

Destination Management Organizations in Island and Coastal Tourism: A Comparative Analysis of Governance, Sustainability and Resilience Practices in European and International Destinations

Evangelia D Parisi*

Department of Digital Media and Communication, Ionian University, Argostoli, Kefalonia, Greece

ABSTRACT

Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) have evolved from destination marketing entities into strategic governance actors responsible for coordinating tourism development, sustainability transitions, stakeholder engagement, and destination resilience. This transformation is particularly evident in island tourism systems, where “islandness”—defined by geographical isolation, resource constraints, ecological vulnerability, and structural dependence on tourism—intensifies socio-ecological pressures such as overtourism, seasonality, carrying-capacity limits, and climate change impacts. Despite the increasing relevance of governance in tourism studies, comparative analyses of DMO practices across diverse island contexts remain limited.

This study examines governance structures, sustainability integration, digital transformation, stakeholder participation, and resilience mechanisms across seven island destinations: Mallorca, the Canary Islands, Madeira, the Azores, New Zealand, Seychelles, and Iceland. Using a qualitative comparative case study design based on secondary data (including policy documents, DMO strategies, governance reports, and sustainability frameworks), the research captures variation in institutional capacity, tourism dependence, and socio-ecological vulnerability. The findings demonstrate that destination governance outcomes are not driven by linear development trajectories, but emerge from the interaction between islandness, institutional capacity, and socio-ecological pressure. Three distinct governance configurations are identified: (i) pressure-driven systems characterized by incremental and reactive adaptation under overtourism conditions; (ii) sustainability-oriented systems where ecological constraints are more effectively integrated into planning; and (iii) adaptive resilience-oriented systems where governance is institutionalized through multi-scalar coordination, behavioral regulation, and long-term sustainability strategies. Across all cases, effective DMOs are characterized by collaborative governance structures, institutional learning capacity, and evidence-based decision-making systems.

Based on these findings, the study develops a comparative typology of island destination governance systems and proposes an integrated socio-ecological framework explaining how governance capacity mediates sustainability and resilience outcomes under conditions of structural constraint. The study advances destination governance theory by reconceptualizing islandness as a structural governance determinant and by demonstrating how adaptive governance mechanisms produce differentiated resilience pathways across island tourism systems.

The study contributes both theoretically and practically by offering a systems-based understanding of DMO evolution in island contexts and by providing guidance for policymakers seeking to design governance systems capable of managing sustainability and resilience in environmentally sensitive destinations

KEYWORDS: Destination Management Organizations, Destination Governance, Sustainable Tourism, Resilience, Stakeholder Engagement, Tourism Planning, islanders

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has long been recognized as a key driver of economic development, employment creation, and infrastructural investment in coastal and island destinations worldwide (Dwyer et al., 2020). However, the continued expansion of mass tourism has increasingly placed significant pressure on the socio-ecological systems of these fragile environments, raising concerns regarding environmental degradation, social carrying capacity, and long-term destination viability (Saarinen, 2021). Island and coastal destinations are particularly vulnerable due to their geographical isolation, limited resource bases, high biodiversity value, and heightened exposure to climate change impacts (Hall, 2022). In recent years, these vulnerabilities have been further intensified by over-tourism dynamics, seasonality pressures, coastal erosion, waste management challenges, and socio-spatial tensions between visitors and local communities (Milano et al., 2019; Mihalic, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the structural fragility of tourism-dependent economies and accelerated the shift toward more resilient and value-oriented development pathways (Gössling et al., 2021).

Within this context, destination governance has undergone a significant transformation. Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), once primarily focused on promotion and market positioning (Pike & Page, 2014), are increasingly evolving into Destination Management and Governance Organizations with expanded responsibilities that include sustainability coordination, stakeholder integration, and strategic destination planning (Buhalis & Volchek, 2021). This evolution reflects a broader governance shift in which DMOs are expected to act as intermediaries among public authorities, private sector actors, and local communities, balancing economic competitiveness with environmental stewardship and social well-being (Gretzel et al., 2020; Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

Despite growing academic attention to sustainable destination governance, comparative understanding of how DMOs operationalize sustainability and resilience across different island contexts remains limited (Dianis & Shoval, 2023). In particular, systematic cross-case analyses contrasting governance models in mature European coastal and island destinations with those in remote island nations are still scarce, despite their importance for understanding institutional diversity and adaptive capacity in tourism systems (Hall & Williams, 2022).

To address this gap, this study undertakes a qualitative comparative case study of seven internationally significant island destinations: Mallorca, the Canary Islands, Madeira, the Azores, New Zealand, Seychelles, and Iceland. These cases are selected to capture variation in governance structures, tourism development stages, and environmental conditions, enabling a structured comparison of destination governance practices across different institutional and geographical contexts.

The study examines five interrelated dimensions of destination governance: (i) governance and organizational structures of DMOs, (ii) sustainability strategies and policy integration, (iii) digital transformation and data-driven decision-making, (iv) stakeholder engagement and participatory governance mechanisms, and (v) climate adaptation and resilience-building practices.

Building on this analysis, the study develops a comparative typology of DMO governance models in island tourism destinations (Figure 1, Table 1). In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on adaptive governance, sustainability transitions, and resilience in tourism-dependent island systems.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 The Institutional Evolution of DMOs: From Marketing to Governance

The conceptualization of Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) has undergone a significant transformation over the past three decades. Early tourism scholarship positioned DMOs primarily as promotional agencies responsible for stimulating demand, strengthening destination branding, and increasing visitor arrivals (Pike & Page, 2014). This growth-oriented paradigm was grounded in the assumption that tourism expansion generates broad-based economic benefits for destinations. However, the increasing visibility of negative externalities associated with tourism growth—such as congestion,

environmental degradation, and resident dissatisfaction- has challenged this assumption and redirected scholarly attention toward more integrated approaches to destination governance (Buhalis & Volchek, 2021).

