

Research paper

Conceptualising Circular Tourism: Taking a Place-Based Eco-System Perspective

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Abstract

The circular economy's potential to support more resource efficient, competitive and resilient economies is ubiquitous in discourses across disciplines, industry and policy. Despite its prevalence, conceptual developments at the intersection between the circular economy and the tourism sector remain limited. This article draws on developments across the disciplines to establish a new conceptualisation of circular tourism, which recognises circular economy principles while also acknowledging the multiplicity of value creation that exists across a circular ecosystem. The paper highlights the centrality of multiple actors, the importance of places for the consumption and production of circular activity and unpacks the role of social value and its potential to (re)shape attitudes, values and integrate sustainability-orientated knowledge into tourists' and tourism actors' everyday lives. By contributing to conceptual clarity, we pave the way to further conceptual, theoretical and empirical work in the literature at the intersection between the circular economy and tourism.

Keywords: Circular Economy · Circular Tourism Ecosystem · Multiple Value Creation · Social Value

1. INTRODUCTION

The circular economy (CE) continues to occupy a prominent place in the global efforts to counteract the triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss (UNFCCC, 2023). Underpinned by three key principles – *Eliminate* (waste and pollution), *Circulate* (materials, products and components) and *Regenerate* (natural systems) – (EMF, 2015), the CE model is “restorative and regenerative by intention and design” (EMF & McKinsey, 2012, p. 7), and offers multiple value creation opportunities decoupled from the consumption of finite natural resources (EMF et al., 2015). In parallel with its growing global momentum, the CE literature has been developing rapidly from an embryonic and niche research field in the early 2010s to an established research field nowadays.

Despite the breadth of CE research, the service sector, and within this the tourism industry, remains underdeveloped within the CE literature (Kabil et al., 2024; Rodríguez et al., 2020; Tomassini & Cavagnaro, 2022; Tomassini et al., 2024). For instance, Kabil et al.'s (2024) bibliometric analysis found that there is a “growing interest in the circular economy approach within the realm of tourism studies. However, this relationship is still in its nascent stages” (p.16). This gap exists despite the sector's significant impact to the global economy. The travel and tourism sector contributed 9.1% to the global GDP amounting to USD 9.9 trillion and 10% of global jobs (330 million) in 2023 (WTTC, 2024). The scale and nature of the tourism sector, nonetheless, produces large-scale negative environmental impacts. In 2019, global tourism accounted for 8.8% of the world's global greenhouse gas emissions (GHG), and every tourism dollar earned generated 1.02 kg of GHG emissions (Sun et al., 2024). These impacts are driven by the high carbon emissions from transportation (especially air travel), accommodation, infrastructure and increased congestion; pollution, waste, loss of biodiversity and erosion; excessive natural resource consumption (including water, energy), many of which being exacerbated by exceeding the ecological and social carrying capacity limits of tourism hotspots during peak season (De Martino et al., 2025; Einarsson & Sorin, 2020; Zorpas et al., 2021). In addition, tourism can have social costs to the communities such as increases in prices, crime, inequality, social injustice, loss of

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cultural identity and traditions, overcrowding in peak season versus shutdown of many services and unemployment in off-peak season (Butler, 2001; Qiu et al., 2020; Seyfi et al., 2024).

Unsurprisingly, there are widespread concerns stemming from these impacts and calls to rethink the “tourism of the future” (Pasquinelli & Trunfio, 2022, p. 238). With these changes come calls to explore whether the CE offers a way to mitigate the sector’s negative environmental impacts (Gabor et al., 2023) and to consider tourism’s social and relational elements (Manniche et al., 2021). As put by Manniche et al. (2021, p. 260) “while tourism (...) has critical sustainability issues, it also represents a unique opportunity to re-configure the way people live, even if only for a short time” and circular tourism (CT) offers opportunities for rethinking processes and relationships within the local space, which, as a result, “can be positively changed by the community that inhabits it and by the one that travel through it” (Tomassini et al., 2024, p. 5).

