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# THE ROLE OF TERRITORIAL IDENTITY IN THE SUSTAINABILITY OF TOURISM IN HUNGARY

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**Abstract:** There is evidence of a strong link and close interaction between territorial identity, whether at the local level or defining a larger territorial unit, and tourism, and several aspects of this have been discussed in the literature. The National Tourism Strategy 2030 in Hungary, among its strategic objectives, pays special attention to the creation and strengthening of national identity and attachment, stating that strengthening domestic tourism contributes to the domestic population's knowledge of Hungary's values and heritage and to the experience of its national identity. Identity is an important pillar of social sustainability, but it also has a role to play in the marketing of destinations and can be investigated from the tourist's point of view as well. The aim of this research is to examine the relationship between tourism and territorial identity from different angles and to confirm the potential for synergies between the two. The novelty of the paper is that it examines territorial identity in the context of sustainable tourism development. The research analyses territorial identity in the context of social sustainability in the designation of new tourism areas and, in parallel, their contribution to sustainable development goals. By analysing and summarising the identity-forming elements of destinations, the relationship between identity, tourism, and social sustainability will be defined. The relationship between tourism and territorial identity is well-documented, with organisations responsible for marketing and branding in the sector utilising this relationship to a great extent. The relationship is employed as a distinctive, unique feature, as part of the development of a regional image and along the lines of cultural identity. The result indicates the starting position of territorial identity, identified as a key indicator of tourism competitiveness, which is changeable and constantly evolving along the dimensions of strategic and functional identity, independently of tourism. The added value of this analysis could be to show which aspects of destinations need to be developed and which areas need to be strengthened in relevance of territorial identity. The enhancement of territorial identity has been demonstrated to exert a favourable influence on tourism demand, whilst concomitantly contributing to the enhancement of the quality of life experienced by the local population. This is achieved by establishing and adhering to the fundamental principles of sustainable and responsible tourism, which is in harmony with the local community.

**Keywords:** social sustainability, sustainable tourism, territorial identity, tourism, destination

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## INTRODUCTION

For the future of tourism, it is important to get to know the role of sustainability and the effects of implementing the concept of sustainability (Butler, 1980; Weaver, 2006; Dávid et al., 2012). At the same time, it is also necessary to study and get to know the role of social sustainability and the effects of activities towards it (Paskova & Zelenka, 2019). One of the elements of social sustainability is territorial identity, which also plays an important role in tourism.

There is evidence of a strong link and close interaction between territorial identity - whether its at a local level or is defining a larger territorial unit - and tourism, and several aspects of this are discussed in the literature. For example, the National Tourism Development Strategy 2030 (NTS2030, 2017) of Hungary, among its strategic objectives, pays special attention to the creation and strengthening of (national) identity and attachment, stating that strengthening domestic tourism contributes to the domestic population's knowledge of Hungary's values and heritage and helps them to experience and live their national identity. Identity is also a fundamental pillar of regional marketing (Spiegler, 2009) and can be examined from the perspective of the consumer, the tourist.

It is widely accepted that the representation of territorial identity is essential in regional and local development strategies and programmes, especially in rural areas (Roca & Mourão, 2004).

The aim of this paper is to present the relationship between tourism and territorial identity from different perspectives and to demonstrate the potential of synergies between the two, with the relevant literature as an essential basis (and secondary source of information). The novelty of the paper is that it examines territorial identity in the context of sustainable tourism development. The research analyses territorial identity in the context of social sustainability in the designation of new tourism areas and, in parallel, their contribution to sustainable development goals. The study examines the correlations through Hungarian research, but the results can also be interpreted in an international context. The research seeks to answer the question of the role of territorial identity in social sustainability and whether its existence influences competitiveness. The answers to these questions and the conclusions can also be interpreted internationally.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

In the literature review section, we examine sustainability in tourism and the definition of territorial identity. Then, linking the two phenomena, we examine how and where the international literature uses territorial identity in the sustainable development of tourism.

### 1. Sustainable tourism

The concept of sustainable development was first introduced in the second half of the 20th century. The literature focuses on the relationship between the three pillars of sustainable development (environment, society, economy), which can only be effective if they are analysed together (Happ, 2014). Since the emergence of the concept of sustainability in tourism, the phenomenon has been addressed in a variety of ways in both literature (Harris et al., 2012) and practice (Hughes et al., 2015). Sustainable tourism "refers to the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability" (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005). Tourism is in a special position in contributing to sustainable development, as it plays a significant role in moving towards sustainability in all three pillars.