Contemporary perspectives increasingly conceptualize DMOs not as isolated marketing entities, but as coordination nodes within complex, multi-actor governance systems (Volgger & Pechlaner, 2015). In this context, destination governance reflects a shift from hierarchical public administration toward networked and collaborative governance arrangements (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). DMOs are therefore expected to facilitate coordination among public authorities, private sector actors, and local communities, aligning tourism development with broader sustainability objectives (Gretzel et al., 2020). However, as Dwyer et al. (2020) highlight, many DMOs continue to operate under conditions of limited authority and financial dependency, constraining their capacity for long-term strategic intervention.

2.2 Sustainability and Carrying Capacity in Island and Coastal Tourism

Island and coastal destinations constitute highly sensitive socio-ecological systems characterized by geographical isolation, limited resource bases, and high ecological value. These structural conditions make them particularly vulnerable to the pressures of mass tourism, especially under spatial and temporal concentration of visitor flows (Hall, 2022).

Within this context, Saarinen (2021) conceptualizes tourism carrying capacity as a multidimensional construct encompassing environmental, socio-cultural, and economic thresholds. When these thresholds are exceeded, destinations risk environmental degradation, reduced visitor experience quality, and declining local community acceptance (Mihalic, 2020).

Addressing these challenges increasingly requires evidence-based destination governance supported by digital monitoring and data-driven decision-making. Smart destination approaches leverage technologies such as IoT systems, sensors, and advanced analytics to monitor environmental pressure indicators, including congestion, waste generation, and resource consumption (Gretzel et al., 2015). However, Milano et al. (2019) argue that the effectiveness of such approaches is often limited by institutional fragmentation and weak inter-organizational coordination.

2.3 Socio-Ecological Resilience and Crisis Management

In the context of accelerating climate change and systemic uncertainty, resilience has become a central concept in destination governance research. From a socio-ecological systems perspective, resilience refers to the capacity of destinations to anticipate, absorb, adapt to, and recover from external shocks while maintaining core functions and identity (Gössling et al., 2021).

For island and coastal destinations, such shocks include acute disturbances (e.g., extreme weather events, coastal erosion, volcanic activity) as well as systemic crises such as pandemics and geopolitical disruptions (Hall & Williams, 2022). Building resilience therefore requires proactive governance approaches, including adaptive risk management, diversification of tourism economies, and coordinated multi-stakeholder crisis response systems (Dianis & Shoval, 2023).

Importantly, resilience is also shaped by institutional learning processes, whereby destinations integrate past crisis experiences into future planning. This enables “build back better” strategies that enhance long-term adaptive capacity and systemic sustainability.

2.4 Conceptual Framework: Integrated Destination Governance in Island Tourism Systems

Building upon the preceding discussion, this study develops an integrated conceptual framework that explains how governance systems in island tourism destinations respond to increasing sustainability and resilience challenges. The framework synthesizes insights from destination governance literature, island studies scholarship, socio-ecological systems theory, and resilience research to examine the interrelationships among islandness, the institutional evolution of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), socio-ecological carrying capacity pressures, governance capacity, and

adaptive governance mechanisms (Hall, 2011; Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Baldacchino, 2004; Folke et al., 2005).

Rather than treating these dimensions as separate analytical domains, the framework conceptualizes them as interconnected forces that collectively shape governance processes and long-term tourism outcomes in island destinations. At the foundation of the framework lies the concept of islandness, which represents the distinctive geographical, environmental, economic, political, and socio-cultural characteristics of island territories (Baldacchino, 2004; Grydehøj, 2017). Island destinations are frequently characterized by spatial constraints, geographical isolation, limited resource availability, economic dependence on external markets, and high reliance on tourism activities. These characteristics influence governance capacity and increase vulnerability to both internal and external disturbances. Consequently, islandness functions as a structural condition that shapes tourism development trajectories, governance effectiveness, and destination resilience.

Within this context, DMOs have undergone a significant institutional transformation over the past two decades. Originally established as destination marketing organizations focused primarily on promotion and branding, DMOs increasingly operate as governance and coordination actors responsible for facilitating stakeholder collaboration, supporting sustainable tourism development, managing visitor impacts, and enhancing destination resilience (Buhalis, 2000; Pike & Page, 2014; Dredge, 2016). Contemporary DMOs function as intermediary institutions linking public authorities, private tourism enterprises, local communities, environmental organizations, and civil society actors within increasingly complex governance networks. However, their effectiveness is frequently constrained by fragmented institutional arrangements, limited regulatory authority, resource dependency, and competing stakeholder interests (Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014).

Simultaneously, island tourism systems experience growing socio-ecological carrying capacity pressures associated with tourism expansion and destination development. These pressures manifest through environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, water scarcity, infrastructure congestion, housing affordability challenges, waste management problems, and socio-cultural tensions between residents and visitors (Saveriades, 2000; Gössling et al., 2012). The carrying capacity of island destinations is often lower than that of mainland regions due to limited land availability and finite ecological resources. Furthermore, these pressures are increasingly intensified by climate change impacts, including sea-level rise, coastal erosion, extreme weather events, ecosystem degradation, and resource insecurity (Scott et al., 2012).

