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Ecotourism as catalyst for regenerative futures: Diversifying the multifunctionality of Traditional Multifunctional Cultural Landscapes

Dissertation

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(Dr. rer. nat.)

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University Hildesheim
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Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, and I also extend a quiet note of thanks to myself for the discipline, perseverance, and resilience that carried me through this complex yet marvellous journey.

Abstract

Rural Europe is characterized by a diversity of Traditional Multifunctional Cultural Landscapes (TMCLs), which embody centuries of socio-cultural, ecological co-evolution and sustain ecological, cultural, and economic functions. Today, these landscapes face profound challenges linked to demographic decline, land abandonment, and environmental change, while policy frameworks increasingly seek multifunctional solutions that integrate heritage, conservation, and livelihoods. Tourism, particularly ecotourism, is frequently invoked as a catalyst for sustaining such landscapes. Yet despite its promise, the role of tourism in TMCLs has been insufficiently conceptualized, fragmented across disciplines, focusing largely on economic or ecological outcomes, with limited consideration of multifunctionality, cultural identity, or regenerative frameworks. This dissertation addresses these gaps by examining how ecotourism can sustain and diversify the multifunctionality of TMCLs and by exploring how regenerative tourism concepts can extend sustainability toward net-positive socio-ecological outcomes, conceptualized here as improvements that simultaneously enhance ecological integrity, cultural vitality, and local livelihoods.

In pursuing these aims, the dissertation investigates the state of tourism research in European TMCLs, asking what themes, geographical patterns, and drivers of change characterize the field and where critical gaps remain. It further examines how visitor characteristics, awareness of certification, and sustainability attitudes influence perceptions of ecotourism in a certified TMCL, and explores how local stakeholders understand the socio-cultural, economic, and ecological consequences of tourism. To enrich these perspectives, the dissertation assesses the extent to which regenerative tourism frameworks can deepen understandings of ecotourism and inform strategies for rural development.

The findings show that TMCL tourism research in Europe is in its early stages, geographically concentrated, and insufficiently engaged with multifunctionality, governance and regenerative paradigms. Visitors in TMCLs strongly value authenticity, cultural heritage, and ecological quality; certification enhances awareness of sustainability practices but remains only modestly recognized. Stakeholder perceptions emphasize that ecotourism can generate employment, cultural pride, and livelihood diversification, but they also highlight limited financial support, lack of training, unequal benefit-sharing, and some environmental trade-offs along with cultural commodification as pressing challenges. Across these studies, regenerative tourism concept emerges as valuable for aligning visitor demand, community governance, and ecological stewardship in ways that transcend incremental sustainability.

By integrating theoretical, visitor, and stakeholder perspectives, this dissertation advances a holistic understanding of ecotourism in TMCLs and demonstrates their potential for regenerative futures. Conceptually, it bridges fragmented literatures by situating TMCLs within ecotourism and regenerative tourism debates. Methodologically, it applies a cumulative, multiscale mixed-method approach that combines systematic review, quantitative visitor analysis, and qualitative stakeholder perspectives. Practically, it provides policy-relevant insights for aligning tourism with conservation, cultural revitalization, and regenerative rural development. Taken together, the research positions TMCLs as living laboratories for regenerative futures, showing how ecotourism can move beyond mitigation to generate net-positive outcomes for landscapes, communities, and cultural heritage in Europe.

Zusammenfassung

Das ländliche Europa zeichnet sich durch eine Vielfalt traditioneller multifunktionaler Kulturlandschaften (TMCLs) aus, die Jahrhunderte sozialökologischer Koevolution verkörpern und ökologische, kulturelle und wirtschaftliche Funktionen erfüllen. Heute stehen diese Landschaften vor tiefgreifenden Herausforderungen im Zusammenhang mit Bevölkerungsrückgang, Landaufgabe und Umweltveränderungen, während politische Rahmenbedingungen zunehmend multifunktionale Lösungen anstreben, die Kulturerbe, Naturschutz und Lebensgrundlagen miteinander verbinden. Der Tourismus, insbesondere der Ökotourismus, wird häufig als Katalysator für die Erhaltung solcher Landschaften angeführt. Trotz seines Potenzials wurde die Rolle des Tourismus in TMCLs jedoch nur unzureichend konzeptualisiert, ist über verschiedene Disziplinen fragmentiert und konzentriert sich weitgehend auf wirtschaftliche oder ökologische Ergebnisse, wobei Multifunktionalität, kulturelle Identität oder regenerative Rahmenbedingungen nur begrenzt berücksichtigt werden. Diese Dissertation befasst sich mit diesen Lücken, indem sie untersucht, wie Ökotourismus die Multifunktionalität von TMCLs erhalten und diversifizieren kann, und indem sie untersucht, wie regenerative Tourismuskonzepte die Nachhaltigkeit auf netto-positive sozioökologische Ergebnisse ausweiten können, die hier als Verbesserungen konzeptualisiert werden, die gleichzeitig die ökologische Integrität, die kulturelle Vitalität und die lokalen Lebensgrundlagen verbessern.

Um diese Ziele zu erreichen, untersucht die Dissertation den Stand der Tourismusforschung in europäischen TMCLs und fragt, welche Themen, geografischen Muster und Triebkräfte des Wandels dieses Gebiet charakterisieren und wo noch kritische Lücken bestehen. Sie untersucht ferner, wie Besuchermerkmale, das Bewusstsein für Zertifizierungen und die Einstellung zur Nachhaltigkeit die Wahrnehmung des Ökotourismus in einem zertifizierten TMCL beeinflussen, und untersucht, wie lokale Interessengruppen die soziokulturellen, wirtschaftlichen und ökologischen Folgen des Tourismus verstehen. Um diese Perspektiven zu bereichern, bewertet die Dissertation, inwieweit regenerative Tourismuskonzepte das Verständnis von Ökotourismus vertiefen und Strategien für die ländliche Entwicklung beeinflussen können.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die TMCL-Tourismusforschung in Europa noch in den Anfängen steckt, geografisch konzentriert ist und sich nur unzureichend mit Multifunktionalität, Governance und regenerativen Paradigmen befasst. Besucher von TMCLs legen großen Wert auf Authentizität, kulturelles Erbe und ökologische Qualität; Zertifizierungen stärken das Bewusstsein für Nachhaltigkeitspraktiken, finden jedoch nur mäßige Anerkennung. Die Stakeholder betonen, dass Ökotourismus Arbeitsplätze, kulturellen Stolz und eine Diversifizierung der Lebensgrundlagen schaffen kann, heben jedoch auch die begrenzte finanzielle Unterstützung, den Mangel an Ausbildung, die ungleiche Verteilung der Gewinne und einige ökologische Kompromisse sowie die kulturelle Kommodifizierung als dringende Herausforderungen hervor. In allen diesen Studien erweist sich das Konzept des regenerativen Tourismus als wertvoll, um die Nachfrage der Besucher, die Governance der Gemeinden und den ökologischen Schutz auf eine Weise in Einklang zu bringen, die über eine schrittweise Nachhaltigkeit hinausgeht.

Durch die Integration von theoretischen Perspektiven, Besucherperspektiven und Stakeholder-Perspektiven fördert diese Dissertation ein ganzheitliches Verständnis des Ökotourismus in TMCLs und zeigt deren Potenzial für eine regenerative Zukunft auf. Konzeptionell schlägt sie eine Brücke zwischen fragmentierten Literaturen, indem sie TMCLs in Debatten über Ökotourismus und regenerativen Tourismus einordnet. Methodisch wendet sie einen kumulativen, multiskalaren Mixed-Method-Ansatz an,

der systematische Überprüfungen, quantitative Besucheranalysen und qualitative Stakeholder-Perspektiven kombiniert. In der Praxis liefert sie politikrelevante Erkenntnisse für die Abstimmung von Tourismus mit Naturschutz, kultureller Wiederbelebung und regenerativer ländlicher Entwicklung. Insgesamt positioniert die Forschung TMCLs als lebende Laboratorien für eine regenerative Zukunft und zeigt, wie Ökotourismus über die Minderung von Schäden hinausgehen und positive Nettoergebnisse für Landschaften, Gemeinden und das kulturelle Erbe in Europa erzielen kann.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Traditional Multifunctional Cultural Landscapes (TMCLs) represent dynamic socio-ecological systems that have evolved over centuries and millennia through the reciprocal interaction of people and nature. These landscapes balance ecological processes, cultural heritage, and economic activities in ways that are unique to them. TMCLs embody both tangible attributes, such as architectural forms, land use practices, and governance styles, and intangible dimensions, including collective identity, rituals, and cultural memory (Pătru-Stupariu, et al., 2019; Zerbe, 2024). They also provide models of resilience and multifunctionality that are increasingly relevant in addressing contemporary rural challenges such as depopulation, land abandonment and climate change.

Tourism has frequently been identified as a potential driver for sustaining and revitalizing traditional cultural landscapes. Since the 1980s, ecotourism has emerged as a widely promoted alternative to conventional mass tourism, aiming to generate economic benefits while simultaneously fostering conservation, cultural revitalization, and education (Koens, et al., 2009; Fang, 2020). In the context of TMCLs, ecotourism holds the promise of revitalizing rural areas by counteracting demographic decline, diversifying and creating new livelihood opportunities, and valorizing cultural and natural resources (Zerbe, 2022; Joshi, et al., 2024; Joshi, et al., 2025). Ecotourism's dual potential to reinforce local traditions and enhance ecological stewardship distinguishes it from other forms of rural tourism (Ressurreiç, et al., 2022).

This trajectory resonates with broader international and European policy frameworks. UNESCO's recognition of cultural landscapes as World Heritage sites and the FAO's Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) program highlight the global significance of traditional landscapes as repositories of cultural and traditional heritage (Brumann & Gfeller, 2022; FAO, 2022). At the European level, the EU Biodiversity Strategy and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) explicitly integrate tourism as part of multifunctional land-use strategies (European Commission, 2020). On a global scale, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 11, 12, and 15) directly underscore the importance of protecting cultural and natural heritage, while the UNWTO emphasizes the role of tourism in advancing sustainable consumption and production (UNWTO, 2017). Situated against this backdrop, this dissertation investigates how ecotourism can contribute not only to sustaining TMCLs but also to actively advancing their transformation towards regenerative futures.

1.2 Conceptual framework

In the context of this dissertation TMCLs are conceptualized as long-standing socio-ecological systems in which the landscape is co-produced by nature and culture through land-use practices, traditional knowledge, governance systems and institutions shaped over centuries and millennia. This systems lens frames our analysis of how ecotourism and regenerative tourism can sustain and ultimately renew and diversify their multifunctionality. Building on the European Landscape Convention's definition of landscape as "an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors" (Council of Europe, 2000), TMCLs can also be understood as cultural landscapes in the UNESCO sense that is sites that tangibly and intangibly express the historic interaction between people and the environment (Farina, 2000; UNESCO, 2008). 'Multifunctional' denotes the concurrent delivery of ecological, social, and economic functions (e.g., biodiversity habitat, food, fiber, heritage, learning, identity, recreation), often best captured at the landscape scale via the

landscape services lens that integrates biophysical and cultural dimensions (Termorshuizen & Opdam, 2009; Willemen, et al., 2010). Their significance is twofold; they conserve living heritage and local identity while offering resilient territorial models for addressing contemporary rural challenges such as demographic decline, land abandonment, and climate adaptation through diversified livelihoods and stewardship institutions.

Ecotourism is commonly defined as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains local well-being, and fosters education and understanding (Global Ecotourism Network, 2016). As a distinct subset of tourism, not merely "green" or "nature" tourism, it seeks quantifiable gains in conservation and community outcomes, often operationalized through credible certification schemes that codify environmental, socio-cultural, and economic standards (Honey, 2008; Doan, 2010; Buckley, 2012; Fang, 2020). For TMCLs, ecotourism's significance lies in its capacity to valorize place-based heritage, channel revenue toward conservation and local enterprises, decentralize pressure from crowded hotspots, and strengthen resident's pride and pro-environmental norms when designed with education, participation, and for equitable benefit-sharing (Wearing & Neil, 2009; Buckley, 2012). Ecotourism has the potential to convert landscape services into fair livelihood streams while reinforcing the traditional and cultural meanings that make TMCLs distinctive (Joshi, et al., 2025).

Regenerative tourism goes beyond "doing less harm" sustainability by aiming for net-positive socio-ecological outcomes by restoring ecosystems, renewing cultural vitality, and strengthening community capability to steward place over the long term. It draws on regenerative development principles (Mang & Reed, 2012) and recent tourism scholarship that emphasizes place-based identity, reciprocity, equity, circular resource flows, and participatory governance as design logics for tourism that leaves places better than it found them (Bellato, et al., 2022; Smithwick, et al., 2023). For TMCLs, this paradigm of regeneration is especially relevant as it reframes visitors as contributors to ecological restoration and cultural continuity, and it positions local institutions (e.g., commons arrangements, producer networks, cultural associations) as stewards at the core of destination design and benefit distribution, thereby aligning tourism with landscape regeneration rather than mere mitigation and economic development. Taken together, the three concepts form an integrated scaffold for this cumulative dissertation. TMCLs provide the systems context and the appropriate scale of analysis (landscape); ecotourism supplies a tested, certifiable pathway to mobilize conservation-and-community benefits from place-based assets; and regenerative tourism offers the normative and design framework for moving from less negative impacts to net-positive change. Together, chapters 2 ,3 and 4 operationalize the TMCL–ecotourism–regeneration linkage analyzing the knowledge base, configuring visitor side mechanisms, and the governance pathways that can turn TMCLs into living laboratories for regenerative rural futures.

1.3 Contemporary approaches and knowledge gaps on TMCL tourism

Tourism in cultural landscapes has been examined from diverse disciplinary perspectives, including rural sociology, geography, landscape ecology, and tourism studies (Meneghello, 2021; Iannucci, et al., 2022). While these approaches have generated valuable insights, they have also produced significant fragmentation (Panzer-Krause, 2019). Much of the existing research has emphasized economic outcomes, such as rural diversification and employment opportunities, or environmental outcomes, such as conservation and ecosystem service provision, while devoting comparatively less attention to the multifunctionality, cultural identity and traditions embedded within landscapes (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015; Zoderer, et al., 2019). This imbalance has limited the ability of existing research to fully capture

the socio-ecological distinctiveness of TMCLs and to connect them meaningfully to broader policy frameworks.

Several contemporary methodological approaches have sought to address these shortcomings. Systematic reviews and bibliometric analyses have been used to synthesize trends in rural tourism and ecosystem services research (Oteros-Rozas, et al., 2015; López-Sanz, et al., 2021). Visitor perception studies emphasize the importance of authenticity, heritage, and landscape aesthetics in shaping tourism demand, yet few explicitly consider how eco-certification influences tourist awareness and eventually behavior or how visitor expectations align with local sustainability objectives (Font & McCabe, 2017; López-Sanz, et al., 2021). Stakeholder-oriented research has explored issues of governance, equity, and community participation in tourism development, with growing attention to participatory and co-creation approaches (Panzer-Krause, 2020; Çakar & Uzut, 2020). However, in the context of TMCLs such perspectives remain scarce and are seldom framed within regenerative tourism concepts that emphasize inclusivity, equity, and long-term resilience (Bellato, et al., 2022; Smithwick, et al., 2023; Joshi, et al., 2024)

Taken together, these approaches reveal both important advances and persistent gaps. Research on tourism in TMCLs remains fragmented, with limited integration across disciplinary perspectives, methodological traditions, and spatial scales. Particularly at the European level, rural tourism research pays little explicit attention to ecotourism in TMCLs, thereby overlooking their multifunctional character and heritage values (Joshi, et al., 2024; Schirpke, et al., 2018). Visitor studies, while valuable. often neglect the role of certification in shaping sustainable demand, while stakeholder perspectives, where studied, tend to overlook regenerative framings that could explore and capture net-positive socio-ecological contributions. Most importantly, there is limited integration across policy, visitor demand, and community governance, constraining understanding of how these dimensions interact in practice.

This fragmentation underscores the necessity of adopting integrated approaches that combine diverse methods to provide a holistic understanding of tourism in TMCLs. Such integrated perspectives are particularly important given the multifunctional nature of these landscapes, where ecological, cultural, traditional, and economic dimensions are deeply interdependent. By situating TMCLs within contemporary debates on sustainable and regenerative tourism, research can more efficiently address questions of long-term resilience, equity, and cultural vitality. The present dissertation contributes to this discussion by adopting a multi-perspective approach that integrates the complementary perspectives which advances contemporary knowledge by bridging disciplinary compartmentalization and by providing an empirically grounded, multi-dimensional understanding of ecotourism in TMCLs.

1.4 Research aim and objectives

The overarching aim of this dissertation is to examine the role of ecotourism in Traditional Multifunctional Cultural Landscapes by integrating theoretical, visitor, and stakeholder perspectives in order to inform regenerative rural futures. The specific objectives are:

1. To systematically analyze the state of research on rural tourism in European TMCLs through a landscape lens.
2. To investigate visitor attitudes toward ecotourism certification and its effects and efficacy in TMCLs, using Vama Buzăului as a case study.

3. To explore local stakeholder perspectives on ecotourism's socio-cultural, economic, and environmental impacts, with attention to governance, youth outmigration, and land abandonment highlighting challenges and opportunities in TMCL management.
4. To assess how regenerative tourism frameworks can enrich understandings of ecotourism and inform TMCL development strategies.

Addressing these outlined research gaps is justified by their profound implications for analyzing the role of ecotourism in sustainable and regenerative development of TMCLs. Clarifying the interconnected dynamics of TMCL tourism trends, visitor engagement, and community stakeholder experiences offer critical insights beneficial to multiple category of stakeholders. Policymakers can gain valuable evidence-based frameworks capable of harmonizing ecological conservation objectives with rural development goals. For tourism practitioners, the findings offer guidance on effective marketing approaches and innovative community-based strategies. Importantly, local communities would be better positioned to maximize socio-economic gains derived from ecotourism while safeguarding their cultural heritage and environmental resources. Pursuing this empirical and interdisciplinary research agenda promises significant contributions toward fostering resilience, inclusivity, and sustainability in TMCLs across Europe.

1.5 Dissertation structure

This cumulative dissertation is composed of three peer-reviewed articles, each addressing a distinct dimension of ecotourism in Traditional Multifunctional Cultural Landscapes (TMCLs), while together forming an integrated research trajectory. The structure reflects a progression from reviewing existing knowledge, to analyzing visitor perspectives, to exploring local stakeholder perspectives and governance, culminating in a synthesis that situates TMCLs within regenerative tourism debates.

The first article (Chapter 2) provides a systematic review of rural tourism in European TMCLs, applying a landscape perspective to identify dominant themes, geographical patterns, and research gaps. This review establishes the conceptual and empirical baseline by revealing the fragmented state of scholarship and the limited integration of multifunctionality, landscape services and different but interdependent dimensions of sustainability.

Building on these insights, the second article (Chapter 3) turns to the demand side of ecotourism through a visitor survey in Vama Buzăului, Romania, an eco-certified TMCL. It examines how visitor characteristics, certification awareness, and attitudes shape perceptions of ecotourism. In doing so, it explores the role of certification, visitor perceptions of ecotourism and visitor engagement in advancing sustainable practices.

The third article (Chapter 4) shifts to the supply and governance side, analyzing semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders in Vama Buzăului. It investigates socio-cultural, economic, and environmental impacts of ecotourism, with particular emphasis on governance challenges, youth outmigration, land abandonment and benefit distribution. This study responds directly to gaps highlighted in the literature review regarding the perceptions of not only visitors but other stakeholders of the TMCLs (the people who live in the TMCL) complementing the visitor perspective by uncovering how local actors perceive both opportunities and risks, while situating these within regenerative tourism debates.

Together, these three studies form the empirical foundation for the general discussion and synthesis (Chapter 5), which integrates findings across scales and perspectives. The synthesis demonstrates how

TMCLs can be conceptualized as living laboratories for regenerative futures, showing the added value of a multi-perspective approach that bridges disciplinary compartmentalization.

Finally, the conclusion (Chapter 6) reflects on the dissertation's overall contributions, policy relevance, and implications for regenerative rural development. It highlights the theoretical, methodological, and practical advances made, acknowledges limitations, and outlines directions for future research.

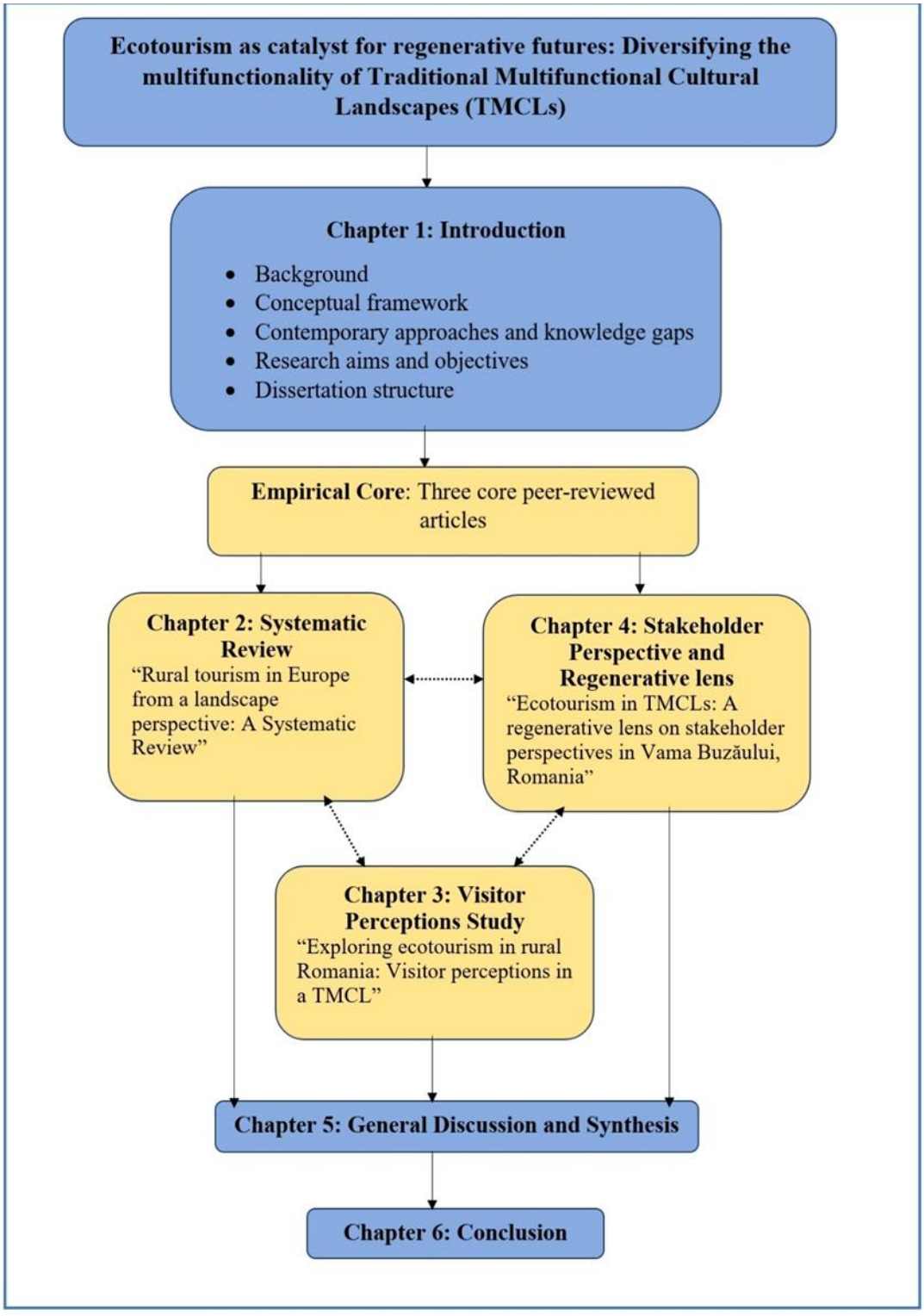

Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of the dissertation structure and chapter relations

2. Rural tourism in Europe from a landscape perspective: A systematic review

This paper has been published in the European Journal of Tourism Research (EJTR).

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Rural tourism in Europe from a landscape perspective: A systematic review

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Abstract
This systematic review offers a comprehensive analysis of the current state of knowledge regarding tourism in European traditional multifunctional cultural landscapes (TMCLs) from a landscape perspective. Adhering to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines, this study aims to identify the principal contextual themes, geographical patterns, and drivers of change in TMCL tourism research from a theoretical landscape perspective. The outcomes of this systematic review revealed that the study of tourism in European TMCLs is still in its early stages, characterized by a scarcity of studies and a limited representation of countries within the existing literature. The analyzed papers underscore a restricted focus on local stakeholder preferences and carrying capacity, with only one study acknowledging the concept of landscape services. Conversely, government initiatives and local community engagement emerge as the most influential drivers of change in the tourism sector. In view of these findings, this study accentuates the significance of embracing a holistic approach to tourism that integrates living systems thinking and regenerative tourism as key priorities. Consequently, the study suggests that future research prioritize investigating local stakeholder preferences, carrying capacity, and other contextual variables to overcome the current limitations of the literature and shape tourism towards a more resilient and sustainable future. The results of this systematic review provide valuable insights for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in the field of tourism in TMCLs. Additionally, they serve as a foundational basis for future research endeavors in this domain.

Keywords: rural tourism, Europe, Traditional Multifunctional Cultural Landscapes (TMCLs), sustainable tourism, resilient tourism, theoretical landscape perspective.

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1. Introduction

Many rural landscapes throughout Europe are established as leisure, recreation and tourism spaces (Woods, 2011; Carneiro, Lima, & Silva, 2015). Describing the reasons behind why an area is rural and creating a boundary line on a map to distinguish between urban and rural spaces, are challenging tasks. As stated by (Hoggart, 1990, p. 245), "The broad category 'rural' is obfuscatory, whether the aim is description or theoretical evaluation, since intra-rural differences can be enormous and rural–urban similarities can be sharp."

In the context of this paper, rural landscapes or spaces refer to areas dominated by natural and semi-natural habitats and land-use types, with prevailing agriculture and, forestry (eventually, also small-scale fishery) and relatively (compared to large settlements and urban areas) low human population density. Related to the landscape setting, diverse natural and cultural resources and traditions are present. The interaction of natural and human factors has shaped complex and dynamic rural landscapes, representing historical continuity despite landscape and historical changes. These rural spaces are specific systems rather than simply areas without cities or towns (European Environmental Agency, 2016, p. 338).

