Exploring Slow Tourism: Integration Between Mobility, Heritage, and Landscape Regeneration

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Abstract. Exploring Slow Tourism: Integrating Mobility, Heritage, and Landscape Regeneration
This study explores the feasibility of slow and sustainable **tourism** to enhance cultural and natural heritage while fostering connections between coastal and inland territories. By promoting **non-motorized mobility**, such as cycling and walking, slow tourism offers an alternative to conventional car-based travel, encouraging deeper engagement with landscapes, local traditions, and historical sites. Focusing on different environments, the study examines how slow itineraries can cross mountainous regions, rural areas, and coastal ecosystems, creating a seamless link between urban centres and remote landscapes. These routes reveal the hidden potential of underutilized spaces, transforming abandoned sites into rest stops, cultural hubs, or meditation areas, while also supporting local economies and community-led initiatives. **Slow travel itineraries** revitalize fragile landscapes and promote environmental awareness and responsible tourism practices by integrating natural conservation with sustainable tourism. From forested reserves to coastal lagoons and historic villages, these journeys immerse travellers in the ecological and cultural richness of the territory. Beyond recreation, the study highlights how investing in infrastructure, safety and services can strengthen vulnerable regions, fostering resilient and interconnected communities. Slow tourism thus emerges as a powerful tool for territorial regeneration, sustainable mobility, and heritage conservation, redefining how people engage with places and local cultures.

Keywords: Coastal resilience · fragile land regeneration · slow mobility strategy

1 Introduction

Slow and Sustainable Tourism: Connecting Coast and Hinterland for Territorial Regeneration

Sustainable tourism has gained increasing attention as an alternative to conventional, car-dependent travel, offering a means of balancing the preservation of the surrounding environment with cultural and economic development. Within this framework, slow tourism emerges as a model that fosters deep engagement with local landscapes, heritage and communities while minimizing environmental impact. This paper explores the feasibility and sustainability of routes that easily connect inland areas with coastal cities. The

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ability to connect two different environments also implies the ability to provide services, places for overnight stays and entertainment for different target intercepted population. This research evaluates the potential of the trail understood co-as **ecosystem infrastructure** in fostering local economic revitalization, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability. Key considerations include infrastructure development, safety measures, and accessibility of services, ensuring that the route meets the needs of both visitors and host communities. By assessing the implications of slow tourism on regional resilience, the study contributes to broader discussions on sustainable mobility, heritage preservation, and territorial cohesion.

Slow tourism, often associated with walking or cycling, is a contemporary travel practice rooted in sustainability and place-based engagement. It promotes a deeper, more conscious interaction with the landscape, local culture, and heritage. While it responds to modern environmental and social challenges, its foundations can also be traced back to historical forms of movement, such as religious pilgrimages and seasonal migrations. In ancient times, travel was often a transformative act—whether heroic, spiritual, or existential—marking a personal encounter with the unknown and the surrounding world. Concepts such as *genius loci*, the "spirit of place", help frame this deeper connection, where the act of moving through a landscape becomes an immersive and reflective experience. This study explores how these values of slowness and connection are revived today through sustainable tourism models that link coastal and inland territories, highlighting their potential for environmental stewardship, cultural preservation, and economic revitalization. By the spirit of places is meant that feeling of being lost in unfamiliar environments in which one comes to find a part of oneself that appears hidden, concealed. Schulz asserts that "through the interaction of surface relief, vegetation and water, characteristic totality or places are formed that constitute the fundamental elements of landscapes," those landscapes that from prospective backgrounds become the protagonists, together with the individual walking, of an emotional and sensory interaction. In every civilization, era, and geographical place, traveling, migrating, habitually moving represents a "human invariant," not universal but characterizing every context and culture to which it belongs.[1]

In recent years, numerous projects and studies have highlighted the potential of soft mobility routes, such as hiking trails and cycle paths, in connecting coastal areas with inland areas. The possibility of strategically connecting the coastal cities, with all their advantages from an economic, viability and social point of view with the less valued and known inland areas, allows the movement of the mass tourist flow to destinations of high historical-cultural value, less known, making them more visible and enriching them, consequentially, from multiple points of view. The coastal road system, in fact, presents a completely different logic from that of hilly or mountainous areas, especially along the Adriatic coast, where settlements follow a **comb-like pattern**, linked to the river components scattered along the territory. The river, therefore, connotes the landscape but also represents a means of transportation, a line that divides the territory and at the same time unites it, with bridges or connections that emphasize its fundamental

[1] Author, Raimon Pannikar: Book title Peace and Interculturality: A Philosophical Reflection-Publisher. Jaca Book (2002).

importance. Numerous are examples of soft mobility that connects the territory precisely by exploiting the potential of river nature as an ecosystem infrastructure.