In addition to environmental challenges, island destinations are highly exposed to external shocks such as economic crises, pandemics, geopolitical instability, and disruptions in international travel flows. Such vulnerabilities increase uncertainty and complicate governance processes, requiring destinations to develop greater adaptive capacity and institutional flexibility (Hall et al., 2018). As a result, traditional hierarchical management approaches are increasingly viewed as insufficient for addressing the complexity and interconnectedness of contemporary tourism challenges.

The interaction between island-specific vulnerabilities, institutional constraints, and socio-ecological pressures generates substantial challenges for destination governance systems. In response, destinations increasingly adopt adaptive governance mechanisms, which emphasize flexibility, collaboration, learning, and multi-stakeholder participation (Folke et al., 2005; Armitage et al., 2009; Berkes, 2009). Adaptive governance approaches seek to enhance the ability of destinations to respond effectively to changing environmental, social, and economic conditions through collaborative decision-making, integrated policy frameworks, stakeholder engagement processes, smart destination technologies, and evidence-based management systems.

A central component of the proposed framework is governance capacity, defined as the ability of destination institutions and stakeholders to coordinate collective action, mobilize resources, implement policies, resolve conflicts, and respond effectively to emerging challenges (Hall, 2011; Dredge, 2016).

Governance capacity functions as a critical mediating variable between structural vulnerabilities and destination outcomes. The framework advances the proposition that sustainability and resilience are not determined solely by the magnitude of tourism pressures or environmental risks but by the effectiveness with which governance systems coordinate adaptive responses and facilitate collective action.

Adaptive governance is further strengthened through processes of institutional learning, which enable destinations to continuously evaluate policy effectiveness, monitor tourism impacts, integrate stakeholder feedback, and revise management strategies in response to changing conditions (Folke et al., 2005; Berkes & Ross, 2013). Through iterative learning processes, governance systems enhance their capacity to anticipate future challenges, reduce uncertainty, and improve policy effectiveness. Institutional learning therefore represents a key mechanism through which adaptive governance evolves and strengthens over time.

Beyond adaptation, destinations may also develop transformative capacity, defined as the ability to fundamentally redesign tourism development pathways when existing models become environmentally, socially, or economically unsustainable (Walker et al., 2004; Folke et al., 2010). Transformative capacity enables destinations to move beyond incremental adjustments and pursue structural changes in governance arrangements, tourism products, visitor management systems, and sustainability strategies. This dimension is particularly relevant for island destinations facing persistent overtourism pressures, climate-related risks, and resource limitations that may require systemic transitions rather than temporary policy responses.

The framework therefore proposes that destination outcomes emerge from the dynamic interaction among six interconnected dimensions: (1) islandness conditions, (2) DMO institutional evolution, (3) socio-ecological carrying capacity pressures, (4) governance capacity, (5) adaptive governance mechanisms, and (6) institutional learning and transformative capacity. Together, these dimensions' influence destination performance in terms of environmental sustainability, socio-economic resilience, tourism competitiveness, community well-being, and long-term destination viability.

Accordingly, destinations characterized by stronger governance integration, greater stakeholder participation, higher institutional learning capacity, and more effective adaptive governance mechanisms are expected to demonstrate superior sustainability and resilience outcomes. Conversely, destinations experiencing fragmented governance structures, weak stakeholder coordination, and limited adaptive capacity are more likely to encounter difficulties in managing socio-ecological pressures and maintaining long-term tourism sustainability.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual relationships among these dimensions and provides the analytical foundation for the comparative assessment of governance, sustainability, and resilience practices across the selected island destinations examined in this study.

The framework illustrates how islandness conditions shape socio-ecological pressures and governance capacity. Through adaptive governance mechanisms, institutional learning processes, and transformative capacity, DMOs and destination stakeholders respond to environmental, socio-cultural, economic, and climate-related challenges. These interactions ultimately influence sustainability performance, resilience capacity, tourism competitiveness, community well-being, and long-term destination viability.

The interaction between governance structures, socio-ecological pressures, and adaptive responses ultimately shapes destination-level outcomes in terms of sustainability performance, resilience capacity, and long-term tourism viability. The proposed conceptual framework integrates islandness, destination governance, socio-ecological pressures, and adaptive governance mechanisms into a unified model explaining sustainability and resilience outcomes in island tourism systems. The conceptual relationships among these dimensions are illustrated in Figure 1.

