>"In an ideal situation, tourism would be managed by the private sector. If there was a leading company, it would set the direction for tourism — but there isn't one. The form doesn't matter — an association, a network, a forum, a formal or informal organization — but something has to exist."</i></p>
	<p><i>"Visit Finland promotes tourism in international markets, Metsähallitus is the responsible organization for the park, but the municipalities, entrepreneurs, landowners, or their representative organization — a company, association, or foundation — should have the task of developing this particular area."</i></p>
	<p><i>"Tourism management could also be external — why not? What matters is the content, the products defined by those working in the area. Well, if it's a local organization, someone will meet you, pull you by the sleeve, and remind you of deadlines. But if it's an external organization, no one might remind you, and that would be a missed opportunity."</i></p>
	<p><i>"Visit Kalaja no longer exists, Visit Konnevesi is in the hands of the municipality, Visit Jyväskylä Region operates separately. There should be one clear organization managing things — whatever form it takes."</i></p>
	<p><i>"Rautalampi develops tourism through Savo Grow, a business development company whose operational area does not include Konnevesi."</i></p>
Public governance	<p><i>"The economic development company can coordinate certain matters, but it is not a tourism operator. It can advise companies, look for contacts with travel agencies, for example from Central Europe, or create a sales channel. But the businesses themselves must also take care of their role. It's not rocket science. There has to be an understanding that we can succeed only together."</i></p>
	<p><i>"Perhaps tourism as a whole should be managed by the municipality and the economic development company. But businesses and the third sector must be actively involved — especially since the municipality cannot provide a sales channel for services."</i></p>
	<p><i>"For successful coordination of tourism, municipalities must take the lead — but entrepreneurship is also needed. Municipal investments are wasted if there are no enterprises."</i></p>
	<p><i>"We are members of Visit Jyväskylä Region, but we see little effort from there. The organization is focused on the regional center. Still, it's better than nothing. For the municipality, this membership is an easy way to say it has taken care of tourism."</i></p>
	<p><i>"To ensure the existence and development of health and wellbeing tourism products, the municipality's role is to provide adequate infrastructure."</i></p>
Community approach to ecosystem governance	<p><i>"Usually, such destinations have a tourism association — a local organization owned or represented by tourism entrepreneurs that coordinates tourism."</i></p>
	<p><i>"It is not good for tourism in Konnevesi and Rautalampi to be managed separately. The whole destination should be under the umbrella of one organization."</i></p>
	<p><i>"In the future, tourism management will be a joint activity."</i></p>
	<p><i>"One possible project is to develop an online platform where enterprises can sell their services together."</i></p>

**Table A3.27.** Tourism management toolkit (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Strategic plans	<p><i>"The master plan has been updated and extended until 2030. We follow the measures outlined in it. Some of them require municipal decisions, so things don't happen quickly. But it is important that the plan exists. Enterprises are engaged in its implementation. A good idea would be to organize training for new entrepreneurs to familiarize them with its content."</i></p>
	<p><i>"The plan includes measures not only for tourism but also for enabling tourism services, for example, developing infrastructure. These measures are implemented by other municipal departments, such as the environmental department."</i></p>
Data-driven management	<p><i>"In national parks, tourism and nature conservation are not in conflict because Metsähallitus professionally maintains the park's infrastructure, monitors erosion, sustainability, and visitor numbers, and we can accordingly protect additional areas or expand visitor capacity, for example, parking spaces."</i></p>
	<p><i>"The visitor counter in the national park does not indicate how long people stayed, whether they used services. Management based on information is important for tourism. Statistics on overnight stays and service use should be combined with park visitation data for a fuller understanding."</i></p>
Subsidiaries	<p><i>"The municipality of Konnevesi owns two subsidiaries related to tourism. The economic development company provides business consulting, communications, marketing, tourism development, and serves as a link between the regional tourism organization and enterprises. This is an internal company, it does not offer external services, but it exists as a company to handle confidential business information. The other is Kellankosken voima, which has the right to engage in external trade. However, neither of these companies functions as a DMO."</i></p>
Development projects	<p><i>"The establishment of the national park gave an initial boost to tourism, but it has been through projects that its development has advanced significantly. Projects are the engine of development. Now this must be maintained, and we must look for ways to do more and better, not just be satisfied with the current level."</i></p>
	<p><i>"When there were projects and we piloted the product 'Tree Story,' there were many active participants and a shared goal, but immediately after the projects ended, everything stopped. Projects take care of coordinating tourism activities, but they need to be tied to specific indicators, such as business growth."</i></p>
	<p><i>"Cooperation works well among entrepreneurs, but when it comes to planning projects, the problem is that much of the funding is region-specific."</i></p>
	<p><i>"It is very unfortunate that the shared will built in the past has dissolved, but we have new plans. We are negotiating with the Council of Northern Savonia for new projects, joint between Rautalampi and Konnevesi."</i></p>
	<p><i>"Previously, along with projects, there was more energy and enthusiasm."</i></p>
	<p><i>"Even if there were projects, they would not achieve much if there are no enterprises in Rautalampi to benefit from them."</i></p>
	<p><i>"Projects bring the resources necessary for tourism to be covered more quickly and successfully."</i></p>

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Communication instruments for visitor management	<p><i>“The principle ‘excursion without litter’ is well accepted, and we have no problems with park pollution. The challenge is fire in hot weather when a forest fire warning is in effect. Through communication, we can influence visitors to make more responsible decisions. It always takes time, but in the end, it has an effect. We rely on entrepreneurs to convey the same message to their clients.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“The need for an Outdoor Etiquette arose even before the pandemic with increasing visitor numbers. But COVID-19 caused an exponential increase in nature visits. Many visitors are new and inexperienced in nature. We need to communicate with them through short, plain-language messages. The etiquette also facilitates our international communication. It contains instructions that guide visitors ‘for’ rather than ‘against’ something. It also includes beautiful nature images. It motivates people to preserve nature. There is also a children’s version in the form of a storybook.”</i></p>
Forums for wide stakeholder involvement in tourism	<p><i>“When the national park was created, interest in tourism increased, but later there was a period of divergence in the tourism sector. Now we regularly organize tourism evenings to meet with entrepreneurs.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“Meetings are organized for tourism entrepreneurs in the municipality. Whoever participates, participates. Basically, the same people keep coming.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“Savo Grow gathers enterprises in a tourism forum, where they can meet and raise important common issues, for example, developing cycling routes. Operators from Konnevesi are welcome as well.”</i></p>
	<p><i>“Together with the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra, we tested a method to involve residents in municipal activities. Although it wasn’t about tourism, the model can also be applied in tourism. We selected 1,000 residents through random sampling and invited them to participate in municipal planning processes. Over 100 agreed, we accepted 25 and trained them. Then they held three workshops with an external facilitator, while the municipality didn’t participate so as not to influence them. This model eliminates the risk of the same vocal citizens always having the word.”</i></p>
<p><i>“Municipalities do not hold meetings, for example of mayors or those responsible for business development, who mainly deal with tourism. There is no forum where joint decisions can be made about tourism in Southern Konnevesi.”</i></p>	

**Table A3.28.** Challenges to ecosystem governance of the destination (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Need of competencies for tourism, health, recreation, and governance	<i>"There is a lack of competence in productization and marketing in Konnevesi. External organizations with experience need to be involved, and the locals should draw from that experience."</i>
	<i>"No doctor is needed – nature heals. Still, those who lead tourists in nature must know what they are doing, must be professionals, and must pay attention to the needs of different client groups."</i>
	<i>"Tourism management requires knowledge of the operational environment, but also enough creative madness to build a vision."</i>
	<i>"The municipality does not try to attract more enterprises but aims to improve the competencies of the existing ones."</i>
	<i>"We constantly encounter the fact that there is a lack of skills to coordinate cooperation. According to entrepreneurs, cooperation is good, but someone else should do the selling."</i>
Resources for governance	<i>"Management functions are dispersed because there is no tourism organization to take them on. The question is who and how will finance the work of such an organization."</i>
	<i>"Building a wellbeing destination profile does not require additional resources, because this is part of rural and nature-based tourism."</i>
	<i>"Someone needs to have the time resources to activate enterprises, using soft power to get them to participate in initiatives like the 'treasure map,' through which services in two municipalities were presented."</i>
Awareness about the division of roles in the ecosystem	<i>"There are international tourism companies operating in national parks without adhering to Metsähallitus' principles of cooperation. So far, there are no cases from Southern Konnevesi, but there are from other national parks, for example, Nuuksio."</i>
	<i>"The annual plan of tourism activities should be accessible to all participants in tourism."</i>
	<i>"The Transport and Infrastructure Agency is aware of its impact on tourism, but issues related to NATO membership are now a priority."</i>