However, sustainable tourism must be seen as an approach. It must be clear that the term 'sustainable tourism', which means 'tourism based on the principles of sustainable development', refers to a fundamental objective: making tourism as a whole more sustainable. The term should be used to describe a state of tourism, not a type of tourism.

### 2. Definition of territorial identity

There are several typologies in the terminology of territorial identity, which define the concept according to different criteria depending on the discipline, mainly along the lines of territorial attachment (Table 1).

Table 1. Conceptual approaches to territorial identity (Source: Own editing)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Social psychological approach | Territorial identity is based on the socio-cultural space, which is based on a "collective feeling"; the similarity and solidarity between group members. | Risse (2002), Roca & Mourão (2004), Capello 2018) |
| Geographical approach | Territorial identity is based on a relational space, i.e. a set of functional and hierarchical relationships in a geographical space. | Camagni (1980), Dematteis (1994), Caldo (1996), Pollice (2003) |
| Political approach | The consequence of the territories created by political interventions, the effect of the institutionalisation of the region. | Bourdieu (1985), Ipsen (1993), Paasi (2003), Raagmaa (2002) |

Key words are associated with this theme, which, whether they are used to describe spatial division from a tourism perspective or to brand a destination, are also part of the basic 'value set' in tourism.

The specificity of territorial identity lies in the link between territorial units and the territorial elements of social identity (Bugovics, 2010). In most cases, the starting point for defining it is by the smallest unit, the municipality, which is one of the most defining factors of the concept (Bugovics, 2007; Pénzes et al., 2014). Territorial identity is inseparable from the criteria of territorial delimitation process. There are different stages of its development (self-awareness, identification, desire to belong), but, whatever the reason for the division of territorial units, identity is part of the delimitation of territorial units (Somlyódiné, 2007). According to Jablonczay (2013), the steps of spatial division are the following (Figure 1):

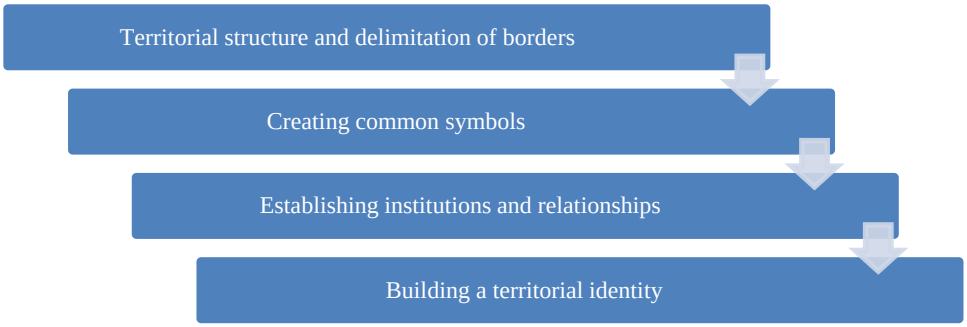


Figure 1. Steps of spatial division (Source: own editing based on Jablonczay, 2013)

According to Somlyódiné's (2007) essay on the interpretation of regional identity, self-identity has two basic forms: attachment to a particular territorial unit ("homeland") and a region-specific (i.e. area-specific) expression of consciousness, the latter including aspects of territorial development. Jablonczay (2013) follows a similar line of thought. In their view, each territory will have an identity of its own if belonging (i.e. collective identity) is created along the following dimensions:

- cultural identity (shaper of a shared consciousness);
- strategic identity (the shared goals associated with the territory);
- functional identity (socio-economic links).

Many researchers, however, question the existence of territorial identity in territorial units where delimitation is the result of a top-to-down (state-led) process (Palkó, 2011), as society is not necessarily able to identify with artificially drawn boundaries. In their opinion, territorial identity is most often formed in places where the creation of a territorial unit is the result of a decentralisation process.

