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Sustainability transitions in tourism: on the transformation of a fragmented sector

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper argues that there are unrealized benefits from a cross-fertilization between research on sustainable tourism and sustainability transitions studies. With the aim to stimulate such cross-fertilization, the paper identifies three contemporary streams in sustainability transitions studies that are particularly relevant for sustainable tourism: deep transitions, transitions in practice, and the geography of transitions. These three streams present complementary perspectives, which can help reach a more nuanced understanding of transition processes in the tourism sector. The paper concludes that while research on sustainable tourism can benefit from theories, concepts, and frameworks from research on sustainability transitions, research on sustainable tourism can support further conceptual developments in sustainability transitions studies.

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Introduction

Tourism is a double-edged sword, bringing economic development opportunities to tourism destinations, but also countless sustainability challenges (e.g. Butler, 1999; Kelman, 2021). These challenges are compound and multifaceted, including environmental concerns, e.g. natural resource degradation, climate change, and loss in biodiversity (Butler, 2000), social, and cultural issues, e.g. overcrowding and cultural erosion (Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2022), and economic development problems, e.g. unequal distribution of incomes and significant capital outflows (MacNeill & Wozniak, 2018). As the forecasts for tourism predict growth (IBISWorld, 2023), the sustainability challenges are expected to amplify, making changes towards sustainable tourism imperative.

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With the urge to understand the prerequisites and possibilities for such changes, prior studies have contributed important knowledge about tourism and sustainability, featuring research on, amongst others, the negative externalities of tourism (Gössling & Peeters, 2015), management and governance aspects of sustainable tourism (Bramwell & Lane, 2011), and tourists' aspirations towards sustainability (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2016). In these and numerous other studies, there is a growing consensus that transformative change is required for the tourism sector to embark on a journey towards sustainability (Prideaux et al., 2020).

To address the prospects of such transformative change, Niewiadomski & Brouder (2022) argue that research on sustainable tourism can benefit from theories and concepts from sustainability transitions studies. As a proposed basis for a merge between these two research fields, they present a combined framework built on economic, environmental, and tourism geography, arguing that such a framework can support the development of a joint research agenda. Sustainability transitions studies is a rapidly growing research field that investigates processes of transformative change to address sustainability challenges (Markard et al., 2012). With analytic frameworks that describe multi-dimensional, multi-layered, and often contested change processes, this field draws attention to meso-level analyses of sociotechnical systems, consisting of actors, institutions, technology, and infrastructure that provide societal functions. As a core founding framework in sustainability transitions studies, the multi-level perspective (MLP) steers the analyst towards the dialectics of stability and change. It describes transitions as co-evolutionary processes characterised by interactions between niches, regimes, and landscapes (Geels, 2002). Niches refer to local 'protected spaces', where actors engage in innovative activities (Schot & Geels, 2008), regimes refer to institutionalised structures that maintain and conserve systems (Fuenfschilling & Truffer, 2014), and landscape refers to exogenous factors and forces that either stabilise regimes or exert change pressure. Early research that formed the basis for sustainability transitions studies often focused on energy provision systems, with transport as the second most popular area of research (Markard et al., 2012). These systems are traditionally dominated by large and powerful supply-side actors, which operate in consolidated organisational fields (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

With a few notable exceptions (e.g. Falcone, 2019; Gössling et al., 2012; Bowie, 2018), the interaction between sustainable tourism research and research on sustainability transitions has been limited. A possible explanation for this is that the fragmented character of tourism makes it difficult to define it as a sociotechnical system (Scuttari et al., 2016). Elaborating on the possibilities of combining sustainability transitions studies and studies on sustainable tourism into a research agenda, Niewiadomski & Brouder (2022) note that 'tourism is not a discrete system' (p.86). Tourism depends on multiple systems to provide mobility, accommodation, entertainment, adventure, recreation, and nourishment. As a sector, it is located on the user side of the systems that sustainability transitions studies traditionally focus on, such as energy, transport, buildings, agri-food, water, and sewerage. However, the tourists are not the only users, and local citizens and businesses also take part in the systems. For instance, tourists might visit a city renowned for its historic architecture. Simultaneously, local businesses, such as cafes, boutiques, and artisanal shops, rely on these attractions to bring in foot traffic, thereby intertwining their livelihood with the tourism sector. Furthermore, the city's residents interact with these sites, either