## Analysis of the interviews from Strandzha

**Table A3.29.** Natural and anthropogenic factors for tourism in Strandzha (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Natural factors as leading for tourism	<i>"There is no other place in Bulgaria like Strandzha, where you can drink from the river and there are no industrial pollutants. Green, green, green!"</i>
	<i>"The tourism potential of Strandzha is that it is a beautiful and very mystical mountain only 60 km from Burgas."</i>
	<i>"Everything in Strandzha is interesting, except that there are no high peaks. There is plenty of everything. But it is far from all the big cities."</i>
	<i>"The focus of Strandzha is silence, tranquillity, fresh air, greenery, forest. People who come for relaxation feel Strandzha as a place that can give them something completely different from the big city. Bulgarians have started seeking their roots in recent years."</i>
	<i>"Most guests - both Bulgarians and foreigners - come because of the biodiversity. They photograph and study beetles, search for green lizards. We have frogs that walk instead of jump, a protected species. We have three in the yard, huge ones. We also have many fireflies, which are visible because there is no lighting around. The nightingales sing nearby."</i>
	<i>"When a person sees the forest, like a tunnel along the path, they are truly impressed. The green affects the soul and brings positive emotions."</i>
Cultural factors as leading for tourism	<i>"Strandzha has potential for cultural tourism, pilgrimage tourism, chapels, hunting tourism, all kinds of tourism!"</i>
	<i>"Mystical places are appealing: Bastet's cave, the chapels, occult sites. People come and say: 'I want to see Bastet.' The legend sells."</i>
Combination of nature and culture for achieving recreational benefits	<i>"After the pandemic, people want nature, calm, clean air, enjoy the birds and flowers, in the heat they look for shade by the streams and at Indipascha, they visit chapels, each of which has a spring with healing waters; they go to Saint Marina to seek help to conceive."</i>
	<i>"They visit the chapels, seeking a cleaner life, cleaner nature, cleaner food, and peace. The air is unlike anywhere else. There are many little springs with water. It is a pity that this is not being developed."</i>
	<i>"Natural and cultural landmarks are intertwined, so they cannot be separated."</i>
	<i>"There are legends of healing waters throughout Bulgaria, but Strandzha is dense with them. Every chapel was built on a site sacred to the Thracians and was discovered through dreams, especially the chapels of Zavernovo."</i>
	<i>"The priest had jumped against the white Kuker during Shrove Tuesday. There is a conflict between the church and the local pagan customs. But there should be no opposition. This is a spectacle, a reenactment, to preserve the traditions and show how things were done in the past. Some consider it blasphemy to feel better in nature than in the church, but God is everywhere."</i>
	<i>"In Strandzha, nature, biodiversity, and forest come first. But they are combined with cultural monuments, architecture, and religion. Strandzha is an easily accessible mountain that has always been inhabited."</i>
	<i>"You cannot help but like it in Strandzha. Strandzha is unique!"</i>
	<i>"I am a person of exact sciences; I do not know if I should say it, but there are people oriented toward spirituality and the paranormal who come to Strandzha. There was a client from Venezuela with Dutch citizenship who had travelled the world. She said that here there were vibrations she had not felt anywhere else. I believe there is an invisible force that acts on the human soul through tranquillity."</i>

**Table A3.30.** Significance and role of the nature park and biosphere park for tourism in Strandzha (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Significance of nature-protective functions	<i>"The park is rightfully there. There is evidence of huge deforested areas."</i>
	<i>"One has to find a way to coexist with nature."</i>
The link between nature conservation and tourism	<i>"A protected area sounds different from a forest. Strandzha has plenty of reasons to be protected; everything is top-notch. This is a long topic to present to visitors. The status of the nature park is a plus; some people come specifically for the park. But its status doesn't impose more restrictions to protect nature than in an unprotected area."</i>
	<i>"If there are no tourists, nature would be better off, but tourists cannot exist without nature. Tourism, however, can contribute financially."</i>
	<i>"Tourism interferes with conservation if there is a dense habitat; nesting birds get disturbed, plants get trampled. What if one person walks by? But it's not suitable for groups or mass tourism. The goal of a hike is to see something interesting, not to get from point A to point B. But there are places that are better left wild, without the nonsense of building stairs and platforms and bringing in careless visitors who are too lazy to explore responsibly."</i>
	<i>"If there is more tourism, there needs to be more regulation."</i>
Lack of significance of the nature park and negative implications	<i>"The entire municipality is in Strandzha Nature Park, but here the streams drain into the river. Sewage treatment plants are necessary. We are like second-class citizens in this regard."</i>
	<i>"What's there to celebrate about the park? What's the point of the status? Go up the eco-trails and see how everything is broken. Let there be a park, but there also needs to be maintenance."</i>
	<i>"Malko Tarnovo as a municipality only experiences negative impacts from the park because of the restrictions."</i>
Presence of UNESCO biosphere park	<i>"About the biosphere park, people don't ask, and we don't know either. Maybe the museum knows more."</i>
	<i>"The residents of Tsarevo municipality gave up on living in a reserve. For Malko Tarnovo it doesn't matter, because Uzunbudzhak is like the core, and the rest is human activity, a buffer zone in sync with nature, and it has been that way for centuries. The status isn't utilized. Bulgarians just want to find something interesting. The status would be important for attracting international tourists. Europeans cannot imagine that such a wild place exists, but the potential for international tourism is unused."</i>

**Table A3.31.** Basis for developing health and recreational tourism in the destination (author’s elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Cleanliness	<i>“The potential is huge, unique. Strandzha is among the cleanest regions in Bulgaria, with no industry or pollution, clean air, and healing waters.”</i>
Quiet and tranquillity	<i>“Everyone says they rest really well here. It’s not quiet, but the noise is different, natural. There’s no traffic, no shouting, no city chaos. A bonus is that we have no mobile coverage. Guests throw away their phones. We use the moment for disconnecting.”</i>
	<i>“It’s peaceful here, the birds are chirping, and our regular guests know it. Silence and tranquillity are our competitive advantage. Coming here from a chaotic street feels like entering an oasis. This is true recreation! Guests throw away their phones, which is an achievement in itself.”</i>
	<i>“It’s calm here, there’s no commotion, but it’s not an advantage for all clients.”</i>
Clean air and climatotherapy	<i>“The air is good, there are recreational benefits from the forests, but private businesses need to develop this into tourism.”</i>
	<i>“No one has ever told me they come here for the clean air.”</i>
	<i>“With the help of magical Strandzha, you quickly get good sleep and no hangover.”</i>
	<i>“In Bulgaria, there are about 90 climate resorts. Malko Tarnovo is a local climate resort. There, as in Sveti Vlas, an ‘oxygen funnel’ occurs, where mountain and sea air currents mix.”</i>
	<i>“In Strandzha, three sea currents meet: the Aegean, the Mediterranean, and the Black Sea. The air is highly rich in oxygen.”</i>
	<i>“At the hospital in Malko Tarnovo, no treatment was applied; patients simply walked two kilometers daily. Yet, even serious illnesses improved very quickly.”</i>
	<i>“Many people settled here for their children, to treat their respiratory problems. Now there’s no sanatorium. We started discussing about climatotherapy again, but there’s no funding. It’s difficult to build a sanatorium with specialists, even though the hospital is empty and could be renovated.”</i>
	<i>“Bulgaria loses millions by not using the air for tourism, health, and recreation... We’re talking about reviving climatotherapy, not creating something entirely new.”</i>
	<i>“Climatotherapy is health tourism, but you don’t have to be sick to benefit from it.”</i>
Pure mineral waters and spa	<i>“People say that only the mineral water from the springs in Mladezhko helps with rheumatism.”</i>
	<i>“The water from the springs in Mladezhko helps the nervous system. In the past, people even brought their livestock there to wash them, and they recovered.”</i>
	<i>“Spa is more for relaxation than for health. We heat the water, and it doesn’t come from the mineral springs. In the river, its temperature is constant, 5–6°C, and the health effect is achieved only when the water is in its natural state.”</i>
	<i>“The spa activities are not based on mineral springs.”</i>