Yet, CT is still an “under-researched and under-theorised area of research” (Tomassini et al., 2024, p. 1). Responding to these relevant, yet largely underexplored themes, we centre the article around three interconnected research questions. First and foremost, we ask: *how can circular tourism be conceptualised?* We agree with Bosone and Nocca (2022, p. 29) that “the first step towards the effective implementation of circular tourism is to clarify the concept itself.” To build this conceptualisation, we investigate the range of actors involved in CT by asking: *which roles do tourism businesses, tourists and places take in a circular tourism ecosystem?* As a result, we go beyond a single actor focus towards what we term the circular tourism ecosystem (CTE). Finally, we expand the existing focus on economic and environmental value creation deriving from CE implementation by investigating: *which forms of social value does circularity create within the tourism industry?*

In doing so, our article makes three important contributions to the extant CE literature. First, we overcome the narrow definitions of CT that have been proposed to date, which risk mirroring the more reductive conceptualisations of the CE, which have focused on CE as encompassing a range of end-of-life materials recovery strategies only. Instead, we establish a new conceptualisation of CT, which recognises CE principles while also acknowledging the multiplicity of value creation that results from its implementation, as well as actors and places within the tourism ecosystem. Second, we highlight the importance of ‘producers and consumers’, as well as the significance of place to CT. In contrast, much of the previous work in CT had been limited to a focus on providers of tourist services. Third, by identifying social value creation, we begin to unpack an area that has received scant attention in the CE literature and specifically within the CT literature. Particularly, we highlight that engagement with circular practices as a part of tourism experiences creates possibilities for changing tourists’ attitudes and values, ultimately potentially leading tourists to reflect and integrate new, more sustainability-oriented knowledge and skills into their everyday lives.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. We begin by summarising the importance of the CE, connecting its relevance to wider sustainability discourses, and pinpointing the opportunities and threats for the CE in the tourism sector (Section 2). We then draw together emerging literature on tourism businesses, tourists themselves, and moves toward place-based tourism to explore a CTE approach (Section 3). Subsequently, we propose a new conceptualisation of CT, and demonstrate how its nuances can be understood by paying more attention to the social value of CTEs (Section 4). We conclude by summarising our findings and suggesting areas for future research (Section 5).

2. CIRCULAR ECONOMY AND TOURISM

When Dame Ellen MacArthur – the fastest solo sailor to circumnavigate the globe in 2005 – launched the Ellen MacArthur Foundation in 2010 to accelerate the transition towards the CE, nobody could have ever imagined that the CE concept would have gained so much traction across policy, businesses and academic circles. CE thinking has rapidly caught scholars’ interest, and CE is now an established research field.

Expansive work has been conducted to date, with scholars producing systematic literature reviews (e.g., Merli et al., 2018; Suárez-Eiroa et al., 2019; Nikolaou & Stefanakis, 2022), contributing to conceptual and theoretical development (e.g., Figge & Thorpe, 2023; Fromberg et al., 2023) as well as investigating implementation (e.g., Hellström & Olsson, 2024; Tuladhar et al., 2023), the relationship with the sustainable development concept (e.g., Garcia-Saravia Ortiz-de-Montellano et al., 2023; Geissdoerfer et al., 2017) and the role of digital technologies as enablers of the transition (e.g., Rusch et al., 2023), among other themes. However, CE is still a contested concept (Korhonen et al., 2018; Corvellec et al., 2021) with multiple definitions (for a review see Kirchherr et al., 2023). This lack of consensus inhibits construct clarity hampering theory building and practical implementation (De Angelis, 2022; Desing et al., 2020). Yet, within this flourishing literature field, there are still remarkable gaps requiring scholars’ attention, most notably, and from the perspective of this

research article, a thorough conceptual and practical understanding of the CE in the service sector (Fehrer et al., 2024; Karpen et al., 2023) and particularly, in the tourism industry (Tomassini et al., 2024).