for recreational purposes or as part of their daily lives. Any decisions or changes in policy, infrastructure or institutional structures can have ripple effects, influencing not just the experience of tourists but also local businesses and resident citizens. As tourism spans the system boundaries that transitions researchers often set, the combination of sustainability transitions studies and studies on sustainable tourism will not be straightforward. On the contrary, it will depend on creative and deliberative conceptual elaborations. The aim of this paper is to stimulate such elaborations.

We identify three contemporary research streams of sustainability transitions studies—‘deep transitions’, ‘transitions in practice’, and ‘geography of transitions’—arguing that these streams are particularly relevant for research on transitions to sustainable tourism. Deep transitions is a recent extension of the MLP, which highlights the importance of historical accounts of techno-economic patterns and trajectories (Schot & Kanger, 2018). This stream of sustainability transitions studies is helpful in highlighting how tourism is embedded in broader societal movements and how transitions depend on inter-connected changes along several systems. However, the long-term orientation of deep transitions research may obscure micro-level practices and the prospects of transitions in everyday life. In this respect, the research stream on transitions in practice is useful as a complement. This stream emerged as a reaction to a perceived supply-side bias in early transitions research (Shove & Walker, 2010). Therefore, the empirical studies in this research stream have primarily focused on users and demand-side dynamics. However, the perspectives conveyed by transitions in practice are equally relevant to address business practices. Even so, this stream of sustainability transitions studies runs the risk of downplaying important dimensions of the local environment. Tourism research often focuses on individual destinations and the environment at these destinations. To highlight this, we turn to research on the geography of transitions. This research stream aims to understand local embeddedness, and how innovations can travel across space (Coenen et al., 2012). This is helpful in embracing a wide range of geographical alterations in tourism, from the natural and cultural environment to economic activities and governance. We further discuss applications of the three streams, elucidating complementarities in terms of theoretical foundations, views of regime-niche dynamics, time perspectives, level of analysis, and conceptualisations of tourism. The paper concludes that the multi-dimensional characteristics of tourism as a persistent societal phenomenon implies that such a plurality will be beneficial for research on sustainability transitions in tourism.

Deep transitions in tourism

The research stream on deep transitions links sociotechnical system evolution with economic development to address patterns of economic growth, stability, and change (Schot & Kanger, 2018). It highlights the necessity of changes across several systems, which are guided by shared meta-rules and meta-regimes. For example, Kern et al. (2020) argue that the meta-rules (e.g. the dominant use of fossil fuels) and meta-regimes (e.g. the logic of the ‘take-make-waste’ model) of a linear economy must change in line with the requirements of a circular economy. Research on deep transitions integrates and synthesizes insights from evolutionary economics, building on neo-Schumpeterian long wave theory and industrialization literature (Kanger, 2022). The neo-Schumpeterian long wave, which Perez (2015) modified as a ‘great surge’, alternates between phases of rapid growth and

periods of stagnation (Gutiérrez-Barbarrusa, 2019). The deep transitions framework proposes that the first deep transition, which spans the period from the industrial revolution some 250 years ago, encompassed multiple and overlapping great surges, and co-evolution of multiple interconnected systems (Schot & Kanger, 2018).