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Clean local food and herbs	<i>"Almost all the food we offer is homemade — from our garden, our chickens..."</i>
	<i>"We have pears, plums, cucumbers. In Bulgaria, we've started to value local production and seeing where it's grown with our own eyes."</i>
	<i>"Visitors look for wild edible plants."</i>
	<i>"Strandzha herbal tea is very popular."</i>
	<i>"Pink rockrose is one of the main herbs in Strandzha. Deposits can be found along the way to Mishkova Niva."</i>
Physical activity	<i>"Walking and cycling — better for health than anything else..."</i>
The combination of sea and mountain	<i>"Malko Tarnovo doesn't have the sea for pronounced recreational tourism, but something can be based on the mountains."</i>
	<i>"In Strandzha, sea and mountain can be combined for even better health results."</i>
Forest recreational resources	<i>"The place is extremely beautiful. People return from the forest recharged, and this is inspiring."</i>
Recreational value of the nature park	<i>"People come to the park just for the nature, especially after COVID-19. Most come for the weekend or for a picnic."</i>
	<i>"Forest therapy is now entering Bulgaria, and Strandzha has the oldest centuries-old forests in Europe, which are still unused."</i>

**Table A3.32.** Health and recreation demand matching Strandzha's resources (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Demand for health and recreation matching Strandzha's resources	<i>"Interest is growing in what Strandzha offers: nature, landmarks, history."</i>
	<i>"After the coronavirus, people are interested in the healing air for improving asthma, chronic bronchitis..."</i>
	<i>"The focus of tourism right now is a return to roots, primarily tranquillity. Stress is the scourge and plague of the 21st century, threatening to destroy our generation."</i>
	<i>"Currently, the most sought-after type of tourism is health tourism."</i>
	<i>"People have a sense of beauty, of nature; they need to be part of it. In the city, everyone is in a rush, as if the world will end tomorrow!"</i>

**Table A3.33.** Significance of evidence, certification, and official status for health and recreational tourism (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Old research and recognition	<i>"There are conditions here for recreational tourism, climatotherapy, and health tourism. The settlers in Malko Tarnovo attest to this, as it was once a certified resort."</i>
	<i>"I am convinced that during the communist era there were studies on the air quality, as they built a pulmonary hospital, but these are now buried deep in some archive."</i>
	<i>"I refrain from commenting on the air quality because it's based on old studies. Everything has an expiry date; we cannot speak of current relevance. Although if tested, the air would still come out clean, since we have no industry."</i>
Documented and observed practical health and recreational benefits	<i>"Thanks to the visits to Strandzha, there are thousands who have recovered — not only locals, but also many foreigners."</i>
	<i>"It is documented that the people who visited truly improved their health."</i>
	<i>"The air here! Even children notice the difference. This is our third summer here, and we can see how the children's immunity improves."</i>
	<i>"We maintain contact with many people — guests and former employees — whose health has benefitted from the oxygen-rich air. We just see it."</i>
	<i>"Mlazhko is famous for its healing waters — for joint disorders and discopathy. I haven't seen such effects anywhere else. Unfortunately, there is no written documentation; the knowledge is passed down orally. It would be useful if the effect were proven. Many people don't believe in shamanic tales."</i>
	<i>"We took a mineral expert to Indipascha. His theory was that in spring, minerals move through the underground waters and rocks, making the water curative."</i>
Merely formal existence of labels and statuses	<i>"People realize that nature provides benefits, for health, for example, but Bulgarians know that everything in official documents is just on paper. What matters is the actual experience — seeing it with your own eyes."</i>
	<i>"There used to be a registered label 'Strandzha,' a label for the region. The idea was for people to support each other and to have local production. But it always existed only on paper. Someone needs to ensure it is implemented."</i>
	<i>"Previously there has been the 'Strandzha' label, a certificate issued by the park directorate. It existed for guides and accommodations. The certification expired and needed renewal, but it was never used, so it was discontinued."</i>
	<i>"An example is the forestry enterprises. The timber is certified, but they see no value because it does not increase its price."</i>
Unavailability of products to be certified	<i>"White and yellow cheese today must have 'bio' or 'eco' labels. We don't have such production."</i>
Need for certification	<i>"A certified product for health tourism is needed. A new study could be initiated in partnership with the state, which could provide certification."</i>
	<i>"We are in the process of developing a methodology for certifying climatotherapy facilities."</i>

**Table A3.34.** Characteristics of tourism entrepreneurship in the destination (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Entrepreneurship as a challenge	<i>"Entrepreneurship is very daunting and carries responsibility for many people. Private initiative is lacking."</i>
	<i>"You have to be very persistent in a small town to survive, but one must have dreams."</i>
	<i>"Every year we face different dilemmas and realities. Right now, we don't know the direction again. That's how it is in family businesses."</i>
Tourism entrepreneurship as a side activity	<i>"I don't do it for profit. I work as an accountant and have sufficient income. The money we earn goes back into the village."</i>
	<i>"We don't actively advertise. If we were to, we'd need to be here full-time and not work elsewhere. At this stage, this is enough for us."</i>
Aspects of the service	<i>"We are limited to hospitality only; we don't provide meals. We don't need staff; we are our own housekeepers. Guests are checking in around the clock. The yard is so large it's difficult to maintain."</i>
	<i>"I always welcome and see off the guests personally. I collect feedback and recommendations."</i>
	<i>"In the hotel, many people feel at home. They like the service, the cleanliness, and that they see only familiar faces."</i>
Good examples of entrepreneurship	<i>"The construction of the spa hotel in Mlazhko is commendable. A significant investment!"</i>
	<i>"The guesthouse in Kachul area is something new. It has very good reviews for service. They have a well-made website and cook themselves. The location is picturesque."</i>
	<i>"It's commendable — young family has settled in Kachul and is developing tourism."</i>
	<i>"The guesthouse in Kachul also provides food and uses many local products."</i>
Activities with growth in entrepreneurship	<i>"I gave it some thought and realized tourism makes sense. I converted my father's house into a guesthouse. We managed to restore everything as it was before. Tourists started coming. Over time, we acquired a second and third house."</i>
	<i>"In Malko Tarnovo, there are about a hundred accommodation sites. The fact is, most of the apartments and guest rooms exist because of border police."</i>
	<i>"We live in Stoilovo but have a house we rent out in Malko Tarnovo."</i>
	<i>"Currently, there are more dining options in town than before."</i>
Overlapping roles between public organizations and business	<i>"The Directorate has its own guides and a price list for this service."</i>
	<i>"At the TIC, we have two guides. We can't cover all tourist flows, nor is that our goal, but previously there were no guides, and what locals said was not always accurate. The Directorate also has one guide, a biologist. There are NGOs and companies; they guide people from Burgas, organize transport, and take longer routes, also including trips to the sea and across Bulgaria."</i>

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Lack of local cooperation	<i>“As a guide, I explain to local entrepreneurs what tourists want, but only a few have understood what it’s about.”</i>
	<i>“We have no connection with the municipality. We only partner with BACHT and ‘Green Strandzha.’ When we accommodate guests, we provide the TIC guides’ contacts. Neither of us has previously worked in this field and we don’t know whom to cooperate with.”</i>
	<i>“At the local level, we cannot help each other regarding labour, but we can do something for advertising.”</i>
	<i>“I have no local partnerships. I work with a few tour operators, but they are not regular.”</i>
Interactions between businesses and the nature park	<i>“The business is already strong; the hotels are built, the park is not a factor for them. The campsites operate without permits and illegally. All of this happens within the park.”</i>
	<i>“The lack of a management plan opens the door for all kinds of self-proclaimed guides, known and unknown. We cannot control them, and this is not the park’s role, but recognized routes, permits, and property rights must be respected. There are established routes in the park, but new ones constantly appear. There is fierce competition among guides.”</i>
	<i>“We have no connection with the nature park and do not know how it develops. Here, people come for the beach.”</i>

**Table A3.35.** Construction sector as a dominator in the tourism ecosystem (author’s elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Relationship of municipal authorities with construction sector	<i>“The municipality wants to protect those who own land in the park so they can build, and in that way, the municipality can collect money.”</i>
	<i>“The new mayor of Tsarevo is trying to create common ground, but there’s also the municipal council. Coastal construction seems unstoppable.”</i>
Intensive construction	<i>“When we arrived, there were only bungalows, and now even the park behind the gas station has been built over. Tsarevo is developing northward, but the growth is somewhat chaotic and unattractive.”</i>
Foreign investors	<i>“The huge construction visible on the shore... some Russian started building apartments 15–20 years ago and never finished. There’s another one nearby, from Scotland. They both went bankrupt.”</i>
Examples from other destinations	<i>“In Sveti Vlas, they built high-rise hotels that don’t offer health tourism services and interfere with the airflow. The sanatorium was destroyed. They would have earned much more if the construction had been aligned with the natural air currents.”</i>