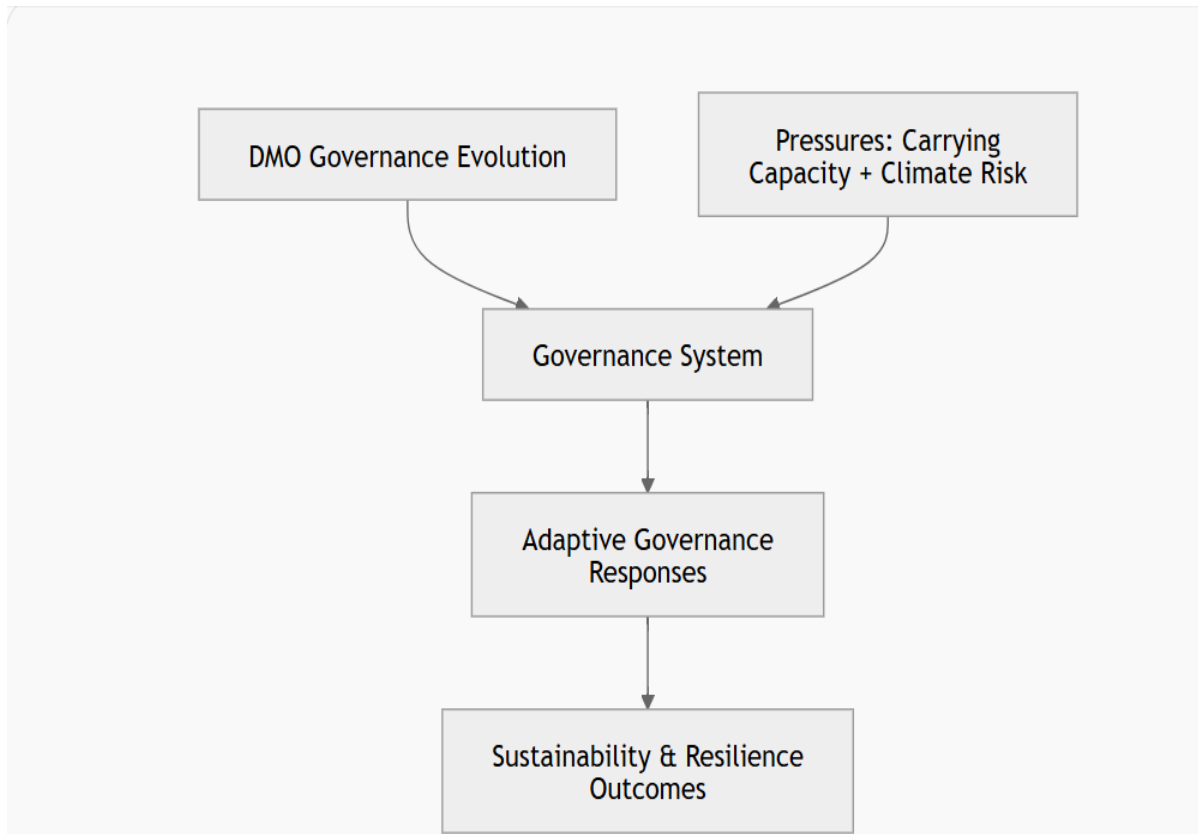


Figure 1. Integrated governance framework for sustainable and resilient island tourism destinations.

3. METHODOLOGY

To address the complex, multi-layered dynamics of contemporary destination governance, this study adopts a qualitative multiple-case study design (Yin, 2018). Case study research is particularly suited for investigating contemporary phenomena within real-world contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon (destination management) and its context (island and coastal systems) are deeply intertwined. By analyzing a diverse set of seven destinations, this approach enables cross-case synthesis to identify systemic patterns, institutional variations, and resilience-oriented governance practices that would not be observable through a single-case design.

3.1 Case Selection Matrix

The seven destinations selected for this study were chosen using purposive, maximum-variation sampling. The selection criteria required that each destination:

- Exhibits high economic dependence on island, archipelagic, or coastal tourism
- Experiences distinct socio-ecological, climatic, or seasonal vulnerabilities
- Possesses an operational, state-recognized Destination Management Organization (DMO) or equivalent regional governance structure actively engaged in sustainability transitions.

Based on the conceptual framework (Figure 1), destination governance outcomes in island tourism systems are understood as the product of interacting socio-ecological pressures, institutional configurations of Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), and adaptive resilience capacities. From this theoretical synthesis, a typology of case study destinations emerges, reflecting systematic differences in governance conditions, vulnerability profiles, and capacity for adaptive response. This typology provides an analytical lens for comparing destinations that operate under distinct combinations of tourism pressure and governance maturity.

3.2 Data Collection and Sources

Data for this comparative analysis were compiled from multiple institutional and secondary qualitative sources to ensure methodological triangulation and analytical robustness. The data collection process included:

- Official DMO strategic documents: multi-year strategic plans, sustainable tourism roadmaps, and governance transition reports from organizations such as Tourism New Zealand, Visit Iceland, and Turismo de Portugal.
- Policy and legislative frameworks: national and regional tourism legislation, carrying capacity regulations, environmental taxation policies, and cruise tourism management protocols at municipal and regional levels.
- Socio-economic and environmental datasets: publicly available indicator sets and reports from regional tourism observatories, Eurostat, the United Nations World Tourism Organization, and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a structured qualitative comparative case study approach combining theory-driven coding and cross-case pattern matching (Yin, 2018). To ensure analytical transparency and replicability, a three-stage analytical procedure was applied.

In the first stage, a deductive coding framework was developed based on the study's conceptual model (Figure 1). Three core analytical dimensions were defined: (i) destination governance capacity, (ii) sustainability integration, and (iii) resilience mechanisms. Each dimension was further operationalized into specific indicators, including stakeholder participation, institutional coordination, carrying capacity management, environmental policy integration, digital transformation practices, and climate adaptation strategies.

In the second stage, all documentary sources (including DMO strategic plans, policy frameworks, and sustainability reports) were systematically reviewed and coded according to the predefined analytical framework. An inductive coding process was simultaneously applied to capture emerging themes not fully anticipated in the initial framework, allowing for context-specific governance features to be incorporated into the analysis.

In the third stage, a cross-case pattern matching procedure was conducted to identify similarities and divergences across the selected island destinations. Cases were compared across the three analytical dimensions, enabling the identification of recurring governance configurations and adaptive strategies.

