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## Tourism promoting sustainable regional development: focusing on rural and creative tourism in low-density and remote regions

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Regional development in insular regions can be challenging due to the unique characteristics and limitations of these areas, such as their isolation, small populations, and limited resources. However, creative tourism can be a viable strategy for regional development in insular regions as it can: diversify the local economy; attract visitors - i.e., insular areas may not have the same natural or built attractions as mainland destinations, but they can still attract visitors by promoting their unique cultural and artistic offerings; promote cultural heritage - i.e., creative tourism can help to promote and preserve the cultural heritage of insular regions, which can be an essential aspect of their identity and attract visitors; create jobs: i.e., creative tourism can create new job opportunities for locals, such as tour guides, workshop instructors, and artists; or even encourage sustainable development. However, it is important for destinations to ensure the sustainability and resilience of the local communities and to use their resources and capacities wisely. This can be achieved by involving the local community in the planning and management of tourism development and by balancing the economic benefits of tourism with the needs of the local community.

Contextually, this review study, based on the analysis of the existing bibliography, as well as the result of the appreciation of a low-density and remote, insular case study located in the Azores Archipelago, seeks to identify an empirical relationship between rural and creative tourism and regional sustainable development in the post-COVID-19 scenario. In this way, the study aims not only to understand the subject in more prominent detail but also to clarify new tendencies, approaches, and potential guidelines that allow the actors implicated to design and drive sustainable regional development in the long term.



Considering this paper's scope, we have applied the analytical descriptive and inductive deductive methods. In fact, we used to give coherence to these ideas that were essentially based on observation, our professional experience, site analysis of the pilot projects of creative tourism, and above all, on the personal contact with the actors of the creative pilot projects in the Azores territory.

First, a literature review approach was used for the approach to the thematic trajectory of Creative and Rural Tourism and Regional Development, followed by a Case Study Research (CSR) method. The steps followed for this paper conception were the following: (i) Literature review (119 thematic scientific articles were analyzed); (ii) Data collection and information processing; (iii) Case Study Analysis.

The data for the study was collected through the existing assessment of the current literature (indirect methods) combined with a CSR (direct method). In fact, through talks and informal interviews with technicians, experts, and leaders in the fields of regional development, the territorial policy as well as tourism entrepreneurs, we have been able to determine the interest of this research as well as the most relevant issues that should be answered throughout the present paper. Therefore, connecting with phase one, the developed literature review intended to cover a wide range of topics, such as the state-of-the-art regarding rural tourism, creative tourism, regional development, and the primary considerations for sustainable development strategies designed through tourism. Also, more than 50 interviews and surveys were conducted with the pilot-projects leaders, the consultants, and the customers. The analysis includes seven pilot projects of creative tourism working in the Portuguese Autonomous Region of the Azores.

Regarding their location, the case studies are located on 4 of the 9 Azorean islands. So, four are located on S. Miguel Island – namely CDIJA, Art in Nature projects, The Farm, and Local Network of Artisans; one on Terceira Island (Refunction Project – GOODBYAZORES); and another one on Faial Island (Mahilawake). Throughout the study, it is feasible to understand the applicability and importance of the Azorean Creative Tourism pilot project in various fields. Furthermore, we can comprehend the pertinence of the projects for the development of regional Human Resources.

Let's consider prior studies that have focused on the business model of the above-mentioned projects (under the CREATOUR AZORES main project). Those results tell us that two main models are viable in this remote territory: i) a model designed for international tourists and ii) a model designed for national and regional tourists. However, the study mentioned above also shows that a precise pattern of tourist profile is identified in both models: a tourist that desires artistic, rural, and nature-based tourism. Such findings confirm the reality that occurred in the remote and low-density regions during the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak - where the tourists prefer these tourism typologies. Based on such outcomes, creative tourism can be seen as a resurgence in popularity on islands following the pandemic. With the shift towards more localized and socially-distanced travel, many travelers may seek out unique and authentic experiences that can be found on islands. This could include attending local festivals and events, visiting artist studios, or participating in workshops and classes. Additionally, many islands may intensely focus on preserving traditional cultural practices, which can significantly interest tourists. However, it will be necessary for destinations to ensure the safety of both tourists and locals and to be sensitive to the potential impact of tourism on island communities.

Thereby, it is suggested that the regional authorities, local governments, and several different pertinent players and actors in this territory sustain and design approaches to intensify these projects' effects once they not only add to the regional growth and destination marketing and advertising but also for the sustainable development. In fact, throughout such types of tourism, mass tourism is avoided. Besides, the above-mentioned creative tourism projects also enable a higher regional financial-economic revival via the alliances conducted by these projects with other organizations and local suppliers.

So, it is possible to establish that in this ultra-peripheral territory, the tourism sector was already pre-suming relevance in 2019, benefiting from a large sample of entrepreneurs and actors in the tourism sector in the Portuguese Autonomous Region of the Azores.

Consequently, these territories have several barriers related to economic decay, high unemployment, population exodus, adverse consequences resulting from the transformation of agricultural land, and loss



of sense of belonging or cultural identity. Accordingly, tourism and the actions inherent to tourism can and should add extensively to the growth and development of rural areas and low-density or remote regions.

Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Parliament established several new measures and strategies that should be considered regarding tourism sustainability.

The sustainable tourism understanding of the local communities should also be enhanced to encourage public participation. The public should understand their participation's importance and how they can add to sustainable tourism development in their respective areas. Also, the main actors in the tourism industry should be capable of aiding in this topic. In this era, tourists are becoming more conscious of their function in sustainability. In this line, by incorporating sustainable principles to foster a tourism destination, marketing and advertisement will have a critical role. Generally, it is conceivable to demonstrate that the correlations between creative tourism and various development processes and techniques could lead to diverse effects depending on the territory's social characteristics and cultural and environmental assets. Here we can bring the case study of the creative tourism-funded project: CREATOUR AZORES and how such a project (and similar initiatives) could be the catalyst for regional sustainable development.

Likewise, tourism can be a player capable of adding to the revitalization of regional economies, diversification of taxation, growth of other financial-economic pillars, qualified job creation, revenue generation, infrastructure progress, transport, services (usefulness for the local community), and income creation by the regional government. Also, to design a profitable strategy, a sustainable development-focused policy must be conceived and established on substantial investments in critical infrastructure and services to get investors and consequent investments - i.e., accessibility and connectivity-movement between cities and territories, energy grids, among numerous other vital elements related to sustainable regional development as well as the creation of human assets.

The practical implications of a resurgence in creative tourism in island regions will depend on the specific destination and community. However, some potential implications may include the following: Increased economic benefits: Creative tourism can bring in additional revenue for local businesses and organizations and individual artists and craftspeople; Preservation of cultural heritage: Creative tourism can help to support and preserve traditional cultural practices and crafts, which can be an essential aspect of island communities' identity; Job creation: Creative tourism can create new job opportunities for locals, such as tour guides, workshop instructors, and artists; Balancing tourism and community needs: It will be necessary for destinations to strike a balance between the economic benefits of tourism and the needs and well-being of the local community. This may involve limiting the number of visitors, promoting sustainable tourism practices, and supporting the development of community-based tourism initiatives. Managing the impacts of tourism: As tourism increases, it may strain the island's resources and infrastructure, such as housing, transportation, and waste management. It will be essential to plan and manage the growth of tourism to minimize negative impacts. Overall, destinations must develop a strategy that prioritizes the community, cultural preservation, and sustainable tourism practices.