**Table A3.36.** Role of the third sector in destination's tourism (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
BACHT	<i>"We founded the association together with a group of enthusiasts from the southern Black Sea Coast area. Three years ago, we got together with the idea of reviving what has been forgotten and lost — the hospital in Malko Tarnovo and Bulgaria's largest climatic resort."</i>
	<i>"During our meetings with mayors of towns that had pulmonary hospitals, they began to show interest, but we realized they didn't even know about climatic resorts."</i>
	<i>"We held a meeting with members of parliament, doctors, athletes, and the municipality so that the local population would understand the potential of climatotherapy."</i>
Tourism society "Green Strandzha"	<i>"Green Strandzha' organizes hiking groups to enjoy the nature."</i>
	<i>"Over the years, 'Green Strandzha' has established itself. They lead thousands of people, but purely for profit. They also apply for many projects. The NGO has a commercial company attached."</i>
	<i>"Green Strandzha' has done dozens of times more for Strandzha than the park itself."</i>
	<i>"The association's plans to revive climatotherapy align with the activities of 'Zelena Strandzha' — fresh air walks and physical activity."</i>
Tourism society "Nasam-Natam"	<i>"Only for one year, the Directorate had a cooperation agreement with 'Nasam-Natam.' The problem was that the association's representative began criticizing those who had created the trails. He removed our markings and replaced them with his own, sometimes even changing the route. In Bryshlyan, he passed through private land. The owner is demanding accountability from the Directorate."</i>
	<i>"The association has 30+ members. We don't need a large membership base, but we have friends, supporters, and volunteers who come for events. We improve trail markings, create new routes, clean up, maintain tourist infrastructure, build shelters and bridges, and do repairs. Sponsors fund this. We run campaigns, and the municipalities also get involved."</i>
	<i>"Nasam-Natam' operates nationwide with the goal of making money. Without permission or coordination with Strandzha Nature Park."</i>
	<i>"Nasam-Natam' brings customers overnight, for two nights. Even if these are volunteers, this counts as tourism. They leave something behind for the locals."</i>
	<i>"Thanks to 'Nasam-Natam,' we have trails and signage."</i>

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
SPNHH "Brashlyan"	<i>"In Bryshlyan, there is a historical heritage society. They organize gatherings, make traditional pies, and have dances and songs."</i>
	<i>"The society was founded in 1997 to preserve the village's spirit and create something meaningful. It has 45 members, mostly from the village. They manage three museums: the monastic school, the ethnographic house, and the agricultural museum with the bread route."</i>
	<i>"The museums in Bryshlyan belong to the society, not the Ministry of Culture. This makes us less dependent on state institutions. The income is used for mowing, the village fair, and other local needs. Women receive payment for their participation."</i>
	<i>"This year, the gatherings in Bryshlyan are no longer held. Rural tourism had been developing well, but only three elderly women remain. People see there is nothing and won't return."</i>
	<i>"The gatherings in Bryshlyan could be supported, for example, by the community center in Malko Tarnovo."</i>
	<i>"In Malko Tarnovo, there are people who could help organize the gatherings, but participation is paid by the hour, and transport is very difficult."</i>
Attempts to establish local regional development association	<i>"There is no unification among hoteliers, restaurateurs, and others. I tried to form an association. It would have been beneficial for the municipality to have funding through the association's participation in regional development. This way, local initiative groups could organize themselves to apply for projects."</i>

**Table A3.37.** Views on the role of the Municipality of Malko Tarnovo in Strandzha tourism (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Negative opinions	<i>"In Malko Tarnovo, there is nothing; nothing is functioning. The local authorities have no desire to revive it. It's all just media appearances."</i>
	<i>"The hospital is municipal, but the mayor is not willing to develop tourism."</i>
Positive opinions	<i>"The only support comes from the Municipality of Malko Tarnovo and the mayor. You go there, say something, and things happen."</i>
Municipality's self-assessment	<i>"I'm selling the hospital to turn it into a center for lung diseases and rehabilitation. But the Ministry of Health has no such plans."</i>
	<i>"The municipality has been trying for years to capitalize on this topic for recreational tourism, but investment is needed."</i>
	<i>"The municipality sees its role as motivating the locals. Can people be provoked and guided? Probably, over time, we, as an external factor for the system, can generate greater interest in tourism. The municipality simply creates the conditions; it does not commit to anything concrete."</i>
	<i>"But the municipality cannot manage on its own without state support."</i>

**Table A3.38.** Characteristics and role of the local population in destination's tourism (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Strandzha residents as a closed community	<i>"The people of Strandzha are very intractable. It's a closed community that doesn't welcome newcomers."</i>
	<i>"There is a contradiction within the local communities. Being isolated, they became self-contained and self-sufficient. Now they go out and see how things are done elsewhere and want the same here, but if someone takes initiative, they start to reject it."</i>
Local attitudes toward nature protection	<i>"With the establishment of the park and Natura 2000, it wasn't explained to the locals what this meant, which is why they hate the park."</i>
	<i>"In Malko Tarnovo, people respect the nature park."</i>
Local attitudes toward health tourism	<i>"The local population knows and cherishes the old ways. Climatotherapy could be the only business opportunity."</i>
Contribution of newcomers to tourism	<i>"The newcomers like us, who came from elsewhere, manage to convey our enthusiasm to tourists. We are more passionate."</i>
	<i>"There should be recognition for those people who come from outside and invest in Malko Tarnovo."</i>
	<i>"COVID-19 brought us here. We were living in a panel apartment in Burgas, four walls, suffocating. It was deadly for the whole family. By chance, we ended up here. We were looking for a house to live in, but it's a very expensive investment with no return. We found this house and jumped in headfirst as entrepreneurs."</i>
Locals as a source of local/traditional knowledge	<i>"We asked people what treatments were used in the hospital in Malko Tarnovo. They say the air heals."</i>
	<i>"The locals talk about the healing effects of the air and the waters. Whether that's true, I don't know."</i>

**Table A3.39.** Characteristics of tourism customers in Strandzha (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Domestic tourists	"Bulgarians go to Mladezhko for the springs. They say: 'We come here to heal.'"
	"Most visitors are Bulgarian retirees."
	"Bulgarians visit — cyclists from Sofia and Sunny Beach. Even Rachkov was here!"
International tourists	"Foreigners don't know that the water has healing properties."
	"The international market is more interested in climatotherapy than the Bulgarian one. Tour operators from Türkiye are ready to work in this area immediately, and they are close to Strandzha."
	"In Saudi Arabia, the state pays citizens to go somewhere to breathe clean air."
	"Because of the climate, Russians and Ukrainians have settled in the area. Before perestroika, people came to Strandzha from the Soviet republics. They still remember this — not just the sea, but also the impact of the climate on their children."
	"There are some foreign visitors as well. We don't have any monitoring, but people come here looking for maps."
	"Foreign visitors respect nature; they don't litter."
	"Foreigners like it here. They come even outside the season and say that Strandzha is unique. They wish tour operators could bring them for longer stays."
	"There were Slovenians who hitchhiked to Iran. Slovaks came with the Biking for Biodiversity project. From France, there were architecture students looking for abandoned buildings to renovate. The project also brought students from Romania, Hungary, and Poland. There were visitors from Lithuania, Latvia, the Czech Republic, and Germany. Most come for research purposes."
	"Foreigners come for jeep safaris — Russian, Polish, English, German."
	"We provide meals for both locals and tourists. Recently we had clients from Taiwan who were visiting Bulgaria because of the roses in Kazanlak. They flew from Istanbul. Germans, Russians, Polish, French, and Czechs also come, mainly from the coast."
	"Most tourists are Bulgarians, many married abroad. Foreigners are usually families with one Bulgarian partner, and some have lived in Bulgaria before."
"Foreign visitors also come who have discovered the local attractions or are passing through the border."	
"In summer, foreigners come by chance — Bulgarians married abroad bring their partners."	
Visitor interests and motives	"People come because they have never been to Strandzha before."
	"Fishermen come for the Veleka River, which is very close."
	"This is not mass tourism; it attracts special people."
	"Elderly people with more health issues may be interested in health and recreational tourism in Strandzha."
"Volunteers can also be tourism clients and help address resource shortages. Once, a pharmaceutical company organized a team-building event with a cause. They brought volunteers into the park and ordered a local-cuisine lunch."	
Regular customers	"People come on foot, by bicycle, or by motorcycle. About 90% are first-time visitors and are amazed. They say Strandzha is a magical place."
	"Approximately 65% of the hotel's clients are regulars. They should have positive impressions, since they keep returning."