The importance of territorial identity is unquestionable, because it is one of the most important factors that builds the territorial brand and influences the image that is formed (Urbánné, 2020). However, as regards to the identity-forming effect of image, it can be said that it involves 'only the image inherent in the relevant space', i.e. the first impression of a given space does not lead to identity formation (Bugovics, 2010). The next related concept to be identified - and a fundamental factor used in tourism - is competitiveness, of which the image of the area is an integral part, and which is significantly influenced by the territorial identity of its inhabitants (Murphy, 2022). A synthesis of the above-mentioned ideas can be seen in Anholt's (2007) model of competitive identity, which defines its dimensions along six criteria - a hexagon (Figure 2).

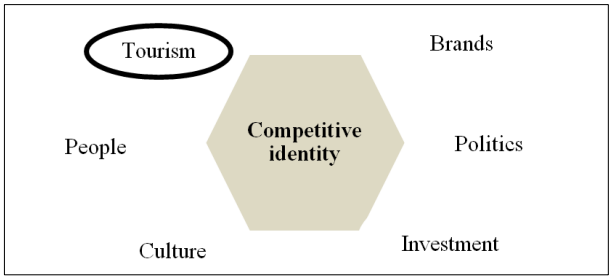


Figure 2. Anholt's model of competitive identity (Source: Murphy, 2022; based on Anholt, 2007:26; own editing)

The six dimensions are as follows:

1. Tourism promotion and visitor experience (word of mouth)
2. Brand that conveys the values and traditions of the place
3. Policy decisions and their influence on local activities
4. The ability of the place to attract capital (investment promotion activities)
5. Cultural activity, export of local heritage
6. Residents' behaviour, hospitality

The theory suggests that in order to create the desired positive image, decision-makers need to address and coordinate each points of the hexagon.

## 3. Territorial identity and sustainable tourism

The relationship between tourism and territorial identity is complex and there are many pieces of literature on the subject. Authors of works of academic interest (Spiegler, 2009; Piskóti et al., 2015; Titisari, 2021) approach the topic from two main perspectives:

1. Territorial identity as a tourism branding element
2. Tourism as a factor of territorial identity

Based on our research, these can be complemented by social sustainability and two additional aspects at the same time, namely

3. Tourism as an element of social sustainability
4. Territorial identity as a component of social sustainability

A novelty of our research is the addition of new elements to the relationship between territorial identity, tourism and social sustainability, which is illustrated in the figure below (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Model of the relationship between sustainable tourism and territorial identity (Source: own editing)

### 3.1. Territorial identity as a branding element

According to the European and UN Tourism's definition of destination branding, the brand is the competitive identity of the product itself (ETC-UNWTO 2009). Sulyok (2014) added to the definition that globalisation and as a result, the increasingly competitive environment are making territorial identity even more valuable. From a certain perspective,

territorial identity in tourism can also be seen as an artificial factor, as decision-makers consciously and often artificially create distinctive features in order to market it, so that image and identity are not only the goal but also the starting point of territorial branding (Spiegler, 2009). This view is reinforced by the claim that the creation of a tourism image generates new identities and cultures, some of which are exploited as the basis for products and services in the sector (Csurgó et al., 2022). One of the risks of the latter is the homogenisation of supply as a result of globalisation, which can lead to the homogenisation of territorial identity as well (Michalkó, 2002).

Identity can also be interpreted from the perspective of the consumer, i.e. the tourist, although it cannot be seen as an identity-forming effect of image (Bugovics, 2010). It cannot, however, be separated from branding, which is closely linked to identity. Travel is, among other things, a way of self-expression and a search for experiences. One of the basic motivations for travel is the search for authenticity (Koncz, 2018), during which tourists identify with traditional values, also a form of identity search (Tóthné, 2005). The Bauer-Kolos author pair, synthesising these two ideas, conclude that identity can be recognised in two forms in the process of territorial branding:

- On the one hand, it represents territorial identity and the possibility of distinctiveness,
- On the other hand, it represents the ability and attitude of target groups to identify with the area.

The positioning of destinations is therefore an essential element of territorial identity, and the conscious construction of it in practice is equal to branding. In other words, identity building becomes branding and then brand image (Bauer & Kolos, 2016).

