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Tourism Degrowth: Strategy Toward a Green and Low-Carbon Industry

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Abstract: Despite decades of implementing green growth initiatives in tourism development, environmental degradation and social inequality continue to intensify across global destinations. Increasing skepticism regarding the capacity of green growth strategies to deliver net positive social and environmental outcomes has led to growing support for tourism degrowth, particularly within selected industry sectors. This paper explores the concept of degrowth, presenting a clear vision for its application in tourism. It identifies key strategies for achieving tourism degrowth and examines the institutional, political, economic, and cultural challenges associated with its implementation. It is argued that a diverse range of wellbeing outcomes may potentially result from tourism degrowth. Additionally, the paper highlights areas for further research to address both practical and theoretical implications of tourism degrowth. The conclusion emphasizes that while some level of downsizing is essential, significant obstacles must be overcome to ensure that resident wellbeing is maintained or enhanced through tourism development in the long term.

Keywords: tourism degrowth, green tourism management, stakeholder wellbeing outcomes

1. Introduction

Economic growth, commonly measured by increases in destination gross domestic product (GDP), presents a dilemma. While it generates wealth, employment, and income, it simultaneously demands greater use of materials, energy, and land, resulting in significant environmental degradation, disruption of vital biophysical systems, and adverse social impacts [1–3]. The distribution of income has neither improved, nor has unemployment or poverty been eliminated in many parts of the world. Despite decades of growth, poverty persists globally, and humanity continues to exceed critical planetary boundaries—threatening biosphere integrity, biogeochemical cycles, climate stability, land-system resilience, freshwater availability, and chemical safety—pushing the Earth system beyond its safe operating space [4, 5].

Contrary to neoliberal expectations, economic growth has not substantially improved living conditions for the majority of the world's population. Income distribution remains inequitable, unemployment endures, and poverty has not been eradicated. Tourism, as a major growth industry globally, has likewise failed to resolve the sociocultural and environmental challenges associated with its continued expansion. Nevertheless, economic growth remains a central objective for governments and tourism operators worldwide, largely driven by neoliberal ideology that promotes market-based reforms, deregulation, and globalization as pathways to human wellbeing [6]. This growth-centric paradigm has contributed to widespread environmental harm and social disruption, particularly within the tourism sector. Rapid tourism expansion has imposed significant costs, including resource depletion, ecological degradation, and the commodification of cultural heritage.

According to the mainstream view, the adverse effects of tourism development can be negated by technological change supported by better, more efficient management activity [7, 8]. This perspective, exemplified by green growth and inclusive growth initiatives aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[1], seeks to reconcile tourism's economic expansion with social justice, resource conservation, environmental quality, and human wellbeing.

A growing number of critics now question the capacity of technological innovation and managerial improvements to reverse tourism growth-induced environmental and social degradation. Prominent "heterodox" approaches include slow tourism [9], Buen Vivir [10], ethical and responsible tourism [11], conscious tourism [12], and regenerative tourism [13]. Among these critical perspectives, the concept of degrowth has gained increasing traction as a framework for rethinking tourism's role in society [2, 14–17]. Proponents of tourism degrowth challenge the idea that continuous economic growth is necessary or even desirable as an objective of destination development. Instead, they advocate for a deliberate downscaling of tourism production and consumption—particularly in wealthy nations—to reduce environmental harm, protect local cultures from commercialization, promote social equity, and improve resident wellbeing.

This paper represents a conceptual contribution to the literature on tourism degrowth. While it provides many tourism examples of specific policy interventions consistent with degrowth,

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[1] United Nations. (2020). *Global Indicator Framework for the Sustainable Development Goals and Targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. 2020*. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/indicators-list/

it does not undertake empirical research. The structure of this paper is as follows: Section 2 presents the standard arguments supporting green growth tourism management. Section 3 argues that, despite decades of green growth initiatives, environmental degradation and social inequality continue to escalate, casting doubt on the ability of the tourism industry to deliver positive environmental outcomes into the future. Section 4 addresses the nature of degrowth and its rationale, outlining a specific vision for tourism degrowth. Section 5 identifies major strategies for tourism degrowth. Section 6 identifies challenges to implementing the degrowth process in tourism across institutional, political, economic, and cultural domains. Section 7 highlights issues for further research to identify and address the practical and theoretical implications of tourism degrowth. It is concluded that a process of tourism degrowth must overcome formidable challenges if stakeholder wellbeing is to be maintained or enhanced over the longer term.

2. Green Growth Tourism Management

Mainstream tourism development is strongly shaped by the principles of green and inclusive growth, as advocated by major international organizations such as UNEP, the IMF, World Bank, and the OECD [18–22]. These institutions advocate for continued economic expansion, asserting that destinations can grow in cleaner, more resource-efficient, and socially inclusive ways without compromising growth rates. The central assumption underpinning this view is that economic growth can be decoupled from environmental degradation. The SDGs reinforce this perspective, emphasizing "sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth" as a means to alleviate poverty and enhance wellbeing [23]. Green growth is defined as that which ensures that the environment continues to provide the resources and ecosystem services upon which human wellbeing depends [22]. Green growth strategies seek to reconcile economic expansion with environmental protection by leveraging technological innovation, resource efficiency, market-based solutions, and regulatory mechanisms. This approach envisions innovations and market-driven measures fostering production, employment, consumption, and ultimately reduced environmental impacts and carbon emissions, as well as reduced inequalities of opportunity.

The growth-oriented mindset remains deeply embedded in tourism planning and destination marketing. UN Tourism (formerly UNWTO) has emphasized that "growth is not the enemy—it's how we manage it" [23]. Destination strategies frequently prioritize increasing visitor numbers and spending, reflecting a persistent growth ethic. In the tourism competitiveness literature, enhancing attractions, infrastructure, and marketing is widely regarded as a means to stimulate demand and boost economic contributions [24]. Growth management principles explicitly underpin destination strategies supported by UN Tourism [25]. Destination websites similarly highlight the importance of attracting more visitors and increasing their expenditure, underscoring the growth ethic driving marketing efforts [17]. Improved attractions, management, and marketing are key performance indicators in destination competitiveness frameworks anticipated to generate greater demand for tourism products and services, thereby increasing economic contributions [26].