To operationalize the conceptual framework and facilitate systematic comparison, destinations were assessed according to their relative levels of governance capacity, sustainability integration, and resilience capacity. Governance capacity referred to the degree of institutional coordination, stakeholder participation, and policy integration; sustainability integration captured the extent to which environmental protection and carrying-capacity considerations were embedded within destination planning; and resilience capacity reflected the presence of adaptive governance mechanisms, climate adaptation strategies, crisis preparedness, and institutional learning processes.

The synthesis of cross-case patterns resulted in the development of a comparative typology of island destination governance models (Table 1). Rather than representing a linear hierarchy of development, the typology reflects distinct governance configurations emerging from the interaction between tourism pressure, socio-ecological vulnerability, institutional capacity, and island-specific structural conditions. Three governance models were identified: Pressure-Driven Governance Systems, Balanced Sustainability-Oriented Systems, and Adaptive Resilience-Oriented Systems.

To enhance validity, triangulation was applied across multiple secondary data sources, including policy documents, institutional reports, and international tourism databases. This ensured consistency of interpretations and reduced potential bias associated with single-source analysis.

The comparative typology developed in this study is presented in Table 1.

Governance type	Destinations	Governance profile	Key characteristics
High-pressure adaptive mass tourism systems	Mallorca, Canary Islands	Medium governance capacity, high tourism pressure	Demand management focus, overtourism challenges, digital to for visitor control
Sustainability-oriented hybrid island systems	Madeira, Azores	Medium governance capacity, strong sustainability orientation	Environmental protection integration, carrying capacity awareness, balanced tourism development
Integrated resilience-based island systems	Iceland, Seychelles, New Zealand	High governance capacity, high resilience orientation	Strong institutional coordination, climate adaptation, embedded

Table 1 Comparative Typology of Island Destination Governance Models

Note: The typology is analytically derived from cross-case pattern matching (see Section 3.3) and does not represent a predefined classification.

The typology demonstrates that governance outcomes in island tourism systems are not determined solely by tourism intensity or environmental vulnerability. Rather, they emerge from the interaction between island-specific structural conditions, institutional capacity, and adaptive governance mechanisms. Destinations experiencing similar levels of tourism dependence may exhibit significantly different sustainability and resilience outcomes depending on their ability to coordinate stakeholders, integrate sustainability objectives into decision-making processes, and respond adaptively to socio-ecological pressures. Consequently, the typology provides an analytical framework for understanding how different governance configurations mediate destination sustainability and resilience under conditions of islandness.

4. CASE STUDY ANALYSIS: GOVERNANCE, SUSTAINABILITY, AND RESILIENCE PRACTICES

Building on the analytical framework outlined in Section 3.3 and the comparative typology presented in Table 1, this section examines how governance capacity, socio-ecological pressures, and adaptive resilience mechanisms interact across diverse island tourism systems. Rather than treating each destination as an isolated unit, the analysis adopts a typology-driven comparative approach, enabling systematic identification of convergence and divergence patterns across governance models. This approach aligns with systems-based perspectives in destination governance and resilience research, which emphasize the interaction between institutional arrangements and socio-ecological dynamics (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Hall, 2019; Koens et al., 2018).

4.1 Pressure-Driven Governance Systems: Mallorca and the Canary Islands

This category includes mature mass tourism destinations characterized by high tourism dependency, strong seasonal concentration, and persistent socio-ecological pressure. Governance systems in these contexts are highly institutionalized but increasingly constrained by overtourism dynamics and carrying-capacity limitations (Koens et al., 2018; Milano et al., 2019).

4.1.1. Mallorca

Mallorca represents one of the most intensively studied overtourism destinations in Europe. Governance responses have gradually shifted from growth-oriented tourism promotion toward impact mitigation and carrying-capacity management (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Key policy instruments include the Sustainable Tourism Tax (Ecotasa), restrictions on short-term rentals, and spatial management strategies targeting high-density coastal zones.

These measures reflect an attempt to internalize tourism externalities, consistent with sustainability-oriented governance transitions described in the literature (Hall, 2019). However, structural dependence on tourism limits transformative capacity, resulting in governance strategies that remain predominantly reactive rather than transformative (Dredge, 2016; Koens et al., 2018).

4.1.2 Canary Islands

Canary Islands face similar but spatially differentiated pressures, including water scarcity, housing affordability issues, and infrastructure saturation during peak seasons. Governance responses increasingly incorporate digital monitoring systems, sustainability planning frameworks, and regulatory debates on tourism expansion limits.

However, as highlighted in broader overtourism literature, such interventions often focus on mitigating impacts rather than addressing structural drivers of tourism dependence (Milano et al., 2019; Gössling et al., 2021). This reinforces a pattern of incremental adaptation rather than systemic transformation.

4.1.3 Synthesis

Across both cases, governance reflects a transition from growth maximization to impact management. Nevertheless, resilience strategies remain largely incremental, consistent with findings that mature mass tourism destinations often experience “path dependency traps” limiting transformative governance capacity (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Koens et al., 2018).

4.2 Balanced Sustainability-Oriented Systems: Madeira and the Azores

This category includes destinations where tourism pressure is moderate and governance systems demonstrate stronger integration of environmental sustainability principles into long-term planning frameworks (Hall, 2019).

4.2.1 Madeira

Madeira represents a hybrid governance model characterized by diversification strategies and sustainability-oriented tourism planning. Regional policies emphasize year-round tourism demand, nature-based tourism development, and dispersal strategies aimed at reducing spatial pressure on core tourist zones.