The landscape has always been the foundational element used to create tourism. It is the primary intrinsic resource that attracts tourists, combining historical, cultural, traditional, and natural heritage elements (Aranzabal, Schmitz, & Pineda, 2009). For example, a study exploring the relationship between landscape and place identity in tourism argues that the unique characteristics of a landscape can play a crucial role in creating a sense of place for tourists and that this sense of place can have a significant impact on the overall tourist experience (Kastenholz, Marques, & Carneiro, 2020). Some authors argue that without landscapes, there may be no tourism and suggest that given the central role of sightseeing in tourism, as well as the definition of landscape (Council of Europe, 2000) itself, affirm that there can be no tourism without landscape and no landscape without a viewer or observer in the broadest sense of the term (Terkenli, Skowronek, & Georgoula, 2021).

Ecosystem services have been widely utilized as a framework for studying tourism in recent decades (Scorza, Murgante, Casas, Fortino, & Pilogallo, 2018; Phelan, Ruhanen, & Mair, 2020; Ramírez-Guerrero, García-Onetti, Arcila-Garrido, & Chica-Ruiz, 2021). Ecosystem services encompass the benefits that humans derive from functioning ecosystems, including both tangible and intangible advantages (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). In tourism, these benefits may involve recreational opportunities, scenic beauty, cultural heritage, educational experiences, or spiritual and religious encounters (Pueyo-Ros, 2018).

However, landscapes are a highly relevant study scale as landscapes often provide the setting and context for tourism activities and experiences to manifest. A landscape perspective allows for understanding the interactions between various elements within a landscape and tourism. This perspective is particularly vital in identifying critical threats to sustainability that arise in specific regions characterized by unique social, cultural, and ecological attributes, which are essentially landscapes (Kates, 2003). Termorshuizen and Opdam (Termorshuizen & Opdam, 2009) introduced the concept of landscape services, which stems from the multifunctional approach to landscapes and integrates both natural and cultural dimensions. By encompassing both natural and cultural aspects, this concept provides a comprehensive understanding of the diverse functions and values of landscapes. The notion of ecosystem services primarily centers on the functions and advantages of ecosystems and land-use systems. In contrast, landscape services specifically direct attention to the ecological functions of landscapes, encompassing the various processes and interactions occurring within a given landscape, commonly referred to as "landscape functions." (Willemen, Hein, Mensvoort, & Verburg, 2010). Thus, landscape services shed light on the broader ecological dynamics and contributions of landscapes to the

surrounding environment. One crucial implication of distinguishing between ecosystem and landscape services is their respective spatial scales. Ecosystem services primarily operate at the level of individual ecosystems or land-use systems, while landscape services transcend these boundaries and consider the collective functions of interconnected social-ecological systems. By incorporating both natural and socio-cultural dimensions, the concept of landscape services offers a more holistic and integrated approach to understanding the multifunctional and dynamic roles and values of landscapes. It recognizes that their ecological attributes do not solely define landscapes; human activities, cultural heritage, and societal interactions also shape landscapes. This comprehensive perspective facilitates a more multifaceted evaluation of landscapes and supports decision-making processes that balance ecological conservation, cultural preservation, and sustainable development objectives.

Additionally, the concept of landscape and landscape services, which incorporates natural and cultural aspects within a spatial unit along with active engagement of local stakeholders, offers an integrated and transdisciplinary approach (Termorshuizen & Opdam, 2009; Vallés-Planells, Galiana, & Eetvelde, 2014). Landscapes consist of complex systems involving multiple stakeholders and decision-makers. Examining tourism at the landscape level facilitates understanding the interactions between these stakeholders and decision-makers, enabling more informed decisions, policies, and strategies.

A particular focus on Traditional Multifunctional Cultural Landscapes (TMCLs) (see section 2 for details) presents an opportunity to balance land use and future land development, particularly in the face of escalating land abandonment and overcrowding in urban centers. Investigating traditional cultural landscapes provides insights into the historical utilization and management of natural resources, as well as the implications of these practices for conservation and sustainable land use (Dieterich & Straaten, 2014). Moreover, it offers an understanding of the cultural identity, memory, and continuity of communities that have lived and interacted with these landscapes, which holds significance, particularly in the context of tourism. Landscapes possess cultural and historical significance, and studying tourism from a landscape perspective allows for an exploration of the impacts and interactions of tourism with cultural and historical heritage.

Although a substantial body of literature exists on tourism in rural landscapes (Panzer-Krause, 2020; Jiménez-García, Ruiz-Chico, & Peña-Sánchez, 2020; Martínez & García, 2021), these studies do not explicitly adopt a landscape lens in their analysis. This study's scope focuses on tourism from a landscape viewpoint rather than tourism in landscapes, meaning that the studies may address the intersection of landscapes and tourism but do not explicitly relate it to the concept of landscape and landscape services. This study aims to systematically review studies that approach tourism through a theoretical landscape perspective.

Accordingly, this study aims to identify the trends and patterns in tourism research in various types of European TMCLs from a theoretical landscape perspective, outlining the current state of knowledge and identifying areas of further study through a systematic review achieved by meeting the following objectives:

1. Identify major contextual themes in European landscape tourism research;
2. Identify the location/geographical patterns in TMCL tourism research;
3. Assess the use of the concept of landscape services in the existing literature;
4. Identify drivers of changes for tourism in TMCLs.

1.1 Background

The European Landscape Convention defines landscape as "an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors" (Council of Europe, 2000, pp. chapter 1, art.1). It encompasses natural abiotic and biotic preconditions, human impact and organization, and human perception as a spatial human-ecological system functions (Vallés-Planells, Galiana, & Eetvelde, 2014; Kirchhoff & Fridolin Brand, 2012). Landscapes represent the operational scale for studying the relationship between society and the environment, as they serve as places where people live and work and where ecosystems provide services (Wu, 2013).

According to the UNESCO Operational Guidelines, cultural landscapes embody the interaction between humankind and the natural environment" (UNESCO, 2008). Cultural landscapes, defined as geographical areas where the interplay between human activity and the environment catalyzes ecological, socio-economic, and cultural patterns (Farina, The Cultural Landscape as a Model for the Integration of Ecology and Economics, 2000) serve as junctions where nature and culture, biological and cultural diversity, and tangible and intangible heritage converge, forming an intricate web of relationships that encapsulates the essence of culture and people's identity (Rossler, 2006).

When referring to traditional cultural landscapes, the term 'tradition' encompasses a combination of elements such as land-use patterns, management systems, architecture, governance, language, music, art, dance, sports, food and food processing, as well as medicinal, religious, and spiritual practices, evoking collective memories, identities, and social cohesion (Presenzaa, Petruzzelli, & Sheehan, 2018; Zerbe, 2022). It should be noted that tradition should not be misunderstood as the antithesis of "scientific" or "modern" (Zerbe, 2022).

Using an interdisciplinary approach (Zerbe, 2022) combines the concepts of cultural landscapes, tradition and multifunctionality to crystallize the notion of 'Traditional Multifunctional Cultural Landscapes.' This approach details Traditional Multifunctional Cultural Landscapes (TMCLs) as our heritage and notes that their systematic study and analyses could provide alternative pathways to sustainability from the present 'unsustainable, natural resource depleting and unhealthy industrial behavior' (Zerbe, 2022, p. xi). The study categorizes 12 types of TMCLs worldwide based on their main features and examples of their occurrence. Those 12 categories are namely, forest landscapes, agroforestry landscapes, pasture landscapes, terraced landscapes, irrigation landscapes, lakescapes, riverscapes, saltscapes, seascapes, hunting and park landscapes, monastic landscapes, spiritual and sacred landscapes (Zerbe, 2022, pp. 20-21).

Landscapes possess inherent functions that exist independently of human presence. However, when people value and utilize these functions, they are referred to as landscape services, which constitute the essence of a landscape's attraction, particularly in the context of tourism (Termorshuizen & Opdam, 2009; Woods, 2011). The concept of landscape services, built upon the theoretical foundations of ecosystem services, recognizes landscapes as complex systems shaped by human utilization, with the delivery and value of these services depending on the intricate ecological network structure of the landscape (Opdam, 2013; Westerink, Odam, Rooij, & Steingröver, 2017). The diversity of landscape services aids in identifying stakeholders within the social-ecological network, encompassing providers (such as landowners and managers) and beneficiaries, reflecting a range of interests among stakeholders and providing a framework for analyzing social-ecological networks (Menzel & Teng, 2010; Westerink, Odam, Rooij, & Steingröver, 2017).

Traditional cultural landscapes, predominantly associated with rural areas, exhibit distinctive cultural patterns rooted in prolonged human habitation and land use, which allows for the development of distinctive local knowledge, customs, and traditions (Gómez-Baggethun, Corbera, & Reyes-García,

2013). Rural areas possess stronger connections to the natural environment and its resources, such as water, food, and building materials, compared to urban areas, evident in agroforestry and irrigation systems that reflect the utilization of local resources over time (Bendix, 2013). Agroforestry systems, irrigation systems, and other forms of land management often reflect this connection in the landscape, related to the local natural resources and their use over time. Additionally, rural landscapes often foster a stronger sense of community and social cohesion, reflected in shared cultural features like sacred sites, community gardens, and collective land use (Vale, 2002). This paper focuses mainly on such traditional cultural landscapes.

2. Study Methods

This systematic review was conducted according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines (PRISMA, 2021) as shown in Fig 1. Inclusion criteria for studies were as follows: (1) must be conducted in Europe, as defined by the UN Geoscheme (UNSD, 2010), (2) one of the main research question/s should be related to tourism, (3) must be conducted in a rural space and (4) must be conducted between 1980, i.e. inception of the concept of ecosystem services (ErikGómez-Baggethun, Groot, L.Lomas, & Montes, 2010, p. 1209) and June 2022. In order to identify studies analyzing tourism from a landscape perspective this systematic review uses the types of TMCLs listed in (Zerbe, 2022, pp. 20-21) as keywords.

Two additional keywords, 'therapeutic landscape' and 'sensescape', were added to the list of keywords in the search combination (see Table 1.) In 1992, Wilber M. Gesler introduced the term "therapeutic landscape" to extend the understanding and scope of the landscape concept as previously established in cultural geography. This conceptualization explored the reasons behind perceiving specific landscapes as having therapeutic qualities (Gesler, 1992). In the previous decades, therapeutic landscapes have garnered considerable scholarly interest, leading to a notable upsurge in research dedicated to this subject. Initially, the terminology "therapeutic landscape" denoted exceptional locales renowned for their established healing attributes, drawing individuals who would embark on extensive journeys in search of enhanced well-being. However, in more recent times, the concept has expanded to encompass a broader array of sites or landscapes where individuals can encounter healing experiences. Given the rapid proliferation of wellness tourism globally, a renewed prospect exists to examine the suitability and application of the therapeutic landscape theory within the tourism domain (Huang & Xu, 2018). Given the rapid growth of wellness tourism on a global scale, there is a renewed opportunity to examine the applicability of the therapeutic landscape theory in the context of tourism. Nonetheless, only a limited number of studies have thus far attempted to undertake this endeavor (Buzind & Yarnal, 2012). Similarly, the additional keyword of ‘sensescapes’ was added to the list of keywords in the search combination. Sensescapes refer to the collection of different sensory experiences that one can have in a particular landscape or environment, and these experiences can include sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations (Bardone & Kaaristo, 2014). When tourists visit a new place, they are immersed in various stimuli, such as a unique view, the sun's warmth, the sounds of local animals or people, and the taste and smell of local food. Regardless of what someone might have heard or read about a destination before arriving, the process of "embodiment" allows them to experience the place directly through their senses (Crouch, 2000). As they process the sensory cues in the environment, the destination becomes a sensescape (Halloy & Servais, 2014). Sensescapes are particularly important in tourism studies, as they demonstrate how sensory perceptions of a landscape can shape tourists' perceptions and experiences. Additionally, how a landscape is perceived through the senses can significantly influence how tourists remember it and even affect their decision to return to the destination (Bunkše, 2012).

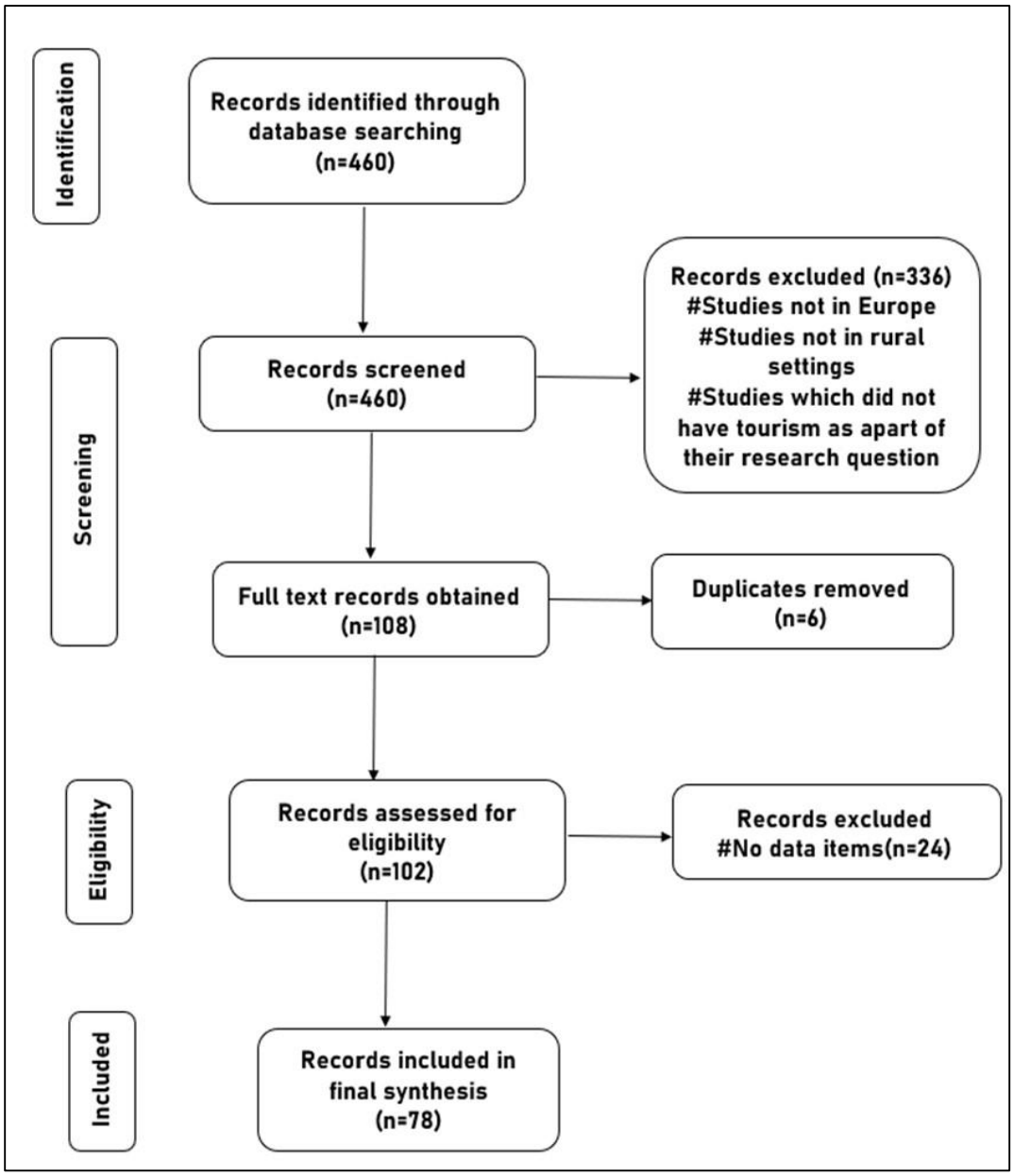

Figure 1. *PRISMA flow diagram for the systematic review*

A comprehensive search of the electronic database Web of Science was conducted using the combination <TMCL type +tourism>, e.g., <Forest landscape AND tourism>. Table 1 shows the types of TMCLs used as search combinations. The papers were screened with respect to the title, abstract, author keywords and keywords plus of all identified studies for eligibility. The search yielded a total of 460 studies. Above mentioned inclusion criteria were applied to the 460 studies and duplicates were removed, resulting in 122 studies. Studies in Turkey (n=20) were removed, resulting in 102 studies. A datasheet developed on Microsoft excel was used to extract from each paper the following data items (1) basic study characteristics (title, author, region of study and country of study), (2) purpose of study, (3) type of landscape, (4) use of concept of landscape services, (5) drivers of change in the tourism sector.

After thoroughly reading the 102 articles, 24 (marked irrelevant) were excluded as they did not contain any of the data items needed to achieve the objectives of this paper. The remaining 78 studies were included in the final synthesis. Countries are divided into four regions (Northern Europe, Southern Europe, Eastern Europe and Western Europe) based on the United Nations Geoscheme for Europe for analysis (UNSD, 2010).

Table 1. *Types of TMCLs used & search combination, adapted from (Zerbe, 2022, pp. 20-21)*

Agroforestry landscape AND tourism	Park landscape AND tourism
Forest landscape AND tourism	River landscape AND tourism
Hunting landscape AND tourism	Sacred landscape AND tourism
Irrigation landscape AND tourism	Seascape OR coastal landscapes AND tourism
Lakescape AND tourism	Terrace landscape AND tourism
Monastic landscape AND tourism	Therapeutic landscape* AND tourism
Pasture OR Pastoral landscape AND tourism	Sensescape* AND tourism

**Note: Additional keyword*

Similarly, a theoretical thematic analysis of the subject areas of the 78 papers was conducted using a six-phase framework developed by (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017), which includes becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing up the findings (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3354). This systematic approach facilitates a comprehensive and robust analysis, aiming to identify recurring patterns, referred to as themes, that hold significance and provide more profound understanding of the data.

Appendix 1 shows the list of all studies included in the synthesis of this review.

3. Results

3.1 TMCL type and number of studies

Out of the 78 studies included in the synthesis, Table 2 shows the number of studies according to TMCL type.

Table 2. *Number of studies according to TMCL type*

TMCL type	Number of studies	% of studies
Forest landscape	22	28
Seascape	21	27
Park landscape	12	15
Hunting landscape	5	6.5
Pastoral	5	6.5
Agroforestry landscape	2	2.5
Sacred landscape	2	2.5
Sensescape	2	2.5
Terrace landscape	1	1.25
Irrigation landscape	1	1.25
Monastic landscape	1	1.25
Lakescape	0	-
Riverscape	0	-
Therapeutic landscape	4	5
Sensescape	2	2.5

Out of the 78 studies included in the synthesis, forest landscapes and seascapes have been the focus of the highest number of studies, accounting for 28% and 27% of the total studies, respectively. Park, hunting, and pastoral landscapes have also received some attention in the research, with 15%, 6.5%, and 6.5% of the studies conducted, respectively. Agroforestry landscapes, sacred landscapes, and sensescapes each account for 2.5% of the studies, while terrace landscapes, irrigation landscapes, and monastic landscapes represent 1.25% of the studies each. Additionally, the research includes investigations into the association between therapeutic landscapes and tourism, which comprise 5% of the studies, and sensescapes, accounting for 2.5% of the studies. Notably, the Web of Science database did not show any studies relating to riverscapes and lakescapes.

3.2 Major contextual themes in European TMCLs tourism

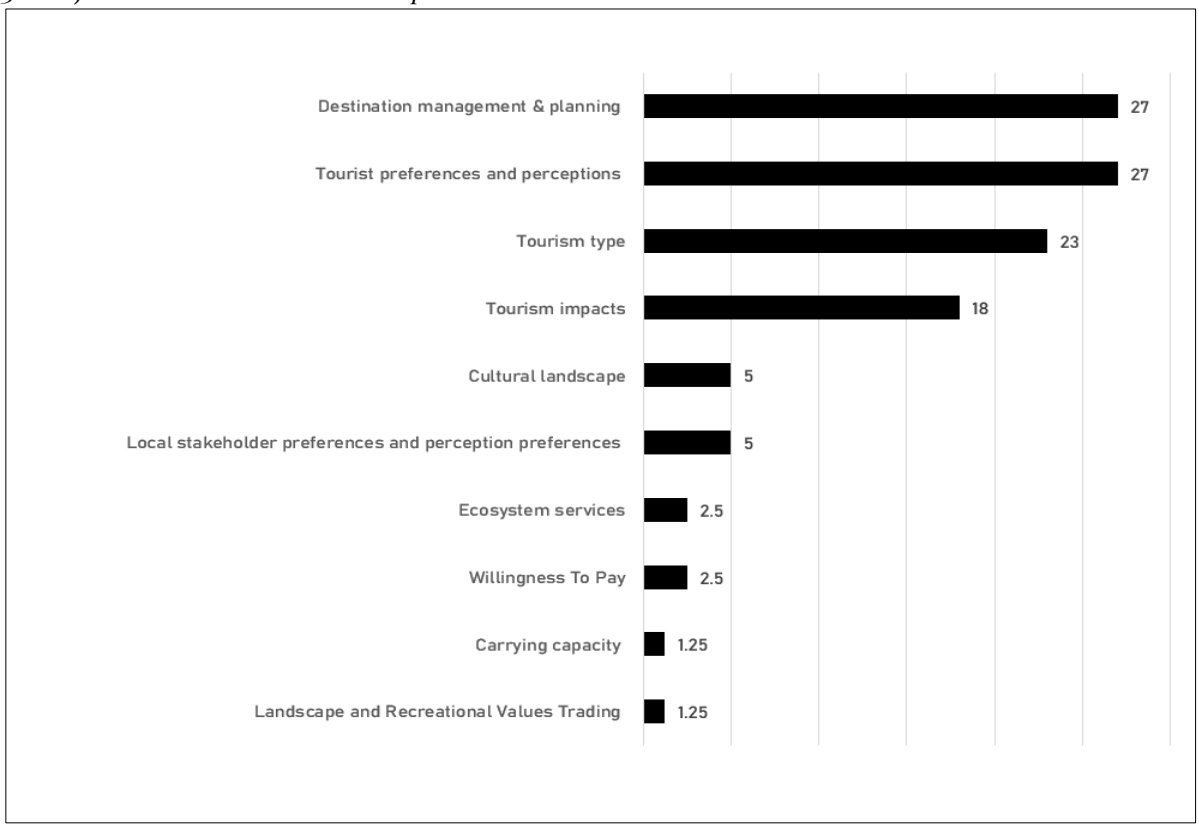

Figure 2. *Major contextual themes of the reviewed papers.*

A theoretical thematic analysis of the subject areas of the 78 papers was conducted using a six-phase framework (as mentioned in section 2). The analysis resulted in the identification of 10 major themes. 27% of the studies concentrated on investigating tourist preferences, aiming to understand the factors influencing tourists' choices and desires. Another 27% focused on destination management and planning, exploring strategies for effectively managing and developing tourist destinations. Within this category, specific attention was given to destination planning, infrastructure development, and marketing strategies. Approximately 23% of the studies delved into various types of tourism, including but not limited to eco-tourism and nature-based tourism. Of particular interest was exploring nature-based and eco-tourism (see section 5). These studies aimed to uncover the unique characteristics, challenges, and potential benefits associated with these forms of tourism. Furthermore, 18% of the studies delved into the impacts of tourism. This investigation predominantly focused on evaluating

tourism activities' environmental and social impacts. Specific attention was given to the livestock farming industry, economic implications, and conflicts within hunting and park landscapes. The remaining studies encompassed a range of topics, each representing a smaller percentage of the overall focus. This includes 5% of studies centered on tourism in cultural landscapes, aiming to unravel the intricate connections between tourism and cultural heritage. Additionally, 2.5% of the studies explored the concept of willingness to pay and another 2.5% focused on ecosystem services. Lastly, 1.25% of the studies concentrated on determining the carrying capacity of destinations, aiming to establish optimal visitor numbers to maintain a balance between tourism development and environmental preservation.

3.3 Geographical patterns in TMCL tourism research

The synthesis of studies included in the analysis revealed distinct regional distributions concerning the geographical scope of research. Southern Europe emerged as the most extensively studied region, accounting for 41% of the included studies, followed by Northern Europe, representing 26% of the studies. Eastern Europe encompassed 17% of the studies, while Western Europe constituted 14%. Notably, only one study was conducted on the European Union scale. The regional distribution of studies according to landscape type is presented in Table 3. Regarding individual country representation, 18 out of 43 European countries were represented. Spain exhibited the highest representation, accounting for 14% of the studies, and Germany followed closely with 12%. Conversely, other Western European countries displayed relatively lower numbers of studies. Finland and Norway shared an equal proportion, with each country accounting for 10% of the studies. Several countries in Southern Europe also demonstrated significant representation in the research. Italy accounted for 10% of the studies, followed by Portugal with 8%, and Greece with 5%. Additionally, Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia collectively represented 4% of the studies. These findings shed light on the regional and country-specific distributions of research efforts, illustrating the varying degrees of scholarly attention given to different European regions and countries in relation to tourism in traditional multifunctional cultural landscapes.

3.4 The concept of landscape services in TMCLs

Only one study, conducted by Spina and Giorno (2021) among the 78 studies included in the synthesis, explicitly addresses landscape services. This particular study focuses on testing a multistakeholder spatial decision-making process within the tourism sector of Sila National Park, located in Southern Italy and designated as a UNESCO world heritage site. According to the authors (Spina & Giorno, 2021, p. 1), the primary objective of the study is to assist the park's community in gaining a deeper understanding of the park's values and resources, as well as to encourage co-design efforts for the improvement and management of environmental and cultural sites. The research methodology employed by (Spina & Giorno, 2021) incorporates the concept of landscape functions and services. Notably, the term "landscape services" remains undefined within the paper. Nevertheless, the authors provide limited information regarding the categorization of landscape services into macro-functions and the utilization of corresponding indicators.

3.5 Drivers of change for tourism in TMCLs

The drivers of change in the context of this study are categorized into three main groups: national, supranational, and global drivers. National drivers refer to factors manifesting at the country or local level. Supranational drivers encompass factors influenced by groups within Europe, independent of individual nations, such as the European Union. Global drivers refer to factors manifesting on a global scale.