CE thinking is gaining ground among practitioners within the tourism sector as witnessed by emerging supranational CE-related initiatives and examples from practice. *The One Planet Sustainable Tourism Programme*, led by *The World Tourism Organisation*, aims to accelerate sustainable production and consumption in tourism policies and practices to address the current triple planetary crises (One Planet Network, 2024a). One of its work streams is to leverage CE principles to achieve the goal of sustainable consumption and production in the tourism sector. *The World Tourism Organisation* – under its new brand *UN Tourism* – highlights that the CE can enhance the competitiveness of tourism businesses, the sustainable development of local communities and promote consumer behavioural change, which in turn, can lead to the transformation of the entire tourism ecosystem (UN Tourism, 2024a). UN Tourism supports the transition towards the CE in tourism with two initiatives, *The Global Tourism Plastics Initiative* – a collaboration with the *Ellen MacArthur Foundation* – and *The Global Roadmap for Food Waste Reduction in the Tourism Sector* (*ibid.*). While the first initiative seeks to encourage the elimination and reuse of plastics alongside collaboration with suppliers and waste managers to increase recycling, the second initiative aims at promoting food waste reduction strategies (*ibid.*).

Yet, the distinct nature of the tourism industry presents challenges in transitioning to a CE. In conceptualising CT, it is imperative to acknowledge its characteristics that can explain the complexity of embedding CE strategies within the industry. First, tourism is selling experiences which are co-produced with tourists that are generally bound by hedonic motivations and the pursuit of pleasurable experiences (Malone et al., 2014). CE strategies should provide product offerings aligned with these motivations. However, research has established that during holidays tourists may abandon their sustainable behaviour (MacInnes et al., 2022) as an escape from their everyday practices. Although many forms of sustainable tourism have emerged over the years, these cannot offset the impact of mass tourism on the environment and host destinations. Nevertheless, developing services and experiences in the circularity framework can offer cost-efficiency and resilience to destinations and businesses, as well as contribute to SDGs (González-Sánchez et al., 2023).

Second, the tourism experience is an amalgamation of many providers offering different services including transport, accommodation, hospitality, tourist attractions etc. Yet, many of these stakeholders have conflicting interests and use of resources in the tourism industry. In addition, stakeholders' lack of commitment, low involvement and awareness of sustainability are barriers to implementing sustainable tourism (Dias et al., 2024) and consequently will impact CE strategies. CE can respond to calls for a systems thinking approach that is based on collaboration, business model innovation and value co-creation which can increase the resilience of the industry, minimise the impact on the environment and provide enhanced economic and social value to both direct and indirect stakeholders (Einarsson & Sorin, 2020). However, it is also important to note that the tourism system is comprised of: a) the origin or tourist-generating region of tourists; b) the tourist destinations or host where tourists stay temporarily; and c) the transit region that connects the journey between two regions (Leiper, 1979). Therefore, to transition to a CTE, it is realistic to recognise that CE practices must be adopted across these regions to support sustainable tourist experiences and benefits from CE are distributed equitably as possible. The tourism industry has been criticised as large portions of its revenue often remains in wealthier nations (i.e. tourist-generating region of tourists). CE may have the potential to generate social value across the regions.

Third, the consumption and production of tourism take place in communities where the impacts of tourism are not limited to those directly involved in tourism activities. Residents' support for tourism development is linked to the economic benefits of tourism that can enhance their quality of life and community well-being (see, for example, Uysal et al., 2016). On the other hand, tensions and conflicts within the community and the tourism industry emerge when over-tourism occurs (Mihalic, 2020) – “a situation in which the impact of tourism exceeds the psychological, ecological, social, economic, psychological and political capacity thresholds (*of the communities*)” (Peeters et al., 2021, p. 19).

