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# Gazing sustainable tourism in Southeast Asia

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This article thoroughly explores the approaches, challenges and disputed sustainable tourism concepts in Southeast Asia. It explores sustainable activities constructed by the hobbies of tourists, as well as the factors that impede the awareness of sustainable tourism.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Upon the results obtained by purposive analysis on literature, the sustainability studies lens traces its roots back to ideas like political ecology and governance theory. The sustainability studies lens describes the process of contestation and the mechanism of sustainability discourse.

**Findings** – Despite strong coverage commitments, tourism within the destination continues to privilege economic development over environmental protection and equity. The environment is degraded through greenwashing and a lack of consideration for voices. At the identical time, the COVID-19 crisis provided a danger to dominant development paradigms with new sorts of tourism.

**Research limitations/implications** – In a multi-site study across Southeast Asia, a longitudinal study analyzing the outcomes of changes in the scope and implementation of certification schemes and environmental, social and governance principles, future research should expand on these conclusions. While empirical research on the proposed Industry-Academy Hub model is expected to test its viability as a framework for collaborative efforts, comparative studies across other regions around the world could place Southeast Asian findings within broader international debates.

**Practical implications** – To ensure sustainability commitments transcend mere gesture politics, they highlight the importance of enhanced governance frameworks, strong enforcement and an anti-greenwashing law. Taking into account transactional ecological limits and cultural sovereignty, it is crucial to note the significance of mainstreaming sustainability in operations, as opposed to focusing on branding sustainability operations for business operators.

**Social implications** – In relation to the ethical issues of inclusivity, justice and fairness in the development of sustainable tourism, the present study has significant social implications, especially in relation to the Southeast Asian tourism community.

**Originality/value** – Indeed, as a new paradigm of the interdependencies between Southeast Asian tourism practices and sustainability discourses, the present article provides a space for industry-academic collaboration, which is a necessity in a proper understanding of governance and power relations and the development of more efficient policy instruments.

**Keywords** Community, Governance, Paradigms, Southeast Asia, Sustainability

**Paper type** Viewpoint

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Context of Southeast Asian tourism growth

Southeast Asia has emerged as one of the globe's fastest-growing tourism regions, with destinations that include Bali, Phuket and Ha Long Bay attracting 69 million site visitors annually and contributing appreciably 314 billion U.S. dollars to GDP and 42 million jobs (ADB, 2025; Zafarullah and Mehnaz, 2025). It addressing those issues requires frameworks rooted in cultural sovereignty, rights-primarily based participation and postcolonial ethics. Proper empowerment involves the co-introduction of tourism narratives, governance and gain-sharing mechanisms (Lawn *et al.*, 2025).

While, ecotourism in the coastlines of Southern Asia is at a tipping point. The mangrove forests, coral and islands in this region provide livelihood for the people and attract 120 million visitors, or 8.4% of the cumulative foreign tourists per annum (Antom, 2025). These ecosystems are getting endangered because of climate change, unchecked tourist development and the dispersal of controlling authority. Indeed, the traditional controlling authority system,



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strictly top-down, is no longer effective. Nevertheless, there is a certain trend within the communities wishing for a controlling authority system wherein there is a sharing of power or control between communities, governments or the private sectors.

### *1.2 Definitions of key concepts*

It debates within the area regularly invoke standards together with sustainability, sustainable tourism, overtourism, cultural authenticity and network participation. Sustainability is most commonly described as development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their very own, balancing ecological, social, and monetary priorities (Boluk *et al.*, 2019; UNWCED, 1987). Sustainable tourism applies those ideas for the tourism zone, looking to align monetary increase with environmental protection and socio-cultural well-being, although in practice these targets are often erratically prioritized (UNWTO, 2005). Overtourism takes place whilst traveler numbers exceed a destination's carrying capacity, generating ecological and social lines. In addition, cultural authenticity and network participation are regularly defined as pillars of sustainability (Boluk *et al.*, 2019; Dodds and Butler, 2019; Jieyao and Kumar, 2025).

### *1.3 Identification of the research gap*

While there is a rapidly increasing amount of literature on the topic of sustainable tourism development in Southeast Asia, it would appear that substantial knowledge exists on topics such as challenge initiatives, as well as on challenges in evaluation. There also seems to be a gap in knowledge with regard to the examination of issues on/related to the definition/dynamics of the framework definition on the topic of location sources (Suriyankietkaew and Nimsai, 2021; Zafarullah and Mehnaz, 2025). This article addresses the gap by supplying a regionally focused, mirrored image of the politics and practices of sustainability in Southeast Asian tourism.

### *1.4 Political ecology in tourism*

This study investigates tourism development in terms of justice and political ecology. Drawing upon political ecology and governance, for instance, several researchers enable an analysis of how narratives about sustainability are created. It values the foster and what the consequences for people and nature are (Buhalis *et al.*, 2023).