Parallel to the presence of water, which closely connotes the coast and river basins, initiatives such as the Regional Natural Park of the Coastal Dunes in Apulia[2] or the OMNIS project aims to promote sustainable and inclusive tourism in the coastal and inland regions of Italy and Croatia[3], demonstrate how it is possible to develop routes that not only allow the exploration of the natural and cultural heritage, but also support local economies. The importance of such routes lies in their ability to **revitalize marginal territories**, fostering the rediscovery of historic villages, local agricultural production and landscapes often neglected by mass tourism flows. Revitalization for tourism purposes consequently implies an organizational engagement of the entire local co-munity, which is consequently driven to consider the ecosystem-ca network as a source of economic and social enrichment.

A key aspect of coastal and inland integration is the valorisation of ecosystem services, i.e. those benefits provided by natural ecosystems that support quality of life and environmental sustainability. As reported in the study presented in Chapter 3 of The GEO Handbook on Biodiversity Observation Networks "At national and sub-national scales, ecosystem services can be an effective tool for informing decisions about the use and management of the planet's resources, especially when trade-offs and synergies need to be considered. Without this information, decisions that determine the fate of terrestrial, coastal and marine systems, and the benefits they provide, are made in the dark, with little understanding of the ecosystem service outcomes (benefits and costs) of a given decision or its consequences for the different stakeholders that depend on these services".

A key aspect of coastal and inland integration is the valorisation of **ecosystem services**, i.e. those benefits provided by natural ecosystems that support quality of life and environmental sustainability. As reported in the study presented in Chapter 3 of "*The GEO Handbook on Biodiversity Observation Networks*" "At national and sub-national scales, ecosystem services can be an effective tool for informing decisions about the use and management of the planet's resources, especially when trade-offs and synergies need to be considered. Without this information, decisions that determine the fate of terrestrial, coastal and marine systems, and the benefits they provide, are made in the dark, with little understanding of the ecosystem service outcomes (benefits and costs)

[2] Natural Park of the Coastal Dunes in Puglia: The Regional Natural Park of the Coastal Dunes from Torre Canne to Torre San Leonardo extends over approximately 1,100 hectares, along eight kilometres of coastline and into inland agricultural areas, occupied by centuries-old olive groves and ancient farms. The perimeter measures a total of fifty-five kilometres; within it lies the Site of Community Importance (SIC) "Littoral brindisino", included in the European network "Natura 2000", SCI characterised by coastal wetlands which have an important value for rare and endangered species of flora and fauna. [Source : https://www.parks.it/parco.dune.costiere/par.php].

[3] OMNIS Project: The OMNIS project aims to promote sustainable and inclusive tourism in coastal and inland regions of Italy and Croatia, with a strong focus on accessibility for people with special needs. By promoting inland destinations and fostering collaboration between coastal and hinterland tourism operators, OMNIS improves travel experiences for travellers with dogs and blind people. [Source: https://omnistourism.it/it/].

of a given decision or its consequences for the different stakeholders that depend on these services"[4]. The reforestation of degraded areas, the protection of coastal wetlands and the creation of ecological corridors can contribute to mitigate the effects of climate change, improve biodiversity, and favour the development of a more environmentally aware and conservation-conscious tourism. In this context, as elaborated also by the previously mentioned research, land management policies are called to stimulate the constructive collaboration between local actors, institutions, and tourism operators, promoting regenerative tourism practices able to guarantee a balance between fruition and ecosystem protection.