3. CIRCULAR ECONOMY TOURISM ECOSYSTEM

According to Tomassini et al. (2024, p. 3), for circularity in tourism “a holistic view seems the only feasible way for considering different transformative practices.” This view mirrors the emerging ecosystem perspective as a research avenue and as an approach for facilitating CE implementation within the broader CE literature (Pietrulla, 2022) and the nascent circular service ecosystems literature (Fehrer et al., 2024). Therefore, we take a broader, ecosystemic perspective to examine the role of actors and places in CT, which is instrumental to the

conceptualisation of CT and an appreciation of the social value that may be achieved by its implementation. Accordingly, we consider businesses, consumers and places in the CTE in the following subsections. We draw on advancements and examples from across the academic literature and practice.

To build our argument, we advance up to date analyses of relevant literature (see for example, Kabil et al. 2024; Rodríguez et al., 2020) by taking an integrative review approach (Elsbach & van Knippenberg, 2020; Snyder, 2019). This approach, which is not new in management and CE studies, is defined as “reviews of the literature that move beyond description of a body of evidence to derive new insights through integration and/or critique” (Elsbach & van Knippenberg, 2018, p. 2). The purpose of this approach is not to review all the articles published on a topic but to synthesise, critique and combine existing perspectives to offer new insights which can be conceptual or theoretical (Elsbach & van Knippenberg, 2020; Snyder, 2019). Following Torraco’s (2005) guidelines on how to perform an integrative literature review, we followed three steps: (1) we identified the conceptual structuring of the topic (i.e., conceptualising circular tourism); (2) we examined the literature with the perspective defined by the article objectives (circular ecosystem and thereby multiple actors and multiple value creation focus) pointing to specific extant research that is critically examined and evaluated (critical analysis), and, (3) finally, via knowledge synthesis, we generated new insights about the topic (the conceptualisation of CT).

3.1 Businesses in the Circular Tourism Ecosystem

Within the tourism system there exist business providers narrowly defined as “traditional providers of holidays and tourism services” (European Parliament, 2024). As Roxas et al. (2020) observe, these businesses and their tourism value chains with stakeholders, suppliers and economic agents will play a crucial role in any attempts to transition to a more CTE.

Manniche et al. (2021) argue that CE has the potential for an integrative and instructive framework to encourage more sustainable tourism practices. With its multiplier effect and through its supply chain across economic sectors, global reach and scale, it can encourage circular flow among businesses and consumers (UN Tourism, 2024b). From this starting point, a bibliometric analysis of research on CE application in the tourism industry revealed five clusters: innovation and eco-efficiency in the circular tourism industry, circular waste management in tourism practice, sustainable tourism management towards circularity, circular tourism towards SDGs achievement and circular mobility to destinations in the tourism industry (see work of González-Sánchez et al., 2023). The analysis showed that the two most researched applications of CE in the industry are mobility and waste management reflecting major environmental concerns in the industry. Kaszás et al. (2022) described the interpretation and implementation of CE in tourism as mostly focused on food waste, energy consumption, water consumption, CO₂ emissions, climate change and global warming.

Beyond waste management, Gabor et al. (2023) argue that the sector’s negative impact can be reduced if CE principles are applied across construction, water management, food and energy provision. Li et al. (2023) find that CE principles can help tourism businesses to enhance innovation and resource efficiency. In a study involving multiple hotel chains, Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida (2020) highlight that the often-cited CE three ‘Rs’ strategies (Reduce, Reuse and Recycle) are implemented. These measures include, for example, reducing waste generation and usage of single-use plastics, reusing furniture and separating of waste streams for recycling. ‘Rs’ strategies are a common theme within the literature. Jones and Wynn (2022) explore how hotel companies have been implementing CE principles and they find practices focussed on waste reduction such as replacing toiletries miniatures, refill stations and recycling of soaps left in guest rooms, which are sanitised and donated. Other examples of circularity in the tourism industry include: *Virgin Atlantic Airlines* partnering with *CanO Water* to offer cans of water on flights instead of plastic bottles (One Planet Network, 2024b); *Hotel Metropole Monte-Carlo* using corn starch straws that are 100% biodegradable (One Planet Network, 2024c); *NH Hotel Group’s CORK2CORK* initiative with cork stoppers collected in some of the company’s hotels for reuse in construction of buildings (One Planet Network, 2024d). Table 1 below outlines selected examples of CE strategies in different sectors within the tourism industry. However, most CE strategies within the industry contribute to addressing the environmental aspect of sustainability, and in doing so, has neglected to emphasise the potential social value of such practices.