### *1.5 Research questions*

As a direct result, the aim of the article will be to explore the conceptualization and application of sustainable tourism within the framework of Southeast Asia and the role of governance within it. This will be assisted through the following three questions for the investigation:

- (1) What is the role of sustainability as a factor within the tourism discourse of Southeast Asia?
- (2) What are the factors, classed under governance, social culture and environment, that are making?
- (3) Are there potential ways through which a just and ecologically responsible future for tourism can be actualized?

### *1.6 Contributions of the article*

This research work makes several crucial contributions. In the theoretical aspect, this research work has successfully accomplished substantial tourism research using the concept of sustainability by way of inoculation, which is contentious and dynamic. Some methodologies are included in this research work due to the substantial reflection practice included in the

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selection of the relevant literature and cases in this research work. There is substantial local context that exists as a result of its setting within the context of the complex setting of Southeast Asia, aside from its importance in the deep debate between tourism and its future.

## 2. Literature

### 2.1 Conceptual framework: critical concept

The definition of sustainable tourism would also apply in the general sense because it would be an improvement to meet the needs of the greater sector of tourism. It would not affect the ability of the succeeding generations to satisfy their needs (UNWCED, 1987; UNWTO, 2005). Although it is highly ethical, it sometimes lacks the depth of analysis in its application in the real world, especially in circumstances where there is inequality, energy imbalance and competition. On the other hand, in the real world, sustainability is sometimes achieved through management practices such as eco-labeling, impact assessment and regulatory advice (Suriyankietkaew and Nimsai, 2021).

To address these gaps, this article is anchored in an essential tourism research attitude that integrates political ecology, postcolonial critique and governance ideas. Political ecology highlights how environmental issues are formed by struggles over electricity, justice and aid manipulation. Postcolonial critique is famous for how tourism can reproduce colonial logics of cultural exploitation and inequality. Governance principle refers to the institutional measures, responsibilities and techniques of decision-making. It determines the way in which guidelines on sustainability are framed and implemented. Taken together, these lenses raise a set of questions about who defines the term “sustainability,” whom it is meant to benefit, and who must pay the price (Nooteboom, 2006).

2.1.1 Clarifying key principles. Numerous crucial principles guide this article’s analysis:

- (1) Floating signifier: a term so widely used that it risks dropping precision and can be appropriated through multiple, even contradictory, interests (Buhalis *et al.*, 2023).
- (2) Contested terrain: sustainability is not a hard and fast or universally relevant model but an area of negotiation where governments, organizations, groups and pupils war over which means legitimacy and control (Maric *et al.*, 2025).
- (3) Greenwashing: the method used to make false claims or exaggerated claims for greater sustainability with the aim of beautifying the photo or being competitive without the actual exchange value (Ragazou *et al.*, 2025).
- (4) The cultural commodification includes the attempts at enveloping the culture in a manner that it can be packaged so as to be sold to the vacationer. In this manner, culture gets sacrificed (Cohen, 1988).
- (5) Inclusive Tourism: Following are the steps necessary to ensure that the community in question, underrepresented perhaps, in a rural community, for instance, gets appropriately represented (Thakur *et al.*, 2023).
- (6) Pseudo-Participation: it is a form of tokenism designed to make engagement with the environment-related neighborhood groups in a manner so that they participate in the process of consultation that takes place on issues concerning the environment (Gius, 2018; Palacin *et al.*, 2020).
- (7) Colonial ethics: A critique of tourism practice that transgresses logics of dispossession, exploitation or illustration under the umbrella of development (Kadomskaia *et al.*, 2020).
- (8) Cultural sovereignty: the communities’ right to delineate, direct and protect their own cultural past and expressions against the use of such by outsiders (Tsosie, 2002).

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In Southeast Asia, wherein tourism is carefully tied to nation-led improvement goals and foreign direct funding, sustainability frameworks are often formed via top-down governance and disconnected from neighborhood realities and aspirations. This study presents sustainability in a different light, which is not as a fixed or universal model but as a field of debate in which many actors – governments, agencies, communities and students play out issues of meaning, power, and legitimacy (Maric *et al.*, 2025). Critical reflection is a narrative about the practices and perspectives that embrace the position of a perspective on the complex relationships between the practices of tourism and stakeholders. Sustainable tourism also involves change through the principles of equity (Khuadthong *et al.*, 2025).

### *2.2 Ecological fragility and environmental issues*

Damages to the reef in the corals, deforestation, water scarcity and the effective disposal of solid wastes are among the causes in the case of Southeast Asia. These are generally more problematic in areas that are environmentally sensitive but do not possess the necessary infrastructure to address the exponentially increased population (e.g. mangrove forest destruction Phuket, Langkawi and Cambodia, which determines the biodiversity of the coastal areas). The situation in the case of Boracay in the Philippines in 2018, known to be a “cesspool” according to Philippine President Duterte, is one such instance related to development impacts upon the ecology (Hu *et al.*, 2021). The seasonal attention of site visitors additionally quickens ecological stress. Popular diving and snorkeling websites, along with Komodo (Indonesia), Maya Bay (Thailand) and El Nido (Philippines), have professional extreme coral harm from overcrowding, anchoring, and pollutants from boats and sunscreens (Turak and DeVantier, 2010). Without visitor caps or systematic effect monitoring, overuse undermines the very factors of hobby on which tourism depends (Dredge, 2022).