Green growth rests on a critical assumption: that economic growth can be decoupled from environmental harm, reducing tourism's carbon footprint. Tourism researchers widely endorse green growth as a pathway to sustainable development, as evidenced by the extensive literature that has now emerged in explicit and often uncritical support for tourism green growth [27–29].

3. Criticisms of the Mainstream View

A growing body of tourism scholarship challenges the mainstream growth management paradigm, arguing that it fails to deliver sustainable social, environmental, and even economic outcomes. Critics question the assumption that technological innovation and improved efficiency can reverse the negative impacts of tourism-related growth. Four key criticisms underpin the case for a degrowth strategy:

1) Growth management is ineffective

Despite decades of economic growth, living standards have not improved for the majority of humanity, with persistent inequalities of income and wealth globally and evident failures to end poverty. As a major international industry, tourism has added to the adverse sociocultural and environmental problems associated with its continued expansion. Despite ongoing green growth initiatives, environmental degradation and social inequality continue to escalate. Tourism contributes significantly to these issues through high-carbon-emission sectors such as aviation, motoring holidays, cruising, and accommodation. Technical improvements have not offset the rising environmental costs of mass tourism, which often leads to resource depletion, pollution, widening income inequalities, community alienation, and cultural commodification—ultimately undermining residents' social wellbeing. Continuing with a "business-as-usual" strategy is increasingly viewed as irrational and unsustainable [1, 14].

2) Economic growth does not guarantee wellbeing

Human wellbeing is broadly regarded as a multidimensional concept comprising emotional, social, and functional components [30, 31]. Mainstream tourism research links increased tourism GDP with improved wellbeing. Human wellbeing, however, depends on more diverse sources than economic production and material living standards [32]. Research demonstrates that beyond a certain threshold, additional economic growth does not enhance life satisfaction or life satisfaction [33]. Above this threshold, it is relative income, not absolute levels, that determines social wellbeing [34–36]. Empirical studies confirm that reducing inequality is more effective for poverty reduction than increasing GDP growth [33]. Despite these findings, tourism growth models continue to prioritize income generation over equity and non-material values [37].

3) The decoupling assumption is overly optimistic

Green growth strategies rest on the assumption (faith?) that economic growth can be decoupled from resource depletion and emissions. Resource decoupling focuses on levels of energy and matter used, while impact decoupling focuses on levels of pollution, such as carbon emissions [38]. Decoupling is the attempt to break the link between GDP growth and its environmental impacts, through efficiency improvements, new technologies, and pricing of "externalities" [38].

While relative decoupling (slower growth in resource use compared to GDP) is achievable, absolute decoupling (declining resource use alongside GDP growth) remains problematic [2]. Absolute decoupling is a core assumption of green growth

management since it is essential for achieving sustainability goals. The majority of green growth analyses in tourism focus only on relative decoupling [1, 2, 7, 8]. However, only under conditions of absolute decoupling will growth management of any industrial activity, including tourism development, actually employ less material throughputs with less emissions overall [39–41].

Green GDP growth requires both an absolute and relative decoupling between growth and resource usage. A major problem for the growth management approach is the mounting evidence that technological progress cannot and likely will not allow absolute decoupling, irrespective of any complementary managerial efficiencies [3]. Studies reveal that as GDP grows in high-income countries, their global material footprints also expand significantly. This trend underscores the difficulty of achieving genuine decoupling, particularly when offshoring emissions masks domestic progress [42–44]. With only some recent exceptions [1, 14, 16], tourism research has largely neglected this issue, despite its centrality to sustainability debates, particularly regarding the determination of preferred development paths.

4) Further concerns

Further concerns include rebound effects, underestimated environmental impacts of services, and the limited potential of recycling [38]. Rebound effects often negate environmental gains, as efficiency improvements result in lower costs and generate additional consumption. Many tourism services remain resource-intensive and cannot be easily dematerialized. Recycling, while beneficial, requires energy and often results in downcycled products of lower quality [1, 38].

Taken together, these criticisms highlight the need to move beyond growth-oriented tourism models. While efficiency improvements are valuable, they must be complemented by strategies that directly reduce production and consumption. Without this shift, both mainstream and heterodox approaches risk failing to address tourism's environmental and social challenges.

4. The Degrowth Alternative

Given the limitations of green growth strategies, degrowth has emerged as a compelling alternative within tourism discourse [45, 46]. Degrowth represents a voluntary transition toward a just, participatory, and ecologically sustainable society grounded in principles of sufficiency, sharing, simplicity, conviviality, equality, and care for all living beings across de-commodified spaces [47–50]. Rooted in ecological economics, political ecology, and social justice, degrowth advocates for a planned, equitable reduction in economic activity—particularly in affluent regions—to align human development with planetary boundaries and enhance long-term wellbeing.

A widely accepted definition of degrowth is that it comprises an actual downscaling of tourism production and consumption that increases human wellbeing and enhances ecological conditions in a destination at the local and global level [51]. On this view, strategies aimed at improving efficiency must be complemented by a commitment to sufficiency in consumption. The ultimate goal is a more balanced, equitable, and resilient tourism sector that enhances humanity's wellbeing, while safeguarding the environment for future generations.

Degrowth rejects the view that continuous economic growth is necessary or desirable. Instead, it promotes a shift from quantity to quality, emphasizing sufficiency over efficiency [51]. In tourism, this entails deliberately downsizing production and consumption to reduce environmental harm, protect cultural heritage, and foster social equity [52]. After downsizing activity adjusts to ecological limits, a "steady-state economy" emerges with stable patterns of production and consumption that respect planetary boundaries [46, 50].

In the tourism context, the degrowth vision would emphasize the following, as displayed in Table 1 [40, 41, 48, 51].

Strategies must be formulated to deliver this vision, and efforts must be made to overcome barriers that will inevitably impede progress toward tourism degrowth.

