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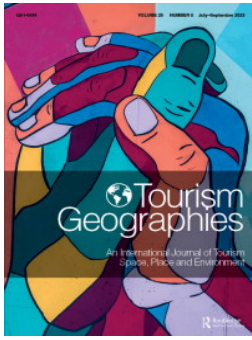
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# Transitioning towards sustainable tourism in the Outer Hebrides: an evolutionary investigation

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## ABSTRACT

While there is rich research on tourism destination evolution, the literature on how normative social and environmental goals (as opposed to contingent events or economic imperatives) drive the evolution of tourism towards more sustainable forms remains under-developed. As a result, the overall understanding of how sustainability in tourism is pursued on the ground and what context-specific factors shape these processes is still insufficient. To address this lacuna, the paper draws upon the sustainability transitions (ST) agenda that focuses on the ground level processes of transitions and conceptualises sustainability transitions as multi-actor, multi-dimensional, evolutionary, disruptive and contested processes. As such, the paper offers a constructive response to Niewiadomski and Brouder's (2022) call for bridging the gap between the research on tourism evolution and the sustainability transitions agenda. More specifically, the paper adopts selected concepts of evolutionary economic geography (EEG) (which have long proved helpful in research on both tourism evolution and sustainability transitions) to address how sustainability in tourism is mindfully pursued in the Outer Hebrides (Scotland, UK) and what geographical and historical factors shape this transition. The analysis draws from 17 semi-structured interviews (conducted in 2020-2021 with tourism businesses and various organisations involved in tourism in the Outer Hebrides) and documentary analysis. Two main groups of place- and path-dependent factors that shape the ongoing transition to sustainable tourism in the Outer Hebrides are identified: 1) institutional and social fragmentation, and 2) infrastructural deficiencies and challenges. The paper finds that the transition to sustainability in tourism in the Outer Hebrides is fragmented and intermittent. Although numerous promising changes are taking place, the transition suffers from a lack of systemic and systematic governance.

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## Introduction

While there is abundant research on tourism destination evolution, the literature on how destinations evolve towards sustainability is still under-developed. Given that

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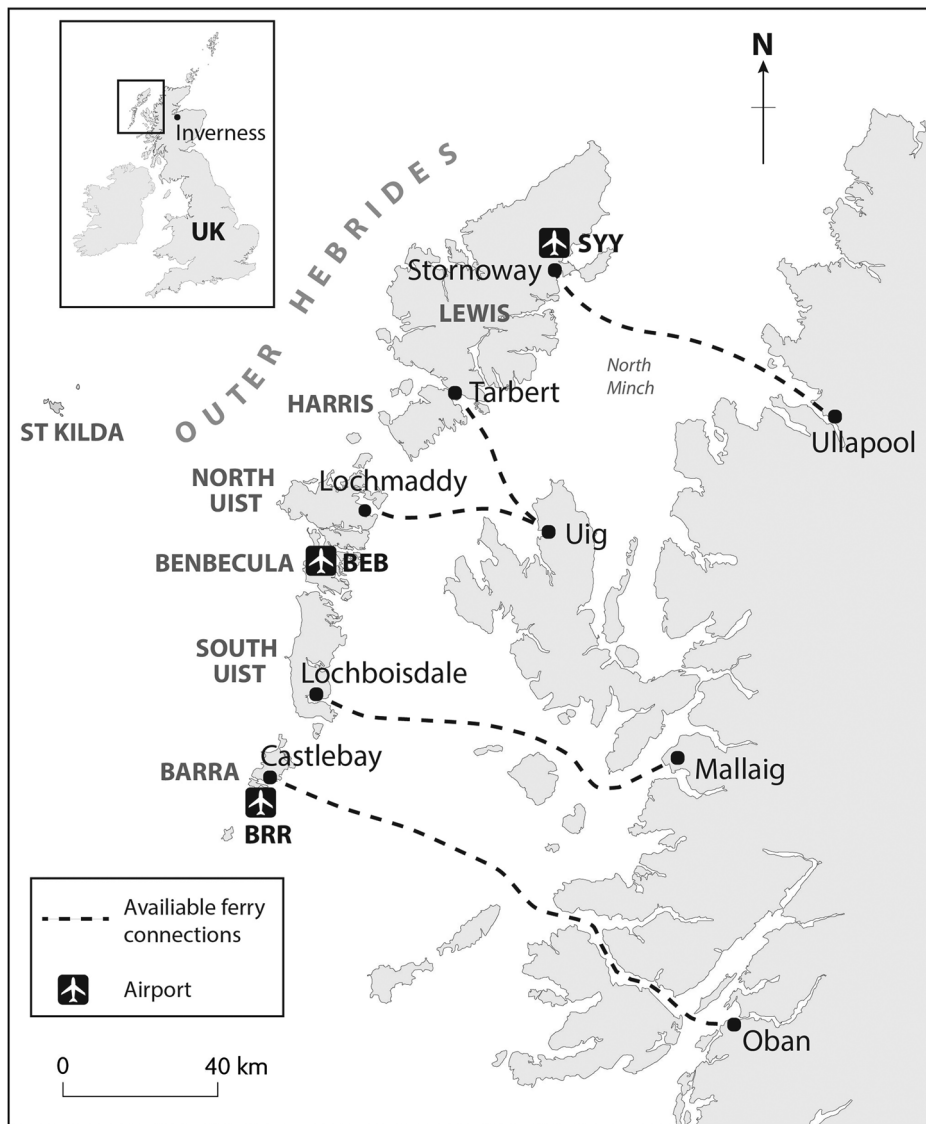
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the major international sustainability agendas such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) have long permeated debates on tourism (e.g. UNWTO and UNDP, 2017), and there is common agreement that the tourism industry should shift from the current, carbon-intensive, environmentally destructive, socially damaging, and economically exploitative form, to one that is more environmentally friendly, more economically even, and more socially just (e.g. UNEP, 2011), this deficiency is somewhat surprising. More attention is therefore required to the processes of *sustainable tourism evolution* (i.e. how sustainable tourism is pursued, implemented and developed) as opposed to *sustainable tourism* as a desired end-state (i.e. what should be achieved as an ultimate outcome) (Butler, 2018; Moisey and McCool, 2008). This argument is particularly timely in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic when the need to re-develop tourism in line with the principles of sustainability has been recognised both in academia (e.g. Brouder, 2020; Ioannides and Gyimothy, 2020; Niewiadomski, 2020) and at the policy level (e.g. OECD, 2020). However, little is known on how the desired changes unfold on the ground, what forces shape them, and to what extent sustainable solutions help alter the largely unsustainable path that tourism has been following to date (Niewiadomski and Brouder, 2022).