Even though there are environmental regulations and controls, the execution of this factor may fail owing to poor enforcement, weak governments and the Situ activist community. Large-scale plans may sometimes disregard the environmental studies involving scientific facts and community concerns (Agarwal *et al.*, 2024). However, there are a few trial sites for such regenerative approaches, including coral restoration in Flores, Indonesia; zero-waste tourism in Siquijor, Philippines; and mangrove replanting in Koh Kong, Cambodia (Khuadthong *et al.*, 2025). However, despite the potential lack of sustainability governance structures, tourism planning in Southeast Asia is based on a paradigm that considers the sustainability of the tourism industry in terms of the environment and the balance of generations. Without systemic trade, environmental vulnerability will remain a significant barrier to sustainable tourism. For instance, it has been mentioned that tourists require 65% more water than the population of Bali, and hence, the disputes about the supply of water have emerged in rural areas (Widhiasthini *et al.*, 2024).

The six-month closure of Boracay Island in the Philippines in 2016 due to “cesspool conditions” remains a powerful symbol of the ecological costs of tourism (Bryan Tan *et al.*, 2016). In a similar manner, Bali’s vulnerability to unique, water-intensive tourism infrastructure has resulted in severe groundwater depletion in agricultural areas (Rani and Chandran, 2025). The unplanned scuba tourism, as well as cruise ship tourism in the Indonesian Komodo National Park, has triggered reef degradation, followed by species disruption (Kurniasari *et al.*, 2019), whereas developments in Langkawi and Phuket have caused mangrove forests to degrade (Cartier, 2002; Main *et al.*, 2007). While the environmental issues concerning the Southeast Asian tourism destinations are presented in Table 1. Instant answers can be given for the second research question: “What are the factors that make up governance, social culture and environment?” The geological stresses concerning the significant Southeast Asian locations are presented in Table 1 from the above analysis of the various components, water scarcity, forest degradation and degradation of the coral reefs are the characteristics of the tourism destinations in Southeast Asia.

**Table 1.** Table 1 Maps ecological pressures across key Southeast Asia

Destination	Environmental impacts	Tourism drivers	References
Boracay, Philippines	Coral reef destruction	Mass tourism	Bryan Tan <i>et al.</i> (2016)
Bali, Indonesia	Beach erosion	Beach tourism	Rani and Chandran (2025)
Komodo, Indonesia	Coral reef	Natural tourism	Kurniasari <i>et al.</i> (2019)
Phuket, Thailand	Mangrove, ecosystem stress	Diving tourism	Main <i>et al.</i> (2007)
Langkawi, Malaysia	Ecosystem and habitat degradation	Large resorts, hotel development	Cartier (2002)
Vietnam	Social–ecological negative side effects	Community-based, informal homestays	Tran (2014)
China	Destinations, groundwater, air depletion	Rapid development, traffic jams	Zeng <i>et al.</i> (2020)
El Nido, Philippines	Damage to corals caused by bleaching, pollution caused by boats, deterioration of beaches	Snorkeling tourist industry, cruise ships and illegal tourist flow	Turak and DeVantier (2010)

**Source(s):** Developed by authors

Note: The term “tourism drivers” here does not only imply the external factors like “urban traffic,” but also the factors related to tourism, such as uncontrolled growth and lack of infrastructure. This clarifies the conceptual accuracy noted by reviewers.

Table 1 draws attention to a regional pattern of ecological fragility linked to governance and policy failures rather than actual traveler volumes. The cases demonstrate that environmental degradation is more a consequence of short-term growth priorities and lax enforcement than it is an inevitable consequence of tourism, as evidenced by Boracay’s vulnerable sewage infrastructure, Bali’s poor water regulations, and Komodo’s lack of tourist caps. The second research question is concerned with “What governance, socio-cultural, and environmental barriers prevent the implementation?” It gets readily addressed through this response to how the degradation of the environment is a result of the failure of an institution, rather than factors that are specific to tourism.

### 2.3 Sociocultural concerns and disempowerment of community

A possibility of renovation, coupled with the creation of jobs, is one aspect that has remained an inherent character in the development of tourism in Southeast Asia. At long last, the tourism activity in Southeast Asia is more or less part of the business that is conducted by subcultures, where rituals, traditions and sacred sites are being taken advantage of by the world in general. For instance, there is a tradition of renovating rituals and dancing events in the temples on the Island of Bali in Indonesia. While in Sapa, Vietnam, ethnic minorities are advertised as a part of “ethnic tourism circuits,” in which they have little control over their illustration (Truong *et al.*, 2025). Additionally, Luang Prabang, Laos, UNESCO designation has brought monetary advantages but also gentrification and erosion of intangible traditions (Zafarullah and Mehnaz, 2025).