**Table A3.40.** Participation of external agents in the destination ecosystem (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Inclusion of other municipalities in the destination	<i>"The park doesn't really know its borders because the municipalities utilize and urbanize zones under orders from the Minister of Environment and Water, and the park has no authority over the urbanized areas."</i>
	<i>"There are four municipalities in the park: Sredets, Sozopol, Tsarevo, and the entire municipality of Malko Tarnovo."</i>
	<i>"Pismenovo is a very popular place. The sea and the mountains combine here. That's why foreigners have also settled there."</i>
Links to tour operators	<i>"I don't know whether tour operators take groups into the park. Recently, for the first time, I received a call from Sofia, from a tour operator who wanted to bring German tourists."</i>
	<i>"Some tour operators bring foreigners."</i>
	<i>"Tour operators are waiting — they want something new."</i>
	<i>"One company from Sunny Beach brings foreign tourists."</i>
Health specialists	<i>"The biggest gap regarding health tourism is the lack of medical personnel."</i>
	<i>"We may be a remote area, but the patient always follows the doctor."</i>
	<i>"Climatotherapy could work like this: the doctor gives a referral, and you choose the sanatorium yourself."</i>
Links to educational institutions	<i>"Cooperation with the 'Assen Zlatarov' University could be developed so that students do practical training here."</i>
	<i>"The association cooperates with 'Assen Zlatarov' University to develop a comprehensive product around climatotherapy."</i>
	<i>"Tourism in Strandzha should cooperate with educational institutions to train staff, for example in physiotherapy, mountain guiding, and tour guiding."</i>
Cross-border cooperation	<i>"International cooperation would help market the tourism product, but it has not been addressed as a concrete topic so far."</i>
	<i>"Cross-border regions offer additional opportunities."</i>
	<i>"On the Turkish side, the priority is not generally tourism, but medical tourism in particular."</i>
Other agents outside the tourism sector	<i>"This year, even the bank closed due to online banking."</i>
	<i>"In Malko Tarnovo, even the post office and the bank disappeared."</i>

**Table A3.41.** Interactions between tourism and government institutions (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Unstable political climate	<i>"The political climate in Bulgaria is unstable."</i>
	<i>"There are no regulations for tourism and cycling routes. We made a plan, the ministry recognized it, but then the parliament dismantled, and now we're waiting for the next one."</i>
Poor synchronization among state institutions and legal gaps	<i>"The Ministry of Tourism does not recognize the Ministry of Health. In the Tourism Act, only balneotherapy is recognized, not climatotherapy. The term 'climatotherapy' doesn't exist at all. Health and medical tourism exist only as terms."</i>
	<i>"The institutions assigned with the new management plan are working aside, while we at the directorate will be implementing it."</i>
Interaction with state institutions	<i>"We fought for eight years with the Ministry of Culture to prevent Mishkova Niva from becoming part of the state forest fund, so it could be transferred to the municipality and allow project applications."</i>
	<i>"The state does not think long-term or sustainably. The institutions? We work not with them, but despite them."</i>
	<i>"What I want from the state is for it not to interfere in my business."</i>
Lack of government action	<i>"The state should provide roads, water, and sewage. After that, people will come here by themselves."</i>
	<i>"Where is the role of the state? Across the border, Kirklareli grows, while Malko Tarnovo shrinks."</i>
	<i>"The state needs to turn its attention to us and change its priorities. Small settlements like this are forgotten by the state. There is no policy to support them. Bulgaria starts from Malko Tarnovo; we are the gateway to Europe, but it seems scary to pass through it."</i>
	<i>"Partnership with institutions doesn't mean they will help. There's no benefit, and it's wrong. They need to be connected to society; work has to be done with people. You can't think you're independent of anyone. Institutions are just not required to work with people, so they rarely do. Even institutions themselves don't communicate with each other."</i>
	<i>"The state does nothing. In history, art, natural sciences, biology, children should be taken to such places. Instead, they are sent to Marmaris. The state must require it."</i>
	<i>"We have talked with the climatotherapy association, but what's the point if the state does nothing?"</i>

**Table A3.42.** Common goals in the destination (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Divergent municipal goals	<i>"Each municipality has its own goals and vision. There is no local-level unification."</i>
Lack of trust	<i>"Organizing a tourism forum cannot be applied in Bulgaria. It all comes down to ego. Everyone grabs a niche and starts working it. Some do it voluntarily, others with hidden agendas — religious tourism, climatourism... How can you sit on the table with such people when lies are immediately evident?"</i>
Formula for unification	<i>"Strandzha could become a destination for recreational tourism. It has begun moving in the right direction, but all interested and responsible parties need to work together without making stupid things. It's difficult, but with persistence, good examples, and new supporters, progress has begun — though the process is very slow."</i>
	<i>"Strandzha could become a comprehensive destination, but we have never attempted to do this before."</i>
	<i>"Unity is achieved through the willingness of everyone to preserve what they have and consider their own, along with hard work and persistence. Petty behaviour must be avoided, and continuity is needed."</i>
Tourism goals at the regional level	<i>"Burgas looks after its sea; we look after our Strandzha."</i>

**Table A3.43.** Advantages over other destinations in crises and global challenges (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Pandemic	<i>"COVID-19 helped. People realized that in small towns close to nature — not necessarily inside the park — they feel good. They understood the benefits. Some even started buying houses. Many young people work remotely. There is a kind of renaissance. The municipality and the state should support this momentum."</i>
	<i>"During the pandemic, there were all kinds of rumours about what was best for treating COVID-19. People talked about fresh air and mineral springs."</i>
	<i>"Despite inadequate management, the park's territories have developed due to social processes that began in 2020. There is an element of returning to the roots, an eco-friendly and purposeful way of life, and also an element of globalization. COVID-19 accelerated these processes."</i>
Climate change	<i>"Climate change does not affect climatotherapy. The air currents remain the same."</i>
Natural degradation, logging	<i>"Strandzha has regenerative potential."</i>
	<i>"Logging is widespread, but there is some special force that makes the plants grow back."</i>

**Table A3.44.** Threats to the destination related to crises and global challenges (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Pandemic	<i>"When we opened the restaurant, there were so many people in Malko Tarnovo — the town was thriving. There was a lot of work. We had a large staff: four waiters and two in the kitchen. But then COVID-19 came. After that, just the two of us remained."</i>
	<i>"The renewed interest in the provinces brought new risks to municipalities, like construction waste in the absence of a proper landfill."</i>
Climate change	<i>"Climate, by its nature, is influenced by many factors — for instance, the lack of winter which we have experienced recently. Can we even speak of climatotherapy anymore?"</i>
	<i>"The active season has shifted slightly toward September. You can feel the effects of climate change, global warming, and deforestation in Strandzha. June is cold."</i>
Natural degradation, logging	<i>"If nature disappears, we will disappear too. The forests have been cut down; now the forest exists only along the roads. That's why there was flooding last year. Heavy rains cause damage every year. If it rains, it becomes a flood, a disaster, it carries everything away. Such events have happened before, but now they are more frequent. Logging and climate change are causing this."</i>
	<i>"The park has a low level of protection. Every day, 20 trucks of timber leave, and no one cares — there is no control. A trail was recently completely plowed over; the cables were dugged out. Nobody has noticed who did it."</i>
	<i>"Logging in the forest is widespread; the forestry service does nothing about it."</i>
Other negative environmental impacts	<i>"Economic activity, pollution, and overconstruction are obstructing the area."</i>
Social sustainability issues	<i>"Strandzha is losing its population, and no one pays attention to what is most important — human health."</i>
	<i>"Intensive construction of apartments for elderly residents and for tourism is underway. In Vasiliko, the locals can now be counted on one hand. Foreigners have moved in."</i>

**Table A3.45.** Need for sustainability (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Ecological sustainability	<i>"People will start value the nature that is disappearing."</i>
Cultural sustainability	<i>"In the Rhodope and Pirin mountains, it became mass tourism. They couldn't preserve the traditions. Maybe it's better for us this way, with just a little bit of tourism. Otherwise, traditions get distorted."</i>
Visitor demand for sustainability	<i>"We haven't talked to visitors about sustainability or about their interest in the protected area."</i>