The aim of this paper is to help address this lacuna. The paper adopts selected concepts of evolutionary economic geography (EEG) (mainly path-dependence) to analyse how tourism transitions to sustainability at the destination level. To account for the intentional and complex nature of this transition, the paper also draws from the sustainability transitions (ST) agenda that defines sustainability transitions as purposive changes which societies and economies need to undergo to shift from the current, largely unsustainable socio-technical system to one based on more sustainable forms of production and consumption (Coenen et al., 2012; Geels, 2010; Köhler et al., 2019). As such, the paper conceptualises the process of sustainable tourism evolution as a purposive sustainability transition. Although the ST agenda has encompassed research on multiple industries, including energy, transport and agriculture (Coenen et al., 2012), it has not yet embraced tourism. At the same time, tourism scholars have yet to fully recognise the theoretical and empirical advancements made in the ST field and utilise them in research on sustainable tourism and its evolution (see Gössling et al., 2012, for an exception). Here, the paper provides a constructive response to Niewiadomski and Brouder's (2022) call for bridging the gap between three distinct and important agendas: tourism destination evolution, sustainable tourism, and sustainability transitions.

More specifically, the paper focuses on the Outer Hebrides (OH), a scenic archipelago off the West coast of Scotland (Figure 1). Due to the overall economic fragility of the area, including declining traditional industries, and social challenges such as depopulation (HIE, 2014; Jacuniak-Suda and Mose, 2014), great hopes are pinned on inbound tourism as a viable alternative to traditional activities (Outer Hebrides Tourism, 2023; Jacuniak-Suda and Mose, 2014). Correspondingly, the need to protect the islands' sensitive natural environment and mitigate the effects of climate change (including coastal erosion and more frequent adverse weather conditions) places sustainability very high on the islands' agenda (Outer Hebrides Tourism, 2023), fully in tune with various national-level pro-sustainability policies.

Typically for rural and remote destinations like islands (e.g. Carlsen and Butler, 2011; Creaney and Niewiadomski, 2016; Scheyvens and Momsen, 2008), the Outer



**Figure 1.** The location and accessibility of the Outer Hebrides (Scotland, UK).

Hebrides strive to find a balance between environmental, social and economic objectives. As such, the OH are an interesting case study to observe through the lens of sustainable tourism evolution. By investigating how and to what extent the tourism industry in the OH is transitioning towards sustainability, the paper aims to answer the following research question: what path-dependent and place-dependent factors shape the sustainability transition in tourism in the Outer Hebrides?

The paper is structured as follows. The next section discusses the adopted evolutionary approach (mainly the concept of path dependence) and demonstrates its applicability to research on sustainable tourism evolution. To conceptualise the process of sustainable tourism evolution more thoroughly, the theoretical section also draws

from the sustainability transitions agenda. The following section provides essential background information on the OH. This is followed by a discussion of the methodology behind this research project. Key empirical findings are presented in the penultimate section where both sets of interrelated path- and place-dependent challenges to an effective sustainability transition in tourism in the OH are explored and a brief discussion of findings is offered. The last section offers conclusions and summarises the implications of this research.

### **Conceptualising sustainable tourism evolution: EEG and the sustainability transitions agenda**

As a theoretical approach, evolutionary economic geography (EEG) combines the advancements made in evolutionary economics with a distinct spatial perspective to explain the development of the economic landscape over time, the processes by which this development occurs, and how they differ between places (Boschma and Frenken, 2006; Boschma and Martin, 2007, 2010). EEG assumes that history matters and historical factors play an important role in determining economic evolution (Boschma and Frenken, 2006; Boschma and Martin, 2010; Martin and Sunley, 2006). As such, one of the flagship concepts in the rich EEG toolbox is path dependence. Path dependence assumes that the economy inherits the legacy of its own past and evolves as a consequence of its own history (Martin and Sunley, 2006). Due to the self-reinforcing processes, historical events and choices may commit the system to a particular trajectory to such an extent that more optimal or rational paths become unavailable (Boschma and Frenken, 2006; Martin, 2010; Martin and Sunley, 2006). Such tendencies can be reinforced by existing institutional frameworks which act as ‘carriers of history’ and often exhibit institutional inertia, although they can also co-evolve with firms and sectors as part of the broader context (Martin, 2010; Martin and Sunley, 2006). Moreover, given that dependence on a particular technology, sunk costs of local infrastructure, reliance on an existing institutional framework or a commitment to current networks (all of which are inherently place-specific conditions) may be important sources of path dependence, the processes of path dependence are also inseparably place-dependent (Boschma and Martin, 2007; Martin, 2010; Martin and Sunley, 2006).

While the notion of path-dependence focuses on how and why economies and systems reproduce themselves and become rigidified over time, its sister notions of path-destruction and path-creation move the focus from ‘continuity’ to ‘change’, thus helping transcend the semi-deterministic nature of economic evolution implied by the idea of path-dependence (MacKinnon, 2012). As Martin and Sunley (2006, p. 408) observed, “the process of economic evolution must be understood as an ongoing interplay of path dependence, path creation and path destruction that occurs as actors in different arenas reproduce, mindfully deviate from, and transform existing socio-economic-technological structures, socio-economic practices and development paths”. While some paths can decay due to changing circumstances, novel solutions may give rise to new paths (MacKinnon, 2012; Martin and Sunley, 2006). Also, importantly for this paper, new paths do not have to emerge in a serendipitous way (i.e.

because of random events), but as a mindful deviation (i.e. because of stakeholders' conscious choices) (Martin and Sunley, 2006).