Despite news references to “community-based tourism,” local community participation is often superficial. The selection process remains focused on governance, and developers only care about symbolic, superficial participation. Another case study is the Mandalika Special Economic Zone, which is found in Indonesia. The Mandalika special economic development, which is described as a sustainable tourism model, saw the settling of populations along the coastline and the constriction of the location where the fishing grounds are, hence the scarcity

of water. Accordingly, this is a sign that the sustainability of development fails to consider the rights of the indigenous population (Zafarullah and Mehnaz, 2025). What is therefore required is one that is guided by cultural sovereignty, participating practices that are guided by human rights, and post-colonial ethics. The empowerment that is used is the one that is guided by the base of the share of the understanding and the benefits of the sharing (Lawn *et al.*, 2025).

#### 2.4 Governance and policy gaps

In terms of enforcement, even though sustainability in tourism is an aim in ASEAN and nationally defined strategies exist, decentralized responsibility without accountability, corruption and lack of capacity pose threats (Zeng *et al.*, 2020). The challenge imperative that occurs pertains to the prevalence of top-down improvement styles with a focus on growth. The priority of investment in the global infrastructures of these developing countries has overshadowed ecological constraints within tourism areas in Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia. This impacts areas such as Ha Long Bay, Mandalika and Langkawi. These development projects illustrate the persistent mismatch between sustainable talk and practice (Ministry of Tourism, 2024).

In contrast, conflicting mandates and elite capture create challenges for coherence at the local level of reporting. These problematic accountability systems are also often less effective than voluntary eco-certification programs as marketing tools due to the absence of consistent metrics and reliable auditing (Abraham, 2024). In contrast, UNESCO-designated areas like Langkawi and Halong Bay are among the countries that face ecological challenges due to overdevelopment and environmental pollution. The issue of sustainability in this particular debate encourages growth and does not hinder it (Thompson *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, Governance for Southeast Asia faces failures of technology and failures of politics across their region. The list of such disasters includes: Unless there are changes to allow for inclusive selection, credible enforcement and sector-coordinated policy and regulatory efforts, sustainable tourism could well be only an illusion (Li *et al.*, 2023).

#### 2.5 Greenwashing the private sector

Many resorts and travel agencies advertise that they follow important social and environmental standards. But only a small number do because of poor sustainability reporting. “Green” claims are frequently difficult to verify. “Greenwashing” refers to the presentation of sustainability more as a marketing tactic than as an operational requirement (Buckley *et al.*, 2024). Although there isn’t much hard data to back it up, the use of sustainability branding is growing in popularity in the personal sphere. According to an analysis, less than 30% of lodge disclosures in Thailand and Indonesia accurately reported environmental requirements, and less than 10% had finished an external audit (Sinaga *et al.*, 2025).

Common greenwashing methods in the tourism industry encompass (Battisti *et al.*, 2025):

- (1) Token measures, including towel reuse campaigns, at the same time as ignoring groundwater extraction or energy intake from fossil fuels.
- (2) Use of indistinct terminology (e.g. “eco-luxurious” or “sustainable reveal in”) without measurable signs.
- (3) Symbolic actions (donations or beach clean-up events with continued destructive fashion consumption patterns). The absence of binding reporting requirements perpetuates this trouble. At the same time as frameworks that include the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) provide steerage and voluntary compliance, one-third birthday celebration verification is uncommon (Mohamadi *et al.*, 2022).

As an instance, a Langkawi lodge operator admitted in 2023, “We list ourselves on eco-structures due to the fact visitors assume it—however, operationally, little has modified.”

Further, a Vietnam-based consultant cited, “Most sustainability techniques are retrofitted for marketing rather than embedded in business decisions” (Mendoza and Tadeo, 2023). Large chains have all started integrating environmental, social and governance (ESG) metrics into strategic planning. Small and medium organizations (SMEs) – which dominate Southeast Asia’s tourism landscape – regularly lack resources or information (Ferrerias-Méndez *et al.*, 2022). Addressing greenwashing calls for obligatory disclosures, unbiased audits and consequences for fake claims. In addition, there are collaborative efforts amongst companies, policymakers and academia to foster transparency and actual transformation (Pham *et al.*, 2025).

### 2.6 COVID-19 as a turning factor for rebuilding

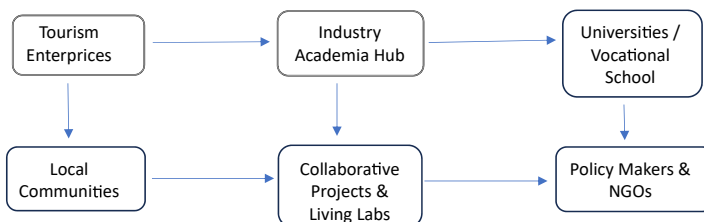
In the case of community ecotourism projects, they are planned in a way that promotes ecological healing, cultural revival, and inclusive governance (Wibowo and Hariadi, 2024). We must not think of the epidemic as just an illness but rather as an opportunity to stop the possible spread of the illness. People would therefore be in a good position to deal with other crises through the development of transdisciplinary models that are both regenerative and just. These programs make it abundantly evident how inclusive government, cultural restoration and ecological rejuvenation could combine to create modest but meaningful recovery steps. Of course, scale change is necessary for such benefits (ASEAN, 2020).