These governance approaches align with sustainability transition frameworks emphasizing diversification and system balancing as mechanisms for reducing vulnerability in island tourism systems (Gössling et al., 2021; Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

4.2.2 Azores

Azores constitute a conservation-oriented governance system where ecological carrying capacity is central to tourism regulation. Policy instruments include protected area management, environmental certification schemes, and controlled tourism development aligned with biodiversity protection goals.

This approach reflects ecosystem-based management principles widely discussed in socio-ecological systems literature (Folke et al., 2005; Hall, 2019), emphasizing long-term ecological resilience over volume-based tourism growth.

4.2.3 Synthesis

Both cases demonstrate that lower tourism pressure enables more proactive integration of sustainability principles into governance systems. This supports arguments that governance effectiveness is

conditioned not only by institutional capacity but also by the intensity of socio-ecological pressure (Koens et al., 2018; Hall, 2019).

4.3 Adaptive Resilience-Oriented Systems: Iceland, Seychelles, and New Zealand

This category includes destinations where resilience is explicitly embedded within national tourism governance frameworks and policy strategies (Hall et al., 2018).

4.3.1 Iceland

Iceland experienced rapid tourism growth following the post-2010 period, creating significant pressure on natural attractions and infrastructure systems. Governance responses include visitor management strategies, infrastructure regulation, and behavioral interventions such as the “Icelandic Pledge,” which promotes responsible tourism practices.

These measures reflect adaptive governance approaches aimed at balancing accessibility with conservation in fragile environments (Gössling et al., 2021; Hall, 2019).

4.3.2 Seychelles

Seychelles implements a blue economy governance framework integrating marine conservation, climate adaptation, and sustainable tourism development. Key policies include marine protected areas and ecosystem-based management strategies aimed at safeguarding biodiversity while maintaining tourism revenues.

This aligns with resilience thinking in socio-ecological systems literature, which emphasizes the importance of ecosystem integrity in Small Island developing states (Folke et al., 2005; Gössling et al., 2021).

4.3.2 New Zealand

New Zealand represents a mature model of regenerative tourism governance. Frameworks such as the “Tiaki Promise” integrate environmental ethics into visitor behavior, while national strategies emphasize sustainability, indigenous partnership (Māori governance principles), and spatial dispersal of tourism flows.

This reflects a shift toward transformative governance approaches, where tourism systems are actively reoriented toward long-term ecological and social sustainability (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Hall, 2019).

4.3.3 Synthesis

These destinations demonstrate advanced adaptive governance structures characterized by institutional learning, multi-level coordination, and integration of sustainability into core governance frameworks. They represent examples of “resilience-oriented destination systems” where adaptation is embedded in policy design rather than emerging as a reactive response (Hall et al., 2018; Folke et al., 2005).

4.3.4 Cross-Case Synthesis

The comparative analysis demonstrates that destination governance outcomes are not solely determined by tourism intensity or environmental vulnerability but emerge from the interaction between islandness, institutional capacity, and adaptive governance mechanisms (Baldacchino, 2004; Hall, 2019).

Pressure-driven systems (Mallorca, Canary Islands) exhibit high institutional capacity but constrained transformative ability due to path dependency and economic reliance on tourism (Koens et al., 2018). Balanced systems (Madeira, Azores) demonstrate stronger integration of sustainability principles and more proactive governance. Adaptive systems (Iceland, Seychelles, New Zealand) show the highest levels of institutional learning and resilience-oriented governance.

This supports socio-ecological systems theory, which emphasizes that resilience is a function of adaptive capacity rather than system stability alone (Folke et al., 2005; Gössling et al., 2021). It also

reinforces the argument that islandness functions as a structural condition shaping governance pathways rather than a deterministic constraint (Baldacchino, 2004; Grydehøj, 2017).

5. DISCUSSION

The analysis, structured through the typology presented in Table 1 and grounded in the conceptual framework (Figure 1), demonstrates that destination governance outcomes in island tourism systems are shaped by the interaction between islandness, tourism dependence, socio-ecological vulnerability, and institutional capacity, rather than by linear or stage-based trajectories toward sustainability (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Hall, 2019; Koens et al., 2018). This finding directly challenges incremental models of destination evolution, which assume a gradual transition from growth-oriented to sustainability-oriented governance. Instead, the evidence suggests that governance pathways are path-dependent, uneven, and structurally conditioned by island-specific constraints.

A central conceptual contribution of the study lies in reinforcing the argument that islandness should be understood not merely as a geographical condition but as a structural governance determinant that actively shapes institutional capacity, stakeholder coordination, and adaptive potential (Baldacchino, 2004; Grydehøj, 2017). Across all cases, islandness operates as both an enabling and constraining condition: while it intensifies socio-ecological vulnerability, it also creates institutional proximity that can facilitate coordinated governance responses under certain conditions.

High-pressure mass tourism systems, exemplified by Mallorca and Canary Islands, demonstrate advanced but increasingly contested governance configurations. In these contexts, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) have adopted more sophisticated, data-informed governance tools aligned with carrying-capacity thinking and smart destination approaches (Gretzel et al., 2015; Koens et al., 2018). However, these governance innovations remain constrained by structural tourism dependency, which limits transformative capacity and reinforces incrementalism. As a result, governance tends to focus on demand management, spatial redistribution, and temporal smoothing rather than systemic reconfiguration of tourism development models (Milano et al., 2019).