Table 3. *Number of studies according to region, country and TMCL type*

Region	TMCL type (number of papers)
Northern Europe (21) [Finland (8), Norway (8), Sweden (1), Denmark (3), Estonia (1)]	Forest landscape (11) Hunting landscape (3) Seascape (3) Sensescape (1) Park landscape (3)
Eastern Europe (13) Romania (4), Poland (7), Czech Republic (1), Slovakia (1)	Agroforestry landscape (1) Sacred landscape (2) Forest landscape (5) Seascape (2) Park landscape (2) Therapeutic landscape (1)
Western Europe (11) Germany (9), France (2)	Forest landscape (3) Seascape (3) Pastoral landscape (1) Park landscape (4)
Southern Europe (32) [Italy (8), Greece (4), Portugal (6), Croatia (1), Albania (1), Serbia (1), Spain (11)]	Terrace landscape (1) Irrigation landscape (1) Monastic landscape (1) Agroforestry landscape (1) Forest landscape (2) Hunting landscape (2) Seascape (14) Pastoral landscape (3) Sensescape (1) Park landscapes (3) Therapeutic landscape (3)
European Union (1)	Forest landscape (1)

As seen in table 4, within national drivers, contextual social factors, which encompass the social context and dynamics surrounding tourism in TMCLs, were discussed in 10 papers. These factors shed light on the social aspects that shape and influence tourism experiences in TMCLs. Government initiatives, highlighted in 13 papers, signify the role of governmental actions and policies in driving changes within the tourism sector. These initiatives can encompass a broad array of measures to promote, regulate, or support tourism development. Similarly, community initiatives, explored in 10 papers, represent the involvement and engagement of local communities in the management and development of tourism activities. This involvement can range from community-led initiatives to collaborative partnerships with external stakeholders. Infrastructural development, discussed in 10 papers, pertains to the construction, improvement, or expansion of physical infrastructure such as transportation networks, accommodation facilities, and recreational amenities, all aimed at facilitating tourism development. Lastly, marketing, mentioned in 2 papers, highlights the strategies and activities undertaken to promote and advertise tourist destinations.

Turning to supranational drivers: rural development funds, examined in 4 papers, encompass financial resources allocated to enhance rural areas. Subsidies mentioned in 3 papers refer to financial incentives or assistance to stimulate and support tourism initiatives. Cultural conservation and promotion funds, explored in 3 papers, denote resources allocated for preserving, promoting, and valorization of cultural

heritage. Grants, discussed in 2 papers, represent financial aid awarded to individuals or organizations involved in tourism projects or research. Lastly, increased access after the communist period, mentioned in 1 paper, pertains to the opening up previously restricted or inaccessible areas following the fall of communist regimes, leading to new opportunities and challenges for tourism development in TMCLs. In terms of global drivers, modernization and technological advancements, addressed in 4 papers, encompass the adoption and integration of technological innovations and advancements in various aspects of tourism operations and experiences. COVID-19, explored in 2 papers, signifies the profound impacts of the global pandemic on tourism, including travel restrictions, health and safety measures, and changes in tourist behavior and demand. Climate change also discussed in 2 papers, refers to the long-term shifts in climatic conditions and associated environmental changes that pose challenges and opportunities for tourism activities in TMCLs. Lastly, global political factors, mentioned in 1 paper, denote the geopolitical dynamics and international relations that can influence the development and management of tourism in TMCLs.

Table 4. *Drivers of change with number of papers*

Category	Driver of change (no. of papers mentioning it)
National drivers	Contextual social factors (10)
	Government initiatives (13)
	Community initiatives (10)
	Infrastructural development (10)
	Marketing (2)
Supranational drivers	Rural development funds (4)
	Subsidies (3)
	Cultural conservation and promotion funds (3)
	Grants (2)
	Increased access after the communist period (1)
Global drivers	Modernization and technological advancements (4)
	COVID-19 (2)
	Climate change (2)
	Global political factors (1)

4. Discussion

The predominant focus of the studies in the analysis revolved around forest landscapes, accounting for 27% of the total studies. This prevalence can be attributed to the recognition of forests as significant locations for recreational activities and opportunities for nature-based experiences (Briassoulis, 2002). The cultural and historical importance associated with forests captures the interest of tourists, resulting in a higher influx of visitors and consequently attracting more research attention. Following closely, seascapes or coastal landscapes garnered considerable attention in the literature, representing 27% of the studies. This finding aligns with previous research (Meyer-Arendt, 2018) emphasizing the early and extensive exploration of coastal landscapes in tourism. The appeal of coastal landscapes can be attributed to the substantial number of tourists they receive (Priskin, 2001) and the wide range of recreational activities they offer (Tress, 2002).

In contrast, the analysis revealed a need for tourism-related studies focusing on riverscapes and lakescapes. One possible explanation for this gap could be the lack of use of the terms 'riverscapes and landscapes'; instead, they might be called landscapes near lakes or rivers. Another possible reason could be the overlapping of these landscape types with others. From a theoretical landscape perspective, the concept of overlapping landscapes delves into the notion that landscapes are not isolated entities with

clear-cut boundaries but rather complex systems comprised of overlapping spatial units. The concept of overlapping landscapes presents a departure from the conventional perception of landscapes as discrete and independent entities, instead highlighting their interconnectedness and the intricate layers of the spatial organization they encompass (Wu, 2013). This perspective recognizes that landscapes are characterized by spatial heterogeneity and diversity, where different elements influence one another through ecological, social, and cultural processes (Farina, 2006).

Despite extensive research on terrace landscapes (Zerbe, 2022), only one study was found in the analyzed literature. Similarly, irrigation and monastic landscapes each had only one study, highlighting the clear need for future research endeavors in these specific landscape contexts. These findings underscore the significance of forest and coastal landscapes in tourism research while simultaneously highlighting the need for increased attention to be directed towards riverscapes, lakescapes, irrigation landscapes, and monastic landscapes. Future studies exploring these landscape types will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of their tourism potential and enhance our knowledge of tourism in the diverse landscape contexts. Similarly, out of all the analyzed papers, it is noteworthy that only one mentions the concept of landscape services. This limited concept inclusion may be attributed to its novelty and inadequate integration with tourism.

A significant portion of research in the field of tourism has traditionally focused on two main areas: tourist preferences and perceptions (27%) and destination management (27%). While these topics are important, it is crucial to consider the preferences and perceptions of local stakeholders, a research area that has received limited attention (5%). While studies focusing on tourist perceptions are vital, local stakeholders, such as residents, business owners, and community leaders, play a crucial role in tourism management and planning, as their preferences and perceptions can significantly impact the success and sustainability of tourism in a particular area. It is crucial to involve them in the planning process, gather their input and feedback, and consider their concerns (Wang, Jiang, Xu, & Guo, 2021). For instance, a study by (Gössling, Hall, & Scott, 2015) found that involving local residents in tourism planning can lead to greater community ownership and support for tourism development. Their findings revealed that such involvement could foster greater community ownership and support for tourism development.

Furthermore, a limited number of studies (1%) have examined the concept of carrying capacity in destinations. Carrying capacity refers to the maximum number of tourists or visitors a destination can accommodate without causing an unacceptable decline in the local community, resources, or visitor experience (Wall, 2020). Understanding the carrying capacity of a destination is crucial for tourism managers and planners as it allows them to make informed decisions regarding the development and management of tourism activities and avoids detrimental environmental, social or cultural impacts on the local community. By incorporating these aspects into tourism research and planning, we can promote sustainable tourism development that benefits both tourists and local communities.

Various types of tourism have been described in the literature, including eco-tourism, nature-based tourism, and creative forms of tourism such as mycotourism, and pescatourism. Nature-based tourism is a broad concept encompassing activities that individuals engage in while on holiday, focusing on connecting with nature and often involving an overnight stay (Ahtikoski, et al., 2011). This type of tourism provides opportunities for experiencing natural environments and often incorporates an understanding of local cultures and tradition. Pescatourism is characterized as a sustainable tourist experience where visitors actively participate in fishing operations, including casting and pulling in nets, partaking in freshly caught fish cooked on board, and visiting fishing villages in Sardinia, Italy (Lai, Cicia, & Giudice, 2016). This experience fosters a shared vision between tourists and locals, encouraging the latter to preserve the environment and recognize the economic and social benefits associated with

tourism development. Concurrently, tourists gain insights into Mediterranean coastal societies' traditional fishing practices and culture. Mycotourism is defined as a specialized product of eco-tourism that attracts individuals from diverse demographics to engage in mushroom harvesting in forested areas. It encompasses various socio-cultural activities, economic benefits, and gastronomy-related sectors (Büntgen, Latorre, Egli, & Martínez-Peña, 2017). This particular study was conducted in the Spanish Province of Soria, approximately 150 km north of Madrid, where mycologists, foresters, gastronomes, farmers, and politicians collaborated to develop a comprehensive program on mushroom-related topics. Through joint efforts involving local, national, and Europe-wide initiatives, this endeavor generated public interest in mushroom picking and associated activities. The growing awareness of mycotourism significantly increased both local and international interest in the region, benefiting regional gastronomy and the hotel sector. This phenomenon also highlights the advantages of synergistic cooperation between local stakeholders and governmental agents in tourism development. Furthermore, an analysis of the literature reveals a need for more research on tourism study and analysis from a landscape perspective across Europe as a whole. Out of the 43 countries listed as part of Europe by the UN Geoscheme for Europe (UNSD, 2010), the study included only 18 countries, indicating the limited coverage of tourism research in Europe from a landscape perspective. Moreover, most of the studies were conducted in regions that are renowned tourist destinations, such as Italy, Spain, and Portugal.

As mentioned earlier, drivers of change in the context of this study are categorized into three main groups: local, supranational, and global drivers. Local drivers of change include various social factors. These encompass the stagnation of available tourism activities (Samora-Arvela, Ferreira, Vaz, & Panagopoulos, 2019), increased demand for high-quality holidays (Tejada, Malvárez, & Navas, 2009; Medina-Munoz & Medina-Munoz, 2012), the availability of new recreational activities (Kling, Dahlberg, & Wall-Reinius, 2019), land abandonment (Martino & Muenzel, 2018; Pröbstl-Haider & Haider, 2014), population depletion (Santoro, Venturi, & Agnoletti, 2020; Loumou, C.Giourga, & Koukoulas, 2000), and a growing public interest in nature (Haukeland, Daugstad, & Vistad, 2011). Government initiatives also contribute to local drivers of change and can include local management plans (Bego & Malltezi, 2011; Sergiacomi, Vuletic, Paletto, Barbierato, & Fagarazzi, 2022)), policy schemes (Bryn & Debella-Gilo, 2011), national funds, and strategic tourist plans (Albuquerque, Martins, & Costa, 2009; Genovese, Culasso, Giacosa, & Battaglini, 2017). Community initiatives, such as private investments in the tourism sector (Tyrväinena, *et al.*, 2014), innovation of new recreational activities (e.g., mycotourism and pescatourism), and other local initiatives in the form of contextual strategies to promote tourism (Fonseca, et al., 2014; Øian, 2013; Tikkanen, Hokajarvi, Hujala, & Kurttila, 2017), also play a role in driving change. Infrastructural developments, including the construction of tourist accommodation facilities, hiking trails, amenities, the growth of tourist centers, and improvements in transportation accessibility, also contribute to local drivers of change (Marín-Yaseli, Laguna, & Lasant, 2003; Czalczynska-Podolska, 2020). Marketing efforts, such as the use of documentaries and the promotion of nature sports, also fall under local drivers (Voda & Moldovan, 2017). Government factors (39%, n=45) were identified as the leading local driver of change, followed by social factors, community initiatives, and infrastructural development. Supranational drivers of change involve factors influenced by the European Union (EU). These include funds from the EU, such as rural development funds, subsidies, cultural conservation and promotion funds, and grants. Only one study reported increased access to certain areas after the end of the communist period as a driver of change (Kołodziejczyk, 2021), while all other supranational factors are in some way funded by the EU (Krzemińska, Dzikowska, Zaręba, & Jarosz, 2018; Zydroń, Kayzer, Fiedler, & Korytowski, 2020). This suggests that the EU employs these strategies as part of its rural development initiatives. Global drivers of change in the tourism landscape encompass various factors, including modernization, technological advancements, changes in employment patterns, the fashionability of specific areas, and the growth of the middle class. Modernization and technological

advancements, particularly in the transportation sector, have significantly influenced tourism. As employment patterns have modernized, individuals have experienced increased income and more free time, enabling greater participation in tourism activities. The fashionability of some specific regions, driven by changing trends and preferences, has also shaped tourism patterns. Furthermore, the growth of the middle class in various countries has contributed to the expansion of the tourism industry. The COVID-19 pandemic has emerged as a significant global driver of change in the tourism industry (Silva, Sousa, & Albuquerque, 2022; Więckowski & J.Timothy, 2021). Climate change has also been identified as a global driver of change in the tourism sector (Buntgen, Latorre, & Martinez-Pena, 2017; Salim, Ravanel, & Gauchon, 2021). The effects of climate change, including rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and environmental degradation, pose challenges to tourism destinations, necessitating adaptations and sustainability measures. One study (Buntgen, Latorre, & Martinez-Pena, 2017) mentioned global political factors as a driver of change. Political events and decisions on a global scale can impact tourism flows, policies, and regulations.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review highlights the current state of research on tourism from a landscape perspective in Europe, indicating that this field is still in its developmental stage, as reflected by the limited number of available studies for analysis and the relatively low representation of countries (18 out of 43). It is crucial to identify future research directions in this field. The review reveals several research gaps that need to be addressed in future studies.

Firstly, one notable research gap revealed in the review is the lack of emphasis on local stakeholder preferences and perceptions in the reviewed papers. Understanding the preferences and perceptions of local stakeholders, including residents, business owners, and community leaders, is crucial as they play a significant role in tourism management and planning. Therefore, future research should prioritize investigating these aspects to ensure the inclusion of local perspectives in tourism planning, development and management. Secondly, there is a bias towards forest and coastal landscapes or seascapes in the distribution of research focus. Other landscape contexts, such as riverscapes, lakescapes, irrigation landscapes, and monastic landscapes, are underrepresented in tourism studies. Further investigations in these areas are necessary to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the tourism potential and implications of these less-studied landscape contexts. Thirdly, the concept of carrying capacity, which is crucial in sustainable tourism development, is insufficiently addressed in the literature. Given its significance in sustainable tourism development, particularly in European cultural landscapes, future studies should prioritize examining carrying capacity to inform more efficient and sustainable tourism development in specific destinations. Fourthly, landscape services, which encompass the various benefits and values of landscapes, are only mentioned in one study, indicating a gap in understanding the role of landscapes in providing various services to tourists and local stakeholders. Therefore, it is crucial to incorporate the concept of landscape services into future tourism research to understand better and assess the multifaceted contributions of landscapes. Furthermore, government initiatives and local community engagement have been identified as powerful drivers of change in the tourism sector. Future research should focus on strategies that effectively integrate these components, leveraging their potential for sustainable tourism development. By studying how governments and communities collaborate, researchers can identify approaches that promote sustainable tourism practices, strategies and mitigate potential negative impacts.

It is essential to acknowledge that this study focuses explicitly on tourism from a landscape perspective rather than tourism in landscapes. Consequently, limitations may arise from relying on a single database and using specific keywords for searching. Researchers and readers should consider these limitations when interpreting the results to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research findings.

Lastly, adopting a holistic approach to tourism is crucial in addressing the aforementioned research gaps. Future research should explore living systems thinking and regenerative tourism paradigms to comprehensively address these gaps. By exploring these frameworks, researchers can promote a more resilient and regenerative future for tourism, moving beyond its sole consideration as an economic industry. This exploration will help shape tourism as a tool and a path toward sustainable development.

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Appendix 1
List of analysed publications

Title	Year	Authors	Landscape type	DOI
Agricultural Heritage Systems and Landscape Perception among Tourists. The Case of Lamole, Chianti (Italy)	2020	Antonio Santoro, Martina Venturi and Mauro Agnolett	Terrace	10.3390/su12093509
Conservation and management issues of Prespa National Park	1997	G. Catsadorakis & M. Malakou	Irrigation	Not available
Setting and blurring boundaries: pilgrims, tourists, and landscape in Mount Athos and Meteora	2011	Veronica della Dora	Monastic	10.1016/j.annals.2011.11.013
Analytical Model for the Development Strategy of a Low-Density Territory: The Montesinho Natural Park	2022	Fátima Matos Silva, Cristina Sousa and Helena Albuquerque	Agroforestry	10.3390/su14074373
The economic value of high nature value farming and the importance of the Common Agricultural Policy in sustaining income: The case study of the Natura 2000 Zarandul de Est (Romania)	2018	Simone Martino, Dominic Muenzel	Agroforestry	10.1016/j.jrurstud.2018.04.002
Geolandscapes and Geotourism: Integrating Nature and Culture in the Bucegi Mountains of Romania	2014	Irina-Maria Necheş and George Erdeli	Sacred	10.1080/01426397.2014.939616
The Significance of Megalithic Monuments in the Process of Place Identity Creation and in Tourism Development	2018	Alicja Edyta Krzemińska, Anna Dzikowska, Anna Danuta Zaręba, Katarzyna Rozalia Jarosz, Krzysztof Widawski, and Janusz Stanisław Łach	Sacred	10.1515/geo-2018-0040
Demand for enhanced forest amenities in private lands: The case of the Ruka-Kuusamo tourism area, Finland	2013	Liisa Tyrväinen, Erkki Mäntymaa, Ville Ovaskainen	Forest	10.1016/j.forpol.2013.05.007
Socio-economic, scientific, and political benefits of mycotourism	2017	Ulf Buntgen, Joaquin Latorre, Simon Egli and Fernando Martinez-Pena	Forest	10.1002/ecs2.1870
Effect of the Season and Forest Management on the Visual Quality of the Nature-based	2016	Liisa Tyrväinen, Harri Silvennoinen & Ville Hallikainen	Forest	10.1080/02827581.2016.1241892

Tourism Environment: A case from Finnish Lapland				
Ex ante evaluation of a PES system: Safeguarding recreational environments for nature-based tourism	2017	Jukka Tikkanen, Raili Hokajarvi, Teppo Hujala, Mikko Kurttila	Forest	10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.03.011
Explanatory variables underlying the route choice decisions of tourists: The case of Geiranger Fjord in Norway	2019	María Díez-Guti´errez, Sahar Babri	Forest	10.1016/j.tra.2020.09.023
Exploring National Park Visitors' Judgements from Social Media: The Case Study of Plitvice Lakes National Park	2022	Carlotta Sergiacomi, Dijana Vuleti´, Alessandro Paletto, Elena Barbierato and Claudio Fagarazzi	Forest	10.3390/f13050717
Financial Inclinations of Visitors to the Wielkopolska National Park	2021	Adam Zydroń, Dariusz Kayzer, Michał Fiedler, Mariusz Korytowski	Forest	Available on research gate
GIS-based Prognosis of Potential Forest Regeneration Affecting Tourism Locations and Cultural Landscapes in South Norway	2011	Anders Bryn & Misganu Debella-Gilo	Forest	10.1080/15022250.2011.576827
High tourism activity alters the spatial distribution of Hazel Grouse (Tetrastes bonasia) and predation on artificial nests in a high-mountain habitat	2020	Marcin Matysek, Robert Gwaidza, Filip Zieba, Maciej Klimecki, Radoslaw Mateja and Piotr Krzan	Forest	Not available
Importance of forest landscape quality for companies operating in nature tourism areas	2019	Erkki Mantymaa, Liisa Tyrvainen, Artti Juutinen, Mikko Kurttila	Forest	10.1016/j.landusepol.2019.104095
Mapping landscape potential for outdoor recreation using different archetypical recreation user groups in the European Union	2017	Franziska Komossa, Emma H. van der Zanden, Catharina J.E. Schulp, Peter H. Verburg	Forest	10.1016/j.ecolind.2017.10.015
Guidelines for recreation as the priority function in the Alps from the German point of view	1996	U. Ammer and R.Detsch	Forest	Not available
Natural resources of the Poleski national park and the development of tourism	2017	Andrzej Soroka, Julia Wojciechowska-Solis	Forest	Available on research gate
Negotiating Improved Multifunctional Landscape Use: Trails as Facilitators for Collaboration Among Stakeholders	2019	Kristin Godtman Kling, Annika Dahlberg and Sandra Wall-Reinius	Forest	10.3390/su11133511
Potential Trade-Offs Between Nature-Based Tourism and Forestry, a Case Study in Northern Finland	2011	Anssi Ahtikoski, Seija Tuulentie, Ville Hallikainen, Vesa Nivala, Eero Vatanen, Liisa Tyrväinen and Hannu Salminen	Forest	10.3390/f2040894
Private landowners' preferences for trading forest landscape and recreational values: A choice experiment application in Kuusamo, Finland	2020	Liisa Tyrväinena, Erkki Mäntymaa, Artti Juutinen, Mikko Kurttila, Ville Ovaskainen	Forest	10.1016/j.landusepol.2020.104478

The impact of tourism and reindeer herding on forest vegetation at Saariselkä, Finnish Lapland: a pollen analytical study of a high-resolution peat profile	2007	Satu Räsänen, Cynthia Froyd and Tomasz Goslar	Forest	10.1177/0959683607077016
The importance of vulnerable areas with potential tourism development: a case study of the Bohemian forest and South Bohemia tourism regions	2014	Josef Navrátil, Miha Lesjak, Kamil Pícha, Stanislav Martinát, Jana Navrátilová, Vivian L. White Baravalle Gilliam, Jaroslav Knotek, Tomá{ Ku~era, Roman [vec, Zuzana Balounová, Josef Rajchar	Forest	10.3986/AGS54108
Tourism management in national parks: Šumava and Bayerischer Wald (Bavarian Forest) in the Czech-German borderland	2021	Krzysztof KOŁODZIEJCZYK	Forest	10.1007s11629-021-6853-9
Towards sustainable growth in nature-based tourism destinations: Clients' views of land use options in Finnish Lapland	2013	Liisa Tyrväinena, Marja Uusitalo, Harri Silvennoinen, Eija Hasu	Forest	10.1016/j.landurbplan.2013.10.003
Using the visitor-employed photography method to analyse deadwood perceptions of forest visitors: a case study from Bavarian Forest National Park, Germany	2019	Joachim Rathmann, Philipp Sacher, Norman Volkmann, Marius Mayer	Forest	10.1007/s10342-020-01260-0
Wild Carpathia Future Development: From Illegal Deforestation to ORV Sustainable Recreation	2017	Mihai Voda, Adrian Torpan and Lucian Moldovan	Forest	10.3390/su9122254
Conservation and management issues of Prespa National Park	1997	G. Catsadorakis & M. Malakou	Hunting	Not available
Ecotourism Opportunities and Challenges in Butrint, Albania, a Unique UNESCO and Ramsar Site	2011	Ferdinand Bego, Jamarber Malltezi	Hunting	Available on research gate
Identifying spatial overlap in the values of locals, domestic- and international tourists to protected areas	2018	Lorena Muñoz, Vera Hausner, Greg Brown, Claire Runge, Per Fauchald	Hunting	10.1016/j.tourman.2018.07.015
Property and Possession: Hunting Tourism and the Morality of Landownership in Rural Norway	2014	Hogne Øian & Ketil Skogen	Hunting	10.1080/08941920.2015.1041658
Wilderness tourism and the moralities of commitment: Hunting and angling as modes of engaging with the natures and animals of rural landscapes in Norway	2013	Hogne Øian	Hunting	10.1016/j.jrurstud.2013.05.004
"It's All About the Scenery": Tourists' Perceptions of Cultural Ecosystem Services in the Lofoten Islands, Norway	2018	Bjørn P. Kaltenborn, Eivind F. Kaltenborn and John D.C. Linnell	Seascape	10.14430/arctic67944

A bridge between tourism and nature conservation: boardwalks effects on coastal dune vegetation	2021	Irene Prisco & Alicia T. R. Acosta1 & Angela Stanisci	Seascape	10.1007/s11852-021-00809-4
Achieving forms of sustainable and competitive tourism in coastal areas. The case of Baixo Vouga	2009	H. Albuquerque, F. Martins and C. Costa	Seascape	Available on research gate
An Overview on Railway Impacts on Coastal Environment and Beach Tourism in Sicily	2021	Irene Cinelli, Giorgio Anfuso, Sandro Privitera and Enzo Pranzini	Seascape	10.3390/su13137068
Assessing the scenic quality of transgressive dune systems on volcanic islands. The case of Corralejo	2021	Eva Pérez-Hernández, Carolina Peña-Alonso, Elisabeth Fernández-Cabrera, Luis Hernández-Calvento	Seascape	10.1016/j.scitotenv.2021.147050
Coastal landscape and the hedonic price of accommodation	2007	Jacqueline M. Hamilton	Seascape	10.1016/j.ecolecon.2006.08.001
Coastal Scenic Beauty and Sensitivity at the Balearic Islands, Spain: Implication of Natural and Human Factors	2021	Alexis Mooser, Giorgio Anfuso, Lluís Gómez-Pujol, Angela Rizzo, Allan T. Williams and Pietro P. C. Aucelli	Seascape	10.3390/land10050456
Coastal and marine protected areas as key elements for tourism in small islands	2014	Catarina Fonseca Helena Calado, Fabiana Moniz, Chiara Bragagnolo, Artur Gil§, Mike Phillips, Margardia Pereira, Miguel Moreira	Seascape	10.2112/SI70-078
Geo-itineraries in the Cilento Vallo di Diano Geopark: A Tool for Tourism Development in Southern Italy	2014	N. Santangelo & P. Romano & A. Santo	Seascape	10.1007/s12371-014-0133-9
Indicator for a monitoring of Germany's landscape attractiveness	2017	Ulrich Walz , Christian Stein	Seascape	10.1016/j.ecolind.2017.06.052
Indicators for the Assessment of Physical Carrying Capacity in Coastal Tourist Destinations	2009	M. Tejada, G.C. Malvárez and F. Navas	Seascape	Available on research gate
Land-use conflicts in coastal tourism and the quest for governance innovations	2020	Anne-Mette Hjalager	Seascape	10.1016/j.landusepol.2020.104566
Leisure traveller perceptions of iconic coastal and fjord countryside areas: Lush naturalness or remembrance of agricultural times past?	2016	Jens Kr. Steen Jacobsen, Hans Tømmervik	Seascape	10.1016/j.landusepol.2016.01.013
Linking modelling and empirical data to assess recreation services provided by coastal habitats: The case of NW Portugal	2017	J. Cunhaa, M. Elliott, S. Ramos	Seascape	10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2017.12.022
Military Training Areas as Semicommons: The Territorial Valorization of Quirra (Sardinia) from Easements to Ecosystem Services	2020	Ginevra Balletto, Alessandra Milesi, Nicolò Fenu, Giuseppe Borruso and Luigi Mundula	Seascape	10.3390/su12020622