### 2.7 The role of Academia–Industry Collaboration

The emergence of academics and industries within the Hubs for the undertaking of research, sustainability audits and innovation for the subjects that encompass the entire financial system, along with the regenerative tourism within the Tourism and Hospitality Sustainability Hub (Wang and Cheablum, 2025) in order to validate options and improve knowledge expertise via the governments and organizations, is the sector that tends to remain poised in the crossing of the gap that arises within the scope of the principle and the practice. ASEAN Tourism requirements offer a regional framework, but compliance stays largely self-said. Integrating participatory verification mechanisms and linking them with academia–enterprise hubs should toughen duty. Further, the rise of virtual nomad and backpacker tourism offers possibilities for dispersed spending but calls for tailor-made laws to mitigate social and ecological risks (ASEAN, 2020). One of the most promising trends for bridging the gap between tourism ideas and practice in Southeast Asia is the upward push of academia–industry hubs. Nevertheless, to address the study’s query 1 – How is sustainability framed and contested in Southeast Asian

F1 tourism discourse? – Figure 1 illustrates an academia–industry collaboration model.

Figure 1 shows that sustainability is negotiated amongst multiple actors – universities, policymakers, industry and communities – each bringing competing priorities. The contested nature of “sustainability” becomes clear when these interests clash (Bosangit *et al.*, 2025). However, the version highlights that collaboration gives a pathway to reconcile these discourses into actionable practices. Nevertheless, it visualizes the proposed academia–



AQ: 7 **Figure 1.** Version of enterprise-Academia Collaboration for Sustainable Tourism. Source: Developed by authors

industry collaboration model, which frames sustainability as a co-created method as opposed to a fixed final result (Rinaldi *et al.*, 2022). In place of being described completely by means of governments or company actors, sustainability emerges through iterative negotiation between universities, practitioners, policymakers and communities (Trencher *et al.*, 2017). This illustrates the contested nature of the construct – with an emphasis on the extraordinary actors who have diverging priorities for financial boom, cultural sustenance and natural bounds who can nevertheless agree upon architectures of knowledge trade.

By incorporating sustainability in all pedagogical and operative practice exercises, this model assists in finding or solving research question one: “What is the role of sustainability as a factor within the tourism discourse of Southeast Asia?” It shows that excellent sustainability involves talk and power-sharing. On the local level, frameworks as well as the “ASEAN Tourism requirements.” In doing so, to respond to analytical question three: “Are there potential ways through which a just and ecologically responsible future for tourism can be actualized?” The following are the enhancements that emerge in Table 2.

Figure 1 illustrates a collaborative paradigm focused on the academic and business sectors. Sustainability issues include the costs associated with the paradigm. Meanwhile, Table 2 shows that new tourism methods in Southeast Asia represent diverse and sustainable opportunities. The table also highlights fragmented practices (including regeneration retreats, nomadic tourism and standards development) in ASEAN (Zhang *et al.*, 2025).

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### 3. Methodology

In contrast to an empirically informed and speculatively framed research design, this article takes a conceptually important and reflective stance. The aim is not constantly focused on quantifiable variables and an inquiry into how sustainability in the tourism sector of Southeast Asia is framed, disputed and enacted in relation to tourism practice and discourse (Richter, 2009). The underlying epistemological stance of this research is informed by key tourism research (Dann *et al.*, 1988), political ecology studies (Clark and Nyaupane, 2024) and governance theories (Bock *et al.*, 2021) and concerned with issues of power (Cornelissen, 2010), justice and ecology (Mandić *et al.*, 2025).

There are three interlinked techniques that guide the evaluation, very similar to the article’s research questions:

**Table 2.** Synthesizes rising improvement within the place

Best practice	Description	Emerging insights	Key sources
Regenerative Tourism	It highlights the need to focus on biological regeneration and the development of common culture	Centers empowerment, and networking	Adams <i>et al.</i> (2022), Cave and Dredge (2021), Sulkowski <i>et al.</i> (2024)
Digital Nomad Tourism	Trends of decentralized tourism in countryside/semi-urban areas by long-stay patterns	Potential solution for the problem of overtourism and diversion of the positive impact of the problem through regulations	Zerva <i>et al.</i> (2023)
ASEAN Tourism Standards	The certification process, sustainability	Equitable principle, as well as adaptation for climatic changes, which in the absence of the effective ASEAN monitoring system	Akkapin (2019), ASEAN (2020)
Industry–Academia Hubs	Living labs, student consultancies and applied research collaborations	Facilitate innovation, adaptive governance and policy experimentation	Shvetsova and Lee (2021)

Source(s): Developed by authors

(1) Literature assessment and Theoretical Anchoring

A purposive evaluation of scholarship in tourism studies, political ecology, postcolonial critique and governance frameworks affords the conceptual basis. This strategy addresses the *first research question*: “What is the role of sustainability as a factor within the tourism discourse of Southeast Asia?” With the aid of permitting interrogation of mainstream paradigms, which include the triple backside line and community-primarily-based tourism, like more recent strategies along with regenerative tourism, cultural sovereignty, and adaptive co-management (McEwan, 2018).