Since Brouder and Eriksson (2013) and Brouder (2014) identified the usefulness of the EEG paradigm in tourism studies, EEG has spawned a plethora of research on how tourism destinations rise, stabilise or decline, and what historical factors shape their development (Brouder and Fullerton, 2015; Flood Chavez et al., 2023; Ma and Hassink, 2014; Mellon and Bramwell, 2016, 2018; Niewiadomski, 2015; Sanz-Ibáñez and Clavé, 2016; Volgger et al., 2019, see also Brouder et al., 2017). However, despite their enormous potential to enhance the general understanding of how tourism development is also shaped by normative social and environmental goals (as opposed to, or alongside, economic imperatives) (Brouder, 2017), evolutionary perspectives have not been extensively utilised in research on how tourist destinations purposefully choose to pursue sustainability (see e.g. Gill and Williams, 2014, 2017; Brouder and Fullerton, 2017 for noteworthy exceptions). Meanwhile, given that the inherited, largely unsustainable and carbon-intensive practices make it difficult for the current tourism system to switch to a more sustainable path, EEG serves as a promising framework for analysing how tourism destinations transition to sustainability (Niewiadomski and Brouder, 2022). Therefore, to conceptualise sustainable tourism evolution as an intentional and purposive transition to sustainability, this paper follows Niewiadomski and Brouder's (2022) call for linking the research on tourism evolution with the sustainability transitions agenda (both of which heavily rely on evolutionary perspectives), and also draws from the sustainability transitions (ST) literature.

The ST agenda, which over the last two decades has evolved into a complex interdisciplinary research field (see Köhler et al., 2019), draws attention to the processes of complex transitions that need to take place for societies and economies to shift from the current unsustainable socio-technical configuration to a new, more sustainable one (Coenen et al., 2012; Geels, 2010, 2011). The ST literature recognises that, to be effective, such transitions must be multi-dimensional, i.e. they need to embrace changes in production, technology, governance, institutional structures, markets, legal frameworks, user practices, and consumption patterns (Coenen et al., 2012; Geels, 2010, 2011; Smith et al., 2010). Furthermore, they need to involve multiple actors such as firms, consumers, national and local governments, public agencies, and community groups (Geels, 2011; Geels et al., 2017). At the same time, sustainability transitions have at least three important characteristics. First, given that they have a normative goal of addressing climate change (alongside various socio-cultural and environmental objectives), they are purposive and intentional (Geels et al., 2017). Second, because of their multi-dimensional and multi-actor character, they are often contested and disruptive, with different actors having different interests (Bridge et al., 2013, Geels et al., 2017). Third, due to the fact that historical and geographical (i.e. context-specific) factors often affect the pace, nature and direction of changes, sustainability transitions are both evolutionary (i.e. path-dependent) and place-dependent in nature (Bridge et al., 2013, Coenen et al., 2012; Essletzbichler, 2012; Hansen and Coenen, 2015; Raven et al., 2012; Truffer et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2010). The latter is also the key reason why geographical and evolutionary approaches have proved helpful in explaining the nature of wider sustainability and energy transitions (e.g.

Bridge et al., 2013, Essletzbichler, 2012; Hansen and Coenen, 2015; Sovacool, 2016; Truffer et al., 2015).

In this respect, this paper conceptualises the process of sustainable tourism evolution as a multi-actor, multi-dimensional, purposive, contested, place-dependent and path-dependent sustainability transition. The analysis below contributes to the sustainable tourism evolution literature by observing the unfolding sustainability transition in tourism in the Outer Hebrides as a mindful deviation (i.e. a path-shaping process driven by normative environmental goals) that is simultaneously shaped by various forces of path- and place-dependence. Before the findings are presented, the following section provides contextual information on the chosen case study.

### **The Outer Hebrides as a tourist destination – towards sustainability?**

The Outer Hebrides (OH) are an archipelago of over 120 islands and skerries, although only 12 of them are permanently inhabited (Outer Hebrides Tourism, 2023). The largest islands include Lewis and Harris (although they are physically one island), North Uist, Benbecula and South Uist (altogether known as 'The Uists'), and Barra (see Figure 1). Referred to as 'the Western Isles' (or *Innse Gall* in Gaelic, the traditional local language that is still commonly spoken in the area), the Outer Hebrides (OH) constitute *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar*—one of the 32 council areas in Scotland and the third least populated region in the country (NRS, 2022).

The Outer Hebrides are accessible only by air and ferry. All air connections are currently operated by Loganair. However, the infrastructural limitations of the three airports (Stornoway, Benbecula and Barra) allow only small capacity aircraft to be used on these routes. In turn, all ferries are operated by Caledonian MacBrayne (CalMac) who offers connections to five ports in the OH from four ports on the mainland and Skye (Outer Hebrides Tourism, 2023) (see Figure 1). Despite the limited accessibility, the Outer Hebrides are growing in popularity as a tourist destination. In 2017 visitation totalled 219,000 tourists, contributing £65 million to the local economy. Tourism accounts for 10-15% of economic activities in the OH, supporting over 1000 full-time jobs (Outer Hebrides Tourism, 2023). Tourists are drawn to the OH by the natural environment, scenic landscapes and white sandy beaches (Outer Hebrides Tourism, 2023; VisitScotland, 2023). The islands also possess unique cultural heritage, including Gaelic culture and history, and various archaeological sites (Outer Hebrides Tourism, 2023), six of which are overseen by Historic Environment Scotland (HES, 2023). Importantly, the OH are also the home of Harris Tweed, the famous traditional wool fabric (Outer Hebrides Tourism, 2023).

According to VisitScotland (2018), 68% of visitors travel to the OH for leisure purposes, while 19% travel for business, 12% visit their friends and families (VFR), and 1% travel for other reasons. The OH also have an increasing offer of adventure tourism. This includes the recently developed 'Hebridean Way', a structured route that offers an opportunity to cycle from the Island of Vatersay in the south to the Butt of Lewis in the north (Outer Hebrides Tourism, 2023). Similarly, walking and hiking, as well as various niche forms of water sports such as surfing, snorkelling, and kayaking, are promoted as a means of enjoying the coastal landscapes and wildlife spotting (Outer Hebrides Tourism, 2023).



Because of the peripheral location, the rural character, and the sensitive natural environment, the Outer Hebrides exhibit several economic, social, and environmental vulnerabilities. In economic and social terms, they are classified by the Highlands and Islands Enterprise as a 'fragile area' (HIE, 2014). The steady decline of traditional sectors such as fishing and weaving, coupled with depopulation and a limited availability of non-local workers, are the most serious economic and social challenges that the islands face (CnES, 2023; CotHaL, 2020; Jacuniak-Suda and Mose, 2014; Ross, 2022). Crofting (a form of land tenure and small-scale farming) remains an important part of the economic, social and cultural landscape of the OH (with approximately two thirds of the area occupied by crofts), although it only plays a complementary economic role and, as such, is not able to compensate for the existing economic challenges (Hunter, 1999; Jacuniak-Suda and Mose, 2014).