Table 1
The degrowth vision applied to tourism

Vision	Key interventions	Tourism examples
Living within ecological limits	Reduce resource use, lower emissions, and protect ecosystems	Tourism must minimize its ecological footprint by transitioning to renewable energy, reducing material throughput, and preserving biodiversity
Social equity	Address overconsumption by affluent groups while improving access by marginalized communities to essential goods and services communities	Promote community-led tourism that redistributes resources fairly and empowers local populations
Redefining success	Prosperity is reimagined beyond material abundance, emphasizing non-material dimensions of wellbeing such as health, social relationships, and purpose	Fundamental aim of tourism development is to enhance stakeholder wellbeing
Empowering communities	Opportunities needed for civic engagement with individuals participating in the life of their community to improve conditions, shape its future, influencing political processes	Local populations should have the opportunity to shape tourism development to reflect their values and priorities
Fostering resilience	Resilience is the ability to mentally or emotionally adapt to, and recover quickly from, adversity, trauma, or significant stress	Encourages tourism within diversified economies, supported by adaptive governance systems capable of withstanding global shocks

(*Continued*)

Table 1
(*Continued*)

Vision	Key interventions	Tourism examples
Localism	Favors local supply chains, strengthening small-scale enterprises, and community-based developments	Fostering sustainable tourism development by encouraging support for local businesses, authentic experiences, and the preservation of local identity and resources
Promoting meaningful experiences	Intentionally designing moments, activities, or environments that foster deep emotional connection, personal growth, and a sense of purpose	Supports slower, more immersive travel experiences that foster respectful engagement with host destinations and meaningful cultural connections
Democratic transformation	Requires participatory governance, integrating efficiency and sufficiency principles into broader land use, infrastructure, and economic planning	Democratic transformation in tourism that leverages democratic principles involves shifting toward inclusive, participatory governance that empowers local communities in decision-making, promotes sustainability, and ensures equitable economic benefits for stakeholders

5. Major Strategies for Tourism Degrowth

A range of initiatives for transitioning society to a degrowth process have been proposed, fostering ongoing debate about the specific institutional changes required. While emphasis differs among scholars, their shared strategic agenda includes the following features, as displayed in Table 2 [3, 40, 41, 48].

These strategies collectively support a systemic shift away from growth-dependent tourism models toward regenerative, community-centered, and low-impact alternatives. Integrating

Table 2
Major strategies for tourism degrowth

Strategy	Key features and interventions	Tourism examples
Selective/physical degrowth	Reduce the physical scale of built capital and energy/material throughput within planetary boundaries Downsize carbon-intensive sectors such as aviation and cruising Support low-impact sectors and introduce ecotaxes/resource caps Provide green job guarantees and retraining	Caps on cruise ship arrivals Repurposing oversized resorts to community use Rail-based tourism replacing short-haul flights Conservation employment programs
Redefining successful tourism development	Shift metrics from GDP to wellbeing and quality of life Invest in public goods and prioritize resident welfare in tourism planning Targeted reductions in energy/material use	Wellbeing-oriented destination frameworks (Bhutan GNH; NZ Living Standards) Regulating short-term rentals to protect housing Investments in parks/cycling infrastructure improving wellbeing
Consumption degrowth	Reduce high-emission or non-essential consumption Promote mindful travel practices using demarketing and carbon disclosures to shift behavior	Restrictions on jet skis in marine parks Replacing helicopter sightseeing with low-impact nature walks Carbon-footprint apps influencing visitor choices
Reduce inequalities in income and wealth	Redistribution and community empowerment Promote equity through progressive taxation and climate justice	Community-based tourism cooperatives Profit-sharing with local communities Indigenous-led governance structures
Work-time degrowth	Reduced working hours to improve wellbeing and reduce consumption Work sharing, basic income, and complementary social policies	30-hour hospitality work weeks improving wellbeing Seasonal work-sharing practices
Tourism business degrowth	Business models prioritizing wellbeing and ecological restoration Social enterprises and cooperatives Circular production systems in tourism firms	Zero-waste hotel models Worker-owned tour cooperatives

(*Continued*)

Table 2
(*Continued*)

Strategy	Key features and interventions	Tourism examples
Localism	Encourage slower, immersive travel and local economic circulation	Farm-stays and village tourism
		Local crafts and food networks
	Support small-scale enterprises and local supply chains	Hiking/cycling tourism supporting local economies
	Strengthen cultural preservation and domestic tourism	
Institutional reform	Shift from growth-oriented capitalism to post-growth governance	Participatory budgeting for tourism revenues
		Green infrastructure financed by tourism taxes
	Participatory governance in tourism planning	Rights-of-nature frameworks shaping tourism limits
	Strengthening stewardship and ecological integrity	

these approaches into destination planning can enhance resilience, equity, and long-term wellbeing.

1) Selective/physical degrowth

The degrowth process entails reducing the physical scale of built capital and constraining the economy's energy and material throughput within planetary boundaries—the environmental limits defined by Earth's regenerative and assimilative capacities. This requires scaling down fossil fuel–dependent, carbon-intensive sectors and eliminating planned obsolescence in products [50].

Importantly, degrowth does not advocate indiscriminate downsizing of all industry sectors. Instead, it promotes selective contraction, prioritizing sectors that are ecologically harmful or socially unnecessary. For tourism, this means reducing carbon-intensive activities such as aviation, cruising, and large-scale accommodation, while fostering socially valuable, low-impact sectors such as renewable energy, organic agriculture, and community-based enterprises [39, 53]. It also prioritizes socially essential services such as education and healthcare, which, despite historically low productivity, are labor-intensive and deliver high social value [48]. This approach aligns with heterodox critiques that call for a smaller, more localized tourism industry—one that is environmentally sustainable and enhances social wellbeing [17].

Complementary interventions include green job guarantees, retraining workers for roles in ecosystem restoration, renewable energy installation, and social care [50]. Reduced production of many types of "unnecessary" goods and services would free up resources to be allocated to merit goods such as the arts, education, healthcare, and socially desirable research and development [54]. Tourism-specific interventions could include ecotaxes, caps on resource use, and investment in eco-friendly transport.

2) Redefining successful tourism development

Tourism degrowth inevitably entails a reduction in tourism's contribution to GDP, a point often criticized by pro-growth advocates who emphasize the material benefits associated with economic expansion [8]. From a degrowth perspective, however, prosperity is redefined to extend beyond material abundance. It prioritizes non-material dimensions of wellbeing—such as good health, physical security, social connections, environmental quality, and opportunities for civic engagement—while encouraging investment in public goods like education, healthcare, recreational facilities, and green spaces. Through this lens, tourism degrowth can strengthen community ties and foster cultural enrichment.