Tourism evolved with the first deep transition, but it has an even longer legacy. Its products and services have largely grown by sequences of complementary innovations (Zuelow, 2015). For instance, travelling existed even before the invention of the wheel and although successive innovations have broadened the types and scope of tourism, none of them have essentially replaced tourism traveling. While dominant types of tourism have experienced shifts, tourism has persisted, reminiscent of long surges (Smeral, 2010). However, contrary to Perez's (2015) assessment of surges where the dawn of a new surge overlaps with the twilight of a dominant one, the evolution of tourism does not signify any ended surges but rather a continued booming and growing (Smith, 2008). There may be downturns due to shocks from economic crises, wars, and pandemics, resulting in cyclical development patterns similar to the Kondratiev waves that inspired the neo-Schumpeterian long wave theory (Tuncel, 2015), but tourism has persisted, adapted and grown most of the time (Gössling et al., 2020). The upsurge of tourism cannot only be explained by low-cost input, saturation of technologies, emergence of new technologies, or refinement and maintenance of infrastructure. Its meteoric rise can also be explained by lifestyle, aspiration for learning and knowing, the need for change, and the accumulated cognitive structures of humans and societies (Smith, 1998).

A deep transition is long-lasting and fuelled by complex interplays of various, typically situation-dependent, mechanisms and patterns, such as combinations of technological advancements, changes in value and norm systems, and cognitive shifts, as well as environmental and economic pressures (Schot & Kanger, 2018). This can be exemplified by how Thomas Cook pioneered mass tourism in the mid-nineteenth century, supported by innovations like travel packages, guidebooks, trains, and ships, and how many of these innovations continue to influence modern tourism. Similarly, in 1851, the transformative nature of the Great Exhibition in London marked a significant upward shift. Although traveling for exhibitions and events was already a recognized practice, the event displayed machinery, tools, and scientific equipment, which indicated a profound change in the intent and character of exhibitions (Purbrick, 2001). From that point, MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, exhibitions) and related events have persisted, with their essence unaffected even by today's digital innovations (Rogers & Wynn-Moylan, 2022). Such instances suggest that a possible deep transition towards sustainable tourism will be more protracted than what is commonly recognized in the nascent literature on deep transitions. If no new punctuation emerges, tourism is likely to maintain its foundational structure throughout a possible second deep transition, as outlined by Kanger (2022).

The deep transition concept recognizes the role of multiple sociotechnical systems in each surge and development cycle. Similarly, tourism depends on several interacting systems. Hence, tourism can be considered as a sectoral system of systems (Sedarati et al., 2022) that merges services such as accommodation, events, restaurants, cultural attractions, marketing intermediaries, and transportation; various suppliers like food and drink manufacturing, automotive, aviation, telecommunications, banking,

architecture and construction; diverse governance bodies such as large-scale enterprises, destination management organizations, national tourism ministries, the World Tourism Organization, and tourism associations; with different types of tourists, including those seeking adventure, education, business, health, sports, recreation, religion, and leisure. Such a 'system of systems' perspective can help build a holistic understanding of the prospects for transitions towards sustainable tourism.

Following the MLP constructs, deep transitions evolve along the interplay of systems and along the phases of start-up, acceleration, and stabilization. The start-up phase is often characterised by landscape changes that put pressure on the regime, leading to destabilization and allowing for niche innovations to flourish (Schot & Kanger, 2018). In the history of tourism, there are several examples. For instance, sea-based traveling was a well-established means of transport in the middle nineteenth century when Thomas Cook launched the first oversea cruise from England to Scotland, combining both sea and land-based travel in the form of packaging shore excursions at each port of call (Smith, 1998). With this niche innovation came a novel form of tourism, which paved the way for a new regime. The discrete innovations that formed this type of cruise were for example maritime, accommodation, food, and itinerary innovations. The start-up phase was followed by an acceleration, where the niche innovation became mainstream. Oversea cruises have been since then a steadily growing and continuously evolving subsector of tourism.