(2) Coverage analysis

The critical analysis is conducted on national and local coverage documents, including sustainability frameworks for ASEAN, national tourism master plans and eco-certification schemes. This directly answers the *second research question*: “What are the factors, categorized into governance, social culture, and environment, that are making the sustainability goals?” Through the recognition of the gap between sustainability goals and implementation in practice (Ishak and Thiruchelvam, 2024).

(3) Considering Empirical Cases Reflectively

The examples, such as those found in Boracay, Bali, Komodo Island, Langkawi and Mandalika, are employed to demonstrate the reflective or mirrored copy in practical life situations. These examples are compiled from secondary sources such as scholarly writings, coverage reports and contributor writings because of the emergence of the practices of resistance, innovation and the trends of opportunity governance. In an effort to address the third research question of “Are there potential ways through which a just and ecologically responsible future for tourism may be actualized?” (Arora *et al.*, 2024), these examples currently function as heuristics and not comprehensive research studies because of the above-mentioned trends.

In adopting these approaches, it can be seen that this article will demonstrate the relevance of this conceptual analysis. In adopting this approach, there possibly can be an identification of newcomer alternatives based on the topic of tourism in ASEAN, governance dynamics and its contradictory movement inside these structures. However, there is no effort in these approaches that tends to prove the generalizability based on empirical evidence.

Such a methodological approach is used in the context of Southeast Asia because it is a case where there is a critical nexus occurring between rapid tourism development, high levels of natural sensitivity, and unbalanced levels of governance capacity. Indeed, the marine destinations in this region are of the utmost importance on a global scale. However, their development has been constrained by a situation where they are in a postcolonial context. It is foreign investment-driven and a state-led development agenda, which makes sustainability in this region quite complex.

#### 4. Finding

This article will examine the outcome of theme analysis and the data collected from secondary sources in response to the question being investigated in this study. The data have been defined under six themes. These are specifically developed to understand the scopes of perception and boundaries of governance and the prospects emerging in the sustainable practices of tourism in Southeast Asia.

##### 4.1 Environmental impacts and ecological fragility

However, the harmful impact of mass tourism on the environment is not lessened by the absence of proper regulation in certain regions of Southeast Asia. Examples and the past six months since Boracay’s closure in 2018 prove that too much can too easily outgrow an area’s

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carrying capacity. Bali is losing fresh water resources, while mangrove ecosystems are decreasing in Phuket, Langkawi, and Cambodia. Why? Overpopulation in Komodo, Maya Bay, and El Nido has caused pollution in these areas that is too frequently compounded by the useful absence of tourist infrastructure or quotas. [Table 1](#) also demonstrates the strong correlation between governance issues, such as inadequate zoning enforcement, infrastructure destruction, private investor policy enforcement and environmental degradation. This is more than just a result of travel. In these cases, the system's weakness is evident as short-term economic goals are consistently given precedence over ecological protections.

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#### *4.2 Sociocultural concerns and community disempowerment*

Tourism has also been promoted as a way toward cultural conservation and the bringer of livelihood, but realities lean toward commodification and disempowerment. In Bali, temple rituals and dances are in actual practice. It has been scheduled to fit into the tourist schedules that lead to the minimalizing of their deeply profound meaning ([Rani and Chandran, 2025](#)). In Vietnam, ethnic minorities are inserted into "Ethnic tourism circuits" in methods that give very little control over representation ([Tran, 2014](#)). UNESCO status in Luang Prabang, Laos, adds sales but results in place gentrification. Although in "Community-based totally absolutely networking tourism," an act of participation may be symbolic as an alternative to conspicuous, because the power of preference-making is in the hands of authorities our bodies or personal builders. The Mandalika special economic zone (Indonesia) is an instance in which massive development changed the lifeworld of the villagers alongside the coast in the name of eco-friendly tourism ([Budi et al., 2023](#)).