In contrast, peripheral island systems such as Madeira and Azores demonstrate stronger alignment between governance structures and ecological constraints. Lower tourism intensity enables more anticipatory governance approaches, where sustainability principles are embedded *ex ante* in destination planning rather than applied as corrective mechanisms. This supports broader arguments in socio-ecological systems literature that reduced system pressure enhances governance coherence and increases the effectiveness of adaptive management strategies (Folke et al., 2005; Hall, 2019).

At a broader scale, Iceland, Seychelles, and New Zealand illustrate more advanced configurations of adaptive and multi-scalar governance, where resilience is explicitly institutionalized within national tourism strategies. In these cases, governance extends beyond regulatory intervention to include behavioral change strategies, ethical tourism frameworks, and ecosystem-based management approaches (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Gössling et al., 2021). This reflects a shift toward institutionalized resilience, where adaptive capacity is embedded within governance systems rather than emerging reactively in response to shocks (Hall et al., 2018).

Taken together, the findings support a shift away from linear and normative models of destination development toward a systems-based and contingency-driven understanding of governance in island tourism systems. As demonstrated in Figure 1, governance outcomes emerge from nonlinear interactions between structural conditions (islandness), institutional arrangements (DMO governance), and dynamic pressures (socio-ecological constraints). The typology developed in this study (Table 1) further illustrates that resilience outcomes are mediated by governance configurations rather than determined by tourism intensity alone (Koens et al., 2018).

This study makes three interrelated contributions. First, it advances destination governance theory by explicitly conceptualizing islandness as a structural governance condition rather than a contextual background variable (Baldacchino, 2004; Grydehøj, 2017). Second, it demonstrates that DMO evolution should be interpreted within broader socio-ecological systems, challenging organization-centric perspectives that isolate DMOs from their environmental and institutional contexts. Third, it develops a comparative typology that explains how different governance configurations produce differentiated sustainability and resilience outcomes under varying combinations of pressure and capacity.

Despite these contributions, the study has limitations. The reliance on secondary documentary data may introduce institutional bias, as policy documents often reflect aspirational governance narratives rather than operational realities. In addition, the qualitative comparative design prioritizes depth over generalizability. Future research should therefore incorporate primary empirical data (e.g., stakeholder interviews, participatory governance analysis) and quantitative sustainability indicators to validate and extend the proposed typology. Further research could also test whether the islandness-driven governance framework applies to non-island contexts characterized by extreme tourism pressure, such as urban overtourism destinations.

Overall, the study highlights that sustainable destination governance in island tourism systems emerges from complex and context-specific interactions between institutional capacity, socio-ecological constraints, and adaptive governance mechanisms operating across multiple scales. Rather than fixed institutional arrangements, island governance should be understood as an evolving adaptive system continuously reshaped through learning processes, structural pressures, and institutional responses (Folke et al., 2005; Hall, 2019).

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined destination governance in island tourism systems through an integrated analytical framework linking islandness, Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) institutional evolution, socio-ecological carrying capacity pressures, and adaptive governance mechanisms. By operationalizing these dimensions into a comparative typology of island destinations, the study advances a systems-based understanding of governance adaptation under conditions of structural constraint, ecological fragility, and institutional complexity, moving beyond linear and stage-based models of tourism development (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Hall, 2019).

The findings demonstrate that governance outcomes in island tourism systems are not determined solely by tourism intensity or environmental vulnerability, but emerge from the interaction between islandness, institutional capacity, and adaptive governance mechanisms. Accordingly, island destinations follow differentiated and non-linear governance trajectories, ranging from incremental and reactive adaptation in high-pressure mass tourism contexts to more proactive, integrated, and resilience-oriented configurations in lower-pressure or strategically governed systems. Across all cases, resilience is conceptualized as an emergent property of governance systems rather than a fixed destination attribute (Folke et al., 2005; Hall et al., 2018).

A key theoretical implication of this study is the reconceptualization of islandness as a structural governance determinant rather than a contextual background condition. Islandness shapes the parameters within which governance capacity operates, influencing coordination mechanisms, policy effectiveness, and the scope for transformative change. In this sense, governance and adaptive capacity function as mediating mechanisms through which structural vulnerability is translated into resilience outcomes.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes to destination governance and island studies literature in three ways. First, it reframes destination governance as an embedded socio-ecological system rather than an organizational function of Destination Marketing Organizations alone. Second, it demonstrates that sustainability and resilience are co-produced through interactions between

institutional arrangements and environmental constraints, rather than achieved through isolated policy interventions. Third, it introduces a comparative typology that explains how different configurations of governance capacity, sustainability integration, and resilience mechanisms generate distinct development pathways across island tourism systems.

From a policy and managerial perspective, the findings highlight that effective destination governance in island contexts requires a shift from reactive impact management toward anticipatory and adaptive governance systems. This includes strengthening institutional coordination across governance levels, enhancing stakeholder participation, embedding carrying-capacity thresholds into planning frameworks, and investing in data-driven and learning-oriented governance systems. In addition, policy interventions must recognize the structural constraints imposed by islandness, particularly in highly tourism-dependent economies, where opportunities for diversification and transformation may be limited without coordinated systemic change.

Overall, the study argues that sustainable destination governance in island tourism systems should be conceptualized as an evolving adaptive system embedded within the structural conditions of islandness. Its effectiveness depends on the continuous interaction between institutional capacity, socio-ecological constraints, and the ability of governance actors to learn, adapt, and transform in response to dynamic tourism pressures. Rather than offering a static model of “best practice,” the study emphasizes the importance of context-sensitive and system-specific governance approaches capable of responding to the complexity of contemporary island tourism systems.