The functional integration between the coast and inland areas is both a challenge and an opportunity to rethink the **sustainable** management of the connection between green areas and more urbanised areas. Through the creation of soft mobility networks, the enhancement of ecosystem services and greater involvement of local communities, it is possible to develop a model that is truly inclusive and capable of generating positive long-term impacts. The future of sustainable tourism therefore passes through a broader, large-scale vision that recognises the value of territories in their complexity and favours a harmonious connection between nature, landscape, culture, and economic development. To move towards the realisation of this model, the intrinsic integration and interdependence of the landscape mosaic of these areas must be considered as fundamental. The possibility of linking these types of territories carries with it a highly important historical significance, which has its roots in the era of the Transhumance, the seasonal migration of flocks, herds and shepherds from hilly or mountainous areas to the plains (in the winter season) or vice versa (in the summer season) along the natural sheep-tracks. Transhumance, recognised by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage, is an emblematic example of how the landscape and social relations have been shaped over the centuries by practices of displacement. Retracing the ancient shepherds' paths through dedicated itineraries means not only preserving a centuries-old tradition but also offering opportunities for experiential tourism that allow visitors to enrich their experience with local stories, landscapes, and flavours. In Italy, two examples of routes that enhance transhumance are the Regio Tratturo Pescasseroli-Candela and the Tratturo Magno, which connect the Apennine regions with coastal areas. Another example is **cycle tourism along waterways**, such as the Rimini-Marecchia route. (Rimini-Marecchia), shows how the territory can be rediscovered through routes that connect the coastline with the hinterland. Following the course of rivers, they pass through historic villages, protected natural areas and ancient production sites, fostering in-depth knowledge of the territory and its ecological and cultural dynamics. These itineraries are part of a wider network of **European greenways**, such as EuroVelo 5 (Via Romea Francigena), which connects different nations promoting sustainable mobility.

Cultural ecosystem services, mentioned earlier, include all the intangible benefits that derive from the interaction between man and the environment, such as the beauty

[4] K. Thonicke Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, Potsdam, Germany e-mail: Kirsten.Thonicke@pik-potsdam.de F. Villa Basque Centre for Climate Change (BC3); IKERBASQUE, Basque foundation for Science, Burlington, Bilbao, Spain e-mail: ferdinando.villa@bc3research.org A. Walz Institute of Earth and Environmental Science, University of Potsdam, Potsdam, Germany e-mail: ariane.walz@pik-potsdam.de 3 Ecosystem Services 43.

of the landscape, the spiritual value of certain places and the recreational experiences offered by nature. Integrating these elements into tourism planning makes it possible to develop destinations that foster psychophysical wellbeing and social cohesion, encouraging regenerative tourism practices. Tourists and pilgrims can meet local communities, participate in traditional events, discover handicrafts, and taste typical products, thus helping to support local economies and learn more about the history of these places. Projects such as the European Union's 'Green Infrastructure Strategy' promote the integration of tourism, environment, and economic development, encouraging the creation of green corridors and the preservation of historic natural and agricultural areas.

The integration of slow tourism, soft mobility and the enhancement of cultural eco-system services can become a key strategy for harmonious territorial development. Through the creation of thematic itineraries, the recovery of historical routes and the enhancement of light infrastructures, it is possible to build a tourism system capable of connecting coast and hinterland, preserving the cultural heritage, and improving the quality of life of local communities. In this context, European strategies such as the Natura 2000 Network and the Green Infrastructure Business Plan aim to strengthen the environmental resilience and economic value of territories, creating opportunities for experiential tourism and landscape regeneration. Investing in tourism that focuses on people's well-being and the enhancement of social relations means not only fostering more authentic and conscious travel experiences but also ensuring sustainable land management in the long term.

2 Creation of Network Between Coastal Cities and Inner Territories

2.1 Strategic Models of Cohesion of Different Habitats

As mentioned in the introduction, there are already contemporary models of action-strategies aimed at the "**hooking**" gesture, between coastal and inland landscapes, or at least typically associated with inland landscapes. In the Italian panorama, some examples can be found in the region of Apulia, where the land conformation already in itself allows a strong contact between the natural elements of water and land. One only must think of the nature parks that have sprung up near the Adriatic coastal lakes of Varano and Lesina. The possibility of walking through their landscapes, experiencing heterogeneous habitats, immediately connected to the Gargano National Park, which is characterised by further peculiar landscape nuances, makes this area rich in naturalistic elements of considerable importance. From the richness of the landscape and nature, therefore, arises the need to connect the economic nerve centres -the town centres- with the numerous settlements scattered throughout the territory, also on an economic and road network level.