There is now a compelling case for moving "Beyond GDP" by incorporating wellbeing metrics into policy evaluation that account for both material and non-material costs and benefits [32, 55, 56]. The emphasis shifts from GDP growth to reducing material and energy throughput, recognizing the limitations of conventional economic indicators in capturing quality of life. Alternative measures of progress, developed by statistical agencies and researchers worldwide, aim to reflect broader aspects of living conditions and life quality. Specific interventions for tourism development could include prioritizing wellbeing outcomes and quality of life over consumption levels; supporting expansion of public sector services such as healthcare, education, and public transport; promoting ethical and cultural renewal; and challenging norms that equate success with material accumulation [57].

The social impacts of reduced GDP depend on which goods and services are targeted for downsizing [38]. A rapid, cross-sector reduction could trigger adverse economic and social consequences; therefore, a cautious, focused approach to reducing energy and material use is recommended to minimize associated pressures [48, 58]. This measured strategy may be expected to characterize tourism degrowth.

3) Consumption degrowth

Overall consumption is the most significant driver of global environmental degradation. The degrowth approach therefore prioritizes reducing both the total level of consumption and the patterns of consumption, particularly those associated with high-emission, conspicuous activities in developed economies. Advocates emphasize the need for destinations—especially in industrialized regions—to curtail the consumption of non-essential goods and services. This transition requires fostering lifestyles, organizations, and institutions that promote non-material sources of satisfaction, such as cultural engagement, community connection, and environmental stewardship.[2]

Tourism degrowth implies reducing consumption of non-essential goods and services, particularly in affluent destinations. This could include high-carbon emitters such as jet skis, joy flights, motoring holidays, and some infrastructure associated with amusement park rides. Different tourism sectors have different carbon footprints, and ethical considerations inevitably will arise in determining which sectors to downsize. Demarketing campaigns and carbon footprint disclosures can help guide consumer choices, but lasting change requires strong shifts in values and behavior [59]. Consumer attitudes toward more mindful

[2]Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2023). *Climate change 2023: Synthesis report, summary for policymakers.* https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_SYR_SPM.pdf

travel practices can result from educational campaigns and awareness initiatives. So also encouraging visitors to act responsibly, respecting local customs and ecosystems [60].

4) Reducing inequalities in income and wealth

A central objective of the degrowth approach is the global redistribution of wealth and income to improve social wellbeing for present and future generations [61]. Income inequality is closely linked to higher carbon emissions—both production-based and consumption-based—across developed and developing nations, with "demonstration effects" driving consumption patterns among less affluent groups [62].[3] For tourism degrowth to achieve its intended social and environmental outcomes, it must be inclusive and responsive to the needs of historically marginalized communities.

In the tourism context, local communities should have a central role in shaping tourism development, ensuring that it reflects their values and priorities. Degrowth encourages tourism activity to occur in diversified economies, helping to forge stronger social bonds between stakeholders, with adaptive governance systems that can better withstand global shocks [1]. Specific interventions that could apply to tourism industry development include support sharing and reclaiming of the commons and sociocultural flourishing and thriving, promoting fair redistribution of resources and wealth via redistributive taxes, supporting caps on extreme wealth and incomes to reduce social inequalities, supporting universal access to decent work and the basics for living well, and supporting climate justice. Support for empowering local communities and encouragement of community values such as self-reflection, balance, creativity, flexibility, diversity, good citizenship, generosity, and non-materialism need ethical and cultural renewal [1, 59].

5) Work-time degrowth

Reducing working hours limits income and, consequently, spending power, which helps curb consumption—the primary driver of global environmental impacts [58]. Historically, productivity gains have been used to increase the production of goods and services rather than to shorten working hours [48]. From a degrowth perspective, these gains should instead be directed toward expanding leisure time, enabling individuals to pursue activities that enhance wellbeing, such as building relationships, engaging with communities, participating in physical activity, volunteering, and developing new skills [48]. When used thoughtfully, increased leisure time can reduce environmental pressures and lower carbon emissions. However, this outcome is not guaranteed, particularly if affluent communities choose carbon-intensive leisure activities [63].

Advocates of degrowth highlight the potential improvements in quality of life associated with greater leisure time, especially given rising dissatisfaction with work-centric lifestyles [41]. While reduced working hours will inevitably lead to lower average annual salaries, research suggests that the negative impact on overall wellbeing may be overstated [64]. Policies to support this transition include lowering the retirement age, promoting part-time work, and adopting a four-day work week. Complementary measures may involve work sharing, redistributing income and wealth through progressive taxation, implementing basic income and job guarantees, and setting minimum and maximum income thresholds.

It is important to recognize that working less will not benefit everyone equally. Employment provides opportunities for skill development, social integration, identity formation, and self-realization.[4] Therefore, any reduction in working hours within tourism occupations must consider these factors to ensure balanced outcomes.

6) Business degrowth

Business activity is a primary driver of economic growth, making the role of corporate organizations in transitioning to a post-growth society particularly complex. Achieving degrowth requires the development and implementation of innovative business models that prioritize societal wellbeing and ecological restoration [65]. Emerging models emphasize values such as sharing and cooperation, creating value for multiple stakeholders throughout the production process [66, 67]. Businesses aligned with degrowth principles operate in a pro-environmental and pro-social manner, guided by a fundamental shift in values.

Formulating and adopting mission statements that reflect these principles can significantly influence production strategies, moving away from the "frivolous" goods and services that dominate current tourism consumption patterns [16]. Key interventions for tourism operators include the establishment of cooperatives and social enterprises—mission-driven organizations that prioritize community interests over purely financial objectives. Success metrics should incorporate sustainability, equity, and stakeholder wellbeing. Tourism firms can lead this transition by redesigning products, embracing circular production models, and integrating wellbeing indicators into performance evaluations [2].

7) Localism

Degrowth advocates for slower, more immersive travel experiences that encourage respectful engagement with host destinations and foster meaningful connections with local cultures and environments. This approach promotes localized production and consumption within self-sufficient economies to enhance community wellbeing [48]. Proponents favor smaller-scale, labor-intensive projects that employ cooperative models and prioritize local resources to meet community needs, rather than relying on mass production methods typical of capital-intensive industries [41]. The emphasis is on locally determined development pathways and poverty reduction strategies, as opposed to externally imposed policies.