Alongside the fragility of the islands' ecosystems and habitats (NatureScot, 2019), the OH also face various effects of climate change, including rising sea levels, increased risks of flooding, coastal erosion, and more frequent adverse weather conditions, all of which further add to the harsh climate of the islands (CnES, 2022). Apart from causing disruptions to transport, utilities, and services, adverse weather conditions make heating houses difficult, thus exacerbating fuel poverty across the OH. Nearly 36% of households in the OH experienced fuel poverty before the energy crisis (CnES, 2021) while during the crisis this proportion rose to 57% (Wilson, 2022).

In line with the Scottish-level agendas such as NetZero (NetZero Scotland, 2023), the OH are looking to embark on a transition to sustainability. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar has recently announced its Climate Change Strategy 2022-2027 wherein it pledges to improve its climate resilience, become carbon neutral by 2038, and contribute to the national Net Zero 2045 targets (CnES, 2022). Similarly, in line with the Scottish tourism strategy 'Scotland Outlook 2030' (Scottish Government et al., 2020), Outer Hebrides Tourism (the region's destination management organisation) declares in their 'Outlook 2030—Tourism Strategy for the Outer Hebrides' that the Western Isles "aspire to a sustainable visitor economy" (Outer Hebrides Tourism, 2021, p. 3).

A considerable amount of control over social and economic development in the OH is also held by community development trusts, an important element of the Outer Hebrides' socio-economic landscape. Community trusts have developed since the Scottish Land Reform Bill in 2001 which gave communities the right to buy out their land from absentee landowners, thus helping them overcome the history of quasi feudal land rights and address the various problems which the absence of legal owners had often caused (Jacuniak-Suda and Mose, 2014; Skerrat, 2013). As a result, much of the responsibility for economic, social and environmental regeneration (including sustainability), lies with the respective communities (Jacuniak-Suda and Mose, 2014). As many as 16 social enterprises across the OH are members of the Development Trusts Association Scotland (DTAS), a Scottish-wide network of community-led organisations which also has sustainability high on their agenda (DTAS, 2023).

Overall, the OH are an attractive, but diverse, tourist destination that faces various place-specific environmental, economic and social challenges, making the transition to sustainable tourism potentially difficult. After discussing the methodology in the next section, the following section will highlight these endeavours and analyse key factors that shape the transition to sustainable tourism in the OH.

## Methodology

The paper draws from two methods of data collection: semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted between August 2020 and June 2021. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, all interviews were carried out online. Based on the initial analysis of publicly available sources on tourism in the OH (including the official websites of Outer Hebrides Tourism, VisitScotland and various community trusts in the OH), two major groups of stakeholders were identified:

- Tourism- and development-related organisations (Interviews 1-9),
- Privately-run tourism businesses based in the OH (Interviews 10-17).

The first group encompassed organisations responsible for governing and promoting tourism development and/or sustainability in the OH. This included three community development trusts and a few organisations based outside the Western Isles. In this respect, interviewees were selected using the method of ‘purposive sampling’ (Silverman, 2005), i.e. based on their involvement in and knowledge of the tourism sector in the OH. However, in the challenging times of the pandemic the willingness to cooperate was also an important ‘selection mechanism’.

Interview questions derived from the adopted theoretical framework and were grouped into three main themes. The first group aimed to establish the status quo of tourism in the OH. It focused on the importance and impacts of tourism in the OH. Drawing from the sustainability transitions literature, and the general understanding of tourism as a complex, fragmented and multi-actor industry (Stoffelen, 2019), the second group of questions aimed to explore the multi-actor, multi-dimensional, purposive, contested and potentially disruptive nature of the desired transition to sustainability in tourism. Paying particular attention to the differences between various stakeholders’ interests, these questions explored different pro-sustainability initiatives in the OH. The third group of questions directly revolved around the notions of path-dependence and place-dependence and aimed to investigate the various factors that shape the transition to sustainable tourism in the OH. Although various exogenous (i.e. non place-specific) factors were also identified, the context-specific ones were the main focus here.

All interviews were analysed according to the Miles and Huberman (1994) method that is based on the rule of analytic induction wherein “concepts are developed inductively from the data, raised to a higher level of abstraction, and their interrelationships are then traced out” (Punch, 1998, p. 201). The list of codes that guided the analysis directly reflected the foci of the three groups of interview questions discussed above: importance of tourism, tourism impacts, the multi-actor nature of tourism, pro-sustainability policies, pro-sustainability initiatives, and factors shaping the islands’ transition to sustainable tourism. Two main themes emerged from the data: 1) social and institutional fragmentation, and 2) accessibility issues and infrastructural deficiencies and challenges, with each of them constituting a distinct set of path- and place-dependent factors moulding the sustainability transition in tourism in the OH.

Documentary analysis took place simultaneously to the process of interviewing and encompassed documents from local and non-local organisations involved in

governing, promoting and/or developing tourism in the OH. This included local organisations like *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar*, Outer Hebrides Tourism, and various community trusts, as well as external stakeholders such as VisitScotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, and the Scottish Executive. The focus was on those documents that addressed tourism in the OH and its desired transition to sustainability (or any individual aspect thereof). Documentary analysis followed the same coding strategy as the analysis of interview transcripts.

The objective of documentary analysis was two-fold. First, it helped understand the specific context of the OH before the interviewing process commenced, thus delivering information presented in the section that introduces the OH as a chosen case. Second, it aimed to cross-check the qualitative information generated by the interviews. Therefore, to ensure that the findings were current, documentary analysis also continued (where necessary) after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from an appropriate research ethics board at both the authors' institutions in May 2020. All respondents were guaranteed full anonymity and for this reason institutions and businesses are not referenced in the analysis below by name. The following section presents the findings generated by both methods of data collection and a brief discussion of the key results.

## **Challenges to sustainability in tourism: path-dependence and place-dependence**

This section is structured according to the main two themes that emerged from the data: 1) social and institutional fragmentation, and 2) infrastructural deficiencies and challenges. While the first sub-section identifies key categories of stakeholders involved in tourism in the OH (i.e. local institutions, community trusts, the private sector, and central institutions) and addresses the different roles they play in fostering tourism development and sustainability across the islands, the second sub-section discusses the interrelated problems of accessibility, tourist traffic management, and the need to both develop new infrastructure and renovate the existing one. The last sub-section offers a general discussion of the research findings.