### 3.2. Tourism, as a factor in strengthening of territorial identity

The organisation of tourism routinely constructs destination identity at different spatial scales (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003). In addition to sectoral objectives, the Hungarian National Tourism Development Strategy 2030 also identifies national strategic objectives, among which the creation of 'identity and attachment' is a priority. The document sees education and training as the key to this, from primary education, through secondary education, to the specialisation of higher education (in tourism). This will result in the creation and strengthening of national and regional identity, contributing to the travel choices of children who become tourists in adulthood. It also contributes to the choice of careers and professions by young adults, which otherwise is becoming an increasing problem in the sector (NTS2030, 2017).

In the context of tourist destinations, the branding process is where the territorial identity intervenes in order to capture the essence and provide the motivation for a visit (Răcășan & Egresi, 2019). Highlighting the specificities of a region through tourism branding can not only attract potential tourists, but also create opportunities for local communities to rediscover their regional identity and encourage investment, which in turn contributes to increasing the performance of the (local) economy and improving the quality of life of local people.

### 3.3. Tourism as an element of social sustainability

Of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the most directly linked to tourism are 8 and 12 (https://www.globalgoals.org/). The focus within SDG 8 titled Decent Work and Economic Growth is SDG 8.9, which focuses on developing and implementing policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products by 2030. Within the Responsible Consumption and Production Sustainable Development Goal (12) the main focus is on the development and implementation of tools that monitor the impact of sustainable progress to reach sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products (12B) (Kassai, 2016; Kőmíves & Vehrer, 2024). Martínez et al. (2020) and his co-authors examined the need to consider social sustainability in relation to tourism development and local support as factors. Social sustainability is a useful concept for addressing tourism development issues (Helgadóttir et al., 2019).

### 3.4. Territorial identity as part of social sustainability

Territorial identity can provide a basis for tourism development plans to help social sustainability. Today, tourism promotes the rediscovery of values such as the preservation of tangible and intangible cultural heritages, which can be achieved through different cultural and social factors (identity, traditions, memories, attachments, local specificities) (Ivona, 2021). Thus, territorial identity can become part of social sustainability (Roca & Mourão, 2004).

The promotion of specific types of territorial attractiveness may prove to be a crucial element in the context of sustainable development planning, programming and project formulation, particularly in rural areas that are currently facing challenges in establishing viable economic activities and social innovation in terms of globally competitive identity features (Roca & Oliveira-Roca, 2007).

## METHODS

Nowadays, the tourism industry, while mitigating the negative effects of the pandemic and the economic crisis that followed, is mostly interested in the renewed demarcation of tourism territorial units and the investments in tourism that have been made/are being made with domestic funding. In 2016, tourism in Hungary was given a completely new role: the main task of the state-level tourism management, i.e. the Hungarian Tourism Agency (MTÜ), in addition to its marketing-type activities, is to implement the strategic objectives of the new territorial approach, based on the National Tourism Development Strategy 2030 (NTS2030, 2017), adopted by the Government of Hungary in the Government Decision 1747/2017 (X. 18.) and its updated version, Tourism 2.0. The first step in the implementation of this new approach was the delimitation of tourism areas covering smaller geographical areas, by abolishing the former classification of tourism regions, which has resulted in the current legislation designating 11 tourism areas.

This research investigates the existence and the possibilities for the development of territorial identity in tourism areas in Hungary. It is important to emphasise that the aim of the analysis is not to criticise the delimitation, but to objectively examine the existence of territorial identity as a factor of competitiveness (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Research methodology (Source: Own editing)

In order to ensure an objective assessment, it was necessary to review the primary assessment after the individual assessment of each region, as the verifiable existence of a criterion is not necessarily true for the whole of each delimited region. The analysis will take into account characteristics of territorial identity factors, which existence can be objectively established and identified at regional level. In the matrix describing territorial identity, these characteristics are indicated by letters as follows:

- Tourism - existing tourism and tourism promotion activities at regional level (A)
- Prosperity of the area in other aspects (B)
- Cultural activity, export of local heritage (C)
- Organisation of local society (D)
- Existence of other identities (E)
- Prominence of the area (F)

The basic criterion for the research was that there should be no overlap between the destination characteristics of each identity element under evaluation, i.e., the identified characteristics should be attributable to a single aspect only. The evaluation was based on the information available on each area, based on descriptive studies and databases. This included the general characteristics of the areas (location, population, economic development, main industries, etc.) as well as their existing image and social organisation based on their geographical, historical, and cultural heritage.