An interesting model of approach to the act of connecting such different areas is represented by the Regional Natural Park "Dune Costiere da Torre Canne a Torre S. Leonardo." Established in 2006, it represents a significant example of how the enhancement of coastal areas can extend inland, creating an ecological and cultural continuum. ISPRA's study "Italy's sandy coastal habitats: ecology and conservation problems" highlight the importance of Italian dune habitats, underlining how coastal dunes play a crucial

role in the conservation of biodiversity and the protection of the coastline from erosion (see Fig. 1). The document reports that the typical physical environment of coastal dune landscapes 'is dynamic and unstable, being dominated by natural forces such as storm surges and fierce winds. The habitat is based on sandy beaches and/or with gravel of small grain size near the foreshore, where the organic material carried by the waves accumulates and decomposes, enriching the substrate with nutrients and salts. The vegetation consists of very short-cycled communities (therophytic-which-alonitrophilic formations) that germinate in autumn or winter, flower and produce fruits in a noticeably short vegetative period (sometimes only 1–2 months in late spring), then dry up in summer. The fruits open in early summer and the seeds, covered with sand, remain dormant until the autumn rains. Due to its peculiarities, the vegetation has an exceptionally low cover (often only 5% of the total), however this is already sufficient to hinder the wind transport of the sand, favouring its accumulation instead'"[5].

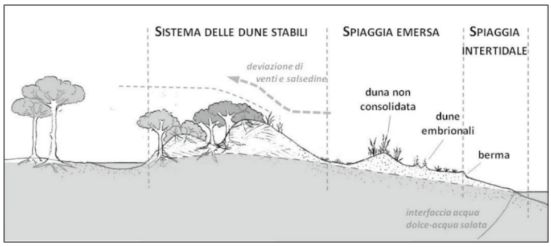

Fig. 1. Beach-dune system profile (drawing by C. Percopo, off scale)

Within the park, routes have been developed that connect the coastal strip with the hinterland, allowing visitors to explore a variety of natural and cultural environments. These itineraries encourage the discovery of ancient hypogenous oil mills, historical farms and water channelling systems, integrating the seaside experience with the rural one.

In parallel, the example of the OMNIS project, aims to promote sustainable and inclusive tourism in the coastal and inland regions of the two countries. The OMNIS project, launched in 2023 under the Italy-Croatia Interreg programme, aims to create a network of inclusive and sustainable itineraries. According to the official monitoring report (2024), over 120 km of trails have been mapped and 18 municipalities involved across both countries. Preliminary data from the first tourist season show a 17% increase in visitors to lesser-known inland destinations compared to the previous year. Furthermore, 63% of surveyed tourists reported that the combined coastal-hinterland routes positively influenced their decision to explore the region beyond the shoreline. These findings suggest that integrated mobility and tourism strategies can support both territorial cohesion and economic diversification.The project areas are located in Italy and Croatia, encouraging tourism that combines coastal attractions with the rich offerings of the hinterland: in Italy, from the Pesaro-Urbino coastal area to the lower Apennines of Pesaro and Ancona,

[5] The habitats of the Italian sandy coasts: ecology and conservation issues [Source: ISPRAMBIENTE.GOV.IT].

encompassing nine municipalities: Acqua-lagna, Apecchio, Arcevia, Cagli, Cantiano, Piobbico, Frontone, Sassoferrato and Serra Sant'Abbondio; in Croatia; from the coastal area of Split to the lively hinterland of Split-Dalmatia County. According to an article published by Ri-sposte Turismo, the main objective of the project is to create a network of accessible itineraries connecting coastal areas with the hinterland, enhancing local natural and cultural resources. Through the collaboration between Italian and Croatian partners, OMNIS intends to develop thematic routes that include historical sites, protected natural areas and local communities, offering tourists authentic and sustainable experiences. This approach not only diversifies the tourism offer but also contributes to the strengthening of local economies and the preservation of shared cultural heritage. As stated on the project's official website, OMNIS was created with the objective of promoting accessible and sustainable tourism, with a focus on groups that encounter barriers in traditional tourism. It aims to enhance inland destinations by highlighting the lesser-known areas of the Italian and Croatian hinterland, encouraging travel outside the most popular coastal regions. A key priority is the improvement of accessibility, especially for visually impaired travelers, pet owners and individuals with special needs. By developing inland itineraries, OMNIS contributes to reducing environmental and social pressures by mitigating overtourism in coastal areas, benefiting local communities and ecosystems. Furthermore, the project establishes a scalable model that can be replicated in future initiatives to support other groups, including the elderly, people with disabilities and people with food restrictions.