### ***Social and institutional fragmentation***

A key set of place- and path-dependent factors shaping the sustainability transition in tourism in the Western Isles derives from the social and institutional fragmentation of the sector, which not only reflects the multi-actor nature of the tourism industry, but also the islands' historical development and their peripheral location relative to the administrative centre of Scotland. The tourism industry in the OH encompasses both local and non-local actors and this distinction often surfaces as an important factor in its own right. Although most actors share similar sustainability-related values (which is an important pre-condition for the sustainability transition to take place), some tensions between them are inevitable. Moreover, different stakeholders attach different degrees of importance to tourism as a source of income (Interviewees 3, 7, 8). As a result, the sustainability transition in tourism in the OH suffers from a lack

of systemic (and systematic) governance and therefore unfolds in a patchy and spatially uneven fashion.

The overarching role is played by the Council and the local DMO—Outer Hebrides Tourism. Interviewee 8 noted that the Council is “*very supportive of most developments... especially where people are trying to take up economic opportunities*”. However, a degree of distrust towards public authorities and council-led projects appears to be present. This stems from historical tensions between the Council and local businesses and a feeling of competition rather than an appreciation of the need to work in partnership (Interviewee 3). Although this is now gradually changing, the Council has very limited resources, which makes working together difficult in practice.

The operations of Outer Hebrides Tourism (OHT) are also evaluated highly. Interviewee 12 (a business operator) referred to OHT as a “*very effective body*”. Although sustainability is not OHT’s priority *per se*, the organisation fully recognises the importance of the local natural environment as the key tourist asset and facilitates the transition to sustainable tourism *via* different initiatives. This includes the P.L.A.C.E. campaign (i.e. parking, litter, animals, campers, engage) that has been developed in line with the tenets of sustainability, and the aforementioned Hebridean Way that promotes active and environmentally friendly tourism (Outer Hebrides Tourism, 2023).

Importantly, the transition to sustainability on the ground is also largely driven by development trusts who own a big proportion of land across the OH. Given that their dominant role is to help communities develop in social and economic terms, many trusts have diversified into tourism (Interviewees 2, 4, 6). In addition to various tourist businesses (e.g. B&Bs) that are run by individual residents within trusts, community trusts also seek income from tourism at the trust level, for instance by operating entertainment centres or developing tourist infrastructure (e.g. parking and other facilities for campervans). However, protecting the assets which they possess, including land and the natural environment, is no less important objective. Interviewee 2 commented:

*“[Tourism] is very important because it’s a large local employer in the area. (...) And also, it’s important that we manage it to ensure that it’s sustainable and it doesn’t damage the land that we are the protectors or the guardians of.”*

Consequently, community trusts strive to develop or upgrade essential infrastructure, either to manage tourist traffic more effectively (paths, parking spaces) or to minimise tourists’ impact on the environment (waste facilities, EV charging points).

However, even though community trusts have common goals and meet regularly to share ideas and discuss successes and failures (Interviewee 5), it is difficult for them to coordinate any tourism-related sustainability initiatives at a regional OH level. While their strategic objectives may sometimes differ (for instance, some rely on tourism more heavily than others), due to various historical developments or different geographical locations, they often have access to different (tourist) assets. As they draw income from various sources (some of which may be more profitable than others), their financial strength also varies.

The diversity and temporality of funding streams offered by central organisations is another impediment here. Not only do different funding schemes pertain to different

elements of the sustainability transition (e.g. RE, energy-efficiency in buildings, EV charging points), but the necessity to compete for the same pots of money hampers collaboration and makes it difficult to manage the transition in a systematic manner. Participants noted that such competition is counter-productive to collaboration while the *ad hoc* nature of funding availability means that applicants often do not have sufficient opportunity to develop projects thoughtfully. Interviewee 8 commented:

*"What is happening is the money is coming out in dribs and drabs and you have to be reactive. (...) When funding is available for something, people try to grab it because it's better to do something than it is to do nothing, but you don't necessarily end up with something that looks like it was thought out."*

Due to the fact that each community trust is responsible for a clearly defined territory (i.e. the land which they own and manage), not only do community trusts are the main place-specific source of social and institutional fragmentation in tourism across the OH, but they also give this fragmentation a distinct spatial dimension in the form of a mosaic of development and sustainability-related initiatives.

The bureaucracy associated with developing applications, tight timeframes for spending the money and completing proposed projects, and the varying requirements of funding bodies, further add to this complexity (Interviewees 4, 8, 11, 16). There is a need for a 'one-stop shop' for businesses and organisations to go to and get all the advice and guidance (Interviewee 7). As Interviewee 15 noted:

*"If somebody else did all the research for us, that would be amazing, it would just save us so much time. I'm not asking for thousands and thousands of pounds, just if somebody else had the time."*

Importantly, the ethos of sustainability is also shared by the business community across the islands. Referring to the start-up of their enterprise, Interviewee (16) noted: *"we did want it to be as sustainable as possible"*. Furthermore, several participants (Interviewees 10, 11, 14, 15, 16) revealed how they had incorporated more renewable forms of energy into their business practices. This would include solar panels, heat pumps or air-to-air heaters, both to reduce energy consumption and carbon footprint, and to obtain certification from the Green Tourism Business Scheme (Green Tourism, 2023).

Sustainability in tourism across the OH is also naturally fostered by various central organisations, although in different ways. For example, VisitScotland runs campaigns on responsible tourism, encouraging all tourists in Scotland to respect the environment, local heritage and host communities. The main objective is to keep tourists informed and help out as an advisory body (Interviewee 7). A more tangible contribution is made by the Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE). Since many community trusts are 'account managed' by HIE, HIE co-funds some posts at the trust level, facilitates access to central funding, and shares their knowledge with OH communities (Interviewees 2, 4, 5). It is also essential to acknowledge Historic Environment Scotland whose role in protecting heritage obliges them to deal with the effects of climate change (increased rainfall, coastal erosion, storms, increased water ingress) and implement energy, waste-management, carbon reduction/sequestration, and infrastructural (insulation, water-proofing) projects on the sites which they manage (Interviewee 1).