## RESULTS

Each of the six factors provides a score for a given tourist area, which can be used to determine the extent to which the foundations of territorial identity are present in the regions at the start of branding and positioning activities, i.e. the position from which destinations start from (Table 2).

Table 2. Characteristics describing the territorial identity of tourist areas (Source: own editing)

| Tourist areas | A | B | C | D | E | F | Points |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Balaton | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | - | 1 | **5** |
| Sopron-Fertő | 1 | - | 1 | - | - | - | **2** |
| Bük-Sárvár | 1 | - | 1 | - | - | - | **2** |
| Tokaj and Nyíregyháza | 1 | - | 1 | 1 | - | - | **3** |
| Mátra-Bükk | 1 | - | 1 | - | - | - | **2** |
| Gyula and its surroundings | 1 | - | 1 | 1 | - | - | **3** |
| Győr-Pannonhalma | 1 | 1 | 1 | - | - | - | **3** |
| Szeged and its surroundings | 1 | 1 | 1 | - | - | - | **3** |
| Pécs-Villány | 1 | - | 1 | - | - | - | **2** |
| Debrecen and its surroundings | 1 | 1 | 1 | - | 1 | - | **4** |
| Budapest and its surroundings | 1 | 1 | 1 | - | - | - | **3** |

In terms of evaluation, it should be noted that a score was only given for a criterion if it is valid for the whole region and/or if the criterion can be used to identify the destination as a whole. In this way, a factor specific to a single municipality in the region was not assessed.

A. Tourism - existing tourism and tourism promotion activities at regional level: Given that the basic criterion for defining a territory for tourism purposes is existing tourism demand, the existence of tourism as a stable element of the Anholt model is not in doubt for each region, and therefore all the identified tourist areas were scored for this criterion.

B. Prosperity of the area in other aspects: For this criterion, areas, which were prosperous beyond tourism were examined, with emphasis on the regional level, including the economic development of the areas, the competitiveness of

other sectors and successful other activities that have an impact on the life of the destination as a whole. Based on the criteria described, other prosperity aspects in 5 of the 11 destinations was assessed. The Balaton destination can clearly be classified as a prosperous area, especially in the Balaton Highlands. This includes the general social well-being of the population, the growing real estate market and the high quality of gastronomy - although it should be noted that none of these activities can be clearly separated from tourism in this region. Győr-Pannonhalma's heavy industry, especially its automotive industry, makes it a prosperous region, which places it among the most developed destinations in rural Hungary. Szeged and its surroundings were assessed on the basis of the food industry, which is not only an economic factor but also a factor of identity (e.g. Pick salami, Szeged paprika, Makó onions). The prosperity of Debrecen and its surroundings and Budapest and its surroundings can also be identified: while the former is the most dynamically developing area of rural Hungary, the latter is a favourite location for global companies (e.g. Suzuki, Samsung) due to its proximity to the capital. In the other areas, the criterion cannot be interpreted at the level of the destination as a whole; the scope of the development of a settlement is not regional.

C. Cultural activity, export of local heritage:As with the first criterion, the export of cultural activity and local heritage is not an issue for any tourist area, since the existence of this criterion is an essential factor in the marketing potential of tourism. It is not just a matter of culture in the narrow sense; the 'spa culture' of Bük-Sárvár, for example, or the agricultural activity of the historic wine regions, are also included here.

D. Organisation of local society: This criterion includes both tourism-type and other forms of organisation - the latter is having a direct or indirect impact on tourism.Balaton, Tokaj and Nyíregyháza, and Gyula and its surroundings got points in this aspect, as these are the places where we can speak of regional organisation independent of financial support (e.g. Balaton Development Council, Tokaj Wine Region Council) or where the local tourism organisation is independent of grant type support and is beyond the local scope (e.g. Nyíregyháza). Gyula and its surroundings is in some ways the exception, as the destination consists of only two municipalities (Gyula and Békéscsaba), but the spa town in the South Great Plain is one of the few municipalities where tourism is growing dynamically thanks to its conscious organisation and where the motivation to travel to the destination is expected to continue to be directed towards a single municipality.