3 Methodologic Approaches and Objectives

Spatial Regeneration Through Ecosystem Services
The research adopts a qualitative case study approach, combining document analysis, spatial interpretation, and project evaluation. Case studies were selected based on three criteria: (1) demonstrable integration between coastal and inland areas; (2) inclusion of ecosystem services and soft mobility strategies; (3) alignment with European sustainability frameworks (e.g., Natura 2000, LIFE SAM4CP). Data were gathered from institutional reports, scientific publications, and technical documentation of projects such as the OMNIS initiative and the Regional Natural Park of the Coastal Dunes. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) were used to map existing routes and identify potential ecological corridors, while content analysis was applied to policy documents and community engagement strategies. The objective was to evaluate how slow tourism infrastructures can serve as catalysts for spatial regeneration by linking ecosystem value, mobility, and heritage.

3.1 Relevance of Ecosystem Services Mapping

The theme of integration between coastal and inland areas also introduces the topic from the exploitation of ecosystem services, which is those benefits provided by natural ecosystems that support the quality of life and environmental sustainability. This typology of services can be scaled according to the context in which they are inserted. The study "Urban regeneration and good land use", part of the Life Sam4cp project,

highlights the importance of mapping and assessing ecosystem services to support spatial planning and promote sustainable land use. This approach aims to identify precisely the areas with the greatest potential for slow tourism, facilitating the creation of routes that link the coast and inland in a strategic and sustainable way. The use of GIS tools and environmental assessment models allows to identify critical areas for biodiversity, high cultural value routes and spaces to be recovered for cycling routes and historical trails. Integrating this information into tourism development plans helps to maximise socio-economic benefits and ensure balanced land management (see Fig. 2).

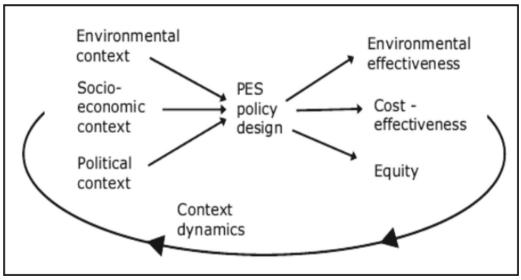

Fig. 2. Payments for ecosystem services placed in the context of criteria for their definition and assessment (Jack et al., 2008). INSPRA Report: towards the national strategy for biodiversity - Definition of the method for classification and quantification of ecosystem services in Italy

3.2 Connection with European Strategies

The approach to land regeneration through ecosystem services is in line with several European sustainable development strategies. The European Union's Green Infrastructure Action Plan and the Natura 2000 Network are key tools to strengthen environmental resilience and improve the economic value of marginal areas. In particular, the project Life Sam4cp - Soil Administration Models 4 Community Profit (SAM4CP)-, funded by the European LIFE + programme, was created to make available some tools for better soil management over the four years of its operation, With particular emphasis on the assessment and mapping of ecosystem services, understood as the tangible and intangible benefits that humans can derive from this natural resource. The project demonstrates how mapping of ecosystem services can contribute to the identification of a network of green corridors and can promote the conservation of historic natural and agricultural areas, With the parallel aim of making these currently unusable areas more visible and comprehensible. These strategies not only protect the landscape but also provide opportunities for regenerative tourism by encouraging local communities to become involved in the management and development of their territory.

A realistic example of the application of these principles is represented by cycling along waterways, such as the Rimini-Marecchia route. The offer proposed to discover the villages and large spaces overlooking the valley of the river Marecchia ranges from routes dedicated to food, those of landscape discovery to those for more experts, with areas to cross through climbing or rough stretches. Starting from the source of the river,