Although residents in the Outer Hebrides do not necessarily feel “remote” in a physical way (Interviewees 2, 5), there is an impression that they are often marginalised by central institutions, which contributes to a sense of “institutional remoteness”. Such feelings are deeply rooted in the past and the history of top-down relationships between central organisations and local actors in the OH. Although Interviewee 2 commented on a specific organisation, their words reflect a common opinion on other central organisations too:

*“So, they still have a long way to go as an organisation to improve things. They don’t consult with communities or engage with communities, they have no tradition of doing that. (...) They’ve (...) dealt with things with a very high-handed approach or a very (...) officious approach and people have long memories. So now they are trying to come in and engage and work with communities and actually communities are turning round and saying ‘no.’”*

The perceived lack of understanding of local issues by national-level stakeholders (as claimed by a few interviewees) is often exacerbated by a one-size-fits-all approach represented by some organisations. For example, Interviewee 4 observed: *“We constantly come up against the situation where there’s one solution for the whole of the country or the whole of the region and we don’t really fit within that”*. Similarly, Interviewee 6 noted *“[they] could be more helpful in adapting things to very micro situations. (...) Nobody is debating the bigger picture stuff, but I don’t need somebody very clever to tell me the big picture stuff, I can understand that”*.

Fortunately, the situation ‘on the ground’ is often better than these quotes might imply. As Interviewee 4 also admitted, there had been a shift towards greater partnership working with the community, with efforts to give communities *“the right resources in the right way to help them do things themselves whilst achieving their own targets and objectives at the same time”*.

However, the sense of institutional remoteness and a lack of understanding of the microenvironment by central organisations, were also mentioned by representatives of the private sector. Several participants commented on the hurdles which they faced around the installation and maintenance of RE infrastructure such as wind turbines (even with successful grants and secured funding) (Interviewees 11, 13, 14). Interviewee 14 commented: *“As far as I know, there’s nobody here who looks after turbines, but I think they always come from the mainland. And then, either it’s going to be down for longer than it would normally be, or you are paying for travel and accommodation and wracking up bills”*. The cost of transitioning to wind power was also highlighted by Interviewee 13, who explained that the overall capital expense is too high and available grants are not sufficient: *“the grants look good on paper, but they are not practical”*.

There is a common agreement across the OH that more “joined up working” is required between the central Scottish level and the OH (Interviewees 1, 5, 6). Central solutions should be tailored to the specific context of the OH, and more guidance is needed on how local actors can meet the requirements developed at the central level. Correspondingly, a deeper engagement from some organisations would be welcomed—especially those who are deemed to have recently scaled back their activities in the OH (Interviewees 5, 6).

Two more path- and place-dependent elements add to the overall landscape of social and institutional fragmentation as a main force shaping the OH's transition to sustainable tourism. First, quite typically for most tourist destinations (Williams, 2009), there is a line of social division between those individuals and firms that live from tourism and those *"who don't run businesses, don't necessarily see themselves as benefiting from having visitors and who maybe have a narrower view of how the local economy works"* (Interviewee 8). Second, tourism finds itself in competition for scarce resources with other sectors in the OH. The best example here is the fishing industry and the debate whether ferry schedules should be tailored to hotel check-in/check-out times or to how supply chains in the fishery sector are organised (Interviewee 13).

The varying level of involvement in tourism, the diversity of interests and strategic objectives, institutional remoteness, and intermittent funding opportunities are the key reasons why the sustainability transition in tourism in the OH is patchy and disjointed. Although a lot of impressive work is being undertaken by multiple actors, the transition comprises of a multitude of firm-level or trust-level one-off initiatives, as opposed to an organised and holistic transition that would be governed in a planned and systematic manner.

### ***Infrastructural deficiencies and challenges***

Since relevant infrastructural developments are a key element of effective sustainability transitions, another set of path- and place-dependent factors shaping the transition to sustainable tourism in the OH are infrastructural deficiencies and challenges. On the one hand, much work is required to upgrade the existing infrastructure and switch to less carbon-intensive solutions. On the other, there is a need to develop new infrastructure to address the mismatch between the volume of tourism and the different kinds of tourist demand in the OH and what the islands can safely accommodate.

The first group of issues relates to accessibility. While the relative physical remoteness of the islands is a key attribute of the destination, it also creates several challenges for a burgeoning tourism sector. The limited number of ferry connections and the poor condition of the existing fleet present problems for local communities in the OH. In social terms, residents have a restricted ability to travel to the mainland (particularly in a high season when ferries are occupied by tourists), whereas in economic terms, the capacity of ferries is a 'natural' cap on the number of visitors. Since these problems are typically being dealt with at a higher political level (Walker and Shove, 2007), many interviewees blamed the government for the current situation. The government's inability to upgrade the existing infrastructure or complete new projects such as the promised two new dual-fuel ferries is a key example. Although the new ferries are purported to significantly reduce the carbon footprint of the current connections to the OH (CalMac, 2023), the five-year delay in delivering them (at the time of writing) further makes the problem a highly political one (Scottish Parliament, 2019).

Consequently, various alternatives are being considered, including a 20-mile tunnel linking the OH to Skye, although views on such a fixed connection to the mainland vary widely, with many interviewees not considering it to be a realistic idea at all.

While there is an argument that a fixed connection could enable tourism growth and “revitalise the local economy and local communities” (Interviewee 3), there are also serious doubts about the nature of this growth and the OH community’s ability to fully capture this value (e.g. will the number of day visitors increase at the expense of longer stays?). It is feared that such infrastructure would predominantly benefit the tourist community (Interviewee 2). Some participants made comparisons to Skye which has been impacted by over-tourism (mainly day visitors) further to the erection of the Skye Bridge (Interviewee 2). While improved accessibility might help in some respects, it would simultaneously create an extra risk to sustainability, as increased traffic would result in higher carbon emissions and higher pressures on the existing infrastructure. As Interviewee 5 observed: “Have the islands got the infrastructure to cope with it? I would question and challenge if they said they did”. Therefore, while the proposed new ferries are likely to contribute to the desired sustainability transition, a fixed connection to the mainland might significantly hamper it.