Deep transitions in tourism indicate a tendency of upsurge. This has created a sector with numerous branches, different forms, and types of tourism, leading to an exponential growth (Butler, 2015; Vu & Hartley, 2022) and an accumulation of sustainability issues (Gössling & Peeters, 2015). Historically, only few transitions in tourism resulted in a partial or total replacement of branches, forms, and types of tourism. For analyses of transitions to sustainable tourism, the deep transitions framework can help elucidate the strong connections between tourism and patterns of techno-economic development. Guided by the imperative to use fossil fuels as a meta-rule present in several systems (Kanger & Schot, 2019), combined with a steady flow of innovations in sea, land, and airborne transport, the travelled distances have continuously increased. With travelling as an aspirational lifestyle (Hall, 2012), this regime can be traced back to the very start of commercial tourism. The advent of civil aviation and the introduction of low-fare-airlines in the twentieth century has escalated the travel intensity, qualifying international tourism as one of the core indicators of the great socio-economic acceleration since the 1950s (Steffen et al., 2015). The tourism sector's travel intensity not only results in massive greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution; increased possibilities to travel over long distances also provide accessibility to far-away destinations, which translates into opportunities for the scale-up of tourism and larger concentrations of visitors at individual destinations, with potentially detrimental consequences for local environments.

As seen from our account of deep transitions in tourism, this research stream zooms out on long-term patterns and trajectories. While such zooming out is beneficial to highlight how transitions to sustainable tourism depend on radical changes in multiple intertwined systems, it cannot elucidate micro-level interactions and the dynamics of actors and their agency. Without the possibility to zoom in on such micro-level dynamics, researchers and decision-makers may not be able to identify

and analyse important prerequisites and prospects for transitions. The next section presents transitions in practice as a research stream that may support such micro-level analyses of transitions towards sustainable tourism.

Tourism transitions in practice

New understandings and expectations of tourism, and how sustainable tourism can be practiced, shed an additional perspective on the possibilities of transitions towards sustainable tourism. In science and technology studies, social practice theory has been proposed as a perspective to balance agency and structure, and as a frame to understand the mutual dependency and co-shaping of individuals and social groups (Svennevik, 2022). Transitions in practice stresses the changes in activities performed by stakeholders, both individually and collectively. This micro-level perspective on sustainability transitions is represented in research on how producers and consumers accept and adopt new practices, which link material elements (e.g. physical objects and artifacts), images (e.g. values, norms, and beliefs) and skills (e.g. abilities and embodied knowledge) (Hargreaves et al., 2013). The underlying logic of this research stream is anchored in the argument that new and more sustainable practices must replace less sustainable ones—a process that involves the formation of new linkages between material elements, images, and skills. New proto practices are pre-formations where the linkages are yet to stabilize. As the proto practices evolve and become more and more performed in daily situations, they gradually replace established routines and habits (Shove & Walker, 2010). Research on transitions in practice is based on a flat ontology that does not accept the landscape from the MLP as an exogenous higher-level construct. Instead, the interrelationships between different stabilising and change-inducing forces are open issues for investigation in each case and it is up to the analyst to decide what forces to focus the individual study on.

Because of the hedonic nature of tourism, where self-oriented rather than normative goals guide behaviours (Nowak et al., 2023), analytic perspectives that acknowledge values and beliefs are important to understand the prospects of transitions towards sustainable tourism. In practice-oriented research on sustainability transitions, there are efforts to incorporate social psychology into the conceptual toolbox and thus add to the foundation of practice theory (de Haan et al., 2014). According to Bögel & Upham (2018), there is a need to further understand how the values of individuals and the social groups they take part in co-evolve during periods of transformative change. Social psychology highlights dynamic, perpetually evolving actions, customs, mannerisms, attitudes, and beliefs, which are interactively shaped by individuals, the social groups they take part in, and the societies they live in (Ringberg & Reihlen, 2008).