E. Existence of other identities: Finally, the existence of other identities was the least valued of the selected criteria, as the regions are often areas that cut across counties and/or areas, with a rather heterogeneous composition. Although this criterion seemed to be applicable to any region during the first evaluation attempt, the results of the objective analysis show that it is difficult to apply validity at the level of the destination. Landscape, ethnic or religious identity almost nowhere to be found at the regional level. Among the destinations, the other sense of identity is only true for Debrecen and its region, where the mention of "Puszta" (and not intentionally the Great Plain) is associated with and linked to the area.

F. Prominence of the area: As with the previous criterion, there are settlements in almost any region that could bring scores for each destination, but the spatial scope described in the methodology requires a more rigorous assessment. Therefore, for this criterion, only those destinations that really contribute to the identification of the area could be highlighted. This criterion is met only by Lake Balaton, which has events that cannot be linked to any other area (e.g. the Blue Ribbon sailing race, the Balaton Crossing, or the Balaton Sound).

## DISCUSSION

Summarising the evaluations, the results for the delimited areas are rather mixed. Unsurprisingly, the highest score was achieved by Lake Balaton, which, irrespective of the identity analysis, can be clearly stated to be a tourist area with a competitive identity already. Debrecen and its surroundings scored four points, as it is a prosperous region with an existing tourism demand and cultural heritage, where the added value of a competitive identity is the existence of other specifications with which the destination can be recognisedr. In terms of competitive territorial identity, five destinations can be characterised as having a medium "score": Tokaj and Nyíregyháza, Gyula and its surroundings, Győr-Pannonhalma, Szeged and its surroundings, and the area around Budapest. These delimited areas have a prosperous economy (Győr-Pannonhalma, Szeged and its surroundings, Budapest region) or an outstanding local organisation (Tokaj and Nyíregyháza, Gyula and its surroundings), in addition to the two basic dimensions (tourism and culture). At the lowest level, two points were given to regions which can only be assessed on the level of basic aspects of tourism, while other factors necessary for a competitive territorial identity are not (yet) present in the portfolio of the regions. These territorial units are Sopron-Fertő, Bük-Sárvár, Mátra-Bükk and Pécs-Villány. In view of the aforementioned points, it should be noted that the result signifies the initial stage of territorial identity, identified as a basic indicator of tourism competitiveness, which is variable and constantly changing along the dimensions of strategic and functional identity, independently of tourism.

The added value of this analysis could be to show which aspects of the destinations need to be developed and which areas need to be strengthened in terms of relevance to territorial identity.

## CONCLUSION

Among the dimensions defined for the analysis, "tourism and promotion at regional level" (A) and "export of local heritage" (C) were the main considerations for decision-makers in the territorial delimitation. However, the development and evolution of the other dimensions should become a common strategic objective as well, which will have a positive impact not only on territorial identity, but also on the quality of life of the local society as a whole. A further research direction could be a detailed analysis of these dimensions with a view to their development. Tourism and territorial identity has an unquestionable and direct relationship, which is used by organisations responsible for marketing and branding in the sector, mainly as a distinctive, unique feature/property, as part of the development of a regional image and along the lines of cultural identity.

The role of identity is also undeniable in the case of spatial distribution for tourism, although its use is much less conscious. The delimitation can be defined primarily in terms of strategic and functional objectives, with geographical criteria and the common economic objectives linked to the areas playing the most important role among the identity-forming factors. In the case of an area delimitation that is considered to be fresh, the assessment of the identity of the area is an inevitable factor and an integral part of the decision-making, with the condition that if the tourism potential can be demonstrated in terms of other criteria, the creation of areas with a weak territorial identity should not be rejected, since identity is changeable and, by its very nature, constantly evolving.

The aim of those who drew up the new tourism delimitations was to define territorial units that not only comply with the provisions of the Tourism Act but also serve the fundamental objective of tourism, which is to maximise the sector's revenue by improving tourism performance indicators (e.g. number of guests and overnight stays, average length of stay, specific expenditure). Although some elements of territorial identity in tourism are often artificially generated, consciously building them is an essential part of branding. Strengthening territorial identity has a positive impact not only on tourism demand (optimally) but also on the quality of life of local society by creating and respecting the basic conditions for sustainable and responsible tourism that coexists with the local population.

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