Tourism degrowth supports local supply chains, small-scale enterprises, and community-based tourism initiatives rooted in local resources [15]. These efforts aim to strengthen local economies, support artisans and farmers, and reduce dependence on globalized tourism models. A localism approach also helps preserve traditional knowledge, languages, and techniques, ensuring that revenues are reinvested in local development rather than extracted by external corporations [61]. Visitors can contribute by making conscious choices—such as using public transport, selecting eco-friendly accommodations, and prioritizing destinations that actively promote sustainability.

Domestic tourism, which typically generates lower emissions due to shorter travel distances, is considered an important strategy for fostering social cohesion and community participation. This approach prioritizes the rights and needs of local residents over

[3]Monserand, A. (2022). *The macroeconomics of degrowth: Conditions, Choices, and Implications.* PhD Thesis, Université Paris-Nord-Paris XIII.

[4]Cazes, S., Hijzen, A., & Saint-Martin, A. (2015). *Measuring and assessing job quality: The OECD job quality framework* (OECD Social, Employment, and Migration Working Papers No. 174). Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jrp02kjw1mr-en

those of tourists and industry stakeholders [17]. However, proponents of localization have yet to fully address challenges such as the loss of economies of scale, which can increase operational costs and limit affordability. Additionally, the case for favoring domestic tourism over international tourism remains contested, given the latter's potential for greater economic contribution through visitor spending [2].

8) Institutional reform

The degrowth approach envisions a societal transition from a growth-oriented, materialistic economy to a convivial and participatory *post-growth economy* [41, 68]. This paradigm challenges the core principles of capitalist systems, which prioritize economic growth, consumerism, and profit. Moving toward a degrowth model requires a fundamental reorientation of values, social structures, and governance frameworks. Key shifts include replacing private accumulation with community wellbeing and moving from commodification to ecological stewardship.

In the context of tourism, degrowth calls for participatory governance, enabling communities to shape tourism development in alignment with shared values. Advocates stress the importance of examining social and institutional reforms that enhance provisioning systems—particularly for energy distribution and across all tourism sectors—to achieve more equitable social and environmental outcomes for stakeholders [50]. Strengthened provisioning systems can ensure decent living standards for destination residents while reducing energy consumption [47].

9) Absence of a holistic tourism degrowth strategy

While several aspects of the strategies required to support degrowth are already being employed in tourism planning and development, they are being undertaken in a piecemeal fashion to minimize adverse impacts, rather than as part of a coherent strategy to downsize the tourism industry, locally or globally. For the most part, implementation of the tourism policy mix is embedded within the mainstream green growth management approach, as opposed to downsizing the tourism industry. Regarding tourism taxes, for example, on the demand side, taxes on fuel, aviation travel, car rental, visa charges, motorway charges, and so on, act to increase travel costs, thereby reducing the demand [69]. On the supply side, company taxes, payroll taxes, land taxes, and waste and environment levies add to production and service costs, a proportion of which is passed on to consumers. Although such taxes may deter tourism activity, they are usually set independently and not part of any strategic degrowth effort.

Outside of the taxation system, destinations worldwide are initiating policies to decrease "overtourism" in particular locations [70, 71]. Participatory urban planning is being undertaken to manage overtourism and prioritize residents' quality of life. In the area of urban and spatial planning, Barcelona and Ghent, both experiencing overtourism, have redesigned urban spaces to restrict hotel construction, reduce car use, improve air quality, and prioritize pedestrians and cyclists. In Spain and Italy, tourism cooperatives and social enterprises operate with community benefit goals rather than profit maximization, offering sustainable tourism experiences [70, 71].

In community-based tourism, Thailand, Nepal, and Costa Rica, local communities manage tourism enterprises, ensuring that profits stay local and cultural integrity is preserved. Amsterdam has banned short-term rentals in some neighborhoods, closed tourist shops in central areas, and shifted focus from attracting more tourists to improving the quality of life for residents. This has resulted in improved urban livability and a more balanced approach to tourism development that prioritizes social and environmental wellbeing over visitor numbers. Vienna has recently focused on resident wellbeing and social sustainability rather than maximizing tourist arrivals, promoting cultural tourism and off-season travel [70].

Consistent with degrowth principles, sustainable farming practices supporting gastronomy tourism reduce environmental impact and promote biodiversity, while farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, and food co-ops reduce transport emissions and support local economies. Community-driven tourism models encourage longer stays and deeper local engagement. Raja Ampat, Nusa Penida, and Labuan Bajo, in Indonesia, are exploring community-empowered, slow, and responsible tourism as alternatives to mass tourism, encouraging longer stays with greater local engagement, with some early-stage success. Bhutan's "high value, low volume" tourism model integrates wellbeing metrics into tourism policy and has helped to preserve culture and environment while generating ongoing revenue. Initiatives including Europe's Interrail or Japan's Satoyama tourism, promote slow, immersive travel by train or foot, emphasizing cultural connection and rural revitalization. Meanwhile, other destinations worldwide are attempting to diversify local economies to reduce dependence on tourism [69, 70].

Other examples exist; however, most have concentrated on local initiatives rather than comprehensive, destination-wide efforts to achieve planned tourism degrowth [71]. Moreover, many remain rooted in a pro-growth paradigm. While these initiatives are welcome, they fall significantly short of meeting the requirements of a true degrowth approach. Certain elements of the degrowth vision and action agenda will undoubtedly be easier to implement than others. Therefore, it is essential for tourism stakeholders to consider individual policy proposals within the context of a strategic degrowth policy mix—examining how proposed interventions interact, identifying complementary measures, and addressing potential conflicts or redundancies within the overall package of degrowth strategies [40].

While these initiatives show promise, most remain localized and are not part of a broader degrowth strategy. Implementing tourism degrowth requires a comprehensive and coordinated set of policies that go beyond isolated interventions [2]. While some existing measures—such as sustainability metrics and environmental taxes—are already in use, they are typically applied in a piecemeal fashion and remain embedded within the growth-oriented paradigm. A realistic degrowth strategy demands a coherent policy mix aimed at deliberately downsizing tourism activity while enhancing social and ecological wellbeing.

6. Challenges in Applying a Degrowth Approach to Tourism

While tourism degrowth offers a transformative vision for sustainable development, its implementation faces significant challenges across institutional, political, economic, and cultural domains. Achieving this transition requires coordinated action at multiple levels of governance and society. Many proposals—such as caps, taxes, and regulations—necessitate strong state intervention, while bottom-up engagement is equally critical. Citizens must support new goals and adopt practices aligned with improving human wellbeing within planetary boundaries [2].