**Table A3.46.** Missing products related to tourism in the destination (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Missing basic tourism services	<i>"Basic services are lacking."</i>
	<i>"There's not even a place to buy a little souvenir, no one to come and tell you about the place."</i>
Missing services to support tourism	<i>"There isn't a laundry service in the area. No one has thought of it and no one is eager to start one. A potential business could be a cleaning company."</i>

**Table A3.47.** Mismatch between demand and supply of accommodation (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Mismatch between demand and supply of accommodation	<i>"Many accommodation providers refuse to host guests for just one night. It's not profitable considering they have to clean the whole house afterwards."</i>
	<i>"Renting an entire house is not suitable for a single family."</i>
	<i>"Those who are on nature tours are not really the hotel's target customers in terms of price."</i>
	<i>"The hotels are full of border police officers."</i>
	<i>"There are no accommodation options for groups. The motel used to take them in, but one can't rely only on weekends."</i>

**Table A3.48.** Factors determining the length of stay in the destination (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
The sea as the main motivation for visits	<i>"There's plenty to see and explore in Strandzha, but people don't stay long because they combine their visit with the seaside."</i>
Lack of services and infrastructure	<i>"Strandzha attracts visitors with its wild and sparsely inhabited character. But not everyone is enchanted by that. The disappointment comes from it being too wild — from the lack of entertainment, variety, and services. By the third day, people start feeling restless. On top of that, there's the lack of infrastructure — no mobile coverage, no sewage, no proper roads. It's not just wild — it's primitive!"</i>
	<i>"If the mineral water tubs in Mladezhko were fixed, people would go there from Brashlyan and back. It would make them stay longer."</i>

**Table A3.49.** Aspects of infrastructure in Strandzha (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Transport infrastructure	<i>"There has been no infrastructure whatsoever, for many years."</i>
	<i>"There's simply no road in Strandzha."</i>
	<i>"If we look back, Malko Tarnovo used to be a border zone. It was difficult to reach Strandzha freely."</i>
	<i>"The problems have been the same for years, but there has been no development. People keep talking about how important the Tsarevo-Malko Tarnovo road is. Only now we see some progress there."</i>
	<i>"There must be infrastructure in order for tourism to develop. There are few investors like us who dare to dive into the deep end. It's a serious challenge."</i>
	<i>"Access to the location is crucial. There needs to be transport connectivity."</i>
	<i>"The road to get here is the worst part. We receive low service ratings, both verbally and online, because of it. Customers get angry about the potholes and the bends. Everyone tries to protect their car. But that's not something we can control. Because of the road, only a very small percentage of visitors come back."</i>
	<i>"If you look at the road to Mishkova Niva — who maintains it? A colleague with a machete and his own jeep."</i>
	<i>"There's no street lighting. Tourists walk around with flashlights, we always have to warn them about this when they arrive. Yet we pay taxes like the hotels in the town center."</i>
	<i>"There's now a project for a four-lane road from Burgas to the border, co-funded by the EU. It will give a huge boost. The trip from the regional center will be safe and take only 30 minutes."</i>
<i>"If people from Sofia start traveling to the seaside through Strandzha, it will bring great benefits. The Burgas road project is very important, even though it will take many years. Bad roads drive people away — even though the current route is quite scenic. Not just a forest — a forestland! And there are many sites worth seeing along it."</i>	
Tourism infrastructure	<i>"Strandzha has the potential to become a tourist destination if the infrastructure is built. Tourist routes should be a top priority, since we are within a protected area. The most natural thing would be to have small shelters and picnic spots — places where people can actually be in nature. This is where the park's role comes in."</i>
	<i>"In Mladezhko, at the start of the eco-trail, there are small water tubs. When they're cleaned, they look nice."</i>
	<i>"In Mladezhko there are caves and springs, and it's the most visited route in the interior of Strandzha. But the status of the meadow hasn't been resolved, and it isn't maintained. People go for picnics and complain. There are jeeps, campers, dust, litter, and loud pop-folk music. The tubs have turned into frog ponds, driving people away from the healing waters. A roundtable discussion should be organized on how to keep the area clean and orderly. There's also potential for a PPP."</i>
	<i>"The nature park has over 65 tourist and eco-trails, totalling about 300 km. There are also cycling routes, one of which was created long ago under a cross-border project with Türkiye. The Park Directorate doesn't have the resources to maintain the trails. We only maintain the signposts, and even that only in the most frequently visited areas."</i>
	<i>"The nature park brings mostly restrictions to the municipality, but at the local level we maintain good cooperation. The Directorate maintains the trails and installs information boards and signs, despite its limited resources."</i>
	<i>"There are various types of routes: interpretive, educational, eco-trails, , and more accessible ones with benches, etc."</i>
	<i>"Some things were poorly made — so much so that you can't go without a guide."</i>

**Table A3.50.** Aspects of tourism product development (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Separate elements that need to be combined into a tourism product	<i>"We have the cleanest air — and it's free. We have the natural conditions that have existed since the Thracians. God has given us everything, yet we can't make use of it... We live in paradise, but we can't bring it out and sell it."</i>
	<i>"There is a health product here — nature itself — but we need marketing."</i>
	<i>"For climatotherapy, it doesn't matter whether you stay in a hotel, a hospital, or a guesthouse. The idea is for people who own houses to return and develop this type of tourism."</i>
	<i>"If you make the product more exclusive, you can select your clients — that's a good approach in tourism."</i>
	<i>"Everyone needs to eat."</i>
	<i>"Strandzha is a dangerous mountain and there should be guides."</i>
Examples of tourism products	<i>"Balneotourism is an expensive pleasure. It requires a lot of private initiative. The state can't invest in everything — it can only create the right conditions. Investment is needed not only in facilities or hotels, but also in equipment and in a certified product."</i>
	<i>"We decided to fund the construction of spa facilities because that's what attracts tourists. If we only advertised clean air, we wouldn't have much success... We're forced to attract visitors through other services — spa, sports field, playground — while recreation remains a bonus. While recreational tourism can simply mean owning a house here and going out to breathe fresh air."</i>
	<i>"Climatotherapy is a product, a service, and a health–recreational factor — officially dating back to the 1950s, and unofficially to the time of the Thracians. Even before socialism, during the reign of Tsar Boris, there were climate schools in Bulgaria, where children with health problems used to live."</i>
	<i>"Tourists come to Brashlyan for the museums, the jeep safaris, the Strandzha folk gatherings, and the reenactments of local games and customs. At first, the safaris seemed funny to me, but then I realized they make perfect sense."</i>
	<i>"Tour Strandzha is a long-distance route, like El Camino."</i>
	Seasonality
<i>"For the past two or three years, we've been working with Italian hunters. They come from late October to mid-January, about twenty people a day."</i>	
<i>"Strandzha is accessible in all seasons. There's something for everyone and every interest. In summer, there's the sea — the Strandzha coast — but the goal is to attract visitors also inland. The sea is the biggest attraction, but the season lasts only two months. In the other seasons, there are hikes and cycling."</i>	
<i>"We work seasonally, only in summer. Now, at the end of June, we're starting the season. Preparation takes almost the whole year, but income comes in a very short period — less than two months."</i>	
<i>"Climatotherapy can help overcome the seasonality of tourism in Strandzha. Right now, everyone is afraid to take the risk of working in winter."</i>	
<i>"Climatotherapy takes place outdoors, but unlike other forms of health tourism, it's not dependent on the seasons. It doesn't require pools or indoor facilities. The air can always be used, and during the shoulder seasons it's at its most beneficial. This offers a way to extend the tourist season."</i>	

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Seasonality	<i>"Thematic events and festivals such as Dancing Strandzha and Taste of Strandzha attract huge interest and help balance seasonality. We focus on combining ethnofolklore, food, and festivity — things that truly appeal to people."</i>
	<i>"The traditional festival of the Strandzha rhododendron draws about 2,000 visitors on average, and up to 4,000–5,000 at its peak."</i>