Gössling & Scott (2018) elaborate on the influence of collective beliefs on business practices in tourism. In interviews with managers representing leading tourism organisations and businesses, they observe contradictory understandings of the climate change issue and its implications for tourism. They explain these contradictions with the existence of belief systems that maintain specific images of material realities even if evidence suggests that these views are false. The views are supported by persistent ignorance, fabrication of uncertainties, and a blind faith in the development of low-carbon technologies, which altogether serve to justify inaction. Gössling and

Scott's (ibid) analysis shows how business leaders' shared images constitute important barriers for decarbonisation efforts in tourism. These images prevent the leaders from acknowledging and embodying knowledge, and developing the skills needed to challenge their current business practices. This illustrates how internalized values, norms, and attitudes can reinforce the links between material elements, images, and skills to avoid engagements in emerging alternative practices.

Joint movements to promote alternative practices are necessary for transitions towards sustainable tourism. The widespread diffusion of vehicles that enable long-distance travel (i.e. material elements), the desire to travel to perceived exotic places (i.e. images), and the ability to efficiently use new modes of transport (i.e. skills) have encouraged routines and habits in tourism with significant transport-related carbon emissions and air pollution, as well as social and cultural challenges (Frändberg & Vilhelmson, 2003). The concept of proximity tourism presents an alternative to these practices by promoting short-distance travelling, low-carbon transportation modes, and post-materialism (Rantala et al., 2020). As an emerging proto practice, proximity tourism can result in innovative and more sustainable business practices (i.e. formation of supply-side linkages), and changes in tourists' preferences and decisions on where to travel (i.e. new formation of demand-side linkages). Proximity tourism encourages the ability to rethink current images of place, including how distinctions are made between tourism, mundane societies, and everyday life (Chen & Chen, 2017). Research suggests that proximity tourists are motivated by a curiosity of the immediate surroundings that stems from a mental distancing from the close and familiar, to be able to approach it differently (Diaz-Soria, 2017). Correspondingly, by means of proximity tourism, traveling becomes a matter of social construction, sense-making, and imaging, rather than a matter of material consumption and physical distance.

In brief, the research stream on transitions in practice makes it possible to embrace complex combinations of current, emerging, and abandoned tourism practices. It highlights the challenges of dissolving existing linkages between material elements, images, and skills, as well as forming new ones. Directing the analytic attention to social practice, the research stream provides conceptual tools to address sustainability transitions at a micro-level. This is helpful with understanding reasons and motives for business-as-usual, as well as for change. With its micro-level orientation, transitions in practice complements the macro-level deep transitions framework, elaborated in the previous section. However, these two streams of transitions research force us to think categorically at either micro or macro levels. Thus, there is a need for a third stream, which can mediate between them. The geography of transitions is such a stream. This stream considers how spatial configurations, territorial characteristics, and local differences influence the emergence, stabilization, and diffusion of new ideas, practices, and technologies. The next section elaborates on how the geography of transitions can enrich research on transitions towards sustainable tourism.

The geography of transitions in tourism

Neither deep transitions nor transitions in practice fully accounts for a pivotal aspect of tourism, namely its reliance on specific local resources. Local resource endowments imply that there may be favourable conditions in some geographical areas to stimulate

and enforce sustainability transitions, while other areas face lock-in and resistance, or struggle to adapt. Moreover, local networks, capabilities, and governance systems can mediate change processes. In sustainability transitions studies, research on the geography of transitions builds on institutional and evolutionary economic geography to elaborate on how geographical diversity and local conditions influence patterns of stability and change (Coenen et al., 2012). With such a perspective, the unique natural, cultural, political, and socio-economic environment at the specific location becomes an integral part of the analysis, while such factors outside the local context may be considered exogenous 'landscape' in accordance with the MLP framework.