1) Industry concerns

The notion of degrowth has its critics including tourism researchers. Several arguments are frequently raised against the concept by policymakers, industry bodies, economists, and even

some sustainability scholars. These arguments fall into economic, social, political, and practical domains.

Many regions rely heavily on tourism revenue, employment, and foreign exchange earnings; deliberate reductions risk economic contraction. Tourism supports millions of jobs globally, especially in small island developing states, least developed countries, and rural regions. Mainstream researchers argue that degrowth would reduce GDP, tax revenue, business viability, and investment attractiveness [7, 8, 18]. Mainstream researchers argue that degrowth could limit access to travel for lower-income groups, effectively creating an elitist tourism system [8]. Tourism is labor-intensive—reducing visitor numbers could exacerbate unemployment and precarity. A major concern is that degrowth may threaten livelihoods without offering viable short-term alternatives and that it may disproportionately harm vulnerable workers. Residents in developing countries—who contribute least to environmental pressures—may bear the greatest economic losses [22, 23]. Another typical concern is that degrowth may lead to conservation underfunding and ecosystem degradation [19]. Supporters of green growth also point out that tourism supports intercultural understanding, global solidarity, and informal diplomacy and that reducing travel may weaken cultural openness and international understanding [20, 22, 23].

Transition strategies are often considered insufficient or unrealistic given the current structural dependence. At the present time, tourism degrowth lacks political viability and institutional alignment. Of course, advocates of tourism downsizing would agree that degrowth risks being inequitable unless carefully designed [2, 3]. Advocates of degrowth, aware of these criticisms, are attempting to develop strategies that eliminate or at least neutralize them [41, 48, 50].

2) Institutional change

Some scholars anticipate a "smooth transition" to tourism degrowth [15], while others link degrowth advocacy to critiques of capitalism [14, 16]. A post-capitalist tourism industry would prioritize production systems that internalize environmental and social costs, avoid commodification, and operate under common property regimes. Such transformation demands both top-down policies—such as resource caps and redistribution—and grassroots participation in identifying community values [59]. However, there is no consensus on what institutional structures should replace current growth-oriented systems, nor on how radical proposals can be implemented amid vested interests and political inertia [55]. Ensuring meaningful public input into future tourism models is essential.

3) Estimating wellbeing outcomes

The success of tourism degrowth ultimately depends on its capacity to enhance resident wellbeing. While material living standards may decline, for some, non-material dimensions, such as health, social relationships, civic engagement, and physical security, can thrive. A central challenge lies in determining the conditions under which wellbeing can be sustained or improved during and after the transition. This requires robust metrics, participatory planning, and the integration of wellbeing considerations into policy evaluation. Without these measures, degrowth risks will be perceived as a threat rather than an opportunity.

Tourism research has largely overlooked the wellbeing implications of degrowth strategies. With few exceptions [64, 72], there has been limited investigation into stakeholder wellbeing outcomes associated with tourism degrowth. It is essential to identify the conditions necessary to maintain or enhance human wellbeing during the degrowth phase and in the long term, as well as the institutional frameworks that can support this process. Although per capita material wellbeing may decline, incorporating sources of non-material wellbeing into policy design can enable degrowth strategies to deliver significant positive contributions—particularly when intergenerational wellbeing is considered.

Greater attention must be devoted to estimating wellbeing outcomes linked to alternative tourism degrowth strategies [64]. Resident wellbeing indicators provide policymakers with richer insights than conventional performance measures [64]. To assess these outcomes, potential impacts of tourism degrowth should be examined through a lens informed by established wellbeing frameworks [24, 37, 73]. Applying such a lens aligns with a community-based approach, fostering public debate and meaningful citizen participation in the degrowth process [57].

As wellbeing metrics have matured, they have become increasingly influential in policymaking, with many countries now using them to guide decisions and inform budgetary processes for sustainable development. If the primary goal of tourism development is stakeholder wellbeing, then the same must hold true for tourism degrowth [57].

4) Barriers to change

Irrespective of the specific transformations advocated by degrowth proponents, resistance from stakeholders benefiting from business-as-usual industrial development is inevitable. Any meaningful shift away from a growth-oriented management model must address opposition from national and international organizations that are ideologically committed to economic growth and closely aligned with business interests [55]. Four major barriers to the adoption of tourism degrowth are outlined in Table 3 [2, 41, 45, 50, 72].

Addressing these and related challenges demands inclusive, participatory policymaking, capacity-building for degrowth-aligned planning, and development of alternative metrics. Public engagement, storytelling, and case studies can help shift narratives. Transdisciplinary collaboration is essential to design tourism futures that are equitable, sustainable, and grounded in community wellbeing.

7. A Tourism Degrowth Research Agenda

The degrowth research agenda is inherently inter- and multidisciplinary, necessitating collaboration among scholars across both the natural and social sciences. This approach involves shifting tourism away from excessive commodification and the exploitation of sociocultural and natural assets, toward recognizing its potential as a transformative experience and a means of enhancing human wellbeing [1, 3, 59]. The degrowth paradigm presents both challenges and opportunities to reframe core assumptions and establish new directions in tourism theory, practice, and research [16, 50]. Advancing understanding and supporting implementation require a comprehensive, interdisciplinary research agenda that explores economic, social, environmental, and institutional dimensions through empirical studies, case analyses, and modeling techniques [40]. Key research areas are outlined in Table 4.