**Table A3.51.** Aspects of tourism product packaging (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Observed gaps in tourism product packaging	<i>"Tourism in Strandzha is currently fragmented."</i>
	<i>"'Green Strandzha' brings visitors, but I don't see them entering museums or using local services. It's not just about walking. People should be able to stop, to stay overnight. There's no coordination."</i>
	<i>"The demand for field trips organized by 'Green Strandzha' is high — they're held every week. Imagine what it would be like if there were more guesthouses!"</i>
	<i>"We can't manage to package the tourism product — to make it a full bundle that connects sea and mountain, nature and cultural-historical heritage."</i>
Recommendations for packaging	<i>"Neither balneo-, nor climato-, nor any other type of product should be presented separately. Sea, mountain, culture, tastes, wines, traditional Strandzha tea, honeydew honey, zelenik pie, yogurt — everything together."</i>
	<i>"Everything is connected — from the airplane to the fork in the restaurant."</i>
	<i>"Balneotherapy and health tourism cannot be the only things to attract visitors to a region. The modern person wants to see more and more — quickly and all at once. The solution is a complex product with a clear focus."</i>
	<i>"People mostly come for rest, comfort, and peace — and to get the most for the price they pay."</i>
	<i>"Sea and mountain complement each other. A visitor from Sofia comes to the seaside and spends a day or two also exploring the most interesting inland sites — but the most famous places aren't necessarily the most interesting."</i>
	<i>"It's important for the tourism product to be comprehensive; otherwise, tourists get bored. See over there, the bus stopped for thirty minutes at the museums and then left. If the product was more complex, its value — and price — would be higher."</i>

**Table A3.52.** Aspects of subsidizing climatotherapy for health tourism (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Aspects of subsidizing climatotherapy	<i>"Climatotherapy needs to be regulated by law — there should be clinical pathways for it."</i>
	<i>"There used to be a four-storey pulmonary hospital. People came for 20-day treatments free of charge, subsidized by the state. It can't be restored now — there are no funds."</i>
	<i>"It should be examined whether the hospital in Malko Tarnovo could operate under the National Social Security Institute for Bulgarian tourists."</i>

**Table A3.53.** Aspects of workforce shortages (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Aging population	<i>"Since this year, we no longer have the folk gathering in Brashlyan. The women have grown very old, and you can't make the young ones take part."</i>
Lack of suitable living conditions for young people	<i>"There's a shortage of workforce, especially in a village like ours. 99,9% of the people are elderly, pensioners. There are no young people to recognize this place as their own. A young family usually has children — and here, you can't even buy bread; there's no shop."</i>
Difficulties in attracting and retaining staff	<i>"Right now we have a lodge keeper and a maid, but generally it's very difficult with the workforce."</i>
	<i>"High staff turnover is the worst thing that can happen to a business."</i>
	<i>"There's no one to clean, no one to serve. There's work, but people are lazy."</i>
	<i>"In terms of staff, we're in a terrible situation. There aren't even chefs or housekeepers for tourism."</i>
Emigration	<i>"People with potential are usually no longer here — in third-category countries like ours, they've already left."</i>
Lack of qualification and specialization	<i>"There are no specialists in Malko Tarnovo."</i>
	<i>"Qualified personnel for health and recreational tourism will have to be brought from elsewhere."</i>
Integration and qualification of minorities	<i>"The Roma people from Malko Tarnovo have integrated on their own, but woodcutters coming from the Yambol area aren't as hardworking or well-mannered."</i>
	<i>"There aren't enough people to work, and those from minority groups lack entrepreneurial ambition."</i>
Personal stories of starting work in Strandzha	<i>"I came to work here thinking that the last years of my career would pass peacefully, but it didn't turn out that way. For me, Strandzha is now like a book that I find fascinating."</i>
	<i>"I came to work here reluctantly. The salary was lower, and the responsibility greater than before."</i>

**Table A3.54.** Aspects of destination marketing (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Insufficient marketing communication	<i>"Our advertising is limping."</i>
	<i>"Everyone says, 'We didn't know anything about this place.' For example, the Thracian sanctuary The Stone near Gramatikovo — it's no less impressive than Beglik Tash, but nobody knows about it."</i>
	<i>"We need to talk more about Strandzha. It's a pity that so little is said about this part of the country."</i>
Year-round tourism as a marketing theme	<i>"We can promote the region by emphasizing that we have something to offer in every season. In August we watch meteor showers, in autumn the sunrise turns strangely yellow, and in winter the weather here is milder."</i>
Word-of-mouth marketing	<i>"There isn't much information online, so word-of-mouth is very important. Even when I came here, I only knew about the Bastet Tomb."</i>
	<i>"Word-of-mouth advertising is very strong. We need to educate people, to tell them what there is to see. The typical visitor is 45+ and has never seen Strandzha before."</i>
	<i>"The main marketing approach is word-of-mouth. We're not in a location that is widely popular. If I were to choose a different approach, like a large-scale advertising campaign, I'm not sure it would justify the costs."</i>
Cross-marketing and referrals	<i>"I send people elsewhere when we're not open, and people are wondering why I do that."</i>
Joint marketing	<i>"Over the years, the municipality has participated sporadically in various pages, guidebook initiatives, or films, but they didn't bring us any real benefit."</i>
	<i>"If a large-scale campaign were made to promote health tourism — like how spa tourism is advertised in Bulgaria — there wouldn't be much need for special services to attract health tourists."</i>
	<i>"For the area to specialize in health and recreational tourism, it needs to be promoted as soon as possible."</i>
	<i>"Building the region's health and recreational profile cannot be done by anyone alone. In business, we don't have the financial resources or visibility, but many state and municipal institutions do."</i>
Destination marketing through individual businesses' visibility on social media	<i>"I try to post news about Strandzha on our Facebook page."</i>
	<i>"I uploaded a short video about the effects of Strandzha's air on the hotel's Facebook page."</i>
Use of international booking platforms	<i>"We're not on Booking.com — only on pochivka.bg and Facebook. We don't want random people or noisy groups. We work with Bulgarian tourists and value them. Before, there were some foreigners who came by chance, but we now advertise only to the domestic market."</i>
Promotion through virtual tourism	<i>"We have a virtual reality project with Türkiye, where Mishkova Niva will be a pilot site. The goal is to make the heritage more understandable. This provides real accessibility, especially for people who can't physically reach the site."</i>
Promotion through tourism fairs	<i>"Tourists should discover Strandzha's potential before they come. It should be promoted at tourism fairs. But now, every municipality just prints a leaflet with five words on it — that doesn't attract anyone."</i>
	<i>"We need to attend exhibitions and invest in online advertising."</i>

**Table A3.55.** Aspects of public governance of the destination (author's elaboration).

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Quotes from the conducted interviews</b>
Aspects of lack of coordination	<i>"Tourism in the nature park is not coordinated. The municipality's priorities do not fully align with those of the park."</i>
	<i>"There is no need for alignment between the tourism side and the management of Strandzha Nature Park."</i>
	<i>"Tourism here is left to its own devices. It's like this all over Bulgaria."</i>
	<i>"Individual municipalities and the park do what they can according to their capacity. There is no oversight."</i>
Aspects of municipal governance	<i>"There is no private initiative. It is not deeply embedded in our national psyche. Previously, the state has been taking care of everything; people were merely beneficiaries of production goods. The municipality, the state, and the mayor are now responsible and blamed for everything. But thinking should go both ways."</i>
	<i>"At the TIC, we present the region to visitors. We have administration and guides."</i>
	<i>"At the moment, we are at a crossroad. As local authorities, we have to hold our ground amid this change, balancing between the old and the new, conservative thinking and 'here comes some money.'"</i>
Aspects of nature park management	<i>"In our directorate, things are bad. The directorate is under the Ministry of Agriculture and Food and its Executive Forest Agency, but most park regulations fall under the MOEW, with the RIEW in Burgas issuing permits for the protected area. We never really know; we are on the sidelines — for the ministry, we are not a factor."</i>
	<i>"A key problem in the management of the nature park is uniting the stakeholders. The system is centralized, under the Executive Forest Agency. It does not respond to local needs, and proper feedback does not happen."</i>
	<i>"According to the organizational rules, the directorate has a total of 42 tasks. Regarding tourism, it conducts planning, research, monitors tourist pressure, and coordinates and controls recreational and tourism activities within its competence."</i>
	<i>"The park has territory, but it is not the owner. We have no right to economic activity, yet during audits we are asked about our revenue. We cannot go to businesses to request money for the park. In my view, the state should take care of these matters. Infrastructure is used, but we cannot charge guides for it."</i>
	<i>"The park is neglected because the directorate has no levers of influence."</i>
	<i>"The park directorate should not have ranger functions; it should focus on economic and non-economic development activities."</i>
	<i>"The park directorate has no legal authority. Instead of benefiting from its resources, it does not even have the legal right to bring in a single group of students."</i>
	<i>"One perception is that the park directorate is incompetent. Its focus is on forests and timber processing, not on nature conservation. There is a conflict because the directorate functions as forest protection but has a greater interest in logging."</i>
	<i>"A weak leader creates a weak link in management, and several of the recent park directors have been such. This leads to delays in activities."</i>
	<i>"There is unwillingness and laziness in park management."</i>
<i>"We do not value our forest. The Turks now have almost no forest, but they manage what remains properly."</i>	