Table 1. Selected Examples of CE Practices in Tourism Industry Sectors (Source: The Authors)

Sector	CE principles	Examples of CE practices in tourism
Accommodation	Reduction in waste	Low-tech reliable bio-grinder Replacing toiletries miniatures with refillable dispensers Waste segregation in rooms Replacing single-use customer laundry bags with reusable bags Eliminating accessories (dental kit, shaving kit) Coffee machines without capsule
	Reduction in use of water and energy	Efficient lighting (e.g. water and light sensors) Improved air conditioner Diesel generator replacement Energy-efficient appliances Water conservation programme
	Reuse of fabrics	Reusing high quality fabrics for chefs' uniform Local linen supplier to improve quality of bedding
	Recycling	Recycling soaps – sanitised and donated Recycling of hotel sheets into staff uniform Reusable packaging Cork stoppers collected for reuse in construction of building
Food providers	Reducing waste	Using smaller dishes at buffet Raise customer awareness to prevent wastage Reusable packaging Properly plan food preparation based on forecasts Use of gourmets or smaller trays and replenishment of the buffet based on the consumption of each product Adapting portion sizes, offering options of small, medium or large portions Using dispensers for drinks, preserves, cereals, etc., and buying products in bulk with less or returnable packaging.
Transportation	Reduction in CO ₂ emissions	Bike share programmes Walking tours
	Reduce waste	Food waste management Water Management (e.g., use of seawater with desalinization and reverse osmosis equipment) Donation of food surplus Food waste biodigester/dehydrators or offloaded ashore Reduce single-use items and plastics
	Reduce use of paper	Electronic airway bills Providing tablets to reduce paper Electronic board passes
	Refurbishing	Refurbishing train fleet with as many new recycled or reused parts
	Recycling/ Waste upcycling	Recycling papers and cans Outdated uniforms to manufacture in-flight products (e.g. napkins) Converting ceiling plates, seat fabric and floor panels into shoes, laptop bags, Bluetooth speaker, office furniture Recycling mattress in cruises Repurposed carpets
Tour operators	Reducing Waste	Signatory to Global Tourism Plastic Initiative Eco-friendly holidays

3.2 Tourists in the Circular Tourism Ecosystem

Most studies of CE including those in tourism have focussed on technological solutions and taken a narrow business model view omitting a (eco-)systemic perspective needed for transitioning to CE (Fehrer et al., 2024; Sørensen & Bærenholdt, 2020). The transformation to a CTE requires the active engagement of stakeholders, which includes tourists, in circular practices. However, few studies in the CE literature focus on the role of tourists and their behaviour (Rodríguez et al., 2020), which is surprising as tourists are fundamental in co-creating and co-producing (memorable) tourism experiences by selecting, combining and interacting with resources including people and places (Sørensen & Bærenholdt, 2020; Zátori, 2016).

Whilst people have different motivations to travel, tourists primarily seek hedonic experiences such as enjoyment, relaxation, and escapism from daily life which lead to carbon-intensive activities (Barr et al., 2010; Tomassini et al., 2024). According to Sørensen and Bærenholdt (2020, p. 4), “tourist practices relevant to circular economy may include selecting, combining and creating different services and experiences in environmentally friendly practice-arrangement bundles as well as interactions with specific products/services.” Along the tourism value chain, tourists interact with a wide variety of stakeholders – before, during and after their holiday – such as travel service providers (e.g., tour operators, travel agents); transport (air, road, sea), accommodation, hospitality, food and beverage providers; operators of activities/attractions, other tourists and residents. At each of these interactions, there is the potential to encourage tourists to engage in circular and sustainable tourist practices.