Pursuing degrowth at both global and destination levels demands profound transformation within the tourism industry [14, 17]. Research is needed to explore how tourism can transition from growth-oriented models to systems aligned with degrowth principles. This includes developing a deeper understanding of

Table 3
Barriers to tourism degrowth

Barrier	Feature	Tourism example
Institutional inertia	Existing systems rely on GDP and growth metrics. Transitioning to wellbeing and ecological indicators requires deep structural reform, which is slow and politically challenging	Many destinations lack the resources or political will to enforce limits or redesign tourism systems. Vested interests and entrenched mindsets present significant obstacles
Political resistance	Degrowth is often perceived as anti-development and politically risky	Tourism policymakers fear backlash from voters, businesses, and media, while the lack of cross-sector coordination complicates implementation
Economic constraints	Large corporations may resist policies that restrict growth, and short-term economic pressures often override long-term sustainability goals. Limited resources in developing countries constrain their ability to collect and manage comprehensive data on degrowth processes	Tourism-dependent destinations face risks to investment, income, employment, and resident living standards from changes in economic, social, environmental, and political conditions
Cultural and ideological barriers	Growth is deeply embedded in societal values and aspirations. Shifting public perceptions requires time, education, and inclusive dialogue. Degrowth must be framed not as sacrifice, but as a pathway to shared prosperity and resilience	Destination managers and tourism business investors tend to espouse a pro-growth ethic to foster tourism production and consumption

Table 4
Tourism degrowth research agenda

Research area	Key focus
Transition pathways	Governance structures and institutional reforms for degrowth Policy mechanisms to shift from growth to wellbeing Obstacles and complexities in transitioning Implications for destinations at different development stages Educational reform to challenge growth as a KPI
Consumption behavior	Strategies to promote sufficiency and mindful consumption Identify goods/services that enhance wellbeing Impact of reduced consumption on norms and values Role of media, education, and art in reshaping societal values Explore feminist perspectives and loss aversion theory
Work-time reduction	Effects of reduced working hours on income, leisure, wellbeing, and environment Feasibility of work-sharing in non-industrialized economies Complementary policies (basic income, job guarantees) Rebound effects from leisure activities
Decoupling and other effects	Feasibility of decoupling tourism growth from environmental degradation Empirical studies across destinations and sectors Modeling rebound effects Role of tertiarization and recycling in reducing carbon footprint
Localism and downsizing	Viability of localism in different contexts Trade-offs between material and non-material wellbeing Effects of localization on economic and social outcomes Effects of degrowth on vulnerable communities Implications for residents of lesser developed destinations
Business model innovation	Development of cooperative and social enterprise models Circular production systems Embedding wellbeing metrics into business performance Case studies on integrating degrowth principles into corporate missions
Wellbeing outcomes	Analyze policy interventions for wellbeing impacts Develop a wellbeing lens for trade-off analysis Identify gainers and losers, focusing on marginalized groups Operationalize wellbeing measures with objective indicators (education, healthcare, civic engagement)

governance structures, institutional reforms, and policy mechanisms that facilitate this shift. Scholars should examine how tourism can move away from commodification and profit-driven objectives toward models that prioritize socioecological renewal and human wellbeing.

Currently, there is no consensus on the strategies required to replace existing social and political institutions or on the form that new institutions should take. Tourism researchers can play a critical role in identifying the economic, political, and social changes necessary to support degrowth, as well as the obstacles and complexities involved in transitioning from growth-oriented policies to degrowth-oriented approaches. Understanding the implications of different degrowth strategies for destinations at varying levels of economic, social, and political development represents an important area for future research [72].

Degrowth also necessitates significant changes in tourism governance and education. Research should identify institutions that either support or hinder degrowth and explore how degrowth values can be embedded in public and private sector planning. The transition from growth management to degrowth implies educational reforms aimed at fostering a deeper understanding of the social structures underpinning pro-growth attitudes and the environmental challenges associated with tourism development [60]. A directional shift in research is required to link educational change explicitly to a tourism industry that rejects growth as a primary performance indicator. Educational reform is essential to reshape industry mindsets away from growth-centric metrics [73]. Given tourism's deep entrenchment in the prevailing growth paradigm, insights from institutional economics are vital for understanding how institutions operate, evolve, and become locked into path-dependent trajectories.

Finally, the degrowth research agenda calls for stronger engagement with critical scholars and activists from both developed and developing nations. Key questions include: How do these policies function? Under what conditions can they be implemented? And what factors contribute to their success?

Understanding how to influence tourist consumption patterns is critical for advancing tourism degrowth. Research should focus on strategies that promote sufficiency, responsibility, and mindfulness in consumer behavior. A significant effort is needed to identify which goods and services—based on their contribution to wellbeing-should be prioritized in production and consumption—and which have minimal or even negative effects on wellbeing. Loss aversion theory, which suggests that individuals adapt less successfully to loss than to gain, indicates that reduced consumption opportunities may negatively affect social wellbeing [72]. Further research is required to assess the relevance of these findings in the context of tourism degrowth.

Participatory processes can assist communities in defining basic needs and identifying sustainable approaches to meeting them. Studies should also examine the impact of reduced consumption on social norms, values, and institutions. Media, education, and art can play pivotal roles in reshaping societal values toward simplicity, cooperation, care, and mindfulness. Feminist perspectives, which emphasize these principles, may offer valuable insights for guiding the tourism degrowth process [74].

An important issue concerns how degrowth in wealthy nations aligns with development aspirations in lower-income regions. The implications for degrowth in lesser developed destinations deserve much more attention from researchers. When thoughtfully planned and designed with consumption degrowth in mind, new destinations could attract the right mix of visitors to advance local or national wellbeing objectives, rather than focusing solely on aggregate visitor numbers or expenditure. Further research into the characteristics of the "ideal tourist" is increasingly important as the tourism industry faces growing pressure to justify its benefits. This also raises questions about the types of support mechanisms needed to maintain economic and social stability during the transition to reduced aggregate consumption.

Empirical studies are needed to evaluate the effects of reduced working hours on income, leisure, wellbeing, and environmental impact [63]. Research should also explore complementary policies such as basic income, job guarantees, and retraining programs. The role of work in supporting flourishing lives must be examined across different cultural and economic contexts. Other research questions include: How can work sharing be implemented in economies that are not fully industrialized? Is there a place for a carbon tax (or dividend) or a basic income in low-income economies? If not, what policies would work best in such contexts? Tourism researchers need to formulate "just transition" mechanisms—how workers displaced from downsized sectors, such as aviation, and large resort accommodation would be supported.

While more leisure time could be socially and ecologically beneficial, an important question concerns what citizens will do with extra spare time. It is likely that some proportion of the population would pursue activities that increase their carbon footprint, but the extent of this is unknown. Understanding potential rebound effects—where increased leisure leads to carbon-intensive activities—is critical [38].