Tourism studies, including research on sustainable tourism, often take geographical diversity and heterogeneity for granted, emphasising how the local history, culture, or natural scenery constitute the very basis for the attractiveness of many destinations. An example is the Greek island Crete, which has experienced a rapid growth of tourism since the mid-1960s, a growth that corresponds to the escalated airborne tourism discussed previously in the section on deep transitions. In her analysis of the possibilities for transitions towards sustainable tourism, Briassoulis (2003) points to a complex two-way relationship between tourism and the local environment on Crete. She explains how the growth of tourism has resulted in economic development, but also a variety of local environmental, economic, and social problems that threaten the long-term sustainability of the island, including its future attractiveness as a destination. Even though explicit goals in the official development plans advance sustainable development objectives, these are at odds with a continued growth of tourism, as advocated by influential interest groups. The case analysis shows how the local institutions cannot effectively deal with this paradox.

Studies in other contexts present similar stories. Analysing a case study of Mongolia as an emerging tourist destination, Shircliff (2020) shows how its nomadic pastoral culture constitutes a key resource for tourism, a culture with a legacy of several thousands of years. But the tourism sector's way of exploiting this culture causes clashes and conflicts. In his analysis, Shircliff points to a problematic asymmetry between the economic interests of an emerging tourist destination and the interests of the local citizens. As a research field, sustainability transitions studies are based on normative propositions of change, suggesting that unsustainable practices, structures, and systems must be transformed to become more sustainable (Köhler et al., 2019). However, Shircliff's (2020) analysis of Mongolia as an emerging destination illustrates that in some instances, transitions towards sustainability are better addressed with conservation than with change.

Transition processes are often contested, comprising conflicting interests, objectives, and agendas that various actors and social groups promote. With sustainability as an overarching target—in itself a contested concept—the notion of governance or "societal 'steering'" of transitions becomes inherently problematic (Meadowcroft, 2011, p.323). Sustainability transitions in tourism are no exception to this. On the contrary, the variety of stakeholders, significant economic interests, and multiple sustainability challenges suggest that transitions towards sustainable tourism will be prone to politicising. To counteract the risk that transition processes are hijacked by powerful interest groups, Meadowcroft (ibid) makes a plea for reflexivity, arguing that reflexivity in the governance of sustainability transitions should be understood as 'a property

of the governance system as a whole' (p.336). Correspondingly, to avoid power concentration, Becken and Loehr (2022) suggest that governance in support of sustainable tourism must be polycentric. The instance of polycentric governance challenges the notion of unified directionality as a key enabler for sustainability transitions (Andersson et al., 2021), thus increasing the possibilities of elucidating critical tensions, trade-offs, power structures, and conflicts.

In a review of the academic literature on the geography of transitions, Hansen & Coenen (2015) note that research that focuses on regimes rarely recognizes the implications of geographical diversity. Correspondingly, in their elaboration of so called 'global regimes', Fuenfschilling & Binz (2018) argue that regime analyses in sustainability transitions studies must be more sensitive to local diversity, as heterogeneity across space can offer opportunities for change. Hansen & Coenen (2015) further note that research on sustainability transitions that focus on niches often have highlighted how local visions can stimulate innovation. Local visions are ubiquitous in studies of new and alternative forms of tourism. For example, Kaae et al. (2019) present an explorative case study of urban ecotourism, showing how an urban wasteland in Denmark was converted into a nature park. The park attracts tourists by offering recreation, guided ecotourism tours, and memorable interpretive experiences that raise the sensitivity to political, environmental, and social perspectives on sustainable development. By offering education on a variety of issues related to sustainability, the park makes it possible for visitors to imagine what sustainability is, and how it can be reached. Consequently, the park is not only a geographical destination. With its intentions to stimulate curiosity and engagement, it also provides a destination in a metaphorical sense; an image of where to go on a journey towards sustainability. With initiatives like this, tourism can stimulate sustainability transitions by facilitating 'travel' of ideas and practices between places and across scales, an issue that has been frequently discussed in the geography of transitions literature (Köhler et al., 2019).