Modeling Nature-Based and Cultural Recreation Preferences in Mediterranean Regions as Opportunities for Smart Tourism and Diversification	2020	André Samora-Arvela, Jorge Ferreira, Eric Vaz and Thomas Panagopoulos	Seascape	10.3390/su12010433
Pescatourism, a sustainable tourist experience	2016	Maria Bonaria Lai, Gianni Cicia, Teresa Del Giudice	Seascape	10.1016/j.jclepro.2016.05.013
The Resurgent Conflict Between Offshore Wind Farms and Tourism: Underlying Storylines	2014	David Rudolph	Seascape	10.1080/14702541.2014.914239
The Stages of the Cultural Landscape Transformation of Seaside Resorts in Poland against the Background of the Evolving Nature of Tourism	2020	Wojciech Bal and Magdalena Czalczynska-Podolska	Seascape	10.3390/land9020055
Wellness Tourism—New Challenges and Opportunities for Tourism in Salou	2021	Marta Gemma Nel-lo Andreu, Alba Font-Barnet and Marc Espasa Roca	Seascape	10.3390/su13158246
Tourism and an evolving international boundary: Bordering, debordering and rebordering on Usedom Island, Poland-Germany	2021	MarekWięckowski, Dallen J.Timothy	Seascape	10.1016/j.jdmm.2021.100647
THE ORIGINS OF COASTAL TOURISM: SEA BATHING AND SEASIDE RESORTS IN CATALONIA	2009	Mercedes Tatjer	Seascape	Not available
Can Livestock Farming and Tourism Coexist in Mountain Regions? A New Business Model for Sustainability	2017	Dino Genovese, Francesca Culasso, Elisa Giacosa and Luca Maria Battaglini	Pastoral	10.3390/su9112021
Competing for Meadows	2022	Marín-Yaseli, María Laguna, and Martínez, Teodoro Lasanta	Pastoral	10.1659/0276-4741(2003)023[0169:CFM]2.0.CO;2
The future of Alpine pastures – Agricultural or tourism development? Experiences from the German Alps	2021	Alice Wanner, Ulrike Probstl-Haider, Magdalena Feilhammer	Pastoral	10.1016/j.jort.2021.100405
Tourism Contribution to Agro-Ecosystems Conservation: The Case of Lesbos Island, Greece	2000	A. Loumou, C. Giourga, P. Dimitrakopoulos, S. Koukoulas	Pastoral	10.1007/s002670010093
Eating ants: understanding the terroir restaurant as a form of destination tourism	2014	Richard Tresidder	Sensescape	10.1080/14766825.2014.956751
Tourists' memories, sensory impressions and loyalty: In loco and post-visit study in Southwest Portugal	2017	Dora Agapito, Patrícia Pinto, Júlio Mendes	Sensescape	10.1016/j.tourman.2016.10.015
A regionalized IO-model to value seasonal recreational ecosystem services in a mountain National Park in Spain	2022	Martin Barroso V, de Castro-Pardo M, Fernández Martínez P, Azevedo JC	Park landscapes	10.1007/s11629-021-6911-3
Aesthetic perceptions of the landscape of a shrinking glacier: Evidence from the Mont Blanc massif	2021	Emmanuel Salim, Ludovic Ravanel, Christophe Gauchon	Park landscapes	10.1016/j.jort.2021.100411

Cultural Landscapes: A Multi-Stakeholder Methodological Approach to Support Widespread and Shared Tourism Development Strategies	2021	Lucia Della Spina and Claudia Giorno	Park landscapes	10.3390/su13137175
Evaluating Local Attractiveness for Tourism and Recreation—A Case Study of the Communes in Brzeski County, Poland	2022	Agnieszka Ziernicka-Wojtaszek and Magdalena Malec	Park landscapes	10.3390/land11010039
Food tourism in protected areas – sustainability for producers, the environment and tourism?	2012	Anne-Mette Hjalager & Pia Heike Johansen	Park landscapes	10.1080/09669582.2012.708041
Gender differences in visitor motivation and satisfaction: the case of Golija-Studenica Biosphere Reserve	2021	Snežana Milićević, Živana Krejić & Nataša Đorđević	Park landscapes	10.1553/eco.mont-13-sis70
Harmony or Conflict? A Focus Group Study on Traditional Use and Tourism Development in and around Rondane and Jotunheimen National Parks in Norway	2011	Jan Vidar Haukeland, Karoline Daugstad & Odd Inge Vistad	Park landscapes	10.1080/15022250.2011.632597
Mapping social values for cultural ecosystem services in a mountain landscape in the Romanian Carpathians	2019	Sorina Mihaela Bogdan, Ileana Stupariu, Andreea Andratopârceanu & Irina Iulia Năstase	Park landscapes	10.26471/cjees/2019/014/072
The role of protected areas in destination choice in the European Alps	2014	Ulrike Pröbstl-Haider / Wolfgang Haider	Park landscapes	Not available
Tourism Impacts and Local Communities in Estonian National Parks	2011	Mart Reimann , Mari-Liis Lamp & Hannes Palang	Park landscapes	10.1080/15022250.2011.638206
Tourism management in national parks: Šumava and Bayerischer Wald (Bavarian Forest) in the Czech-German borderland	2021	Krzysztof KOŁODZIEJCZYK	Park landscapes	10.1007/s11629-021-6853-9
Tourism and preservation policies in karst areas: comparison between the Škocjan caves and the Ardèche gorge	2007	Mélanie Duval	Park landscapes	Available on research gate
Critical issues in health and wellness tourism: an exploratory study of visitors to wellness centres on Gran Canaria	2012	Diego Ramón Medina-Muñoz & Rita Dolores Medina-Muñoz	Therapeutic landscapes	10.1080/13683500.2012.748719
Land planning as a support for sustainable development based on tourism: a case study of Slovak rural region	2015	Michal Klaučo, Bohuslava Gregorová, Uglješa Stankov, Vladimir Marković and Polina Lemenkova	Therapeutic landscapes	Available on research gate
Spiritual tourism on the way of Saint James the current situation	2017	Lucrezia Lopez, Rubén Camilo Lois González, Belén Ma Castro Fernández	Therapeutic landscapes	10.1016/j.tmp.2017.07.015
The resident and visitor gaze: a comparison of coastal social values at risk due to sea-level rise	2021	Beatrice Meo, Sonia Graham, Eduard Ariza, Antònia Casellas, Deisiane Delfino	Therapeutic landscapes	10.1016/j.envsci.2021.05.017

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Exploring ecotourism in rural Romania: visitor perceptions in a Traditional Multiunctional Cultural Landscape

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Abstract
Ecotourism is increasingly gaining global attention as a strategy to cope with environmental changes and socio-economic transformations, particularly in rural areas. This study investigates visitor attitudes toward ecotourism in the eco-certified Traditional Multifunctional Cultural Landscape (TMCL) of Vama Buzăului, Central Romania, through a structured questionnaire survey. Employing a seven-statement scale derived from the Ecotourist Predisposition Scale tailored specifically for measuring visitor attitudes in TMCLs, it investigates the relationships among visitor characteristics, ecotourism attitudes, familiarity with ecotourism as a concept, and certification awareness. The results indicate a significant correlation between ecotourism familiarity and certification awareness, identifying two distinct visitor clusters based on their attitudes. The study emphasizes the pivotal role of certification in promoting sustainable tourism and offers insights for targeted marketing and educational strategies in TMCLs. Certification enhances destination credibility, marketability, sustainable practices, and community support while providing feedback to certification bodies. The findings highlight the need for educational initiatives to increase awareness among less familiar visitors, informing strategic marketing and policy development. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for preserving the ecological integrity and cultural heritage of TMCLs, supporting their sustainable development and long-term viability. The study recommends future research on the effectiveness of diverse, tailored on-site educational tools to promote ecotourism and pro-environmental behaviors in TMCLs. These insights, with their practical implications are valuable for researchers, policymakers, and ecotourism practitioners, laying the groundwork for future studies in this field.

Keywords Traditional multifunctional cultural landscapes (TMCLs) · Ecotourism · Eco-certification · Visitor attitudes · Romania

1 Introduction

Tourism has a reciprocal and complex interrelationship with the environment, relying heavily on natural and cultural resources. Hereby, ecotourism is becoming of increasing interest worldwide to cope with environmental challenges and socio-economic transformations, especially in rural areas. The Global Ecotourism Network (Global Ecotourism Network 2016) defines ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains local well-being, and fosters knowledge and understanding through education. Ecotourism, a niche within tourism, has core objectives of preserving natural and cultural capital, local rural development and knowledge dissemination (Fang 2020). It has evolved from an alternative to mass tourism to an integral system with positive impacts on destination dynamics (Khartishvili, et al. 2020). As a multifaceted strategy, ecotourism prioritizes sustainable enjoyment of natural and cultural landscapes, actively contributing to biodiversity, ecosystem conservation, and restoration, as well as community involvement in planning, implementation, and cultural exchange (Doan 2010; Ressurreiç, et al., 2022).

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Although often conflated with other forms of tourism such as "sustainable," "responsible," "nature," "green," or "low impact" tourism, it is crucial to conceptualize ecotourism as a distinct category within the broader tourism spectrum (Honey 2008). Certification by credible authorities distinguishes ecotourism by ensuring adherence to rigorous environmental sustainability standards, social responsibility, and economic viability (Buckley 2012). Certification promotes responsible travel that conserves the environment, sustains local communities, and enhances destinations' credibility and marketing advantages (Honey 2008). Certified ecotourism destinations can demonstrate enhanced environmental stewardship, effectively decentralize tourism from crowded hotspots, and balance regional development, promoting the exploration of lesser-known areas rich in cultural and natural heritage. Many rural destinations in Romania, including our study site, Vama Buzăului, are relatively underdeveloped in tourism yet show strong potential for growth in this sector. Certification can play a crucial role in facilitating the exploration of such lesser-known, culturally and naturally affluent areas.

Here, the term 'rural' denotes regions characterized by the predominance of natural and semi-natural habitats, along with land-use practices primarily centered on agriculture and forestry (eventually, also fishery) and are distinguished by relatively low population densities compared to larger settlements and urban areas, respectively. According to the Romanian National Tourism Authority (NTA, Romania, 2019), an ecotourism destination is defined by its adherence to responsible marketing, sustainable management, community support, environmental awareness, and nature conservation. These destinations typically include a protected area and surrounding communities, with the protected area's administration playing the central role in overall management. The focus is on local and regional products, small-scale infrastructure, and marketing, underpinned by values of sustainability, nature conservation, and cultural preservation, with conservation objectives integrated into tourism planning. Romania's extensive natural and cultural heritage, largely unexploited by mainstream tourism, presents a significant opportunity for ecotourism research.

Understanding visitor attitudes and perceptions in rural areas is crucial for advancing destination management practices and sustainable tourism (Gössling, et al., 2015; Gursoy & Chi 2018). Current studies provide insights for optimizing resource allocation, developing infrastructure, refining marketing strategies, and aligning with diverse tourist expectations and local community requirements (Sthapit & Coudounaris 2017; Buhalis & Sinarta 2019; Panzer-Krause 2020). Effective market segmentation based on demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral factors is vital for improving precision in marketing, contributing to overall tourist and host satisfaction (Wearing 2008; Buhalis & Sinarta 2019). For instance, Sthapit and Coudounaris (2017) demonstrated that higher visitor satisfaction fosters positive word-of-mouth, significantly enhance the destination's appeal and reputation.

This research conducted in Vama Buzăului (Central Romania), a certified ecotourism destination, aims to address gaps in understanding visitor attitudes toward ecotourism within Traditional Multifunctional Cultural Landscapes (TMCLs), which are dynamic socio-ecological systems with significant cultural and ecological importance (Zerbe 2022). It is important to note that TMCLs are not a form of certification; rather they represent a broad conceptual framework for analyzing landscapes, systems where tradition, cultural heritage and natural ecosystems intersect. In contrast, ecotourism certifications in Romania are administered under the national standards to provide a formal mechanism to ensure destinations meet rigorous sustainability criteria. In this study, we conceptualize Vama Buzăului as a TMCL (see 2.1). TMCLs are notable for their ecological, socio-economic, and cultural importance. They represent intersections where nature and culture merge and encompass tangible and intangible heritage. Within TMCLs, "tradition" encompasses land-use practices, architectural styles, governance structures, and cultural customs, focusing on preserving cultural values rather than opposing modernity or scientific advancement (Zerbe 2022). These landscapes continually evolve, reflecting living heritage, collective memories, identities, and social cohesion and providing critical insights into sustainable development and cultural continuity (Zerbe 2022; Joshi et al. 2024). In contrast, certification, as the one provided to Vama Buzăului, is crucial in decentralizing tourism from hotspots like Brașov and redirecting visitor flows to less developed areas such as Vama Buzăului. This strategy alleviates pressure on popular destinations while promoting exploration of lesser-known yet rich areas, fostering balanced regional development and addressing contemporary tourism challenges. It supports a tourism model that values quality over quantity, encouraging authentic travel experiences and cultural diversity in alignment with ecotourism principles. However, it is necessary to note that certification is not an end in itself but rather a mechanism that encourages businesses and stakeholders to improve their environmental, social, and economic practices. As a result, certified entities gain both tangible and intangible advantages. For instance, certification can strengthen their marketing reach while informing visitors about the destination's key environmental and social dimensions.

Analyzing visitor attitudes in TMCLs allows local communities to shape tourism development, fostering ownership, pride, and equitable benefits while creating authentic ecotourism experiences emphasizing cultural

preservation, awareness, and cross-cultural understanding. This study aims to enhance scholarly knowledge on ecotourism dynamics within TMCLs, acquire empirical data, generate insightful perspectives, and establish a foundational knowledge base. Additionally, the findings of this study can illuminate the role of ecotourism certification in tourism development, thus promoting the sustainable management of natural and cultural heritage in these historically rich landscapes that have developed over centuries and millennia (Zerbe, 2025).

Specifically, the objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To systematically compile and present visitor characteristics (such as demographics, knowledge of destination, source of information, activities performed, and length of stay).
2. To examine the relationship between visitor characteristics and their attitudes toward ecotourism.
3. To investigate the relationship between familiarity with ecotourism and awareness of certification.

We hypothesize that visitors with a higher familiarity with ecotourism are more likely to recognize a destination's certification status compared to those with lower familiarity levels. Accordingly, the hypotheses are conceptualized as follows:

Hypothesis 0 (Null hypothesis): There is no association between certification awareness and familiarity with the concept of ecotourism.

Hypothesis 1 (Alternative hypothesis): Visitors who are more familiar with ecotourism are more likely to be aware of the destination's certification status than those who are less familiar.

This hypothesis is significant within the context of ecotourism and TMCLs because such recognition enhances the credibility and marketability of destinations, promotes sustainable practices, supports local communities, and provides valuable feedback to certification bodies (Buckley 2002; Font & Harris 2004). Furthermore, it highlights the importance of educational efforts to increase awareness among less familiar visitors, informing strategic marketing and policy development (Litvin, et al. 2008; Munar & Jacobsen 2014). Understanding the relationship aids in preserving the ecological integrity and cultural heritage of TMCLs, contributing to their sustainable development and long-term viability.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Study area

Vama Buzăului, located approximately 45 km southeast of Brașov in Central Romania, experiences a temperate continental climate with four distinct seasons. Summers are warm, and winters are cold and snowy, with an average annual temperature of 8–10 °C. Precipitation is evenly distributed throughout the year, slightly higher in summer, fostering lush vegetation. The region is naturally endowed with a mix of temperate deciduous and coniferous forests, creating a diverse ecosystem of significant ecological value (Stăncioiu, et al., 2018).

Historically, the village served as a border between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Kingdom of Romania, with its heritage tracing back to 1211, greatly influencing its cultural identity. The name "Vama," meaning "customs" or "border" in Romanian, reflects the area's blend of natural and cultural elements. The historical amalgamation of villages and the formation of collective communes, shaped by diverse practices, governance systems, and customs, enrich the region's cultural heritage (VBTIC 2023).

Vama Buzăului exhibits a strong sense of community and social cohesion, reflected in its rich history of organizing customary fairs, folkloric exhibitions, and performances that showcase local crafts and products. Annual events such as "Fiii Satului" and "Festivalul Gospodarul Vămășan" invigorate the community and serve as platforms for integrating tangible and intangible cultural elements. The village maintains its cultural identity through agricultural and craftsmanship traditions. It is the birthplace of Romania's 'Gastrolocal' movement. This movement allows visitors to enjoy traditional dishes made from locally sourced ingredients, with gastrolocal owners required to produce at least 70% of their food (Lingu 2023). Vama Buzăului punctuates its commitment to environmental conservation and biodiversity protection, exemplified by the Bison Valley Reserve established in 2008, where a sub-population of the European Bison (Bison bonasus L.) is preserved. This ecological initiative strengthens the landscape where local communities are situated and shape their cultural and socio-economic aspects, seamlessly aligning with the ethos of a TMCL (VBTIC 2023) (Fig. 1).

Vama Buzăului is one of the eight certified ecotourism destination recognized by the National Tourism Authority of Romania (AER, 2023). The certification process in Romania has six stages (Fig. 2). Firstly, applicants must review the guidelines for obtaining the Eco-Romania Certificate of Good Practices in ecotourism. Then, they

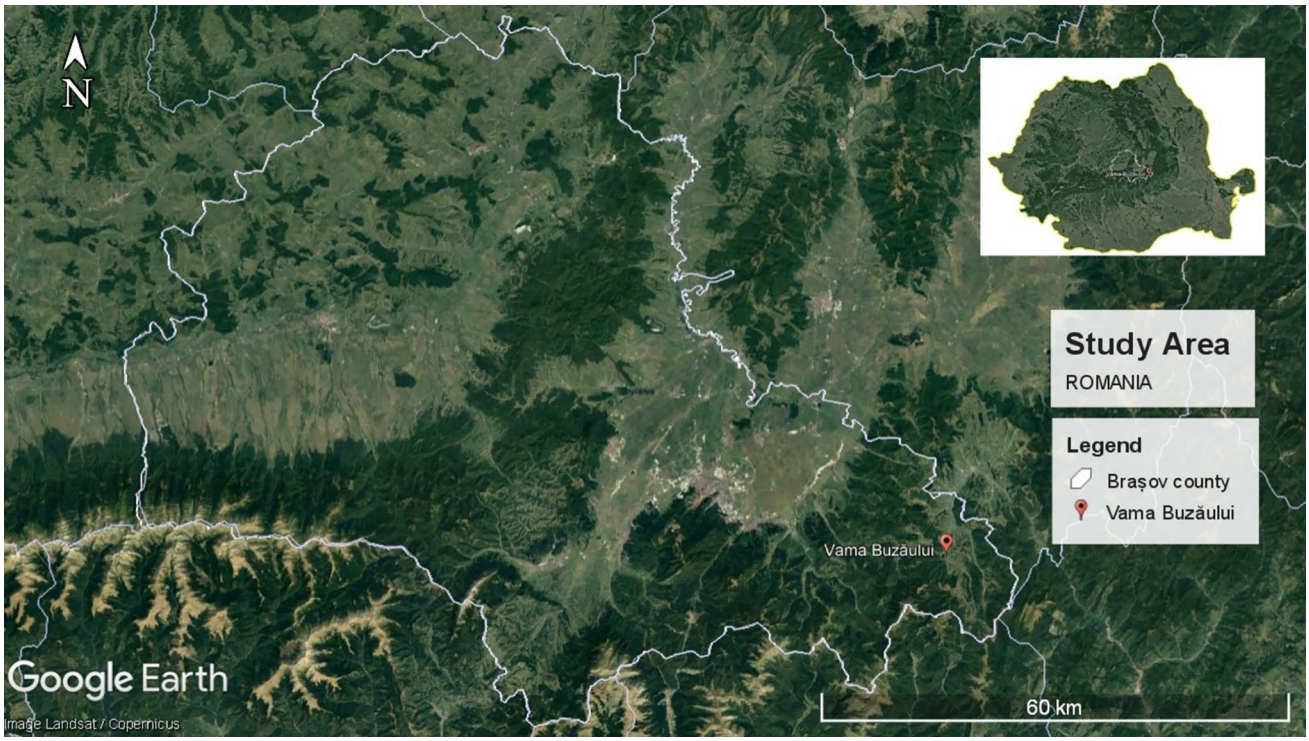

Fig. 1 Vama Buzăului, Brașov County, Romania (Google Earth, 2024)

must complete and submit the evaluation request and self-evaluation forms to the AER Certification Department; the evaluation fee is due only if the process advances. Following this, an evaluation visit must be scheduled and coordinated, with an evaluation fee of up to 300 euros to be paid. During the visit, the applicant must present documentation substantiating compliance with the criteria, such as accreditations, contracts, and invoices. The evaluator then forwards these documents to the AER Certification Department. Finally, the Certification Committee reviews the submission and establishes the conditions for awarding the Eco-Romania certificate. Upon approval, the beneficiary receives both the diploma and certification logo after the agreement for logo usage (AER, 2023). The certification requires periodic re-evaluation, typically every two to three years, to ensure compliance with established sustainability standards. If the destination fails to meet the requisite environmental, social or economic criteria AER sets, its certification can be revoked (AER, 2023). This systematic reassessment underscores the importance of ongoing commitment to responsible tourism and continuous improvement in areas such as resource management, community engagement, and visitor experience.

Vama Buzăului serves as a model for local, sustainable development, emphasizing ecotourism to preserve cultural practices and values within multifunctional cultural landscapes that integrate nature and cultural elements. The study positions Vama Buzăului as an ideal site for exploration from a TMCL perspective, considering the unique characteristics of this region shaped by the confluence of people and nature.

2.2 Method

Publicly accessible Romanian data sources, including the Romanian National Institute of Statistics (INSEE, 2024), Brașov City Council (2024), lack disaggregated site-specific tourism data such as annual arrivals, overnight stays, and percentage of foreign or domestic visitors. Instead, existing reports consolidate indicators at the national or regional level. Consequently, collecting formal, site-specific tourism statistics requires coordinated efforts by local authorities and tourism organizations. Research endeavors like the present study can contribute to bridging this gap by offering empirical insights into visitor profiles and tourism trends at the local level.

We conducted a structured questionnaire survey to investigate visitor attitudes toward ecotourism in Vama Buzăului and its cultural landscape. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section collected visitor characteristics, including group type (e.g., family), size (number of visitors in the group), nationality, age, gender, education level, duration of stay, activities, and primary

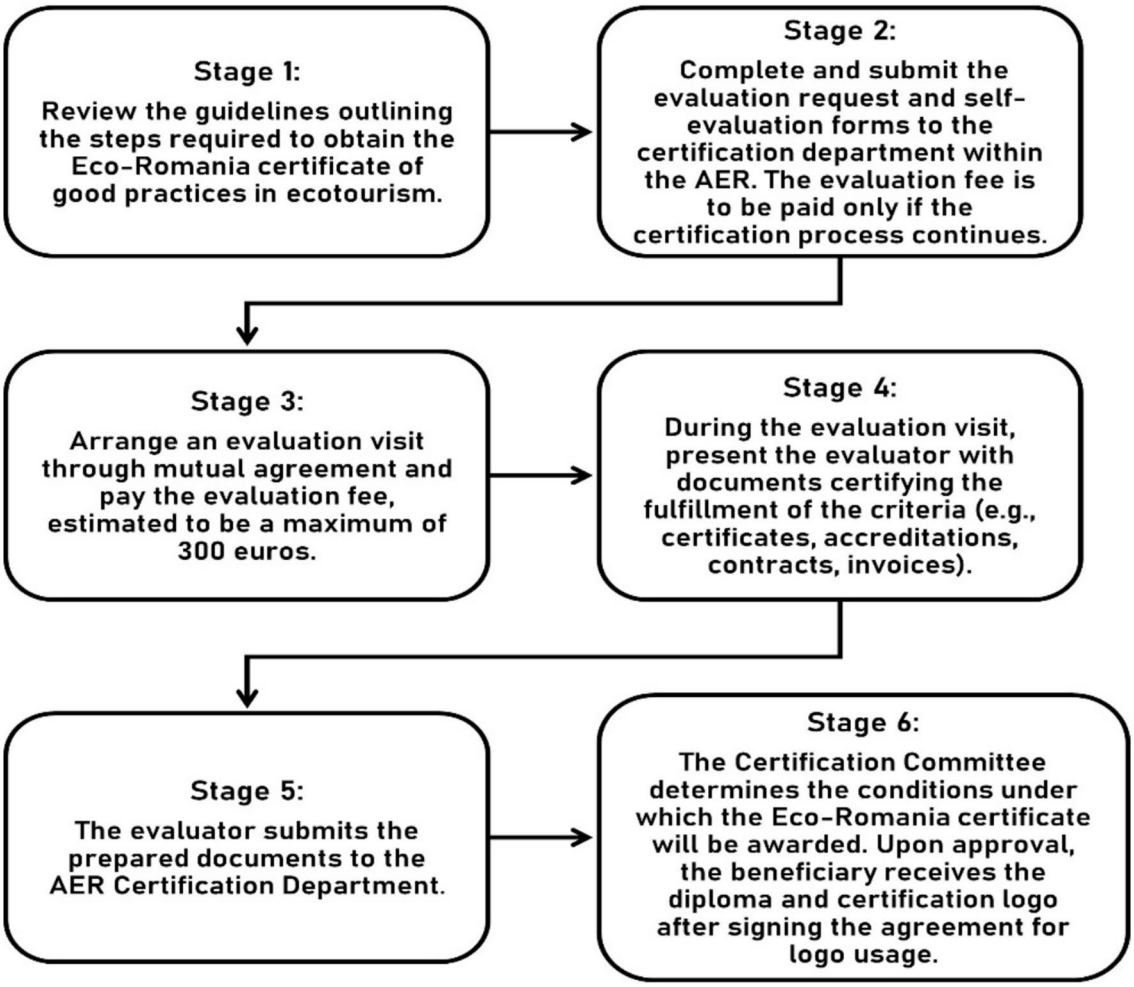

Fig. 2 Ecotourism destination certification process followed by Vama Buzăului (AER, 2020)

information sources. The second section assessed visitors' familiarity with and attitudes toward ecotourism using the Ecotourist Predisposition Scale (EPS) (Nowaczek & Smale 2009). The EPS identifies visitor dispositions across six dimensions which are ethics, education, culture, nature, specialization, and contribution. The scale underwent pre-testing and rigorous reliability and construct validity testing for each dimension. This study adapted the EPS to develop a research instrument with seven statements tailored to the study's context.

The third section examined visitor knowledge of Vama Buzăului's certification status, information sources, and the likelihood of recommendation to other visitors. Closed-ended questions employed a 5-point Likert Scale for precision. The questionnaire (see Appendix) was administered to 169 visitors using simple random sampling, ensuring voluntary participation. Data were collected from August 2 to 23, 2023 covering weekdays and weekends. Questionnaires were not administered in accommodation units, gastrolocal points, or during events to prevent data alteration.