**Table A3.56.** Lack of a management plan for the nature park (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Reasons for the absence of an adopted management plan	<i>"The reason there is no management plan is that Strandzha is the only nature park that includes a coastal area from the most attractive part of the Black Sea."</i>
	<i>"It is a force majeure and catastrophic situation that the park lacks a management plan. This is due to political interests. Long-term management plans, regional policies, and continuity in the context of dynamic political processes are absent."</i>
	<i>"Several projects of the park failed. I was part of a project to draft the management plan in 2011. The project was funded, with a total of 62 activities planned – education, soft activities, social programs, supporting activities, infrastructure. The aim was to create a unifying effect and a comprehensive vision for Strandzha Nature Park's product. At that time, the capacity in terms of expertise was insufficient for proper management. Only a small portion of the funds was utilized, followed by severe financial corrections. The plan was not adopted, and now a new one is being developed. This marked a turning point in the development of the directorate. A complete moratorium on project applications was imposed by the MOEW because the financial responsibility was assumed by the Executive Forest Agency."</i>
Arguments for the necessity of a management plan	<i>"The nature park has no management plan. None of the tasks we are supposed to perform are actually happening. We have no regulatory document to rely on. We hope something will start by the end of the year, with the MOEW preparing the plan."</i>
	<i>"The lack of a management plan is problematic. Tsarevo is fencing off territories and even developing the dunes."</i>
Arguments against the necessity of a management plan	<i>"In Malko Tarnovo, the absence of a park management plan is not a major issue. Management aligns with the municipality's Urban Development Plan. There is no need for urban expansion in Malko Tarnovo. In Tsarevo, however, the situation is different. Tourism can function without this plan. In no municipality does its absence have a negative effect. Even at the national level, there is no unified concept for tourism; each municipality has its own approach."</i>
	<i>"Project funding does not depend on the management plan."</i>
	<i>"The management plan regulates only development and activities. On the one hand, it is good to have something formalized, but with or without it, in this country, everyone does whatever they want."</i>
Information and guidelines for planning a new management plan	<i>"Two million leva have been allocated for the drafting of the management plan. It will be written by a company relying on surveyors, biologists, ecologists, zoologists, and tourism experts."</i>
	<i>"The management plan must be synchronized with the Urban Development Plan of Tsarevo, requiring compromises in both directions. Without compromises, it cannot work."</i>
	<i>"The new management plan will again be created without consulting those who are actually doing the work. Afterwards, there will be a discussion where we will argue. I hope I am wrong."</i>
	<i>"Previously, when the plan was drafted, there was no one to consult; everything was done without information. Since then, much construction has taken place, and other aspects were mishandled by institutions. The situation has changed, but the old, unapproved plan can still serve as a foundation."</i>

**Table A3.57.** Tourism management toolkit (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Strategic plans	<i>"We prepared a tourism development strategy 'Strandzha – Accessible to Everyone.' The Municipality of Malko Tarnovo helped with permits and financing. Now Tsarevo has joined in as well."</i>
Development projects	<i>"Over the years, projects have been carried out inconsistently."</i>
	<i>"We have no funding. We have partners and cooperation. The funding programs are designed in a way that we cannot participate."</i>
	<i>"Until now, EU funds reached only the large municipalities. Zero points received for a small population!"</i>
	<i>"Every initiative requires some investment. EU projects are so difficult, and the requirements for businesses are so high... You need a serious backing to survive."</i>
	<i>"We work without European funds. Until recently, I had no desire to engage; now I'm looking into it, but execution is complicated."</i>
	<i>"There is no capacity in the park management. Last year they tried a transboundary cooperation project, but it was not approved."</i>
Digital platforms	<i>"The newest strategic goal in tourism is the digitalization of content already acquired by the public through our own channels. This allows us to be heard everywhere. Today the world is managed and communicated via mobile phones. We are currently developing a municipal mobile app, with one focus on tourism. It will include digital maps, audio guides, cultural content, and administration. Digitalization will also facilitate service for foreign visitors. The goal is to bring the municipality into the 21st century and connect the administration with the people, but the road will be long."</i>
	<i>"The park's routes are not uploaded to maps. On the BG Mountains platform (kade.si), everything created in Bulgaria and verified is available. Everything we've developed in Strandzha over three years is there, but Malko Tarnovo Municipality wants to create a new app. They do absurd things just to get projects, but that's how it is throughout Bulgaria."</i>
	<i>"Overnight stays are registered online. Grandma Siyka cannot register. The women gave up. On the other hand, we have to dig by hand to produce 'organic' products."</i>
	<i>"I created the website malko-tarnovo.com. My idea was to popularize traditions, customs, and culture. The site can be financed through membership fees and online advertising."</i>

**Table A3.58.** Challenges to ecosystem governance of the destination (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Need for competencies	<i>"The employment office organizes opportunities for retraining, but there is no channel for people to learn about these opportunities. And to what extent can we really help just by talking?"</i>
	<i>"When someone is willing to work, they don't need much formal qualification. Ignorance can be overcome, but the most important quality of a worker is responsibility."</i>
	<i>"It would be useful to organize training in communication or marketing, for example. But most businesspeople say it's a waste of time. Why would someone tell me how to do my job?"</i>
Lack of funding	<i>"No investment is made in the area because politics is such that there is no electoral support or return after elections."</i>
	<i>"We do have ideas; we are looking for investors."</i>
	<i>"There is no way for municipalities to see benefits in the park. Earlier, when parks were established, municipalities received funding, but now there is none; now the park is managed by magic."</i>
	<i>"There is chronic underfunding of development activities."</i>
Butterfly effect of the presence of military and border police	<i>"Along the refugee wave, some initiative is observed. The need for border security created a mobilization of human resources from the interior of the country. In response, apartments and houses were renovated here and registered as accommodation facilities."</i>
	<i>"What is AirBnB? Here, accommodation without registration is illegal. Many of the properties go legitimate and start paying taxes because the border guards need invoices."</i>
	<i>"The border guards are ruining tourism in Strandzha. Why don't they stay in the barracks or renovate some building for this purpose?"</i>
	<i>"All accommodation facilities are occupied by military personnel sent from the interior, year-round. This is a problem because groups have nowhere to stay."</i>
	<i>"We don't accommodate border police; we have no contract for that, nor have we asked. I prefer the traditional tourist as a guest."</i>
	<i>"We feel very safe. Even though there are many migrants, there is a presence of border police."</i>

**Table A3.59.** Relationship between tourism and regional development in Strandzha (author's elaboration).

Subtheme	Quotes from the conducted interviews
Tourism for regional development	<i>"And this place can only be a tourist destination. Otherwise, we cannot encourage people to settle here. There is no industry here, but not because we are in the park. Tourism is the key."</i>
	<i>"Malko Tarnovo is not rescued yet; it is in total ruin. The area can develop through climatotherapy and health tourism."</i>
	<i>"Strandzha is among the poorest and most depopulated regions in Bulgaria, with no chance of recovery. Tourism should develop for the sake of regional development."</i>
	<i>"In Malko Tarnovo, only the forestry enterprise, the municipality, and the tourism sector remain."</i>
	<i>"Tourism would provide employment. There is no way to reopen the mine or the marble quarry. Now we only have a pellet plant."</i>
Regional development for tourism	<i>"For tourism to exist, there must first be suitable conditions for people to settle here."</i>
	<i>"Depopulation continues. The area has no chance to offer young people what they want."</i>
	<i>"The area needs improvement. I would add lighting in Stoilovo and at tourist sites, some innovations for everyone's benefit. What benefits the locals also benefits tourism — and vice versa."</i>
	<i>"Even migrants do not want to stay here."</i>
Lack of regional development as a prerequisite for certain tourism resources	<i>"Malko Tarnovo and Strandzha have huge potential for tourism — the protective status, the economic and social neglect, and the depopulation since the 1990s, the lack of industrialization also bring something positive — nature and authenticity."</i>
	<i>"We are simply ourselves. One must be genuine; there is no need to lie to people. People feel you and your willingness to be with them. This will remain in the future as a driving force. Strandzha is interesting because of its authenticity. Even the unmaintained trails are interesting. It's like a jungle!"</i>

## BIOGRAPHY



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