#### *4.3 Governance and coverage gaps*

In spite of the fact that sustainable tourism in these ASEAN frameworks and at the country-level master plans is an objective, the decentralized approach has bestowed the responsibility without the power or resources upon the local authorities in this area. The subsequent section looks at factors influencing ASEAN tourism. Eco-labels are another bunch of policies that disclose the gaps in the above policies. It lacks benchmarks and is audited by a third party. Therefore, eco-labels lean more toward marketing and less toward the concept of accountability in the quest for sustainability. Case studies of Langkawi, Malaysia ([Cartier, 2002](#)) and Ha long Bay in Vietnam ([Bhaya Cruises Blog, 2025](#); [Viet, 2014](#)) propose that the label for which everyone aspires – UNESCO Biosphere Reserves – is no longer an obstacle in the way of overdevelopment because the ideology of sustainability is used as an excuse for development instead of being an antidote for it. Unless this occurs, being sustainable will remain a statement and a goal rather than a change.

#### *4.4 Greenwashing and personal region*

The personal zone has increasingly embraced the language of sustainability in recent years, but many of the claims are either unsupported or misleading. Less than 10% of resort submissions in Thailand and Indonesia have been reviewed by an impartial third party, and fewer than 30% of submissions contain verifiable environmental data ([Ching, 2024](#)).

Greenwashing examples include:

- (1) Token measures and packages for reusing towels, while disregarding resource-intensive operations.
- (2) General terms like "eco-luxury" that lack quantifiable criteria.
- (3) Seaside easy-ups are one example of a symbolic gesture used to divert attention away from extractive practices.

During interviews with industry insiders, it has been suggested that sustainability is more of a marketing tool than a way to transform the current approach. An additional barrier for SMEs is

the lack of mandatory reporting and effective verification systems. Greenwashing can be stopped by implementing accountability policies, which are not only subject to mandatory disclosure and but also penalties for misleading information (von Briel and Dolnicar, 2025).

#### 4.5 *The revolution in recovery that is COVID-19*

In regard to the tourism sector in Southeast Asia, it was left open to both exposure and adaptation to the pandemic. Rural cooperatives in Yogyakarta explored the collaborative potential for these concepts, such as the generation of storytelling over history, in addition to the exploration of water-sharing systems in agriculture in Bali. However, the impact of lockdown policies significantly reduced international visitor arrivals and caused unemployment, but also gave a temporary relief for biological sustainability (Pratiwi, 2025).

#### 4.6 *Collaboration between industry and academia*

The main aim of the academic-industry partnership would be the use of these innovations. They are vital for the sustainable management of the tourism industry in order to create an effective joint business that could benefit each other. For example, the Tourism and Hospitality Sustainability Hub Bali brings together the engagement of policymakers and industry members, as well as college students, for the creation of joint tasks like the formation of an audit report on the tourist systems through network formation. The above-mentioned centers (Figure 1) function upon the notion of the two-way flow of knowledge with the process. It is implemented in the practical knowledge in the corporate sector and in the theoretical knowledge in academia, respectively. Moreover, it has become evident that Table 2 features the power dynamics in the challenges that emerge in the context of the new best practices. It connects to the digital nomad experience and regenerative retreats, as well as the ASEAN sustainability requirements. It is important that the processes of scalability and verification remain optimized in order to promote good governance in environments. It features the innovation transition process in terms of pilot schemes to trading systems (Trang, 2025).

### 5. Discussion

This phase integrates the broader insights with regard to the framing, contestation and realization surrounding sustainability in tourism within the Southeast Asian context through the amplification of the case proof established within the findings section. The proposed form of this enterprise-academia symbiosis is depicted in Figure 1. It responds to the first question through the illustration of sustainability as a collaborative process that is established through a form of negotiating strategy as opposed to an endpoint or a hypothesis to the provision above regarding the novel framing for this discussion. It responds to the question. Table 2 can be deemed representative in providing an appreciation for the new practices that exist with regard to this subject matter that acknowledge the transformative potential as well as its limitations (Stumpf *et al.*, 2016).

The aim of this research paper is to examine the extent to which the problem of sustainability in the touristic branch in the region of Southeast Asia has been constructed, contested and implemented. Results demonstrate not only the linkage of the problem of sustainability in the touristic branch but also how and to what extent it has been used in order to prevent the knowledge of sustainability by means of biological risk, disintegration of the topology of the network, disaster of government and private space of greenwashing. On the other hand, there are new trends, nomads or regenerative travel, as well as collaborations with educational establishments that represent a movement toward flexibility.

#### 5.1 *The sustainability dilemma*

This evaluation examines the use of sustainability as a signifier for a competing actor by contesting parties in order for them to attain their goals rather than sustainability as an objective. Governments establish it to legitimize large-scale projects, private companies use it

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as a branding tool, and groups are often invoked without any real empowerment. This illustrates how sustainability discourse is deeply connected from a political ecology perspective, where social justice and ecological constraints are inextricably subordinated to immediate economic needs (Rastegar, 2025).

### *5.2 Justice, power and governance*

Findings in Boracay, Mandalika, Langkawi and Ha Long Bay indicate that initiatives to address ecological realities do not support governance frameworks. Sustainability initiatives are threatened by nepotistic practices and a lack of enforcement of laws on these matters.

These results corroborate other assessment findings about governance ideals, showing that if justice systems do not prioritize distributive power in decision-making, organizations aiming to achieve sustainability cannot achieve a balance between accountability and engagement with organizational networks.