A sample of 169 respondents provides meaningful insights into visitor attitudes at Vama Buzăului, particularly given its modest visitor volume and niche status as a certified ecotourism destination. Nonetheless, caution is warranted when interpreting the findings. While 169 respondents constitute a practical sample, it remains limited to broad generalization. Moreover, data collection was confined to specific locations and times, excluding accommodation units and events, potentially underrepresenting certain visitor segments. Despite these constraints, the sample is sufficient for preliminary exploring demographic and attitudinal patterns in a niche ecotourism context. Future research should consider larger and more temporally diverse samples to enhance the reliability and generalizability of the results.

Data analysis was performed using multivariate analysis in IBM SPSS version 28.0. Cross-tabulations and statistical tests such as Pearson Chi-Square, Likelihood Ratio,

Linear-by-Linear Association, and KMO Bartlett's tests were applied. A KMO value exceeding 0.5 justified factor analysis (Hair, et al., 2013). Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was employed to identify the underlying dimensions of the seven ecotourism attitude statements. Cluster analysis (K-Means clustering) was conducted based on the visitors' responses to the attitude statements.

3 Results

3.1 Visitor characteristics

The survey, with 169 responses, delineated several visitor characteristics. Table 1 provides a detailed overview of visitor characteristics. Table 2 represents the activities

Table 2 Activities performed (multiple choice) by the 169 visitors involved in the study

Activity	Number of visitors	% of visitors involved
Connecting with nature	141	83.5
Exploring a new place	105	62.0
Hiking	102	60.5
Camping	73	43.0
Visiting cultural attractions	70	41.5
Fishing	60	35.5
Biking	26	15.5
Participating in local festivals	14	8.0
Other activities	14	8.5

Table 1 Characteristics of the 169 visitors involved in the study on perception of ecotourism; for the "source of ecotourism certification information," the sample size was 74*

Category	Subcategory	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	52.1
	Male	47.9
Age (years)	14–24	3.0
	25–35	33.7
	36–50	33.7
	51–65	22.5
	Over 65	7.1
Education	Elementary education	1.2
	High school graduates	18.3
	Undergraduate degrees	59.8
	Graduate degrees	20.7
Nationality	Domestic (Romanian)	88
	International	12
Group type	Family	80
	Hiking groups	20
Group size	Range (2–16 individuals)	Average: 5
Trip duration	Average duration	3 days
Source of destination information	Friends	59
	Social media	32
	Flyers and travel books	3.5
	Radio, TV	0.6
	Other	4.4
Visit frequency	First-time visitors	68
	Repeat visitors	32
Awareness of ecotourism certification	Aware	43.8
	Not aware	56.2
Source of ecotourism certification information	Local signs	40.5
	Internet	36.5
	Other sources	4.7
	Social media	1.2
	Not specified	9.5

*Note: Sample size is 74 for 'source of ecotourism certification' because only 74 respondents were aware of the certification

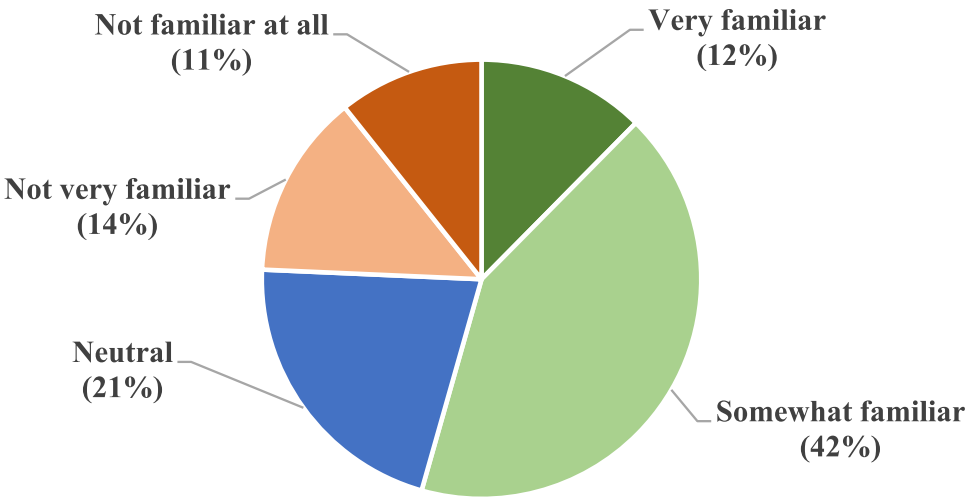

Fig. 3 The familiarity of respondents with the concept of ecotourism ($n = 169$)

performed by the visitors. Figure 3 represents the visitor's level of familiarity with the concept of ecotourism.

3.2 Ecotourism attitudes and relationship with visitor characteristics

Visitor's attitudes toward ecotourism were measured using 7 statements. Responses to those statements were recorded on a Likert scale (Table 3).

KMO test revealed measure of sampling adequacy of 0.720. PCA identified two components with eigenvalues greater than 1, indicating that the seven statements measured two distinct factors. Varimax rotation clarified that Factor 1 was measured by statements 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7, while Factor 2 was measured by statements 3 and 4. Factor 1 emphasizes on ecotourism's role in conserving natural resources, protecting wildlife and habitats, fostering environmental awareness, and influencing visitors to choose and pay for eco-certified destinations. Factor 2 emphasizes on ecotourism's contribution to the local community's economic benefits and the preservation of cultural traditions.

K-means clustering resulted in two distinct clusters. Cluster 1, comprising 106 respondents (62.7% of 169), is characterized by negative z-scores across all statements. This indicates that respondents in this cluster predominantly chose the lower end of the Likert scale, specifically "Strongly Agree" and "Agree," reflecting stronger agreement and more positive evaluations of the ecotourism attitudinal statements. Cluster 2, comprising 63 respondents (37.3% of 169), is characterized by positive z-scores across all statements. This indicates that respondents in this cluster predominantly chose the upper end of the Likert scale, specifically "Neutral," "Disagree," and "Strongly Disagree,"

Table 3 Visitors ($n = 169$) response to attitude statements recorded on a Likert scale (in brackets number of visitors; highest percentages in bold)

Statement	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)	Mean
1. Ecotourism destinations contribute positively to the conservation of natural resources	**71 (120)**	27.2 (46)	1.8 (3)	0	0	1.31
2. Ecotourism supports the protection of wildlife and their habitats	**69.8 (118)**	26.6 (45)	3.6 (6)	0	0	1.34
3. Local communities benefit economically from ecotourism activities	**58.6 (99)**	33.1 (56)	7.7 (13)	0.6 (1)	0	1.50
4. Ecotourism destinations prioritize the preservation of cultural heritage and local traditions	**54.4 (92)**	36.1 (61)	9.5 (16)	0	0	1.55
5. Ecotourism fosters environmental education and awareness among visitors	27.8 (47)	**41.4 (70)**	27.8 (47)	3% (5)	0	2.06
6. I am willing to pay a premium for ecotourism experiences that align with sustainable practices	5.9 (10)	27.8 (47)	**29 (49)**	26.6 (45)	10.7 (18)	3.08
7. I actively seek eco-certified accommodations when visiting ecotourism destinations	2.4 (4)	7.1 (12)	**47.3 (80)**	36.1 (61)	7.1 (12)	3.38

reflecting comparatively more critical or less positive evaluations of the ecotourism attitudinal statements.

The relationship of the investigated visitor characteristics is carried out with a focus on their correlation with cluster membership. Results showed no statistically significant relationship between cluster membership and visitor characteristics, except for familiarity with the concept of ecotourism ($p = 0.16$) and source of destination information ($p = 0.27$). However, cluster membership revealed some notable insights. Cluster 1 had a higher proportion of female respondents (69.3%) than Cluster 2 and included 71% of individuals aged 21–35. In terms of education, Cluster 1 comprised 67.3% of respondents with Bachelor's degrees and 62.8% with graduate degrees. Furthermore, Cluster 1 contained 90.4% of respondents who were very familiar with the concept of ecotourism and 63.3% who were moderately familiar. In contrast, 68.4% of respondents unaware of certification were in Cluster 2, including all respondents whose information sources were flyers and travel books and 69.5% of all first-time visitors.

3.3 Ecotourism certification awareness and familiarity with the concept of ecotourism

Table 4 illustrates the relationship between "Certification Awareness" and "Familiarity with Ecotourism," showing the distribution of individuals across different familiarity levels based on their certification awareness.

Table 5 presents the Chi-Square tests, including Pearson Chi-Square, Likelihood Ratio, and Linear-by-Linear Association. All tests yield statistically significant results with p values less than 0.001, indicating a strong association between certification awareness and familiarity with ecotourism.

4 Discussion

The demographic analysis indicates a slightly higher proportion of female respondents (52.1%) than males (47.9%). Most respondents were between 25 and 50 years old, and most (59.8%) possessed an undergraduate degree. Notably, 80.1% of respondents visited as family groups, highlighting Vama Buzăului's appeal as a family destination, which can be crucial for developing targeted programs and marketing strategies. Among the visitors, 43.8% were aware of the certification status, with the majority (40.5%) gaining this knowledge from on-site local signs. This highlights the effectiveness of on-site signage in fostering visitor awareness and education. The most common activity reported was connecting with nature (83.5%), emphasizing the role of TMCLs in facilitating nature engagement. Further analysis reveals that females, younger visitors, and individuals with higher educational backgrounds are more likely to be aware of and have positive attitudes toward ecotourism. These trends align with existing environmental research, demonstrating that education and age significantly influence environmental awareness and pro-environmental behavior (Konalingam, et al. 2024; Mi, et al. 2024; Bülbül, et al. 2020). Similarly, research has shown that higher educational attainment correlates with increased environmental knowledge and positive environmental attitudes (Wang, et al. 2022). For example, a study (Gao, et al., 2024) examining the impact of environmental education on tourists' responsible behaviors found that individuals with higher education levels exhibit greater environmental awareness and proactive behaviors, highlighting the strong link between education and environmental engagement. These findings underscore the importance of educational initiatives such as UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) initiative

Table 4 Crosstab of certification awareness and familiarity with ecotourism ($n = 169$)

		Very familiar	Somewhat familiar	Neutral	Not very familiar	Not familiar at all	Total
Certification awareness	Yes	17	35	11	7	4	74
	No	4	36	25	16	14	95
	Total	21	71	36	23	18	169

Table 5 Chi-Square test for statistical relationship (sig. = significance) between certification awareness and familiarity with ecotourism, with the number of valid cases = 169

Value		Asymptomatic Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	20.287	< 0.001	< 0.001
Likelihood Ratio	21.152	< 0.001	< 0.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	15.989	< 0.001	< 0.001

and targeted awareness campaigns in enhancing ecotourism participation and supporting sustainable practices. They highlight the critical role of demographic factors in shaping environmental engagement, suggesting that strategies to increase ecotourism participation should consider these demographic influences.

The findings provide significant insights into the relationship between visitors' familiarity with the concept of ecotourism and their awareness of certification status within the context of TMCLs like Vama Buzăului. The positive correlation identified via Chi-Square rejects the null hypothesis accepting the alternate hypothesis suggesting a strong association between certification awareness and familiarity with ecotourism. The Linear-by-Linear Association test further emphasizes the significant linear trend in the association, i.e., as certification awareness increases or decreases, there is a corresponding linear increase or decrease in familiarity with ecotourism. This correlation emphasizes the importance of visitor knowledge and understanding in promoting and sustaining ecotourism practices within TMCLs. Additionally, the association highlights the role of certifications in enhancing the credibility and attractiveness of ecotourism destinations consistent with previous studies (Bien 2006; Honey 2008; Buckley 2012). Certification is not an ultimate goal; rather, it is a tool to motivate businesses and other entities to enhance their environmental, social, and economic performance. As a reciprocal outcome, certified entities accrue both tangible and intangible benefits. For example, certification can offer marketing advantages to the certified party, simultaneously informing visitors of the environmental and social issues associated with the destination. Addressing visitors with low familiarity requires alternative strategies beyond highlighting certification credentials. Emphasizing tangible benefits such as unique cultural immersion opportunities, authentic local experiences, and family-friendly outdoor activities can better resonate with audiences who do not prioritize sustainability labels. Storytelling approaches in marketing campaigns, social media influencers' involvement, and on-site interactive exhibits can also foster curiosity and engagement. Furthermore, partnerships with local businesses to offer bundled experiences (e.g., combining nature exploration with regional gastronomy or cultural tours or visitors harvesting products like herbs and mushrooms to be included in traditional meals) can demonstrate immediate value to travelers, helping to spark initial interest in ecotourism's broader sustainability goals without requiring a preexisting inclination toward eco-certified destinations.

Cluster analysis identifies two distinct visitor groups with varying levels of agreement toward ecotourism statements. Cluster 1, with stronger positive evaluations, predominantly consists of younger, well-educated females. This suggests that targeted marketing strategies could strategically leverage this demographic's propensity for ecotourism engagement, attracting them to lesser-visited areas seeking tourism development. In contrast, Cluster 2, characterized by more critical evaluations, can help delineate areas where visitor education and engagement can be enhanced to foster more favorable attitudes toward ecotourism across TMCLs. The results indicate the need for a proactive and information-based approach to visitor education and engagement. Effective information dissemination is crucial, with social media and local signage emerging as important sources for visitors aware of certification status. Enhancing visibility through these channels could improve overall awareness and support for certification initiatives. Among the respondents, only 12% were international visitors and represented six countries, with 60% receiving destination information through friends and 90% aware of the ecotourism certification, primarily via the internet (78%). The effectiveness of both traditional (word-of-mouth) and modern (internet) information sources underscores the need for a multifaceted communication strategy in TMCLs.

From a practical standpoint, the results indicate that enhancing visitor education about ecotourism could further bolster the recognition and success of certified TMCLs like Vama Buzăului. For instance, the study of Šimková et al. (2024) on eco-certification shows that well-designed certification programs can increase visitors' awareness of environmental issues and positively influence their decision-making process. Visitor education could be improved through targeted marketing strategies, informational campaigns, and on-site educational programs emphasizing the benefits and importance of ecotourism certification. For example, research shows that visitors who receive on-site educational content are more likely to engage in sustainable behaviors and also foster a deeper commitment to environmental stewardship (Iakovoglou, et al., 2015). Implementing policies that foster visitor awareness and education can contribute to the sustainable development and conservation goals of TMCLs.

While the study offers valuable insights, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. The reliance on self-reported data can introduce biases such as all respondents indicating a high likelihood of recommending the destination, with only 1.9% reporting neutrality. This may be influenced by the lack of anonymity in responses, particularly given the high percentage of domestic visitors. This limitation was due to practical constraints related to accessibility to anonymous survey instruments at the destination.

5 Conclusion

This study provides a foundational understanding of ecotourism dynamics within TMCLs while laying the groundwork for future research into the intricate

relationship between (eco) tourism and these ecologically and culturally significant areas. It addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining the role of ecotourism certification and its impact on ecotourism awareness and engagement in TMCLs. The findings indicate that certification can significantly enhance ecotourism development in these regions and statistically show that increased awareness and understanding of ecotourism amplify the certification's effectiveness.

The research highlights the necessity of targeted educational and marketing strategies to decentralize the flow of visitors from overburdened hotspots and direct them toward touristically lesser-developed but eager destinations. It underscores the pivotal role of on-site signage in raising visitor awareness about ecotourism certification, demonstrating that effective information dissemination at the destination is crucial for promoting ecotourism in TMCLs. This insight fills a literature gap concerning the efficacy of on-site educational tools in advancing ecotourism in TMCLs. Future research should utilize more extensive and diverse samples, incorporating longitudinal data to extend the findings and evaluate the ongoing impacts of certification programs over extended periods. This would provide deeper insights into the sustainability and efficacy of such programs. Building on the current study, future investigations could experimentally evaluate the relative effectiveness of various educational strategies, such as on-site programs, digital campaigns, and interactive exhibits, in enhancing awareness and fostering pro-environmental behavior among visitors, specifically for TMCLs.

Additionally, employing survey tools that ensure anonymity could improve data reliability. Comparative studies across different TMCLs and ecotourism destinations would broaden the understanding of factors influencing certification awareness and the effectiveness of promotional strategies. Examining the long-term effects of certification on ecological conservation and local community well-being would also be a valuable area of inquiry.

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Data availability No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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4. Ecotourism in Traditional Cultural Landscapes: A Regenerative Lens on Stakeholder Perspectives in Vama Buzăului, Romania

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Ecotourism in Traditional Cultural Landscapes: A Regenerative Lens on Stakeholder Perspectives in Vama Buzăului, Romania

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Abstract

Traditional Multifunctional Cultural Landscapes (TMCLs) are coupled socio-ecological systems in which cultural heritage, land-use practices, and ecological functions co-exist and are co-produced. Ecotourism has increasingly been promoted as a tool for sustainable development in TMCLs, yet little empirical evidence exists on how local stakeholders perceive its impacts. This study explores stakeholder perspectives on ecotourism development in Vama Buzăului, Romania an eco-certified destination, and explores its implications through regenerative tourism lens. Semi-structured interviews with twelve diverse stakeholders provided insights into socio-cultural, economic, environmental, youth outmigration and governance-related impacts. The findings reveal that stakeholders associated ecotourism with socio-cultural revitalization (community pride, festivals, gastrolocal identity) but also raised concerns regarding crowding and cultural commodification. Economic perceptions emphasized new livelihood opportunities, indirect value-chain benefits for non-tourism actors, and improved infrastructure, alongside concerns about unequal benefit distribution and rising land prices. Environmental perceptions were ambivalent: stakeholders noted improved waste management and conservation initiatives (e.g., the bison reserve) while also highlighting litter, traffic congestion, and reduced communal grazing areas. Respondents further linked ecotourism to youth retention and land re-use, though outsider investment was perceived as a potential pressure on traditional land-use patterns. Finally, local government was viewed as a key enabler through administrative support and small-scale infrastructure development, while direct financial support was considered insufficient and future needs included diversified attractions, micro-loans, and capacity building. Interpreted through a regenerative lens, these outcomes demonstrate how ecotourism in TMCLs can move beyond sustaining existing systems to actively enhancing cultural vitality, community resilience, and ecosystem health. The study highlights the pivotal role of participatory governance and local government in enabling regenerative pathways, emphasizing inclusive planning, equitable benefit-sharing, and long-term policy support. Overall, Vama Buzăului provides an illustrative case of how TMCLs can serve as real life laboratories for regenerative rural development, offering lessons for destinations seeking to align ecotourism with holistic development while avoiding unidimensional growth-driven, unsustainable ecotourism models.

Keywords Traditional Multifunctional Cultural Landscapes (TMCLs) · Ecotourism · Regenerative tourism · Stakeholder perceptions · Eco-certified destination

Introduction

Traditional cultural landscapes are dynamic socio-ecological systems that often bear a high degree of cultural and natural heritage (Aplin, 2007) and thus represent the confluence of tradition and nature, encompassing both tangible and intangible heritage (Pătru-Stupariu, et al., 2019). These cultural landscapes often exhibit multifunctionality in its environmental, social and economic dimensions and are referred to as Traditional Multifunctional Cultural Landscapes (TMCLs) (Zerbe, 2022).

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'Tradition' in this context, encompasses elements such as land-use practices, architectural styles, governance structures, customs that collectively uphold cultural values being passed from generation to generation (Zerbe, 2022). Multifunctionality in this context does not merely mean that "more than one activity occurs" in a landscape. Rather, multifunctionality as an analytical concept implies the intentional or demonstrable co-existence and co-production of multiple bundles of functions at the landscape scale, instead of the dominance of a single primary function that suppresses or externalizes others (Zerbe, 2024). In the specific context of TMCLs, "multifunctional" denotes the simultaneous delivery of ecological, social/cultural, and economic functions/services rooted in long-standing land-use practices and governance/meaning systems. This is often best captured through a landscape-services framing, which explicitly integrates biophysical functions with cultural values and institutions and allows assessing synergies and trade-offs within one place-based system (Termorshuizen & Opdam, 2009; Vallés-Planells, et al., 2014). Not all landscapes are meaningfully multifunctional; in TMCLs, multifunctionality is maintained through long-standing stewardship practices and institutions that can unravel when a single use becomes dominant or when local capabilities decline. These landscapes, shaped over centuries, millennia, are not static instead they continually evolve, serving as repositories of collective memories, identities, and social cohesion (Zerbe, 2025). These collective memories include historical events, traditional practices, and cultural rituals. The identities they preserve are those of the communities that have inhabited and shaped these landscapes over generations. The social cohesion they foster is evident in the shared values, norms, and customs that bind these communities together. TMCLs provide critical insights into holistic development illustrating how cultural continuity can persist despite ongoing environmental and societal changes (Joshi, et al., 2023). They reflect the intricate balance between human activity and ecological stewardship and provide valuable models of holistic development.

Tourism has a reciprocal and complex interrelationship with the environment, relying heavily on natural and cultural resources. Hereby, ecotourism is becoming of increasing interest worldwide to cope with environmental challenges and socio-economic transformations, especially in rural areas (Buckley, 2012; Joshi, et al., 2025). Ecotourism emerged as a segment of alternative tourism development during the 1980s, driven by the perception that modern mass tourism practices were deleterious to host destinations (Koens, et al., 2009; Wondirad, et al., 2020; Mondino & Beery, 2019). The Global Ecotourism Network defines ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains local well-being, and fosters knowledge and understanding through education (Global Ecotourism Network, 2016). Ecotourism, a niche within tourism, has core objectives of preserving natural and cultural capital, supporting local rural development and promoting knowledge dissemination (Fang, 2020).The emergence of ecotourism marked a shift towards more sustainable tourism practices. As a multifaceted strategy, ecotourism prioritizes sustainable enjoyment of natural and cultural landscapes, potentially contributing to biodiversity conservation and restoration as well as community involvement in planning and cultural exchange (Mckercher, 2010; Walter, 2013; Jamaliah & Powell, 2018) (Mckercher, 2010; Walter, 2013; Jamaliah & Powell, 2018).

Although often conflated with "sustainable", "responsible", "nature", "green" or "low-impact" tourism, it is crucial to conceptualize ecotourism as a distinct category within the broader tourism spectrum (Honey, 2008). In practice, this distinction is frequently operationalized through credible certification and standards that codify environmental, socio-cultural, and economic requirements and thereby help reduce "greenwashing" and ambiguity (Buckley, 2012; Font & McCabe, 2017). In the present case, ecotourism is not used only as an abstract concept but is also institutionally defined; Vama Buzăului is an eco-certified ecotourism destination within Romania's national Eco-Romania framework administered by the Association of Ecotourism in Romania (AER, 2023) (further site details are in Section 2.1).

Beyond sustainability-oriented framings, regenerative tourism has emerged as a perspective that emphasizes place-based renewal and net-positive socio-ecological outcomes rather than only mitigating harms (Pollock, 2020; Bellato, et al., 2022; Smithwick, et al., 2023). Regenerative tourism is increasingly discussed as a paradigm that moves beyond impact-mitigation logics by positioning tourism as a place-based, living-system endeavor that seeks to enhance the regenerative capacity of coupled human–nature systems and generate net-positive outcomes over time. However, regenerative tourism does not yet have a single universal definition; rather, recent syntheses show that it is best understood through a set of conceptual pillars that recur across the literature, most notably community-centrism, an ecological worldview and living-systems thinking, meaningful multi-stakeholder collaboration, and an explicit orientation toward net positive effects (Iddawala & Lee, 2025). In this article, we therefore employ regenerative tourism not as a second descriptive framework parallel to sustainability, but as an interpretive lens that guides how stakeholder-reported changes are understood. While results are presented using the familiar socio-cultural, economic and environmental categories for transparency and comparability it should be noted that regenerative tourism is not a standalone concept rather it

builds upon the concept of sustainability (Mang & Reed, 2012). Within TMCLs, a regenerative lens is analytically useful because it foregrounds whether ecotourism is perceived to strengthen local stewardship, cultural vitality, and community capability to sustain multifunctionality over time rather than producing only incremental improvements. In this study, regenerative tourism is therefore used as an interpretive lens for stakeholder reported impacts and governance constraints without expanding into a separate conceptual treatise.

Several studies have acknowledged the potential of ecotourism to facilitate the sustainable development of rural destinations (Doan, 2010; Ressurreiç, et al., 2022; Anindhita, et al., 2024). A substantial body of research examines resident attitudes and stakeholder perceptions of tourism and ecotourism impacts in rural destinations. However, TMCL-specific evidence that foregrounds how stakeholders interpret ecotourism trade-offs, governance realities, and multifunctionality dynamics that is explicitly interpreted through a regenerative lens remains comparatively limited. For instance, a recent systematic review (Joshi, et al., 2023), of rural tourism in European TMCLs indicates that research in this domain is still at an early stage and highlights a limited, sparse focus on local stakeholder perceptions within the existing literature suggesting the need for more empirical work on local stakeholder perspectives in TMCL ecotourism contexts.

The study of Vama Buzăului, a TMCL presents a unique opportunity to fill the stated research gaps. The local stakeholders' perspectives in such a setting are crucial for understanding the real-world impacts of ecotourism on TMCLs, particularly regarding environmental, cultural, and socio-economic outcomes. Here, stakeholders are understood as the local community and the two terms are used interchangeably. This is because ecotourism activities unfold within a shared socio-spatial setting in which community members live and work, consequently, all local residents regardless of whether they are directly engaged in ecotourism economically are implicated in its impacts and outcomes and therefore constitute stakeholders.

Additionally, by examining the role of ecotourism in mitigating land abandonment and outward migration, this study offers practical insights that could inform policy and planning in similar rural TMCLs across Europe and beyond. The research emphasizes the need for inclusive and participatory approaches in developing ecotourism strategies by highlighting the importance of local stakeholder perspectives. It underscores the potential of TMCLs to serve as models for holistic development, where cultural heritage and nature conservation are harmoniously integrated within the socio-economic fabric of local communities. The main aim of this empirical study is to address these gaps by providing an in-depth analysis of local stakeholders' perceptions regarding ecotourism's role in the development trajectory of the TMCL.

The specific objectives are:

a. To assess the perceptions of local stakeholders concerning ecotourism's impacts (both positive and negative) on the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions of the TMCL.
b. To evaluate the role of ecotourism in addressing the issue of land abandonment and outward migration in the TMCL.
c. To analyze how ecotourism benefits stakeholders not directly involved in the tourism sector.
d. To analyze the local stakeholder's perception of the local government's role in ecotourism development and identify local perspectives of future requirements for ecotourism development.

Based on our study, we interpret the results through the lens of regenerative tourism, examining whether ecotourism in TMCLS actively revitalizes cultural, ecological and socio-ecological systems.