on the Alpe della Luna, you can proceed keeping the sea of Rimini behind and looking at the coastal hills of ancient towns, villages, and castles. "The Valmarecchia is a border territory, "*romagnola*" for its approach and hospitality, but nestled between Tuscany and the Marches, a territory more designed by history together with the Montefeltro than by the bureaucracy of the regions." Territorial regeneration can be achieved through the exploitation of sustainable connecting ecosystem services. ' Bike Marecchia", a parallel route to the one that can be taken on foot, starts from the banks of the iver Marecchia, extending to Ponte Messa for a length of 45.7 km. The cycle path of Val Marecchia, Threcorded a 25% increase in usage between 2020 and 2023 (source: Bike Marecchia Project Report). In the same period, local businesses along the route reported an 18% rise in tourist-related income, suggesting a direct economic benefit from the soft mobility infrastructure. It stretches from the coast to the inland along the banks of the river Marecchia, offering a route immersed in nature that connects Rimini to Novafeltria. This track has no significant differences in level, but the unpaved ground adds a slight degree of difficulty and an element of charm that differentiates the route from the linear slopes of the Riviera Romagnola.

Similarly, transhumance routes such as the Regio Tratturo Pescasseroli-Candela and the Tratturo Magno can benefit from an accelerated mapping of ecosystem services to identify strategic locations for refreshment, Equipped rest areas and landscape interpretation centres. The recognition of transhumance as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage further strengthens the importance of these routes for the enhancement of local traditions and the promotion of experiential and sustainable tourism. Migration has played a key role in the modelling of landscape and social relations in central Italy. In the period between 1600 and 1800, it is estimated that between 5 and 6 million sheep moved annually from Abruzzo to Puglia, with revenues representing a third of the entire state budget. The tracts, the ancient ways of transhumance, covered a total extension of about 3,000 km, constituting a fundamental network for the pastoral economy of the time. [elearning.unite.it] Recently, the practice of transhumance has been reassessed not only for its social and cultural value, but also as a factor in the conservation of the rural landscape and agro ecosystem. Studies have shown how the reactivation of transhumance routes can contribute to the enhancement of ecosystem services and the strengthening of local communities. These examples show how the exploitation of the old ways of transhumance and the development of cycling routes can be integrated into a sustainable tourism model, promoting the rediscovery of the territory and collective well-being (see Fig. 3).

3.3 Towards Integrated Land Management

Integrating ecosystem assessment into regional tourism development plans ensures balanced management between environmental conservation and the creation of new economic opportunities for local communities. European spatial planning strategies, such as the **Green Infrastructure Strategy**, demonstrate how an integrated approach to landscape regeneration can generate long-term positive impacts. The creation of soft mobility networks and green corridors not only improves the quality of life of the inhabitants but also promotes greater tourist attractiveness based on sustainability and respect for the territory. Through these strategies, slow tourism can become an engine of development



Fig. 3. Analysis of soft mobility along the Adriatic coast, from Abruzzo to Puglia. In the analysis are highlighted the tracts of the tracts, the Via Francigena and the Via Micaelica. There are also overlays of paths that trace in an analogous way the ancient tracks of the Transhumance. (Source: Chiara Correra).

for inland areas, contributing to economic revitalization, conservation of the natural heritage and promotion of a more responsible and inclusive tourism model.

4 Conclusions

The analysis shows that slow and sustainable tourism represents a strategic opportunity for territorial regeneration through coastal-inland connection. The ecosystem approach to soft mobility network planning highlights how the protection of cultural and natural heritage and the involvement of local communities can be the pillars of an integrated and resilient development model. The infrastructure of routes that exploit pre-existing landscape elements, such as rivers, old transhumance routes and cycling networks, contributes to the decongesting of coastal destinations, distributing tourist flows over often marginalised inland areas. This approach, in addition to mitigating the environmental impacts of conventional tourism, is part of a broader framework for adaptation to climate change, where the recovery of ecological connections and the preservation of biodiversity play a significant role (Thonicke et al., 2018). The results of the study highlight the need for multi-level governance strategies, where coordination between institutions, tourism operators and local stakeholders is crucial to the creation of a sustainable tourism offer. In particular, the importance of adopting land-use planning tools incorporating predictive models on the carrying capacity of territories, ensuring a balance between use and protection of the landscape, emerges. However, while slow tourism presents multiple benefits, it also raises potential risks that must be acknowledged. These include green gentrification—where increased attractiveness of slow routes may lead to displacement of local populations—as well as conflicts over land use between conservation goals and economic interests. Furthermore, maintenance of soft infrastructure (e.g., unpaved

trails, signage, resting areas) often lacks stable funding, threatening long-term viability. A more critical and balanced approach is therefore essential to ensure equitable and durable outcomes.

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