In turn, questions about accessibility are implicitly linked to deeper considerations how to manage the impacts of increased visitation. Discussed propositions include tourism tax to raise funds for sustainability purposes, and a by-law requiring visitors to demonstrate on entry that they have booked accommodation for the duration of their stay (Interviewees 2, 5). However, apart from the fact that such initiatives might discourage tourists from visiting the OH, there are concerns over administering and policing such a by-law (Interviewees 7, 9). Nevertheless, the notion of a cap on the number of tourists directly links to much more tangible challenges—mainly those associated with the (tourist) infrastructure across the OH.

First, there are multiple problems with the physical condition of the existing built infrastructure. Akin to HES dealing with climate change and weather-related issues on the historic sites which they manage, community trusts and private owners face similar challenges with hotels, B&Bs and other facilities. The need to invest in renovations that would guard against the impacts of climate change is well recognised across the OH. However, since accessing funding is challenging, many residents cannot afford such renovations. Hopes are therefore pinned on renewable energy, both as a source of income and a way to upgrade and decarbonise the existing built infrastructure. Indeed, the potential to develop RE at the community level is significant and many community trusts have already successfully embarked on this path (Interviewee 1). Apart from generating energy for the respective communities (and addressing the issue of fuel poverty), such developments can result in energy excess that can be sold to the market or that can be used to support tourist facilities such as charging points for EVs (Interviewees 2, 4, 5). However, the weak grid which restricts the possibility of selling the excess to the market, a lack of coherent, forward-thinking strategy on how to promote RE, and the precarious funding environment, hamper this potential from being realised (Interviewees 2, 4, 5, 13).

Although the shortage of infrastructure to help manage the existing tourist traffic responsibly may sound as less significant than the larger energy-related needs and other big infrastructural deficiencies, it is in fact a much greater pressing issue in the OH. In combination with the steady increase in visitation, the shortage of basic infrastructure is deemed to reinforce unsustainable practices ‘on the ground’. As Interviewee 3 suggested, “I think everybody has realised we need it [tourism] to be managed in such



*a way where it's maybe not all about heavy footfall or how we manage that flow of tourism and more of an infrastructure around that".*

The rise in campervans coming to the OH is the most significant pressure here, with campervans remaining, arguably, the most contested form of visitation in the OH. Understandably, some accommodation providers are dubious about the increase in campervans and their contribution to the local economy. As Interviewee 10 commented, *"we also don't want people with campervans coming in. (...) [I]f they spend money, they spend not enough money to sustain the islands, so the campervans are no use on the islands"*. Simultaneously, tourists in campervans are often accused of behaviours that are not socially and environmentally sound, including littering and inappropriate disposal of waste, causing traffic issues, or overcrowding car parks (Interviewees 3, 5, 10, 11, 16). As Interviewee 4 summarised it: *"There have been independent travellers who come in campervans, who take up quite a lot of space in the ferries, who like to camp wherever they feel like it"*. There is an expectation that better infrastructure would improve the dispersal of campervans across the OH and help minimise their negative impact: *"there are certain areas where we don't have much infrastructure and a bit more infrastructure could help us a lot."* (Interviewee 5).

However, the overall perception of campervanners as low spenders is somewhat spurious. As Interviewee 12 observed, *"I think people assume they go to Tesco on the mainland, pack their campervans and eat all their cheap food in the campervan while they are here, but I don't think that's the actual reality"*. Similarly, Interviewee 8 commented: *"The thing to bear in mind is that (...) these are people who have money to spend and they do dine in restaurants, they do buy significant kind of gifts and mementos of their visits"*. Offering opportunities for campervan tourists to behave in a sustainable way, and to spend money on the islands may be therefore the most appropriate solution. Some community trusts have recently addressed this challenge by developing car parks for campervans. Interviewee 5 commented: *'Of course they will come, they will find somewhere to stay overnight and if there isn't an opportunity for them to contribute to that community (...) then they won't. (...) So, I think, like I say, if you provide the opportunity for them to spend money, they will'.*

Even though the ferry capacities limit the number of vehicles brought to the islands, the imbalance between the number of campervans coming to the OH and the capacity of the islands to accommodate demand without detrimental environmental and social impacts has yet to be addressed. Further proposals include discouraging tourists from bringing their vehicles to the islands and encouraging them to rely on a local, to-be-developed network of EVs (Interviewee 8). In addition, OHT was recently awarded £230,000 from the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund (established by the Scottish Parliament, 2019) to improve the visitor experience through developing car parks, campervan services points, electrical hook ups and signage (VisitScotland 2023).

However, as Interviewee 9 indicated, despite the multitude of initiatives, the islands still lack a holistic view on how to promote tourism growth while fostering the transition of tourism to sustainability: *"I don't feel it's looked at in a holistic way. So, if we really were serious about developing tourism in the Outer Hebrides, what does that mean? What does that mean in terms of infrastructure development?"*

Therefore, if tourism is to evolve towards sustainability and secure a place as a key source of income across the islands, it will be necessary to overcome the path- and place-dependent nature of the existing infrastructure which was developed to serve the community pre-tourism, and before climate change-related issues intensified.

## Discussion

The results presented in the preceding two sections lead to three main reflections. First, as the case of the OH shows, a purposive transition to sustainability in tourism at the destination level (i.e. a mindful deviation driven by normative social and environmental goals) is subject to similar evolutionary influences as tourism development shaped by contingent events. Rather than being a deliberate and straightforward shift from one configuration to another (as the word 'purposive' might erroneously suggest), the pursuit of sustainability is often moulded by the context-specific forces of path dependence. The two sets of factors that shape the transition to sustainable tourism in the OH are a direct reflection of various historical developments in the OH, including previous investments (e.g. infrastructure), previous structural changes (e.g. the emergence of community trusts), and previous relationships between stakeholders (e.g. the institutional distance from the centre). Therefore, as highlighted by Brouder (2017) and Niewiadomski and Brouder (2022), there is much to gain from utilising the theoretical assumptions of EEG (e.g. Martin and Sunley, 2006; Boschma and Frenken, 2006; MacKinnon, 2012) in research on sustainable tourism evolution and defining the desired transition to sustainability in tourism as a process of path-creation that is subject to various forces of path-dependence.