Materials and methods

Study area

Vama Buzăului, Brașov County in Romania Situated 45 km southeast of Brașov, Vama Buzăului is an eco-certified destination, one of only eight in Romania (AER, 2023) (AER, 2023). Figure 1 shows the location map of the study area. Figure 2 shows the eco-certification process. Vama Buzăului is characterized by a temperate continental climate with distinct seasonal variations. It experiences warm summers and cold, snowy winters, with an average annual temperature ranging between 8–10 °C. Precipitation is well-distributed throughout the year, with a slight increase during the summer months, supporting the region's lush vegetation. The landscape is marked by a mosaic of temperate deciduous and coniferous forests (Stăncioiu, et al., 2018). Historically, Vama Buzăului served as a strategic border between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Kingdom of Romania, a role that has influenced its cultural identity. The destination's name, "Vama," meaning "customs" or "border" in Romanian, and 'Buzau' is the name of the river flowing through the border, symbolizing the intersection of natural and cultural elements in the area. The village's rich history is reflected in the amalgamation of various villages and the formation of collective communes, each shaped by unique land-use practices, governance systems, and customs, which together enrich the region's cultural heritage (VBTIC, 2023).

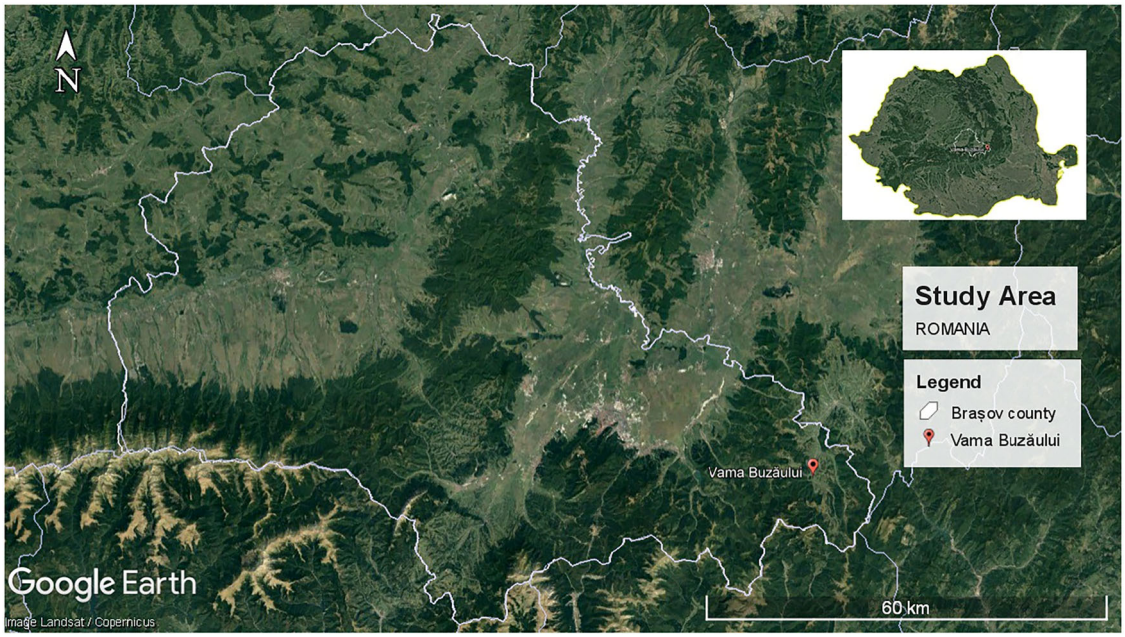

Fig. 1 Vama Buzăului, Brasov County, Romania (Google Earth, 2025)

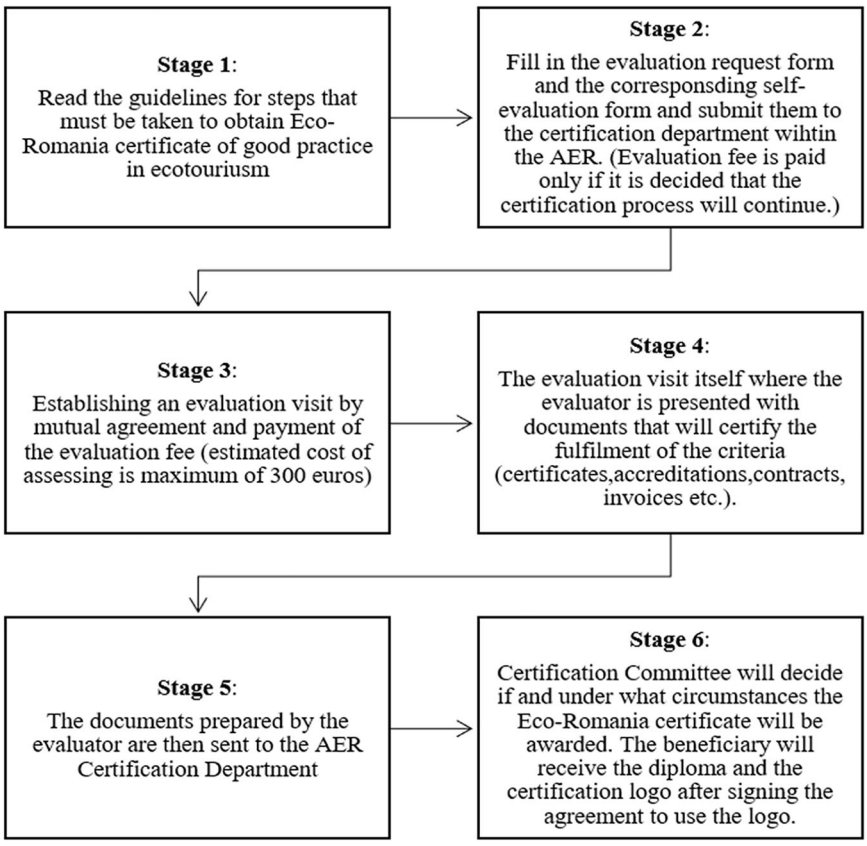

Fig. 2 Eco-certification process of Vama Buzăului (AER, 2023)

The community of Vama Buzăului exhibits a strong sense of social cohesion deeply rooted in its traditions and cultural practices. The village is renowned for its customary fairs, folkloric exhibitions, and performances that highlight traditional crafts and local products. Annual events like "Fiii Satului," "Festivalul Gospodarul Vămășan," and "Vama de la Munte" serve as vital platforms for showcasing and integrating the region's tangible and intangible cultural

Table 1 Multifunctionality of the village of Vama Buzăului, Romania based on the environmental, social, and economic dimension

Dimension	Parameters	Examples in Vama Buzăului
Environmental	Habitat, biodiversity & agrobiodiversity functions; ecosystem services (regulating, provisioning, cultural), protected areas, landscape aesthetics, environmental quality as a basis for ecotourism.	Bison Valley Reserve for rewilding and conservation, improved waste management, preserved natural landscapes offering ecological functions and recreational opportunities.
Social	Cultural heritage & identity, community cohesion, preservation of local traditions, social and cultural services, learning/interpretation and cultural exchange.	Revitalized local traditions through festivals (e.g., Folk festival 'Vama de la Mute'), the gastrolocal movement reinforcing culinary heritage; active community participation, community pride and recurring local festivals.
Economic	Local employment, livelihood diversification, infrastructure development (transport, connectivity, utilities), growth local value chains through local markets and entrepreneurial activities.	Creation of ecotourism-related jobs, increased economic opportunities, upgraded roads and enhanced public services that support local commerce and visitation.

Multifunctionality is used analytically to denote the demonstrable co-existence and co-production of multiple function bundles at landscape scale, not merely 'more than one use'. This table provides a descriptive baseline of the co-existing function bundles observed/characteristic in Vama Buzăului as a TMCL system, to support interpretation of stakeholder perceptions and trade-offs

heritage. Vama Buzăului is also the birthplace of Romania's 'Gastrolocal' movement, where visitors can enjoy traditional dishes made from locally sourced ingredients, with at least 70% of the food produced by local land users (Lingu, 2023). In terms of environmental stewardship, Vama Buzăului is committed to conserving biodiversity, as demonstrated by the establishment of the Bison Valley Reserve in 2008. This reserve is dedicated to preserving and rewilding a sub-population of the European Bison (*Bison bonasus* L.), strengthening the region's ecological integrity and enhancing the cultural and socio-economic aspects of the local communities. This initiative aligns proficiently with TMCL principles, where the interplay between natural and cultural elements is crucial (VBTIC, 2023). Table 1 represents the multifunctionality of Vama Buzăului based on its environmental, social and economic dimensions.

Methods

This study utilizes a qualitative research methodology to examine local stakeholders' perspectives regarding ecotourism in TMCLs. The qualitative approach comprehensively explores stakeholders' subjective experiences, interpretations, and nuanced perceptions within their sociocultural contexts.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with twelve stakeholders from Vama Buzăului. In order to ensure participant anonymity and minimize bias, numerical identifiers were assigned to the participants, and all personal identifying details, such as names, ages, and genders, were excluded from the analysis and presentation of results. Table 2 shows the IDs assigned to the interviewees and their link with ecotourism.

Participants were selected via purposive sampling, a non-probability method allowing researcher discretion to include individuals deemed most relevant to the study objectives (Quinlan, et al., 2018) (Quinlan, et al., 2018). A comprehensive sample was taken to reflect the range of perspectives within the community, including both individuals directly engaged in ecotourism activities (such as entrepreneurs, administrative representatives, and those involved with conservation or gastrolocal initiatives) as well as those indirectly connected (residents). This ensured that the analysis captured a multifaceted representation of stakeholder experiences and perceptions relevant to ecotourism development in the TMCL. Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze and report patterns within the interview transcripts, following a six-phase framework outlined by (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). It includes becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing up the findings (p. 3354). This method is selected for its wide use and systematic strengths in exploring the depth and

Table 2 Interviewee IDs and link with ecotourism

Interviewee ID	Ecotourism link	Comment
IV1	Indirect	Resident
IV2	Direct	Accommodation owner
IV3	Direct	Gastrolocal owner
IV4	Indirect	Resident
IV5	Indirect	Resident
IV6	Direct	Administrative
IV7	Direct	Alternative form of accommodation
IV8	Indirect	Resident
IV9	Direct	Accommodation owner
IV10	Indirect	Resident
IV11	Indirect	Resident
IV12	Direct	Administrative

Interviews aimed to capture diverse viewpoints on ecotourism and its impacts in the TMCL context of Vama Buzăului. Conducted in Romanian language with the support of co-authors, interviews ensured clarity and authenticity. Transcripts were translated verbatim into English to maintain accuracy and preserve original meanings and contexts. Verbal consent was obtained from participants prior to commencing and recording interviews

structure of the data. The thematic analysis was performed using f4analyse software.

Themes were derived based on predetermined research objectives, with the data systematically indexed according to this framework to enable structured comparisons across stakeholder perspectives. The indexed data was organized into a matrix, where rows represented stakeholders and columns represented themes, facilitating identification and synthesis of patterns and divergences. The final analysis stage involved mapping and interpreting the data to elucidate key dimensions of the data. The themes were explicitly linked to the research objectives through interpretative mapping. This stage provided comprehensive insights, linking identified themes to our research objectives, broader theoretical and empirical contexts. This systematic, structured methodology ensures a rigorous and comprehensive analysis, highlighting recurring themes and contributing to a deeper understanding of stakeholder perceptions.

Results

The analysis of interview transcripts based on the objectives resulted in the identification and extraction of five thematic areas, which are the positive and negative impacts of ecotourism on the socio-cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions of the site, the role of ecotourism in addressing land abandonment and outward migration, perceived benefits for stakeholders not directly involved in ecotourism, the role of the local government in ecotourism development and stakeholders perspectives of future requirements for ecotourism development. The extracted themes are summarized in Table 3. Each theme is then discussed in detail below and the results are interpreted with respect to the conceptualization Vama Buzăului as a TMCL.

Since, interviewees sometimes used 'tourism' colloquially to denote ecotourism, our interpretation focuses on the eco-certified ecotourism initiative as the institutional object of analysis while acknowledging that some pressures (e.g., traffic/crowding) may reflect broader visitation dynamics. While many of these impact categories are widely reported in tourism–community research (e.g., sustainability–resilience and community livability lenses), TMCL-specific evidence interpreted through a regenerative lens remains limited, which is where our contribution lies (Giang & Caldicott, 2022; Muschter, et al., 2021).

Local Stakeholder Perceptions on Ecotourism's Impacts (Positive and Negative)

Socio-Cultural Impacts

Community members in Vama Buzăului generally viewed the influx of visitors positively for its social and cultural benefits. Several interviewees expressed that tourism has permeated new energy into local traditions and festivals. *"It's nice to see new faces and know that people appreciate our town,"* mentioned one interviewee (IV1), noting that events like the annual folk music festival "Vama de la Munte" attracted unprecedented attendance from tourists, especially after the COVID pandemic. This increased external interest was perceived to bolster local pride and encourage the preservation of cultural heritage. For example, an interviewee (IV3) mentioned *"For me it is not a job, I am neither a chef, nor a waiter, nor a patron, I am a host. This is how I see the concept* [of ecotourism] *and I do it with passion and pride"* suggesting that what was once everyday life is now recognized as something of value. Another interviewee (IV12) also emphasized the positive recognition of local traditions: *"I love that our traditions are being noticed."* Similarly, another interviewee (IV5) added, "*People come from far, as far as Bucharest on weekends to enjoy our traditional food & recipes."* Some stakeholders also credited tourism with fostering social cohesion, as neighbors collaborate to host visitors and share advice. One interviewee (IV4) mentioned that ecotourism has *"connected us as a community because I see that people help each other and ask for advice* […] *this brings added value to our community."* These accounts indicate a sense of empowerment and validation of local culture through tourism engagement. However, a few stakeholders voiced concerns about potential socio-cultural downsides. The

Table 3 Key themes from the thematic analysis

Theme	Positive Outcomes	Challenges/Concerns
Socio-cultural impacts	Enhanced community pride and revitalized traditions. Increased cultural exchange and social cohesion.	Risk of cultural commodification. Disruptions due to overcrowding.
Economic impacts	Growth of local businesses and job creation. Improved incomes and upgraded infrastructure.	Rising land prices. Unequal benefit distribution among community members.
Environmental impacts	Improved waste management and environmental awareness. Successful conservation initiatives (e.g., Bison Reserve).	Increased litter and traffic congestion. Reduced communal grazing areas.
Land abandonment and outward migration	Incentivizes youth retention. Repurposes idle land for ecotourism ventures.	Potential alteration of traditional land-use patterns by outsider investments.
Benefits to non-tourism stakeholders	Indirect benefits through improved public infrastructure and expanded market opportunities.	Perceived marginalization of those not directly involved in ecotourism. Increased cost of living and property prices.
Role of local government	Effective administrative support and infrastructural investments. Facilitation of bureaucratic processes.	Insufficient direct financial support. Need for enhanced management of ecotourism related impacts.
Future requirements	Demand for diversified attractions. Need for financial incentives such as micro-loans and capacity-building.	Concerns about preserving cultural authenticity amid ecotourism expansion.

most commonly cited issue was the inconvenience caused by crowding during peak tourist visit times like weekends. *"Sometimes there can be a lot of tourists and it's hard to go about our day* […] *running into crowds everywhere,"* mentioned one interviewee (IV1), illustrating how an influx of visitors can disrupt daily routines. Another interviewee (IV5) worried that cultural authenticity might be compromised as traditions become commodified for tourist consumption. *"Sometimes I feel like our culture is being sold as tourist attractions,"* they noted, *"but it is the way of the world."* Similarly, another interviewee (IV2) also observed that crowding effects community members, *"those who are not in charge of tourism are a bit against tourists, it bothers them that the commune is crowded."* Such comments reflect a cautious awareness that while tourism brings recognition, it also risks diluting the intimate, authentic character of the TMCL. Overall, socio-cultural perceptions were positive, highlighting increased community pride and cultural vitality tempered by minority concerns about overcrowding and maintaining authenticity.

These accounts indicate a sense of empowerment and validation of local culture through ecotourism engagement. The revival of festivals and the gastrolocal movement can also be interpreted as regenerative practices, where ecotourism strengthens cultural vitality rather than merely sustaining it.

Economic Impacts

Nearly all local stakeholders acknowledged economic benefits from ecotourism development in the community. Stakeholders pointed to new livelihood opportunities emerging along with tourism growth. *"Local businesses like the gastrolocals and shops are making more money,"* mentioned one interviewee (IV1), adding that *"there are more job opportunities, especially for young people"*. This perception was echoed by multiple participants who observed employment opportunities in new guesthouses, shops and other ecotourism related services that have risen up to cater the visitors. The opening of gastrolocal points which serve locally grown traditional food and other gastronomic products was repeatedly mentioned as an example of how ecotourism stimulates the local economy beyond formal ecotourism jobs. As mentioned by an interviewee (IV3), *"they* [tourists] *come to experiment and see what the gastrolocal is all about and the flow of tourists in the last 4 years has increased tremendously"*. Farmers, too, have benefited indirectly by selling more produce and dairy to these businesses. As one interviewee (IV8) mentioned, *"even if you're not in the tourism business, you still see benefits. For example, as a farmer, I sell cheese and vegetables to gastrolocals* […] *everyone in the community benefits from it"*. In addition to income generation,

stakeholders highlighted improvements in infrastructure attributable to ecotourism. They noted that roads have been upgraded, a public Wi-Fi network has been installed, and transportation links to the nearest city have been made more reliable, changes which *"make it easier to get around"* for community members and visitors alike. Such investments were appreciated as they improved the quality of life for residents. As mentioned by an interviewee (IV1), *"We have free Wi-Fi, regular bus to the city, electricity because people* [tourists] *come from* [urban] *places like Bucharest and they want these things"*.

Despite these broad gains, the economic upsides were not perceived to reach everyone equally. The unequal distribution of benefits was a recurrent theme. A few stakeholders pointed out that families directly involved ecotourism businesses enjoy most of the profits, whereas others on the periphery feel left out. *"Not everyone has equal benefits* […] *Some locals would rather have industries or factories built here"* one interviewee (IV1) mentioned. Another interviewee (IV8) mentioned, *"if a factory was opened in the area, three would be more jobs. It is true there would be more work for all"*. These remarks underline a lingering perception among a minority that ecotourism, while lucrative for some, might not be the appropriate solution for all community members. Nevertheless, no respondents reported any severe negative economic impacts, such as loss of livelihoods; instead, the concern was about relative inclusivity. One nuanced economic impact noted was the rising land price in the area. As an interviewee (IV7) mentioned, *"since the past 4,5 years the value of land in Vama has felt an increase"*. This trend can benefit landowners but may make it costlier for locals (especially youth) to acquire property. Local stakeholders largely credit ecotourism with revitalizing their economy creating jobs, increasing household incomes, and prompting infrastructural improvements while recognizing the need to broaden participation to share economic benefits equally.

Stakeholders not directly involved in ecotourism too, have benefited indirectly by selling more products and dairy to these businesses. This integration of traditional livelihoods into new markets exemplifies a regenerative dynamic, as it revitalizes agricultural and traditional practices (like wood working and crafts) while creating new opportunities.

Environmental Impacts

Stakeholder perspectives on ecotourism's environmental impact were ambivalent, with relatively fewer positive observations compared to the socio-economic dimension. On the one hand, community pride in the area's natural assets has grown alongside ecotourism. Locals were proud that Vama Buzăului is now known as *"where the bison reserve* [and] *Urlătoarea waterfall* [are]*,"* as one interviewee (IV4) mentioned. Some stakeholders believed that ecotourism has prompted better environmental management by authorities and the community. As an interviewee mentioned (IV6), *"From a point of view, the reservation has given the Vama Buzăului commune a big mouthful of oxygen."* Another interviewee mentioned (IV4) *"waste collection services have improved after ecotourism took off, new trash bins are installed, and garbage disposal has become more regular and waste separation is done for improved recycling"*. There were even anecdotes of environmentally responsible behavior among visitors, one interviewee (IV6) mentioned seeing tourists carry their litter out of the forest and use the first available trash can, striving to *"keep* [the area] *just as they found it"*. On the other hand, several interviewees raised concerns about negative environmental pressures resulting from increased visitation. Increased waste was the most frequently mentioned issue, *"automatically there will be waste or all kinds of extra debris when more people enter the community"*, one interviewee (IV10) mentioned. Littering in the bison reserve and along hiking trails was cited as an occasional problem caused by some visitors. *"Sometimes I find litter near the river or in the fields, and that upsets me. We take care of this land, it's our home."*, (IV10). Stakeholders noted heavier vehicle traffic on weekends, leading to noise, air pollution, and even safety hazards on narrow rural roads. *"There are many cars, and the streets are narrow*, [it is] *a little dangerous to walk. There are kids playing around, and animals too,"* one interviewee (IV8) mentioned. Another interviewee (IV12) added *"Now, we have people coming in every weekend, cars parked everywhere."* Some stakeholders also discussed broader land use impacts. The establishment of the bison reservation itself was a point in question for a minority as about 10 hectares of former communal grazing land were fenced off for the reserve, reducing pasture available to villagers' livestock. *"People were less receptive* [to tourism at first] *because that area* [present Bison reserve] *was used for grazing animals,"* an interviewee (IV6) mentioned, noting that any loss of traditional grazing area *"does not always sound good"* to those dependent on livestock. This highlights an important environmental trade off inherent in the ecotourism project that is sometimes dedicated conservation land can constrain other uses. Despite these concerns, it is noteworthy that no interviewee perceived any catastrophic environmental damage from ecotourism rather the concerns were manageable issues like litter, congestion, and land use changes. Instead, initiatives like the bison reserve and improved waste management indicate that ecotourism can act as a regenerative force, enhancing ecosystem health while instilling ecological pride among residents. The stakeholder's overall point of view was that ecotourism must

continue to prioritize environmental care to ensure the long-term sustainability of the TMCL.

Ecotourism's Role in Addressing Land Abandonment and Outward Migration

Most stakeholders believed that ecotourism's growth has directly contributed to retaining the local population, especially youth who might otherwise leave this rural area. One interviewee (IV12) shared, *"Yes, of course* [ecotourism has helped]. *There are a lot of young people who have taken the initiative to return to Vama because they have the opportunity to work in their home village and earn some money."* This statement exemplifies a common perception that new ecotourism-related enterprises (guesthouses, gastrolocals, handicrafts, etc.) are persuading back some who had left and dissuading others from leaving in the first place. Multiple respondents provided concrete anecdotes of this trend. For instance, an interviewee (IV5) mentioned that her grandson, who previously commuted to Brașov for weekend work, *"now helps in a gastrolocal nearby and is satisfied."* Similarly, another interviewee (IV10) mentioned, *"I like that it's keeping people here. I see young folks staying, finding work at Gastrolocals and guesthouses or selling homemade products instead of running off to Braşov or Bucharest."* These perspectives illustrate how ecotourism creates local jobs that allow people to make a living while remaining in the community. As a result, interviewees widely credited ecotourism for strengthening family ties and social structures that might have been undermined by youth out-migration in the past.

Regarding land abandonment, stakeholders linked ecotourism with a more active use of local land and properties. There was a shared notion that formerly idle or underutilized land is now seen as an opportunity. *"For the young people of Vama Buzăului, it is an opportunity, like others, to open rooms for rent"* mentioned an interviewee (IV9), implying that instead of leaving land vacant or selling it off cheaply, families are investing in small-scale tourist accommodation. Even those community members not opening guesthouses often lease their fields or homesteads to neighbors who need land, ensuring it *"is not empty."* This indicates that the prospect of ecotourism is incentivizing locals to maintain ownership and productive use of their land rather than abandoning it entirely. As mentioned by an interviewee (IV4), "*This* [ecotourism] *thing keeps us here because you have something to do* […] *if you want to get down to business, you have something to do."*

While the overall picture was optimistic, a few nuanced perspectives emerged. One of the interviewees (IV12) mentioned that more people especially younger families were staying in Vama Buzăului because of the new opportunities and that *"land isn't being abandoned."* *"But,"* he cautioned, *"it's not always locals who are buying it. It's outsiders, and that changes things."* This observation reveals an underlying complexity that is the growing interest in the area which has attracted outside investors or new residents who purchase the property. Such changes can have mixed implications, for instance abandoned homes are being occupied and renovated, injecting capital into the village but the social fabric and traditional land use patterns may shift if external actors become major landowners. However, despite this note of caution, no interviewee suggested that tourism is causing people to leave. Instead, the worst-case scenario expressed was that ecotourism alone might not be sufficient to keep everyone from migrating outwards due to lack of economic opportunities, particularly so if they do not feel included in the benefits.

Families are investing in small-scale tourist accommodation. This reactivation of previously idle land reflects regenerative land use, where ecotourism contributes to reversing abandonment and strengthening socio-ecological resilience.

Benefit Distribution

The study also explored whether the benefits of ecotourism extend to 'non-tourism" stakeholders that is those not directly employed in the tourism sector. According to local stakeholders, the indirect benefits of tourism are felt across the community, although to varying degrees. A strong consensus emerged that improved public infrastructure driven by ecotourism serves all residents. For example, better roads, enhanced public transport, and cleaner public spaces were repeatedly cited as "*community-wide gains"*. As one interviewee (IV12) put it, *"The improved roads are used by all and not just those in tourism. The public spaces are nicer now too, and there are more recreational activities* […] *everyone in the community benefits from it."* This highlights that investments initiated by ecotourism have a ripple effect, increasing accessibility and quality of life for the entire community and not just tourists or tourism businesses.

Another commonly mentioned indirect benefit was the expansion of markets for local products. Interviewees mentioned small-scale farmers selling more eggs, milk, cheese, and vegetables to nearby gastrolocals or at the weekend farmers' market because visitor demand supplements the usual local consumption. As mentioned by an interviewee (IV10), *"Even if you do not own a guesthouse or a restaurant, you can still benefit* […] *farmers sell more produce, craftsmen like me sell more handmade goods* […] *and the roads are better! That helps everyone, not just the tourists."* Testimonies such as these demonstrate a widely perceived integration of ecotourism into the local value chain. Ecotourism creates additional income streams for

residents who engage in traditional livelihoods (farming, animal husbandry, crafts), reinforcing those livelihoods rather than replacing them.

Ecotourism was also credited with intangible communal benefits. By bringing outside visitors, tourism has subtly broadened locals' horizons and created opportunities for cultural exchange. Exemplifying this sentiment one interviewee (IV9) mentioned, "*We had guests, my father had tourists from Scotland, tourists from England, from Italy, so also foreign tourists. And I liked it. From my point of view, I guess, interacting with other people from other places, even foreign people, you learn from them*". Additionally, organizing tourism activities (like village tours or folk music festivals) has required cooperation among villagers, which some said has improved community relationships and collective action. One stakeholder (IV2) mentioned that even those not in tourism have become more involved in community events (like the Vama de La Munte or cleaning campaigns), partly because these events have grown in prominence due to tourism.