Comparing the research streams

Emanating from different research traditions, the three streams of sustainability transitions studies discussed in the previous sections offer complementary perspectives on transitions towards sustainable tourism. With different theoretical foundations, they present different notions of regime-niche dynamics and the dialectics of stability and change. Drawing on evolutionary economics and long wave theory, the deep transitions framework depicts regime-niche dynamics as punctuated equilibria, in which transformative changes interrupt long periods of relative stability. For instance, groundbreaking niche innovations such as the steam train or aviation catalysed transformative change in tourism by inducing comprehensive and complementary innovations (Zuelow, 2015). By contrast, with foundations in social practice theory and social psychology, transitions in practice draws attention to common routines and habits in tourism, and how they may be interrupted and eventually replaced by alternatives. Such alternative practices emerge through human interaction and creativity; transitions scholars refer to them as proto practices, which can initiate the formation of new linkages between material elements, images, and skills (Shove & Walker, 2010). Such

formation stimulates the emergence of new routines and habits. The geography of transitions presents yet another perspective on regime-niche dynamics. Based on institutional and evolutionary economic geography, this research stream highlights the critical role of local resources and power structures. It helps unpack the often-contested character of transitions, pointing at potential conflicts between different views on the desired scope and directionality of change, and highlighting the critical role of shared visions.

Time is a central element in research on sustainability transitions. It shapes decisions in terms of resource distribution, as well as different actions and initiatives and their perceived urgency (Sovacool, 2016). The three streams of sustainability transitions studies represent different time perspectives. Proponents of the macro-level deep transitions framework consider transitions as long-term phenomena. Single surges within the broader spectrum of sociotechnical evolution can last for 50 years or more and the first deep transition has been estimated to span approximately 250 years (Schot & Kanger, 2018). Our discussion indicates that even longer time spans may be relevant for research on deep transitions in tourism. This can be compared to the micro-level analyses advocated by researchers in the transitions in practice stream. Such analyses are useful to highlight short- to medium-term engagements of actors, engagements that are necessary for the formation of sustainable practices in tourism. These formation processes depend not only on the sharing of information, but also on a consistent influence in a variety of social groups. Otherwise, emerging proto practices run the risk of fading away (Smink et al., 2015). The geography of transitions complements the time scales of deep transitions and transitions in practice by adding a more dynamic perspective of time. Research on the geography of transitions highlights how tourism often relies on local natural and cultural resources with legacies of thousands of years, and how short-term business interests can clash with both resident interests and longer-term sustainable development objectives (Creaney & Niewiadomski, 2016; Hunter, 1997). This is helpful in showing how sustainability transitions at individual locations may involve conflicting agendas with different temporalities and time spans.

The application of the three streams of sustainability transitions studies in research on sustainable tourism will convey different views of what tourism is, and what it can be. The deep transitions framework will favour conceptualisations of tourism as a sectoral system of systems. Such analyses underscore the significance of tourism as an important driver of societal development and learning for centuries, and since the eighteenth century, a significant sector for national economies and international trade (Zuelow, 2015). The deep transitions framework also accentuates the complexity of tourism, suggesting that sustainability transitions in tourism will interact with intricate patterns of socio-economic evolution in different systems and at different scales, both nationally and internationally. However, as the drivers of deep transitions in tourism remain underspecified, questions arise regarding the agents of change and the mechanisms through which sustainability transitions may be realized. By applying concepts from the research stream on transitions in practice, researchers may conceptualise tourism as a bundle of practices, intertwined with the sharing of experiences and social interactions (Hampton, 2018). This makes

Table 1. Summarised comparison of the research streams.