Further investigation is required into the feasibility of decoupling tourism growth from environmental degradation. Empirical studies are needed for a range of destinations and for different tourism sectors [2]. Research on policy design and estimated outcomes of degrowth policies in specific contexts presents a promising opportunity for future research. This includes modeling rebound effects—where efficiency gains lead to increased consumption—and assessing the role of tertiarization and recycling in reducing tourism's carbon footprint. While some problems with these initiatives were outlined above, their role in reducing tourism's carbon footprint deserves further research.

Research should evaluate the viability of localism across diverse destination contexts, particularly in small or remote regions that depend heavily on international tourism. Much of the discourse supporting localism appears to implicitly prioritize non-material dimensions—such as quality of life and wellbeing—over material (economic) outcomes, viewing them as more "authentic" or "relevant" [10]. These issues warrant more comprehensive investigation, especially regarding the material wellbeing outcomes potentially forgone through the development of community-based, small-scale tourism, and the non-material benefits that may be gained from adopting a localism strategy. Further research is also needed to assess the impacts of localization in destinations of varying geographic size and structural characteristics. This raises equity questions: how does degrowth in wealthy nations align with development aspirations in lower-income regions?

Emerging business models aim to drive positive sociocultural and environmental change by fostering mutually beneficial relationships with all stakeholders, both within and beyond the organization [75, 76]. Although these models have not fully adopted the degrowth paradigm, they align with its principles in many respects, emphasizing sharing, cooperation, community engagement, and localized economies over competition. A key point of consensus is that wellbeing outcomes—encompassing

economic, social, and environmental impacts—should be embedded in organizational mission statements rather than treated as externalities [66].

As part of the degrowth research agenda, tourism scholars can examine the benefits of various business models that align with degrowth principles. This includes exploring cooperatives, social enterprises, and circular production systems, as well as integrating wellbeing metrics into business performance evaluations. Case studies can provide valuable insights into pathways for embedding degrowth values within corporate missions [66, 75].

Policy interventions designed to support the transition to degrowth must be evaluated for their impact on resident wellbeing. This includes examining the composition of the wellbeing lens [31, 56, 64]. Further research is needed to identify potential beneficiaries and those adversely affected by tourism degrowth, with particular attention to marginalized groups defined by geography, gender, race, class, and caste [77].

Organizations that prioritize wellbeing often experience healthier employees, reduced health-related costs, improved workplace environments, and higher levels of customer engagement [78]. Researchers should explore strategies to replicate these benefits within tourism contexts.

These considerations highlight the need for additional case studies and research to clarify the trade-offs between material and non-material wellbeing that businesses and communities must navigate when developing alternative tourism models. A persistent issue in heterodox critiques of wellbeing is the overemphasis on subjective measures, while neglecting objective dimensions such as education, healthcare, civic engagement, and social relationships [37, 57]. This, coupled with the lack of operationalization of this complex concept, has significantly hindered progress in tourism and wellbeing scholarship.

Understanding the interconnections among different types of wellbeing—and how these vary across communities and stakeholder groups—will enable more effective and better-targeted policy interventions, particularly for disadvantaged demographic segments within destinations [79]. Until these gaps are addressed, tourism researchers will continue to lack standardized indicators for determining optimal tourism degrowth pathways.

8. Conclusion

Despite mounting evidence of the environmental and social costs of tourism growth, the pursuit of expansion remains a dominant strategy among governments, destination managers, and industry stakeholders. The mainstream "green growth" approach—based on the assumption that technological innovation and improved management can decouple growth from environmental harm—has proven inadequate in addressing tourism's long-term sustainability challenges.

This paper has presented the case for a selective degrowth approach to tourism: a deliberate, equitable reduction in tourism production and consumption, particularly in high-income regions, aimed at enhancing resident wellbeing and respecting ecological limits. Degrowth offers a paradigm shift from efficiency to sufficiency, challenging the reliance on GDP as a measure of progress and advocating for alternative indicators of tourism success to be rooted in stakeholder wellbeing outcomes.

Tourism degrowth offers a transformative vision for a more sustainable and equitable future. It challenges the dominant growth-centric paradigm and invites societies to rethink their relationship with nature, community, and prosperity. Rather than pursuing endless expansion, degrowth calls for a reorientation of tourism development toward ecological integrity, cultural authenticity, and collective wellbeing.

Degrowth challenges the notion of a single path to development, acknowledging a diversity of valid pathways. The degrowth process faces formidable challenges in its implementation. These include institutional inertia, political resistance, economic dependencies, and deeply embedded cultural values that equate growth with success. Overcoming these barriers requires systemic change, participatory governance, and a redefinition of prosperity that prioritizes quality of life over material expansion. A robust research agenda is essential to support this transition. A more detailed understanding is required of each of the policy interventions recommended to achieve degrowth in particular tourism sectors. Scholars must explore the practical and theoretical implications of tourism degrowth, including its effects on wellbeing, consumption, labor, business models, and institutional structures. Case studies and interdisciplinary collaboration will be critical in identifying viable pathways and informing policy design. Tourism degrowth research must address transition strategies, consumption patterns, institutional reforms, and wellbeing outcomes, while developing standardized indicators and practical frameworks for implementation. Without this, tourism scholarship will remain ill-equipped to guide destinations toward sustainable, equitable futures.

The degrowth alternative has substantial consequences for tourism sustainable development theory and practice and warrants greater attention from destination managers, tourism researchers, and various stakeholder groups. Ultimately, tourism degrowth represents an opportunity to restructure the industry around principles of ecological integrity, social justice, and human flourishing. By embracing this vision, destinations can move beyond growth-centric models and toward a more resilient, equitable, and sustainable future. As global challenges such as climate change, resource depletion, and social inequality intensify, degrowth offers a bold alternative to tourism business-as-usual.

Tourism degrowth offers a transformative vision for sustainability, challenging the growth-centric paradigm and advocating for a reorientation toward ecological integrity, cultural authenticity, and collective wellbeing. It is anticipated that the arguments presented will stimulate empirical research to advance our knowledge of the advantages and challenges of applying selective degrowth to identified tourism sectors. While implementation faces significant challenges, a robust research agenda and participatory governance can support this transition. By embracing selective sectoral degrowth, the tourism industry can become a force for regeneration, enhancing human flourishing while safeguarding the planet for future generations.

Ethical Statement

This study does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by the author.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest to this work.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Author Contribution Statement

Larry Dwyer: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration.

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