Despite these positive accounts, a few stakeholders pointed out that indirect or passive benefits can only go so far. Not everyone felt personally touched by ecotourism's prosperity. *"Some benefit, but not everyone,"* mentioned one interviewee (IV5), acknowledging that households with existing resources to engage with tourists see more gains than those who do not. The general sentiment was that anyone who wanted to participate could find a way to benefit, even if indirectly but if a person chose not to get involved, they might feel relatively left out. As mentioned by an interviewee (IV11), "*If you're just living here, working a normal job, all you see is the prices going up, the village getting busier."* Notably, there was no indication of social conflict or resentment between those in ecotourism and those out of it. Instead, there was a recognition that ecotourism is a new opportunity that some seize more actively than others. Some stakeholders mentioned discussions within their families or among neighbors about starting some modest ecotourism venture (such as opening a small gastrolocal eatery or building a couple of rooms for rent) to take advantage of the growing visitor numbers.

Local Government's Role in Ecotourism Development

Local government institutions particularly the Vama Buzăului municipal administration emerged as key actor in the ecotourism initiative, and stakeholders' perceptions of their support were generally favorable. Many interviewees acknowledged that the mayor and local council have proactively facilitated ecotourism development. *"The local government has helped the community right from the start in all manners,"* said one interviewee (IV5), *"like applying* [for] *funding or preparing documents to get involved in ecotourism."* Multiple participants mentioned that the local administration provided guidance in navigating bureaucratic procedures such as obtaining permits, certifications, or accessing development grants for community members who started accommodations or established gastrolocal points or other ecotourism businesses. This administrative assistance was highly valued. As exemplified by an interviewee (IV8), *"the council helps with the paperwork* […] *there is a lot of governmental process to complete to open the business, and* [they] *help."* Such hands-on support can lower barriers to entry, enabling more locals to participate in ecotourism. Additionally, the local government's strategic investments and partnerships were highlighted by the stakeholders. Interviewees credited the local government for starting infrastructure improvements such as roads, signage, waste management, and internet connectivity that have made the village more attractive and accessible to tourists. Brașov County also provided an 80-hectare forest land to the commune in 2008 for free use in conservation and ecotourism. This multi-level governmental backing has been crucial in establishing Vama Buzăului's reputation as an eco-certified destination. From the community's perspective, these efforts translate into concrete support, *"Those who run this municipality* […] *especially the mayor* […] *I have all the respect,"* mentioned an interviewee (IV1) expressing trust that local leaders are steering the community in a positive direction.

However, perceptions of government support were not unanimously positive. A few interviewees reported little to no direct support for their initiatives, especially financially. *"No* [support]. *Just my own funds* […] *no outside* [help]*, I funded my own business"* one interviewee (IV9) mentioned, implying that while general infrastructure was improved, he did not receive any grants or subsidies to start his business. Some stakeholders felt the authorities could do more to manage flows to reduce problems like traffic and litter. Such comment can indicate an expectation for continuous government involvement in mitigating ecotourism's adverse impacts as they arise. The local government is seen by local stakeholders as an active partner in ecotourism development, providing institutional support that ranges from bureaucratic facilitation to infrastructure provision.

Future Requirements for Sustainable Tourism Development

When discussing the future, local stakeholders articulated clear aspirations as well as concerns for ecotourism development. A dominant response to future requirements was to diversify and expand the ecotourism offerings in Vama Buzăului. Many interviewees noted that the current

ecotourism is mostly limited to the Bison Reserve (Valea Zimbrilor) and the Urlătoarea waterfall. While these two attractions have put the commune on the map, residents worry that relying on only a few sites could limit growth or limit repeat visits. *"I would like to see more activities for visitors. Right now, they come for the bison and the waterfall, but after that, they do not have much to do,"* one interviewee (IV10) mentioned. Others echoed that sentiment, suggesting the development of additional tourist attractions such as cultural trails, historical sites, agritourism experiences on local farms, or adventure activities to encourage longer stays and repeat visits. For instance, (IV2) mentioned, *"for the tourist who comes to Vama Buzăului […] you need more places to visit […] bike trails […] all sorts of activities […] to stay as many days as possible."* Similarly, (IV7) added, "*we are not limited to having only the bison reservation, the Urlătoarea waterfall […] the tourist […] may want more things."* Another commonly cited requirement was financial assistance or incentives for local entrepreneurs. *"It would be more encouraging if* [the authorities] *provided, you know, small loans interest-free or with low interest to start* [a tourism] *business"* mentioned an interviewee (IV8). The idea of micro-finance or grant programs specifically aimed at rural ecotourism development was seen as a catalyst that could help families who lack the capital to join the ecotourism sector. This also indicates a desire of the broader community of being involved in the ecotourism sector. Alongside funding, training in hospitality and marketing was mentioned as a future need, especially if Vama Buzăului is to attract more international tourists.

Preserving the intrinsic characteristics and structure of the TMCL amid development was another recurring theme in these future visions. Stakeholders are proud of Vama Buzăului's natural beauty and cultural traditions, and want tourism growth to be balanced with conservation. As mentioned by an interviewee (IV12), *"I would like for Vama Buzăului to develop more* [tourist attractions] *so that we are not limited to only the bison and the waterfall, but sometimes I worry if in the future our culture and traditions will be modernized* [too much] *to bring more tourists."* This quote captures the general dual aspirations to advance and innovate in ecotourism, yet not at the expense of the tangible and intangible heritage that makes the area unique. Stakeholders mentioned that any new attractions should be authentic and rooted in local culture or nature, for example workshops reviving old crafts, organizing genuine traditional festivals for tourists, or creating nature education centers and guided hiking tours. The interviews conveyed a desire for participatory planning: people feel their intimate knowledge of the land and culture is an asset that should guide development decisions, ensuring ecotourism remains appropriate to the TMCL context.

Discussion

Our findings from Vama Buzăului underscore the high importance of engaging local stakeholder perspectives in ecotourism development, particularly within TMCLs. The results provide a nuanced account of how residents perceive the benefits and challenges of ecotourism in TMCLs. The local perception in Vama Buzăului reveals how bottom-up involvement can translate the abstract promise of ecotourism into tangible socio-economic gains at local level. In line with previous findings (Snyman, 2016; Samal & Dash, 2023) that private ecotourism enterprises can foster local socio-economic development when communities are involved, Vama Buzăului's experience shows a collaborative model in practice: the local government, together with residents, actively shaped the ecotourism initiative to align with community needs. By documenting local stakeholder's enthusiasm for improved infrastructure, cultural revival, and livelihood opportunities, our study reinforces arguments in the ecotourism literature that empowering local stakeholders leads to more collectively desired outcomes and can facilitate sustainability (Anindhita, et al., 2024). For instance, (Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2011) observed that involving communities in ecotourism can build social cohesion and resilience. This dynamic is evident in Vama Buzăului, where interviewees described greater community cooperation and pride stemming from the development of ecotourism in the area. The participatory ethos in Vama Buzăului's planning aligns with emphasis on stakeholder collaboration as a cornerstone of sustainable ecotourism (Wondirad, et al., 2020). Thus, the study also provides empirical support for theoretical frameworks that advocate inclusive governance in ecotourism development within traditional cultural landscapes.

We use 'regenerative tourism' as an interpretive lens to assess whether ecotourism strengthens local stewardship, cultural vitality, and the community's capability to sustain TMCL multifunctionality over time, rather than only minimizing impacts. Viewed through a regenerative tourism lens, these findings suggest that ecotourism in TMCLs can move beyond sustaining existing systems to actively revitalizing them. Cultural traditions are not merely maintained but renewed; landscapes are not only conserved but reactivated for multifunctional purposes; and community relations are strengthened in ways that enhance long term socio-ecological resilience (Mang & Reed, 2012; Bellato, et al., 2022).

Socio-Cultural Impacts of Ecotourism

The results of this study reflect the dual nature of ecotourism's socio-cultural impacts in Vama Buzăului. On the one side, the community's positive outcomes like

revitalized traditions, heightened cultural pride, and strengthened social fabric are examples of how ecotourism can serve as a tool for cultural conservation and rural revitalization. (Mondino & Beery, 2019) noted that ecotourism can act as a learning tool for sustainable development, helping communities revalue their cultural and natural heritage in countries like Italy. Similarly, our findings show that locals increasingly cherish their heritage (festivals, crafts, local gastronomy) as they see visitors appreciating these assets. At the same time, stakeholders' concerns about cultural commodification and authenticity loss align with existing literature (Kneafsey, 2000; Koens, et al., 2009; Doan, 2010) in rural ecotourism. It should be noted that the commercialization of the stakeholder's daily life to meet tourist expectations can create tension between economic interests and cultural integrity. This contrasts with cases where outside operators dominate tourism, and locals feel alienated (Koens, et al., 2009).

In regenerative terms, this cultural revitalization illustrates how heritage can be dynamically reinterpreted for contemporary relevance (Sharma & Thama, 2023). The gastrolocal movement, artisanal crafts and traditional festivals embody regenerative practices that embed cultural continuity within evolving economic and social context (Bellato, et al., 2022). This dynamic reflects the capacity of ecotourism in TMCLs to strengthen cultural identity while fostering intergenerational continuity.

Economic Impacts and Distribution of Benefits

Economically, this case study reaffirms that ecotourism can generate significant local income and employment, as reported in the literature (Doan, 2010; Mudasir, et al., 2020). However, a critical insight from this study is the issue of uneven benefit distribution. Statements such as "*not everyone has equal benefits"* shows the local perception that ecotourism's gains often accrue disproportionately to those with resources or proximity to the attractions, potentially exacerbating local inequalities if left unaddressed. This finding underscores the need for mechanisms to broaden participation and develop benefit sharing schemes to ensure inclusive development.

From a regenerative perspective, the results highlight the capacity of ecotourism to generate new opportunities and stimulate local entrepreneurship. The regenerative lens emphasizes circularity and inclusivity in economic systems, where the gains derived from ecotourism are circulated broadly to reinforce local livelihoods rather than being concentrated among a small group of stakeholders (Bellato, et al., 2022). This kind of approach contributes not only to resilience but also socio-economic sustainability in the long term (Miedes-Ugarte & Flores-Ruiz, 2025).

Environmental Impacts

Residents noted improvements in waste management and a culture of cleanliness that aligns with ecotourism principles. This suggests that when communities embrace ecotourism, they may also internalize stronger pro-environment behaviors which may be indicative of ecological consciousness rising in host communities (Wondirad, et al., 2020; Samal & Dash, 2023). Moreover, the pride locals feel in their natural and cultural heritage indicates a sense of environmental stewardship ecotourism fosters (Smithwick, et al., 2023) (Smithwick, et al., 2023). However, the community's concerns about litter, traffic, and the loss of grazing land illustrate the real challenges of balancing increased human activity with environmental protection. These micro-level issues mirror larger debates in ecotourism literature about carrying capacity and the risk of degrading natural resources as ecotourism grows in scale (Wondirad, et al., 2020; Samal & Dash, 2023).

Enhanced waste management services and the conservation of the European Bison exemplify a shift towards regenerative practices, in which ecotourism not only minimizes ecological harm but actively contributes to ecosystem restoration and stewardship (Smithwick, et al., 2023; Buckton, et al., 2023). Regenerative tourism thereby reframes environmental protection as a process of enrichment and renewal, aligning ecological sustainability with community wellbeing (Mang & Reed, 2012).

Ecotourism, Land Abandonment, and Outward Migration

A particularly novel contribution of this case study is its examination of ecotourism's role in mitigating land abandonment and outward migration. Our findings provide empirical evidence that ecotourism can help address the problem of rural outmigration and land abandonment by creating attractive local opportunities. This supports anecdotal assertions in policy discourse that ecotourism is a promising strategy to combat depopulation (Martos et al., 2024). In Vama Buzăului, the community's testimonies indicated a stabilization (even a slight increase) of the resident population, especially among working-age youth. Similarly, the study shows evidence of youth returning from cities and families repurposing land for ecotourism rather than selling it pointing to a demographic and land-use turnaround partly facilitated by ecotourism. This is a significant insight for TMCLs as it demonstrates that multifunctional land use (combining traditional farming with new ecotourism functions) can enhance the viability of rural communities, as suggested by Zerbe (2025).

Furthermore, the findings also reveal that while ecotourism reduced out-migration by providing jobs, it

simultaneously increased outside investment (people from outside the area buying properties, drawn by the area's appeal). This reflects a form of rural gentrification or amenity migration, a phenomenon where affluent outsiders move into scenic rural areas (Gustafson, 2002) which can have mixed effects on local social structures. Responses from interviewees show that local stakeholders are aware and somewhat weary of this phenomenon. These findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of ecotourism's complex impact. However, planners should monitor and manage the implications of new migration patterns, for example, by encouraging local land owners to retain the land and preventing speculative land grabs.

Regenerative tourism highlights the abovementioned transformations as evidence of renewed vitality (Bellato, et al., 2022). By reactivating abandoned land and strengthening local ties, ecotourism demonstrates regenerative potential to reverse socio-economic decline in TMCLs.

Governance and the Role of Local Government

Similarly, the case of Vama Buzăului offers theoretical insights and practical implications for ecotourism in TMCLs. Theoretically, it exemplifies the concept of multifunctionality as the landscape is simultaneously a place of agriculture, habitation, cultural heritage, and ecotourism. The ability of the community to integrate a new function (ecotourism) without displacing the traditional ones (farming, grazing, local festivals) speaks to the resilience and adaptability of TMCLs. It provides a living example of what Zerbe (2025) describes as merging tradition and innovation for a sustainable future. Local stakeholders effectively became agents of this merge, ensuring that ecotourism development is embedded in the local context (for example, gastrolocal restaurants built on traditional cuisine and local ingredients) rather than imposed from outside. Additionally, the social outcomes like enhanced community cooperation support social exchange and empowerment facilitated by ecotourism in TMCLs.

When residents perceive the exchange with tourists to be beneficial, they respond with more significant support and engagement. Practically, the findings suggest recommendations for ecotourism governance in TMCLs and similar rural areas. Our governance implications are deliberately constrained to what the interviews support that is stakeholders emphasized municipal facilitation (paperwork, infrastructure, enabling conditions) and expectations for fairer benefit sharing rather than documenting a formal participatory council architecture.

Firstly, inclusive planning frameworks are crucial. Early and ongoing involvement of local people in decision making is something other regions could emulate by setting up participatory councils and committees where community members can voice ideas and concerns. As our study shows, locals bring invaluable perspectives on appropriate development and where sensitive limits lie (such as how much commercialization of culture is acceptable). Planners and policymakers in rural development should treat local knowledge as a central input, not an afterthought. Secondly, the role of local government is pivotal in catalyzing ecotourism, so building strong public-community partnerships is crucial. In this case, the local authorities provided infrastructure and helped knit together a network of support which ensured that ecotourism was backed by policy (eco-certification, funding, land grants) beyond the destination's limited resources. Thirdly, mechanisms to spread benefits widely should be part of ecotourism policy.

In regenerative tourism, governance is recognized as a key enabler of systematic transformation (Bellato, et al., 2022; Smithwick, et al., 2023; Sharma & Thama, 2023). Local governments' facilitative role in Vama Buzăului suggests potential to formalize regenerative pathways by embedding participatory governance, infrastructure development and support schemes that promote socio-cultural renewal and ecosystem health simultaneously.

Future Pathways: Towards Regenerative Ecotourism

Vama Buzăului's locals highlighted indirect benefit channels (infrastructure, markets for produce). Formalizing these channels can maximize equity. For example, destination planners could establish local procurement policies (so that accommodations source a percentage of supplies from nearby farms and artisans) or community development funds where a portion of ecotourism revenue is reinvested into public services like schools and medical clinics. These steps ensure that even those not directly in ecotourism feel a positive impact, increasing overall community support. Similarly, findings indicate a need for capacity building and financial support to enable interested locals to join the ecotourism sector. Training programs in hospitality, language skills, or digital marketing would empower willing community members to start businesses or improve existing ones, addressing some stakeholder's hesitation about inequal benefit sharing. Credit or grant schemes which can be funded through local government programs or NGOs, could lower the barrier for low-income families interested in joining ecotourism as service providers. This would operationalize the community's own vision of widespread grassroots entrepreneurship.

In this way, this case study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on ecotourism in traditional cultural landscapes by illuminating how local stakeholders perceive and influence the trajectory of sustainable development. The conceptual and empirical dimensions highlight the potential

of TMCLs as integrated socio-ecological systems capable of contributing meaningfully to the broader global agenda of sustainable development. It confirms that integrating local perspectives is not just a matter of equity but enhances the effectiveness and resilience of ecotourism initiatives. The study's insights into sociocultural revitalization, economic inclusion, demographic stabilization, and governance provide a grounded example for comparison with other TMCLs pursuing ecotourism as a development strategy. It highlights that while challenges such as benefit distribution and cultural commodification exist, they can be managed through community empowerment and adaptive governance. Vama Buzăului stands as an encouraging example of a TMCL leveraging its natural and cultural heritage through ecotourism for community development.

However, it is crucial to avoid replicating the growth-driven development paths that compromised sustainability in rural tourism destinations in Western Europe during the 1970s. Previous research (Ferguson, 2015; Panzer-Krause, 2019) indicates that purely expansionist approaches prioritizing continuous increase in visitor numbers and infrastructure often led to sociocultural commodification, ecological degradation and weakening of local governance structures. As (Sharpley, 2009) and (Saarinen, 2006) argue, when tourism development privileges economic metrics over community well-being and environmental stewardship, it can erode the very cultural and ecological assets upon which rural tourism depends. In the context of Vama Buzăului, where local stakeholder engagement and the integration of ecotourism with cultural heritage have so far supported sustainable outcomes, it is critical to reinforce development strategies that move beyond simple expansion.

Adopting a regenerative development framework allow Vama Buzăului to avoid growth driven models of mass tourism and instead pursue quality driven, place based innovation (Sharma & Thama, 2023). Practical implementations could include channeling ecotourism revenue and volunteer initiatives into habitat restoration, cultural heritage projects, afforestation programs, wildlife monitoring, and traditional craft workshops. Such activities transform ecotourism into a mechanism for enriching local ecosystems and preserving cultural traditions. To clarify the underlying mechanisms, we synthesize the empirically derived pathways across the socio-cultural, economic, environmental, and governance dimensions into a concise regenerative ecotourism development framework. Taken together, the results point to a small set of interlinked pathways through which ecotourism can become regenerative in TMCLs. Socio-cultural revitalization is reflected in renewed community pride and re-activated living traditions (festivals, gastronomy, place identity), while economic benefits extend beyond ecotourism operators through locally embedded value-chain linkages that connect accommodations and gastrolocals with farming and crafts yet remain contingent on perceived fairness in benefit distribution. In parallel, improved waste management and heightened recognition of conservation assets indicate emerging ecological stewardship, but stakeholders also highlight manageable pressures (litter, congestion, and land-use trade-offs), underscoring that enabling governance, municipal facilitation, infrastructure, and access to training/finance remains a necessary condition for maintaining multifunctionality over time. A careful shift from a quantity-driven to a quality-driven development model is thus essential for safeguarding the long-term sustainability of Vama Buzăului and similar TMCLs.

Conclusion

This study examined local stakeholder perspectives on the multifaceted impacts of ecotourism within the TMCL of Vama Buzăului, Romania. Analysis revealed that ecotourism has fostered community cohesion, cultural revitalization, and economic growth through job creation, improved infrastructure, and innovative initiatives such as the gastrolocal movement. At the same time, stakeholders expressed concerns regarding cultural commodification, rising land prices, uneven benefit distribution, and environmental challenges such as increased waste and traffic congestion. The findings contribute to the existing body of knowledge by addressing a significant gap in the literature on ecotourism in TMCLs.

The results further suggest that while ecotourism can mitigate issues of land abandonment and outward migration, its sustainability depends on continuous policy support and adaptive management strategies that balance growth with the preservation of cultural authenticity, environmental integrity and contribute to regenerative socio-ecological outcomes. Practically, these insights offer valuable implications for policymakers and practitioners by highlighting the critical role of local government in facilitating infrastructure improvements and providing administrative support. Theoretically, the study reinforces that sustainable development in TMCLs requires a nuanced integration of traditional practices with modern ecotourism dynamics, ensuring that benefits are equally distributed among all community members.

Framing the results through a regenerative perspective further enriches the findings. This case is among the first to empirically interpret ecotourism in a TMCL through a regenerative lens highlighting pathways for policy and practice. Ecotourism in Vama Buzăului has not only sustained but actively revitalized socio-ecological systems. Cultural traditions such as festivals and gastronomy are reinterpreted for contemporary relevance, abandoned land is

reactivated for ecotourism and multifunctional livelihoods and ecological stewardship is strengthened through initiatives like the bison reserve. These processes embody regenerative principles, where tourism produces net positive cultural, economic and environmental outcomes rather than merely reducing harm (Mang & Reed, 2012; Bellato et al., 2022).

These insights further demonstrate that the concept of TMCLs aligns closely with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) objectives, offering a holistic framework for place-based sustainability. TMCLs inherently support SDG 15 (Life on Land) through biodiversity conservation rooted in traditional ecological practices. At the same time, their emphasis on cultural continuity and community resilience contributes to SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). The multifunctionality of TMCLs linking agriculture, cultural heritage, and ecotourism advances SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). The empirical findings from Vama Buzăului reinforce these linkages, illustrating how ecotourism within TMCLs can contribute to demographic stabilization through income generating activities (SDG 1: No poverty), foster environmental consciousness (SDG 13: Climate action), and enhance participatory governance (SDG 16: Peace justice and strong institutions) and multi-level collaboration (SDG 17: Partnership for goals).

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. The study's qualitative approach, which relied on semi-structured interviews with a relatively small sample size, may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Accordingly, findings are analytically transferable rather than statistically generalizable, offering a grounded basis for comparison with other TMCLs and for hypothesis-building on regenerative pathways. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the research does not allow an evaluation of ongoing trends or the lasting effects of ecotourism on local socio-economic conditions, cultural and traditional aspects, and environmental stewardship; instead, it creates a foundation for future research. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to better capture evolving stakeholder perceptions and long-term sustainability outcomes associated with ecotourism development in TMCLs. Comparative research involving multiple TMCL sites could provide deeper insights into context-specific factors influencing ecotourism's success and challenges, thus informing more universally applicable policy frameworks. Further studies might also integrate mixed-methods approaches, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses.

Thus, Vama Buzăului exemplifies how ecotourism can foster sustainable regional development while preserving traditional cultural landscapes when effectively managed and embedded within local governance and community participation frameworks. Continued emphasis on inclusive stakeholder engagement and adaptive governance mechanisms is essential to ensure that ecotourism achieves balanced socio-cultural, economic, and environmental outcomes in TMCLs. Looking forward, a regenerative approach to ecotourism development could further ensure that these outcomes are not only sustained but enhanced. By striving for net positive contributions to the community and environment rather than growth in mere visitor numbers Vama Buzăului can avoid pitfalls of unbridled ecotourism expansion and remain on a development pathway that continuously improves its socio-ecological systems, securing a thriving future for the area.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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Author contributions S.J. conceptualized the study and designed the methodology. S.J., A.B. and A.A. conducted fieldwork and contributed to data collection. S.J. carried out the data analysis. S.J. and S.P.K drafted the main manuscript text. S.Z. and M.S. contributed to theoretical framing and provided critical revisions. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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Compliance with ethical standards

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5. General Discussion and Synthesis

This cumulative dissertation examined the role of ecotourism in TMCLs, bringing together three studies that approach the topic from complementary and contemporary angles: a systematic review of tourism in traditional cultural landscapes of rural Europe, a visitor survey in an eco-certified TMCL, and an in-depth qualitative study of local stakeholder perspectives. Together, these papers provide a comprehensive, multi-scalar understanding of how ecotourism interacts with landscapes, communities, and visitors, and how it can contribute not only to sustainable development but also to regenerative rural futures.

5.1 Integrating findings across the three studies

The systematic review in Paper I (chapter 2) confirmed that research on tourism in European TMCLs remains fragmented and geographically concentrated, with strong concentrations in Southern and Northern Europe. Most studies address tourist preferences and destination management, while ecosystem services, certification, and regenerative framings remain marginal. This mirrors findings in wider rural tourism reviews, which highlight similar thematic silos and disciplinary fragmentation (Wondirad, et al., 2020; Karali, et al., 2021). By identifying these gaps, Paper I provided a foundation for the subsequent empirical modules.

Paper II (chapter 3) directly addressed the lack of visitor-focused research in an eco-certified TMCL. The results showed that familiarity with ecotourism strongly predicts awareness of certification, and that certification visibility enhances credibility and shapes visitor predispositions. This resonates with evidence that sustainability labels increase trust and pro-environmental behaviour but only when effectively communicated (Font, et al., 2016; Paul & Ray, 2023). Importantly, the identification of two visitor clusters, an eco-positive majority and a more neutral minority complicates the assumption that ecotourism markets are homogeneous. This segmentation provides new insights for designing differentiated products, educational and extension interventions in TMCLs.

Paper III (chapter 4) extended the analysis by situating ecotourism within local stakeholder perception and local governance. Stakeholders emphasized both benefits (cultural revitalization, youth retention, ecological pride) and risks (cultural commodification, uneven benefits, environmental stress), underscoring effective governance and associated support or lack of support as the decisive factor shaping outcomes. This aligns with existing studies emphasizing the role of participatory governance in mediating tourism's sustainability impacts (Fan, et al., 2024; Rose, et al., 2025). What Paper III adds is the explicit application of regenerative tourism concepts, showing that stakeholders themselves articulate governance, authenticity, and equity as prerequisites for advancing towards the regenerative paradigm.

When viewed cumulatively, the three modules demonstrate how visitor expectations (Paper II) and community perspectives (Paper III) intersect with the research gaps revealed in Paper I. For instance, the scarcity of visitor perceptions research particularly in a certified eco-tourism destination was empirically addressed through the survey, while the limited presence of regenerative framings was expanded through the stakeholder study. This cross-paper dialogue illustrates the added value of the cumulative design with each study responding to and complementing the others, collectively building a more holistic understanding of tourism in TMCLs.

5.2 From Sustainability to Regeneration

The findings across the dissertation indicate that ecotourism in TMCLs operates on a continuum from sustainability to regeneration. At the sustainability level, tourism contributes to conservation, employment, and diversification. At the regenerative level, it revitalizes traditions, fosters ecological restoration, and strengthens community cohesion. Recent studies also highlight this shift, framing regenerative tourism as a necessary progression beyond sustainability (Bellato, et al., 2022; Bellato & Pollock, 2023; FII Institute, 2025).

