

## **Conceptualizing the insertion of circular economy principles in tourism system: Characteristics and constraints of post-communist Romania**

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**Keywords** | Tourism System, Circular Economy, Nudges, Resource Management, Sustainable Development

**Objectives** | The escalating resource consumption and environmental impacts of the tourism sector necessitate a paradigm shift towards sustainable practices. The concept of circular economy (CE) emerges as a promising framework to address these challenges from the point of view of tourism resource fragility. Unlike the current linear economy's 'take-make-waste' approach (Rodríguez et al., 2020), CE embodies a regenerative model emphasizing resource efficiency and waste minimization. This study aims to conceptualize CE within the tourism sector, drawing upon its utility, proven benefits in other sectors, and potential implementation strategies. Firstly, the necessity of adopting a circular approach in tourism is underscored by this latter's increasing resource demands and consequent environmental and social impacts. Tourism's footprint extends to local communities, ecosystems, and global resources, necessitating an urgent shift towards sustainable practices (Velenturf et al., 2019). Secondly, the effectiveness of CE in other sectors offers valuable insights for tourism. Various sectors, including agriculture, manufacturing, and construction, have successfully implemented CE principles, demonstrating significant environmental and economic benefits. These sectors have realized resource efficiency, waste reduction, and economic gains, laying a blueprint for tourism's circular transition (Gralak et al., 2022; Hosseinian et al., 2021). Thirdly, the application of CE principles in tourism is explored through literature examples. Implementing CE in tourism involves policy interventions, nudges towards sustainable consumer behaviour, and innovative business models. For instance, the adoption of sustainable supply chain practices, waste management systems, and eco-innovative services can significantly enhance the circularity in tourism (Sparrevik et al., 2021). Additionally, integrating CE principles at the policy and operational levels would require stakeholder collaboration, innovative financing models, and a rethinking of tourism development strategies (Rădulescu et al., 2022; Staicu & Pop, 2018).

**Methodology** | The study relies on an extended literature review on the particularities of the tourism system to use existing theories and models to understand defining elements and actors of change. The penetration of circularity concepts within the literature and main national policy documents was performed through a qualitative inquiry.

**Main results and contributions** | The insertion of circular economy principles into tourism needs a systemic approach (Renfors, 2023), which can be based on different scales such as economic (macro-economy vs. micro-economy), and geographic (tourism space as a whole vs. its composing elements such as resources, infrastructures, products, actors). Other levels may be taken into consideration such as the tourism market (offer vs. demand), flows (origin vs. destination), competition between tourism destinations, etc. From a higher-level perspective on the tourism system, policies and strategies are key to regulating and implementing circular economy principles, whereas, on a lower level, the instruments of decision-making such as nudges, choice architecture, incentives, and information framing must be defined and utilized in the tourism literature. Romania has only recently (October 2023) adopted the Action Plan for the National Circular Economy Strategy, as part of the Waste Management Reform of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP). In Romania, the tourism blueprint documents still promote continuous infrastructure development to narrow the gap with Western countries and struggle with a correct understanding and instrumentalization of sustainability principles. Recent documents, such as “National Strategy for Tourism 2023-2035”, barely use the concept CE, mostly when describing the objectives of the European funding programs or as a complementary attribute of the syntagm “sustainable development”.

**Limitations** | It is very difficult to set a conceptual border between macro and micro-approach, from general circular principles to circular practices.

**Conclusions** | Integrating circular economy principles into the tourism system must take into consideration the complex nature of tourism: system, industry, and activity and its multi-scale manifestation. This study provides a foundational understanding for future research and practical implementations, aiming to transform tourism into a more sustainable, resource-efficient industry.

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