	Theoretical foundation	Regime-niche dynamics	Time perspective	Level of analysis	Conceptualisation of tourism
Deep transitions	Evolutionary economics, long wave theory	Stable and punctuated equilibria	Long (50-250+ yrs.)	Macro	Tourism as a sectoral system of systems
Transitions in practice	Social practice theory, social psychology	Routines and habits vs. proto practices	Short to medium	Micro	Tourism as a bundle of practices
Geography of transitions	Institutional and evolutionary economic geography	Local resources, power, conflicts, and visions	Different time scales	Meso	Tourism as a destination

it possible to elucidate the fundamental roles of business actors and users; and how they interact and engage in social groups to enact or counteract sustainability transitions. Such research is instrumental to provide insights on individual and collective agency. Finally, analyses of the geography of transitions differ from the traditional meso-level research in sustainability transitions studies that tend to focus on individual sociotechnical systems (Markard et al., 2012). Researchers who refer to the geography of transitions will instead conceptualise tourism as a destination, focusing on the local environment where policies, social aspirations, entrepreneurs, and agents of change are embedded. Such analyses can elucidate how each destination is shaped by a distinct combination of social norms, institutionalised practices, governance systems, and political actions. This can help show how location-specific factors influence transitions towards sustainable tourism. Moreover, insights from the geography of transitions can be devised to analyse how transitions in tourism could spark changes outside the initial geographical context and beyond the sectoral boundaries of tourism. Table 1 summarises the comparison of the three research streams.

The table shows how the three research streams complement each other through their diverse theoretical foundations, descriptions of regime-niche dynamics, time perspectives, levels of analysis, and conceptualizations of tourism. This diversity comes at a cost, as researchers may find it difficult to combine concepts from the research streams into a coherent framework. For instance, the levelled ontology of the deep transitions framework (which is derived from the MLP) may be difficult to combine with the flat ontology advanced by research on transitions in practice (Huttunen et al., 2021). Still, the three streams provide a variety of useful perspectives on transitions towards sustainable tourism, perspectives that researchers can apply in analyses with different aims and with different research designs.

Conclusions

In the introduction of this paper, we noted that the combination of sustainability transitions studies and studies on sustainable tourism will depend on creative and deliberative conceptual elaborations. With the aim to stimulate such elaborations, we have identified three contemporary streams in transitions research—deep transitions, transitions in practice, and the geography of transitions—arguing that these streams are particularly useful for research

on transitions towards sustainable tourism. We started from the proposition that sustainability transitions studies can assist research on sustainable tourism by providing useful theories, frameworks, and concepts to analyse and understand transformative change processes. Throughout the paper, we have discussed several examples to illustrate how such analyses can be executed. However, even though our paper supports the proposition that sustainability transitions studies can assist research on transitions towards sustainable tourism, our conceptual discussion arrives at a slightly different conclusion, suggesting that there is also a significant potential for tourism research to enrich sustainability transitions studies. Tourism is in many ways extreme with its multifaceted societal and environmental impacts, its strong connections to socio-economic development, its solid connotations to the human psyche and the practices that humans engage in, and its persistent local embeddedness while still having significant global implications. Due to this complexity, tourism offers a compelling case for future sustainability transitions studies, with a substantial potential to assist further conceptual developments in this research field. Hence, the potential benefits of cross-fertilization go both ways.

The complexity and multi-dimensionality of tourism will make it difficult to describe and analyse transitions towards sustainable tourism with a single coherent framework. Rather, our discussion points to the virtues of maintaining conceptual plurality. Such plurality can be shown in research based on different theoretical frameworks that present different notions of stability and change, favour different levels of analysis, embrace different time horizons, and—not the least—convey different conceptualizations of tourism as a phenomenon. Opening for such plurality can help future research on transitions towards sustainable tourism to develop a more nuanced understanding of the possible routes forward.

The introduction of the paper started with a metaphorical description of tourism as a double-edged sword that facilitates economic development, while being marked by numerous sustainability challenges, and the following conceptual discussion suggested that tourism often has been an important mechanism for socio-economic evolution and a vital instrument for societal change. Its spanning of geographical distances and system boundaries means that tourism can support wide-spread diffusion of alternative ideas and practices. Hence, future research does not have to restrict itself to analyses of transitions to more sustainable forms of tourism. It can also investigate how sustainability transitions in tourism can stimulate even broader and more encompassing societal transformations.

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