REFERENCES

1. Armitage, D., Plummer, R., Berkes, F., Arthur, R. I., Charles, A. T., Davidson-Hunt, I. J., Diduck, A. P., Doubleday, N. C., Johnson, D. S., Marschke, M., McConney, P., Pinkerton, E. W., & Wollenberg, E. K. (2009). Adaptive co-management for social–ecological complexity. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 7(2), 95–102.
2. Baldacchino, G. (2004). The coming of age of island studies. *Geographical Review*, 94(2), 272–283.
3. Berkes, F. (2009). Evolution of co-management: Role of knowledge generation, bridging organizations and social learning. *Journal of Environmental Management*, 90(5), 1692–1702.
4. Berkes, F., & Ross, H. (2013). Community resilience: Toward an integrated approach. *Society & Natural Resources*, 26(1), 5–20.
5. Bramwell, B., & Lane, B. (2011). Critical research on the governance of tourism and sustainability. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 19(4–5), 411–421. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2011.580586>
6. Buhalis, D. (2000). Marketing the competitive destination of the future. *Tourism Management*, 21(1), 97–116.
7. Butler, R. W. (1980). The concept of a tourist area cycle of evolution. *The Canadian Geographer*, 24(1), 5–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0064.1980.tb00970.x>
8. Dredge, D. (2016). Policy networks and the local organization of tourism. *Tourism Management*, 52, 349–362.
9. Dwyer, L., Forsyth, P., & Dwyer, W. (2020). *Tourism economics and policy*. Channel View Publications.
10. Folke, C., Hahn, T., Olsson, P., & Norberg, J. (2005). Adaptive governance of social-ecological systems. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 30, 441–473.
11. Folke, C., Carpenter, S. R., Walker, B., Scheffer, M., Chapin, T., & Rockström, J. (2010). Resilience thinking: Integrating resilience, adaptability and transformability. *Ecology and Society*, 15(4), 20. <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-03610-150420>
12. Gössling, S., Peeters, P., Hall, C. M., Ceron, J. P., Dubois, G., Lehmann, L., & Scott, D. (2012). Tourism and water use: Supply, demand, and security. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 20(1), 1–23.
13. Gössling, S., Scott, D., & Hall, C. M. (2020). Pandemics, tourism and global change: A rapid assessment of COVID-19. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 29(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1758708>

14. Gössling, S., Scott, D., & Hall, C. M. (2021). Tourism and water: Interactions, impacts and challenges. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 29(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1720705>
15. Gretzel, U., Werthner, H., Koo, C., & Lamsfus, C. (2020). Conceptual foundations for understanding smart tourism ecosystems. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 100, 261–266. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.10.001>
16. Grydehøj, A. (2017). A future of island studies. *Island Studies Journal*, 12(1), 3–16.
17. Hall, C. M. (2011). A typology of governance and its implications for tourism policy analysis. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 19(4–5), 437–457.
18. Hall, C. M. (2019a). Constructing sustainable tourism development: The 2030 agenda and the managerial ecology of tourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 27(7), 1044–1060.
19. Hall, C. M. (2019b). *Tourism and social marketing*. Routledge.
20. Hall, C. M. (2022). *Tourism and climate change: Impacts, adaptation and mitigation*. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 92, 103318.
21. Hall, C. M., & Williams, A. M. (2022). *Tourism and innovation*. Routledge.
22. Hall, C. M., Prayag, G., & Amore, A. (2018). *Tourism and resilience: Individual, organisational and destination perspectives*. Channel View Publications.
23. Koens, K., Postma, A., & Papp, B. (2018). Is overtourism overused? Understanding the impact of tourism in a city context. *Sustainability*, 10(12), 4384.
24. McCool, S. F., & Moisey, R. N. (2008). *Tourism, recreation, and sustainability: Linking culture and the environment*. CABI.
25. Mihalic, T. (2020). Conceptualising overtourism: A sustainability approach. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 82, 102906.
26. Milano, C., Cheer, J. M., & Novelli, M. (2019). Overtourism: Excesses, discontents and measures in travel and tourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 27(4), 453–459.
27. Ostrom, E. (2009). A general framework for analyzing sustainability of social-ecological systems. *Science*, 325(5939), 419–422.
28. Pike, S., & Page, S. J. (2014). Destination marketing organizations and destination marketing: A narrative analysis of the literature. *Tourism Management*, 41, 202–227.
29. Saarinen, J. (2021). Tourism and sustainable development goals: Research on sustainable tourism geographies. *Tourism Geographies*, 23(2–3), 257–275.
30. Scott, D., Hall, C. M., & Gössling, S. (2012). Tourism and climate change: Impacts, adaptation and mitigation. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 20(3), 301–319.
31. Saveriades, A. (2000). Establishing the social tourism carrying capacity for the tourist resorts of the east coast of the Republic of Cyprus. *Tourism Management*, 21(2), 147–156.
32. UNWTO. (2018). ‘Overtourism’? Understanding and managing urban tourism growth beyond perceptions. <https://www.unwto.org>
33. UNWTO. (2021). *International tourism highlights, 2021 edition*. <https://www.unwto.org>
34. Volgger, M., & Pechlaner, H. (2014). Requirements for destination management organizations in destination governance. *Tourism Management*, 41, 64–73.
35. Walker, B., Holling, C. S., Carpenter, S. R., & Kinzig, A. (2004). Resilience, adaptability and transformability in social–ecological systems. *Ecology and Society*, 9(2), 5.