### *5.3 Postcolonial ethics and cultural sovereignty*

It often perpetuates colonial ideologies of extraction, where sources of culture become used for consumption external to it, as is reflected in the commoditization of rituals, history and landscapes. This judgment, from a postcolonial ethic, illustrates that cultural sovereignty and the freedom of groups to narrate and represent and reap from their own history in their own words and voices must be the new paradigms of sustainable tourism, in place of potentially exploitative “network-principally based” tourism.

### *5.4 Expanding choices and flexible routes*

Modern practices are emerging despite these systemic, demanding situations. Examples of initiatives to move beyond the triple bottom line toward fashions based on ecological recovery, round economies and participatory governance include regenerative retreats, network-led conservation and academia-industry hubs. However, those practices are still dispersed and do not have institutional support or integration into standard tourism education. This points to the necessity of adaptive governance frameworks that can further integrate those alternatives into practice and policy. These frameworks are typified by co-control, iterative learning and resilience-building.

### *5.5 Connecting the lower back to explore inquiries*

In light of the results, this section goes over the guiding research questions again and makes links between the empirical data and more general theoretical discussions.

- (1) How does Southeast Asia frame and debate sustainability? → Results reveal that its miles are strategically deployed by communities, agencies and states, frequently concealing ecological fragility and inequality.
- (2) What environmental, sociocultural and governance barriers prevent implementation? → Systemic constraints included short-term financial priorities, susceptible enforcement and pseudo-participation.
- (3) What are the prospects of resilient and just futures? → Opportunities are presented through regenerative tourism, university-industry collaboration and shared frameworks, but structural transformation and ethics are required to scale.

Taken together, the above understanding indicates that although Southeast Asia practices sustainable tourism today, as well as conceptual developments, the potential for transformation lies within addressing currently existing gaps, as well as encouraging cooperative styles such as the industry-Academia Hub, which the similar belief similarly accomplishes.

## 6. Conclusion

Sensitive measures on sustainable tourism are symbolic and basically greenwash in nature. The aspirations delineated will actually turn out to be empty promises, thereby impinging on the aspect of ignoring both inequality and the risk posed to the environmental context. On the other hand, future collective measures will turn out to be more inclusive, having emphasized structural transformation.

### 6.1 Theoretical implications

This critically investigates major tourism studies from diverse angles. It further develops the former talk on its symbolic mediation and illustrates how sustainability instead represents a contested, dominant debate and not simply an objective setting. By presenting structural weaknesses of accountability, enforcement and network participation, it further develops perspectives for political ecologies and governance thinking. Further, this review integrates postcolonial values into its tourism critique and illustrates concerns for cultural ownership and remedying the commercialization of identity and history. Finally, this article introduces the enterprise-academic Hub approach as a novel innovation in its own right, placing universities as active participants in experiments in policy and tourism research and education development.

### 6.2 Practical implications

To ensure sustainability commitments transcend mere gesture politics, they highlight the importance of enhanced governance frameworks, strong enforcement and an anti-greenwashing law. Taking into account transactional ecological limits and cultural sovereignty, it is crucial to note the significance of mainstreaming sustainability in operations, as opposed to focusing on branding sustainability operations for business operators. This proposed business and idea of Academia Hub bridges the gap that has historically existed between knowledge and action so as to facilitate co-sharing. With an investigation to prevent applied research. Therefore, ensuring that benefits from tourism take a responsible form in relation to rights approaches becomes essential to groups concerning a fair share of benefits from tourism. All the prior implications discussed confirm that a need for change exists and that a sense of progress concerning a sense of justice and evolution within tourism is essential.

### 6.3 Limitations and future research

As a conceptual analysis, the research substitutes secondary sources for primary fieldwork. As a conceptual reflection, the research substitutes secondary sources for illustrative case examples. Although this mode of research enables the synthesis of key findings, there is little doubt that it inhibits the strength of validation. Inevitably, this research will impound the degree of empirical testing, although it still enables basic synthesis. In multi-sited area research across Southeast Asia, long-term research analyzing the outcomes of changes in coverage and the implementation of certification schemes and environmental, social and governance principles, destiny research needs to extend these conclusions. As empirical research on the suggested form of the industry-Academia Hub model is expected to test its workability as a joint effort framework, comparative studies among other regions worldwide may place the outcomes in Southeast Asia in the broader international debate.

### 6.4 Closing reflection

Finally, in its last stages, the uniqueness in this article is the way in which the industry-academia hub model is proposed as a solution to the long-standing disconnection in Southeast Asia between the discourse and the practice of sustainability. The Hub emphasizes co-launching, implemented research and the change in the curriculum as the measure through

which sustainability could be incorporated into the operations of governance and business, as opposed to existing certification and frameworks for coverage. The uniqueness is in the way in which universities are no longer seen as partners in defining the exercise and responsibility, but as the producers of knowledge.

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