Specifically, this dissertation contributes three theoretical advances. First, it extends the landscape perspective by showing how TMCLs function as socio-ecological systems shaped by visitors, stakeholders, and governance, rather than as static heritage sites. Second, it adapts the Ecotourist Predisposition Scale in a European TMCL context, providing a new empirical basis for analyzing attitudes and perceptions in an eco-certified landscape. Third, it applies regenerative tourism concept in TMCLs through stakeholder perspectives, demonstrating that governance, authenticity, and equity are central conditions for achieving net-positive contributions. In this way, the dissertation bridges the gap between conceptual debates and empirical evidence, contributing to an evolving theoretical framework for regenerative rural tourism and explicitly positioning it as a necessary evolution beyond incremental sustainability, particularly in the context of TMCLs.

5.3 Multifunctionality and resilience in TMCLs

The findings reinforce multifunctionality as both the defining characteristic and a key resilience mechanism of TMCLs. Ecotourism can enhance resilience by conserving biodiversity, revitalizing cultural practices, and diversifying livelihoods, while complementing rather than displacing existing functions of the TMCL. At the same time, tourism can also introduce pressures such as land-use conflicts, unequal distribution of benefits and fear of cultural commodification. Similar ambivalences are reported in recent European case studies, which show that while tourism can strengthen resilience it can also undermine resilience especially when governance mechanisms and support are weak (ETC, 2024; Carretero & Monroy-Rodríguez, 2025). Our studies demonstrate this tension empirically in a certified Eastern European TMCL, illustrating that resilience is not an inherent outcome of ecotourism but remains contingent upon participatory governance, equitable benefit-sharing, and the capacity of local institutions to balance multifunctional demands.

5.4 Contributions, policy implications and future directions

This dissertation makes contributions at the conceptual, methodological, and practical levels. Conceptually, it bridges fragmented literatures by situating TMCLs within ecotourism and regenerative tourism debates, highlighting multifunctionality in TMCLs as both an analytical lens and a governance challenge. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of a cumulative, multi-scalar design that integrates a systematic review, a quantitative visitor survey, and qualitative stakeholder interviews, showing how combining different approaches can yield a holistic understanding of ecotourism as not only a development strategy but also a catalytic socio-ecological phenomenon. Practically, the dissertation generates insights for a range of stakeholders. For policymakers, the findings provide evidence for aligning tourism with European instruments such as the EU Green Deal, Common Agricultural Policy (eco-schemes), LEADER initiatives, and Natura 2000. For practitioners, they highlight strategies to leverage authenticity and certification in marketing while ensuring equitable benefit-sharing through community-based models. For local communities, the results identify pathways to strengthen socio-economic

benefits without compromising cultural integrity or ecological resilience and diversifying the multi-functionality of their landscapes without compromising the existing functions.

While these contributions are significant, they must be considered alongside certain structural limitations of this cumulative research design. The dissertation's empirical focus rests on the study of a single TMCL, Vama Buzăului, which provides depth but can constrain generalizability across the diversity of TMCLs in Europe. Moreover, the temporal scope is limited to cross-sectional data, which restricts the ability to capture long-term processes of socio-ecological change or the evolving impacts of tourism over time. These limitations suggest several future research directions such as expanding comparative case studies across different European (and non-European) TMCLs, incorporating and even comparing additional actor groups like organizational stakeholders and developing longitudinal research designs to generate stronger causal insights into regenerative tourism dynamics.

By situating contributions alongside these broader limitations, the dissertation underscores the importance of both empirical grounding and critical reflection. This balance ensures that the findings are not only theoretically robust but also practically relevant, while pointing toward new research avenues that can further clarify how TMCLs may serve as living laboratories for regenerative futures, integrating innovation with tradition.

6. Conclusion

This cumulative dissertation examined the role of ecotourism in Traditional Multifunctional Cultural Landscapes (TMCLs) through three complementary studies: a systematic review, visitor perceptions analysis and an in-depth qualitative study of local stakeholder perspectives in an eco-certified TMCL. Together, these studies provide an integrated, multi-scalar understanding of how ecotourism interacts with traditional cultural landscapes, visitors, and communities, and how it can contribute not only to sustainability but to regenerative rural development. These studies concretize that TMCLs are not static landscapes but dynamic socio-ecological systems whose (tourism) futures depend on the careful alignment of visitor demand, local governance, multifunctionality diversification and policy frameworks.

The findings demonstrate that ecotourism in TMCLs should operate along a continuum from sustainability to regeneration. At the sustainability level, tourism supports conservation, employment, and rural diversification. At the regenerative level, it revitalizes traditions, fosters ecological restoration, and strengthens community cohesion. Crucially, whether outcomes are sustainable, regenerative depends on governance quality, equity, and the visibility of appropriate certification as a bridging mechanism between visitor expectations, unique destination features and community traditions, practices and heritage.

Theoretically, this dissertation advances the integration of regenerative tourism into TMCL research, linking ecological, cultural, and socio-economic dimensions under the concept of landscape services. Empirically, it provides Europe-wide systematic review of TMCL tourism, validates visitor's predisposition clusters and certification awareness and applies regenerative frameworks to analysis of stakeholder perspectives, in a European TMCL. Practically, it highlights certification as a trust-building tool, demonstrates the importance of visitor segmentation for product development, and emphasizes participatory governance as the decisive condition for equitable and authentic tourism outcomes.

Beyond academic contributions, the studies have broader policy relevance. It shows that TMCLs can serve as experimental zones for regenerative rural development, aligned with European Green Deal ambitions and international biodiversity strategies. By embedding regenerative principles in certification, governance, and rural policy frameworks, TMCLs can showcase how traditional cultural landscapes may simultaneously restore ecosystems, reinforce cultural identity, social cohesion and enhance livelihoods while preserving traditions, culture and heritage.

Thus, this dissertation demonstrates that ecotourism can be more than a tool for sustainable rural development; under the right conditions, it can act as a catalyst for regeneration. TMCLs, with their intertwined ecological, cultural, and socio-economic functions, are uniquely positioned to serve as living laboratories for testing and scaling regenerative practices. By advancing both theoretical and practical insights, this work contributes to the ongoing redefinition of ecotourism's role in Europe's rural landscapes and provides a foundation for policies and practices that move beyond sustainability toward regenerative futures. The central conclusion is that ecotourism in TMCLs can realize its potential only when conceived not as an extractive or merely preservative activity, but as a regenerative practice that simultaneously enhances cultural vitality, ecological integrity, and social equity. Under such a framing, TMCLs may be understood as exemplary territories where tourism functions as a catalyst for resilient and inclusive rural futures across and beyond Europe.

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Appendix I: List of papers analyzed in the systematic review

Title	Publication date	Authors	Landscape type	DOI
Agricultural Heritage Systems and Landscape Perception among Tourists. The Case of Lamole, Chianti (Italy)	2020	Antonio Santoro, Martina Venturi and Mauro Agnolett	Terrace	10.3390/su12093509
Conservation and management issues of Prespa National Park	1997	G. Catsadorakis and M. Malakou	Irrigation	Not available
SETTING AND BLURRING BOUNDARIES: PILGRIMS, TOURISTS, AND LANDSCAPE IN MOUNT ATHOS AND METEORA	2011	Veronica Della Dora	Monastic	10.1016/j.annals.2011.11.013
Analytical Model for the Development Strategy of a Low-Density Territory: The Montesinho Natural Park	2022	Fátima Matos Silva, Cristina Sousa and Helena Albuquerque	Agroforestry	10.3390/su14074373
The economic value of high nature value farming and the importance of the Common Agricultural Policy in sustaining income: The case study of the Natura 2000 Zarandul de Est (Romania)	2018	Simone Martino, Dominic Muenzel	Agroforestry	10.1016/j.jrurstud.2018.04.002
Geolandscapes and Geotourism: Integrating Nature and Culture in the Bucegi Mountains of Romania	2014	Irina-Maria Necheş and George Erdeli	Sacred	10.1080/01426397.2014.939616
The Significance of Megalithic Monuments in the Process of Place Identity Creation and in Tourism Development	2018	Alicja Edyta Krzemińska, Anna Dzikowska, Anna Danuta Zaręba, Katarzyna Rozalia Jarosz, Krzysztof Widawski, And Janusz Stanisław Łach	Sacred	10.1515/geo-2018-0040
Demand for enhanced forest amenities in private lands: The case of the Ruka-Kuusamo tourism area, Finland	2013	Liisa Tyrväinen, Erkki Mäntymaa, Ville Ovaskainen	Forest	10.1016/j.forpol.2013.05.007
Socio-economic, scientific, and political benefits of mycotourism	2017	Ulf Buntgen, Joaquin Latorre,Simon Egli and Fernando Martinez-Pena	Forest	10.1002/ecs2.1870

Effect of the Season and Forest Management on the Visual Quality of the Nature-based Tourism Environment: A case from Finnish Lapland	2016	Liisa Tyrväinen, Harri Silvennoinen & Ville Hallikainen	Forest	10.1080/02827581.2016.1241892
Ex ante evaluation of a PES system: Safeguarding recreational environments for nature-based tourism	2017	Jukka Tikkanen, Raili Hokajarvi, Teppo Hujala, Mikko Kurttila	Forest	10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.03.011
Explanatory variables underlying the route choice decisions of tourists: The case of Geiranger Fjord in Norway	2019	María Díez-Guti´Errez, Sahar Babri	Forest	10.1016/j.tra.2020.09.023
Exploring National Park Visitors' Judgements from Social Media: The Case Study of Plitvice Lakes National Park	2022	Carlotta Sergiacomi, Dijana Vuleti´, Alessandro Paletto, Elena Barbierato and Claudio Fagarazzi	Forest	10.3390/f13050717
Financial Inclinations of Visitors to the Wielkopolska National Park	2021	Adam Zydroń, Dariusz Kayzer, Michał Fiedler, Mariusz Korytowski	Forest	Available on research gate
GIS-based Prognosis of Potential Forest Regeneration Affecting Tourism Locations and Cultural Landscapes in South Norway	2011	Anders Bryn & Misganu Debella-Gilo	Forest	10.1080/15022250.2011.576827
High tourism activity alters the spatial distribution of Hazel Grouse (Tetrastes bonasia) and predation on artificial nests in a high-mountain habitat	2020	Marcin Matysek, Robert Gwaidza, Filip Zieba, Maciej Klimecki, Radoslaw Mateja and Piotr Krzan	Forest	Not available
Importance of forest landscape quality for companies operating in nature tourism areas	2019	Erkki Mantymaa, Liisa Tyrvainen, Artti Juutinen, Mikko Kurttila	Forest	10.1016/j.landusepol.2019.104095
Mapping landscape potential for outdoor recreation using different archetypical recreation user groups in the European Union	2017	Franziska Komossa, Emma H. Van Der Zanden, Catharina J.E. Schulp, Peter H. Verburg	Forest	10.1016/j.ecolind.2017.10.015
Guidelines for recreation as the priority function in the Alps from the German point of view	1996	U. Ammer And R.Detsch	Forest	Not available
Natural resources of the Poleski national park and the development of tourism	2017	Andrzej Soroka, Julia Wojciechowska-Solis	Forest	Available on research gate

Negotiating Improved Multifunctional Landscape Use: Trails as Facilitators for Collaboration Among Stakeholders	2019	Kristin Godtman Kling, Annika Dahlberg And Sandra Wall-Reinius	Forest	10.3390/su11133511
Potential Trade-Offs Between Nature-Based Tourism and Forestry, a Case Study in Northern Finland	2011	Anssi Ahtikoski, Seija Tuulentie, Ville Hallikainen, Vesa Nivala, Eero Vatanen, Liisa Tyrväinen and Hannu Salminen	Forest	10.3390/f2040894
Private landowners' preferences for trading forest landscape and recreational values: A choice experiment application in Kuusamo, Finland	2020	Liisa Tyrväinena, Erkki Mäntymaa, Artti Juutinen, Mikko Kurttila, Ville Ovaskainen	Forest	10.1016/j.landusepol.2020.104478
The impact of tourism and reindeer herding on forest vegetation at Saariselkä, Finnish Lapland: a pollen analytical study of a high-resolution peat profile	2007	Satu Räsänen, Cynthia Froyd and Tomasz Goslar	Forest	10.1177/0959683607077016
THE IMPORTANCE OF VULNERABLE AREAS WITH POTENTIAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THE BOHEMIAN FOREST AND SOUTH BOHEMIA TOURISM REGIONS	2014	Josef Navrátil, Miha Lesjak, Kamil Pícha, Stanislav Martinát, Jana Navrátilová, Vivian L. White Baravalle Gilliam, Jaroslav Knotek, Tomá{ Ku~Era, Roman [Vec, Zuzana Balounová, Josef Rajchar	Forest	10.3986/AGS54108
Tourism management in national parks: Šumava and Bayerischer Wald (Bavarian Forest) in the Czech-German borderland	2021	Krzysztof Kołodziejczyk	Forest	10.1007s11629-021-6853-9
Towards sustainable growth in nature-based tourism destinations: Clients' views of land use options in Finnish Lapland	2013	Liisa Tyrväinena, Marja Uusitalo, Harri Silvennoinen, Eija Hasu	Forest	10.1016/j.landurbplan.2013.10.003
Using the visitor-employed photography method to analyse deadwood perceptions of forest visitors: a case study from Bavarian Forest National Park, Germany	2019	Joachim Rathmann, Philipp Sacher, Norman Volkmann, Marius Mayer	Forest	10.1007/s10342-020-01260-0
Wild Carpathia Future Development: From Illegal Deforestation to ORV Sustainable Recreation	2017	Mihai Voda, Adrian Torpan and Lucian Moldovan	Forest	10.3390/su9122254

Ecotourism Opportunities and Challenges in Butrint, Albania, a Unique UNESCO and Ramsar Site	2011	Ferdinand Bego, Jamarber Malltezi	Hunting	Available on research gate
Identifying spatial overlap in the values of locals, domestic- and international tourists to protected areas	2018	Lorena Muñoz, Vera Hausner, Greg Brown, Claire Runge, Per Fauchald	Hunting	10.1016/j.tourman.2018.07.015
Property and Possession: Hunting Tourism and the Morality of Landownership in Rural Norway	2014	Hogne Øian & Ketil Skogen	Hunting	10.1080/08941920.2015.1041658
Wilderness tourism and the moralities of commitment: Hunting and angling as modes of engaging with the natures and animals of rural landscapes in Norway	2013	Hogne Øian	Hunting	10.1016/j.jrurstud.2013.05.004
"It's All About the Scenery": Tourists' Perceptions of Cultural Ecosystem Services in the Lofoten Islands, Norway	2018	Bjørn P. Kaltenborn, Eivind F. Kaltenborn And John D.C. Linnell	Seascape	10.14430/arctic67944
A bridge between tourism and nature conservation: board-walks effects on coastal dune vegetation	2021	Irene Prisco & Alicia T. R. Acosta1 & Angela Stanisci	Seascape	10.1007/s11852-021-00809-4
Achieving forms of sustainable and competitive tourism in coastal areas. The case of Baixo Vouga	2009	H. Albuquerque, F. Martins and C. Costa	Seascape	Available on research gate
An Overview on Railway Impacts on Coastal Environment and Beach Tourism in Sicily	2021	Irene Cinelli, Giorgio Anfuso, Sandro Privitera and Enzo Pran-zini	Seascape	10.3390/su13137068
Assessing the scenic quality of transgressive dune systems on volcanic islands. The case of Corralejo	2021	Eva Pérez-Hernández, Carolina Peña-Alonso, Elisabeth Fernández-Cabrera, Luis Hernández-Calvento	Seascape	10.1016/j.scito-tenv.2021.147050
Coastal landscape and the hedonic price of accommodation	2007	Jacqueline M. Hamilton	Seascape	10.1016/j.ecolecon.2006.08.001
Coastal Scenic Beauty and Sensitivity at the Balearic Islands, Spain: Implication of Natural and Human Factors	2021	Alexis Mooser, Giorgio Anfuso, Lluís Gómez-Pujol, Angela Rizzo, Allan T. Williams and Pietro P. C. Aucelli	Seascape	10.3390/land10050456

Coastal and marine protected areas as key elements for tourism in small islands	2014	Catarina Fonseca Helena Calado, Fabiana Moniz, Chiara Bragagnolo, Artur Gil§, Mike Phillips, Margardia Pereira, Miguel Moreira	Seascape	10.2112/SI70-078
Geo-itineraries in the Cilento Vallo di Diano Geopark: A Tool for Tourism Development in Southern Italy	2014	N. Santangelo & P. Romano & A. Santo	Seascape	10.1007/s12371-014-0133-9
Indicator for a monitoring of Germany's landscape attractiveness	2017	Ulrich Walz , Christian Stein	Seascape	10.1016/j.ecolind.2017.06.052
Indicators for the Assessment of Physical Carrying Capacity in Coastal Tourist Destinations	2009	M. Tejada, G.C. Malvárez and F. Navas	Seascape	Available on research gate
Land-use conflicts in coastal tourism and the quest for governance innovations	2020	Anne-Mette Hjalager	Seascape	10.1016/j.landusepol.2020.104566
Leisure traveller perceptions of iconic coastal and fjord countryside areas: Lush naturalness or remembrance of agricultural times past?	2016	Jens Kr. Steen Jacobsen, Hans Tømmervik	Seascape	10.1016/j.landusepol.2016.01.013
Linking modelling and empirical data to assess recreation services provided by coastal habitats: The case of NW Portugal	2017	J. Cunhaa, M. Elliott, S. Ramos	Seascape	10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2017.12.022
Military Training Areas as Semicommons: The Territorial Valorization of Quirra (Sardinia) from Easements to Ecosystem Services	2020	Ginevra Balletto, Alessandra Milesi, Nicolò Fenu, Giuseppe Borruso and Luigi Mundula	Seascape	10.3390/su12020622
Modeling Nature-Based and Cultural Recreation Preferences in Mediterranean Regions as Opportunities for Smart Tourism and Diversification	2020	André Samora-Arvela, Jorge Ferreira, Eric Vaz and Thomas Panagopoulos	Seascape	10.3390/su12010433
Pescatourism, a sustainable tourist experience	2016	Maria Bonaria Lai, Gianni Cicia, Teresa Del Giudice	Seascape	10.1016/j.jclepro.2016.05.013
The Resurgent Conflict Between Offshore Wind Farms and Tourism: Underlying Storylines	2014	David Rudolph	Seascape	10.1080/14702541.2014.914239

The Stages of the Cultural Landscape Transformation of Seaside Resorts in Poland against the Background of the Evolving Nature of Tourism	2020	Wojciech Bal And Magdalena Czalczynska-Podolska	Seascape	10.3390/land9020055
Wellness Tourism—New Challenges and Opportunities for Tourism in Salou	2021	Marta Gemma Nel-Lo Andreu, Alba Font-Barnet and Marc Espasa Roca	Seascape	10.3390/su13158246
Tourism and an evolving international boundary: Bordering, debordering and rebordering on Usedom Island, Poland-Germany	2021	Marekwięckowski, Dallen J.Timothy	Seascape	10.1016/j.jdmm.2021.100647
THE ORIGINS OF COASTAL TOURISM: SEA BATHING AND SEASIDE RESORTS IN CATALONIA	2009	Mercedes Tatjer	Seascape	Not available
Can Livestock Farming and Tourism Coexist in Mountain Regions? A New Business Model for Sustainability	2017	Dino Genovese, Francesca Culasso, Elisa Giacosa and Luca Maria Battaglini	Pastoral	10.3390/su9112021
Competing for Meadows	2022	Marín-Yaseli, María Laguna, And Martínez, Teodoro Lasanta	Pastoral	10.1659/0276-4741(2003)023[0169:CFM]2.0.CO;2
The future of Alpine pastures – Agricultural or tourism development? Experiences from the German Alps	2021	Alice Wanner, Ulrike Probstl-Haider, Magdalena Feilhammer	Pastoral	10.1016/j.jort.2021.100405
Tourism Contribution to Agro-Ecosystems Conservation: The Case of Lesbos Island, Greece	2000	A. Loumou, C. Giourga, P. Dimitrakopoulos, S. Koukoulas	Pastoral	10.1007/s002670010093
Eating ants: understanding the terroir restaurant as a form of destination tourism	2014	Richard Tresidder	Sensescape	10.1080/14766825.2014.956751
Tourists' memories, sensory impressions and loyalty: In loco and post-visit study in Southwest Portugal	2017	Dora Agapito, Patrícia Pinto, Júlio Mendes	Sensescape	10.1016/j.tourman.2016.10.015
A regionalized IO-model to value seasonal recreational ecosystem services in a mountain National Park in Spain	2022	Martin Barroso V, De Castro-Pardo M, Fernández Martínez P, Azevedo JC	Park landscapes	10.1007/s11629-021-6911-3
Aesthetic perceptions of the landscape of a shrinking glacier: Evidence from the Mont Blanc massif	2021	Emmanuel Salim, Ludovic Ravanel, Christophe Gauchon	Park landscapes	10.1016/j.jort.2021.100411

Cultural Landscapes: A Multi-Stakeholder Methodological Approach to Support Widespread and Shared Tourism Development Strategies	2021	Lucia Della Spina and Claudia Giorno	Park landscapes	10.3390/su13137175
Evaluating Local Attractiveness for Tourism and Recreation—A Case Study of the Communes in Brzeski County, Poland	2022	Agnieszka Ziernicka-Wojtaszek and Magdalena Malec	Park landscapes	10.3390/land11010039
Food tourism in protected areas – sustainability for producers, the environment and tourism?	2012	Anne-Mette Hjalager & Pia Heike Johansen	Park landscapes	10.1080/09669582.2012.708041
Gender differences in visitor motivation and satisfaction: the case of Golija-Studenica Biosphere Reserve	2021	Snežana Milićević, Živana Krejić & Nataša Đorđević	Park landscapes	10.1553/eco.mont-13-sis70
Harmony or Conflict? A Focus Group Study on Traditional Use and Tourism Development in and around Rondane and Jotunheimen National Parks in Norway	2011	Jan Vidar Haukeland, Karoline Daugstad & Odd Inge Vistad	Park landscapes	10.1080/15022250.2011.632597
MAPPING SOCIAL VALUES FOR CULTURAL ECOSYSTEM SERVICES IN A MOUNTAIN LANDSCAPE IN THE ROMANIAN CARPATHIANS	2019	Sorina Mihaela Bogdan, Ileana Stupariu, Andreea Andratopârceanu & Irina Iulia Năstase	Park landscapes	10.26471/cjees/2019/014/072
The role of protected areas in destination choice in the European Alps	2014	Ulrike Pröbstl-Haider / Wolfgang Haider	Park landscapes	Not available
Tourism Impacts and Local Communities in Estonian National Parks	2011	Mart Reimann , Mari-Liis Lamp & Hannes Palang	Park landscapes	10.1080/15022250.2011.638206
Tourism management in national parks: Bavarian Forest in the Czech-German borderland	2021	Krzysztof Kołodziejczyk	Park landscapes	10.1007/s11629-021-6853
TOURISM AND PRESERVATION POLICIES IN KARST AREAS: COMPARISON BETWEEN THE ŠKOCJAN CAVES AND THE ARDÈCHE GORGE	2007	Mélanie Duval	Park landscapes	Available on research gate
Critical issues in health and wellness tourism: an exploratory study of visitors to wellness centres on Gran Canaria	2012	Diego Ramón Medina-Muñoz & Rita Dolores Medina-Muñoz	Therapeutic landscapes	10.1080/13683500.2012.748719

LAND PLANNING AS A SUPPORT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT BASED ON TOURISM: A CASE STUDY OF SLOVAK RURAL REGION	2015	Michal Klaučo, Bohuslava Gregorová, Uglješa Stankov, Vladimir Marković and Polina Lemenkova	Therapeutic landscapes	Available on research gate
Spiritual tourism on the way of Saint James the current situation	2017	Lucrezia Lopez, Rubén Camilo Lois González, Belén Ma Castro Fernández	Therapeutic landscapes	10.1016/j.tmp.2017.07.015
The resident and visitor gaze: a comparison of coastal social values at risk due to sea-level rise	2021	Beatrice Meo, Sonia Graham, Eduard Ariza, Antònia Casellas, Deisiane Delfino	Therapeutic landscapes	10.1016/j.envsci.2021.05.017

Appendix II: Visitor survey questionnaire

Hi! We are doing a survey about tourism in **Vama Buzăului**. You can help us by answering a few questions.

*Write group size and type of group (family, hiking group…….)

1. What is your nationality (as in indicated in your passport)?
    - Romania
    - Other, please specify ……

2. Is this your first visit to *Vama Buzăului?*
    - Yes
    - No, it's my …… visit

3. What activities did you participate in your visit to *Vama Buzăului? (*Multiple *choice)*
    - Hiking
    - Biking
    - Camping
    - Fishing
    - Participating in local festivals
    - Connecting with nature
    - Exploring a new place
    - Visiting the cultural attractions
    - Other, please specify……

4. How did you know about the destination?
    - Radio, tv
    - Flyers, Travel books
    - Social media
    - Through friends
    - On my own, please specify how…….
    - Others, please specify…….

5. How long is your trip to Vama *Buzăului?*

…… days

6. What is your gender?
    - Female
    - Male
    - Diverse

7. How old are you?
    - 14-20
    - 21-35
    - 36-50
    - 51-65
    - Over 65

8. What is the highest educational degree you received?
    - Elementary
    - Highschool
    - College/ Undergraduate degree (Bachelors)
    - Graduate degree (Masters and above)

(*Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and creates knowledge and understanding through interpretation and education of all involved (visitors, staff and the visited).*

9. How familiar are you with the concept of ecotourism? (Choose one)
    - Very familiar
    - Somewhat familiar
    - Neutral
    - Not very familiar
    - Not familiar at all

10. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Ecotourism destinations contribute positively to the conservation of natural resources.					
Ecotourism supports the protection of wildlife and their habitats.					
Local communities benefit economically from ecotourism activities.					
Ecotourism destinations prioritize the preservation of cultural heritage and local traditions.					
Ecotourism fosters environmental education and awareness among visitors.					
I am willing to pay a premium for ecotourism experiences that align with sustainable practices.					
I actively seek eco-certified accommodations when visiting ecotourism destinations.					

11. Are you aware *Vama Buzăului is a certified eco-tourism destination?*
    - Yes
    - No

If yes, please specify how …….

12. In your opinion, how well does *Vama Buzăului* meet ecotourism goals and commitments? (Choose one)
    - Very well
    - Moderately well
    - Adequately
    - Not very well
    - Not at all

13. How likely are you to recommend *Vama Buzăului as an* ecotourism destination to others? (Choose one)
    - Very likely
    - Likely
    - Neutral
    - Unlikely
    - Very unlikely

14. Please share any specific sustainable practices or initiatives you have observed or experienced during your visit to this ecotourism destination.

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