Second, given that path-dependence shapes places as much as places shape path-dependence (Martin, 2010; Martin and Sunley, 2006), the general understanding of how sustainability transitions in tourism unfold also requires geographical sensitivity. Due to the spatial fixity of tourism supply (Hall and Page, 2014) (including tourist infrastructure and facilities, tourist attractions such as historical sites, and the natural environment of the destination), the transition to sustainability at the destination level is inevitably determined by place-specific factors. As the case of the OH has shown, this may range from the necessity to address various effects of climate change and the need to develop (or upgrade) tourist infrastructure in order to manage tourist traffic more responsibly, to various challenges associated with the social and institutional fragmentation within the destination (e.g. how to govern the transition to sustainability in such a fragmented sector as tourism in a systematic and consistent manner?). Although social and institutional fragmentation is a common feature of tourism in many different contexts (rather than a unique characteristic of the OH), it can often have a few place-specific dimensions that reflect the history of the destination to date and exert an influence on its future trajectory. In the OH, community development trusts stand out as a key example. Though the work they do towards sustainability is commendable, the lack of coordination at the OH level make the transition fragmented and disjointed.

Importantly, the multi-actor nature of tourism also necessitates a multi-scalar approach. More attention is required to the role of external stakeholders and the

destination's relationship with the administrative centre as the main source of key policies, agendas, and funding (particularly in the case of peripheral destinations suffering from 'institutional remoteness'). The multitude of external organisations involved in promoting sustainable tourism in the OH, combined with the peculiar funding environment which encompasses many short-term, one-off opportunities instead of a larger, more coherent scheme, is another reason why the transition to sustainable tourism in the OH lacks systematic governance and leads to spatially uneven outcomes.

Third, although EEG is a useful framework for addressing the path- and place-dependent nature of sustainability transitions in tourism (thus extending the existing scholarship on tourism destination evolution by paying more attention to the role of normative goals), it unfortunately falls short of accounting for a few other important features of such transitions, namely their multi-dimensional, multi-actor, contested and disruptive character. In this respect, the holistic conceptualisation of sustainability transitions, which has been developed in the field of energy/sustainability transitions (e.g. Bridge et al., 2013, Geels et al., 2017, Köhler et al., 2019) can conveniently complement the EEG perspective in research on sustainable tourism evolution and help theorise the process of sustainable tourism evolution thoroughly. As the case of the OH has demonstrated, in fragmented and multi-actor sectors like tourism, the diversity of interests, strategic objectives, assets, endowments, and views, is a strong force shaping the transition to sustainability, even if basic consensus on the intended direction of changes exists. The case of the OH illustrates that good will, and an existence of ambitious policies and agendas, are not sufficient conditions for the transition to sustainability to unfold effectively. What is therefore needed is a systematic and systemic form of multi-scalar governance that would help various dimensions of sustainability to be pursued in a synchronous, coordinated, and consistent way, both across different groups of stakeholders and different territorial units. The potential of the sustainability transitions literature to help tourism studies address this crucial issue has yet to be realised.

## Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to analyse how the Outer Hebrides (OH), a scenic archipelago off the West coast of Scotland that is increasing in popularity as a tourist destination, pursues sustainability. Drawing from the sustainability transitions (ST) research field, the paper conceptualised the desired transition to sustainability in tourism in the OH as a set of complex, multi-dimensional, multi-actor, purposive, contested and disruptive processes (Coenen et al., 2012; Geels, 2010, 2011; Köhler et al., 2019). Given that evolutionary perspectives have long proved useful both in research on tourist destination evolution and wider sustainability transitions (but only negligibly in research on sustainable tourism evolution), the paper adopted the concept of path-dependence to thoroughly account for the key historical and context-specific factors shaping this transition. This allowed for investigation into the evolution of sustainable tourism in the OH as a mindful deviation from the current, carbon-intensive, largely unsustainable configuration to more sustainable practices

and solutions. As such, the paper offered a constructive response to Niewiadomski and Brouder's (2022) call for bridging the gap between the research on (sustainable) tourism evolution and the sustainability transitions agenda, and Brouder's (2017) call for greater attention on how tourist destinations are shaped by normative social and environmental goals, as opposed to contingent events or economic imperatives.

Two main interrelated sets of place- and path-dependent factors shaping the transition to sustainable tourism in the OH have been identified: 1) a high level of institutional and social fragmentation across the OH, and 2) various infrastructural challenges and deficiencies which the islands face. Tourism-related actors across the OH generally share the same pro-sustainability values and contribute towards sustainability on a local and site-specific level. However, different (groups of) stakeholders exhibit different strategic objectives and focus on different aspects of sustainability, depending on the assets and resources they possess. This includes the significance they place on tourism, their ability to obtain capital in a complex funding environment, and the relationships they have with external, central-level organisations. Such a socially and institutionally fragmented landscape of the tourism sector in the OH is a core reason why the transition to sustainability is patchy and asynchronous, and why it unfolds in an inconsistent fashion. The challenging funding environment at the central level, which relies on one-off, highly competitive initiatives instead of a more coherent financing scheme, is an important exogenous factor further adding to the intermittent and uneven transition to sustainability in tourism in the OH. As such, the transition to sustainability in tourism in the OH suffers from a lack of systemic and systematic governance.

The various infrastructural challenges which the OH face are another example of how historical developments, investments and decisions shape the transition. First, given that much of the existing infrastructure had been developed before tourism became an important industry and before climate change-related challenges intensified, there is a need to improve the built environment and tailor it better to the needs of tourism, while trying to make it as sustainable as possible (for instance, by diversifying into renewable energy). Second, to control the increasing footfall and minimise tourism's negative social and environmental impacts, the OH face pressures to develop new infrastructure (particularly for campervans). However, because of the lack of systematic governance, each stakeholder addresses this problem in a different way, which further adds to the fragmented nature of the transition.

The paper has two important theoretical implications. First, it has shown that evolutionary perspectives, which have been effectively used both in the research on tourism destination evolution and the work on wider sustainability transitions, are particularly helpful in accounting for the place- and path-dependent factors shaping the mindful pursuit of sustainable tourism. Second, it has demonstrated that the advancements made in the sustainability transitions literature (such as the holistic conceptualisation of sustainability transitions) conveniently complement the EEG framework in addressing sustainable tourism evolution. However, more research is needed to utilise the advancements made in the ST literature and verify their applicability to tourism (including other theoretical frameworks like the multi-level perspective, MLP). Since the ST agenda has much more to offer than a more nuanced conceptualisation of how sustainability evolves, this paper is only a modest

contribution to what will hopefully develop as a more intense and productive dialogue between these two fields.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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