Sørensen and Bærenholdt (2020) identified several current and future tourist circular practices including use of sharing platforms for travel and accommodation; walking/ cycling/ activity holidays; staycation, use of eco-certified accommodation; use of locally produced and sourced products; sustainable transport options; minimisation of food waste, as well as reusing, sharing, reselling, and recycling material products. Other examples include reusing towels, waiving daily room cleaning, reducing single-use products, waste reduction, energy and water conservation (Dolnicar, 2020; MacInnes et al., 2022). Table 2 provides an overview of various activities categorised by their respective tourism sector/industry and circularity strategy adopting the 9-R CE strategies (refuse, rethink, reduce, reuse, repair, refurbish, remanufacture, repurpose, recycle, recover) used by Kirchherr et al. (2017). This list begins to demonstrate the variety of tourist practices aimed at reducing GHG emissions and supporting moves toward a circular model “designed to be regenerative of natural, human and social capital, operating within the earth’s and local destinations’ sustainable boundaries” (Einarsson & Sorin, 2020, p. 5).

Table 2. Examples of Circular and Sustainable Tourist Practices (Source: The authors and based on Kirchherr et al., 2017)

Sector	Examples of Circular and Sustainable Tourism Practices	R-Strategies
Destination and Holidays	Reduce number of holidays Extend stay per holiday Travel during off-peak season Avoid ‘tourism hotspots’ Avoid multiple destination holidays Staycation Choose local or domestic destinations Choose eco-certified destinations or packages	Refuse/Reduce Rethink Rethink/Reduce Refuse/Rethink Reduce Refuse/Reduce Reduce Rethink
Transport	<u>Travel from home to destination</u> Reduce travel between destinations on one holiday Reduce air travel Travel by rail, coach, ferry rather than by air/car Car sharing Air travel – only economy class, with less luggage <u>Travel during holiday</u> Walk and cycle (i.e., slow travel) Use of public transport rather than private car/taxi	Reduce Reduce Rethink Reuse Rethink Rethink Rethink Rethink/Reduce

	If private car needed, consider electric car sharing services	
Accommodation	Choose eco-certified or low-carbon accommodation (e.g., smaller hotels, self-catering, camping, glamping) Choose sharing platforms for accommodation Minimise waste including food waste Reduce energy consumption (e.g., shorter showers, temperature control, towel reduce, opt-out of daily room cleaning) Recycle waste	Rethink Reuse Reduce Reduce Recycle
Hospitality	Choose local restaurants Choose locally produced and sourced food and beverages Reduce meat consumption Reduce food waste	Rethink Rethink Reduce Reduce
Shopping	Reduce shopping Bring reusable products (e.g., shopping bags, refillable water bottle, reusable cup, cutlery) Buy locally produced and sourced products Buy second-hand or repair products Rent holiday equipment rather than buying	Reduce Reuse Rethink Reuse Reuse
Activities/ attractions	Choose low-carbon activities (e.g., walking, cycling, canoeing) Consider volunteering activities Respect culture of local communities (i.e. follow local customs, traditions and lifestyles) Engage in local community-led activities Visit local (low carbon) attractions Engage in environmental conservation activities (e.g., litter picking, beach cleans) Support conservation efforts (e.g., visit nature reserves/national parks, donate, respectful and responsible behaviour, preserve biodiversity)	Rethink/Reduce Rethink Rethink Rethink Rethink/Reduce Rethink/Reduce/ Recycle Rethink

However, whilst people might engage in pro-environmental behaviours and circular practices at home, this declines significantly when on holiday, even for those who are committed to the environment (Barr et al., 2010; Dolnicar & Grün, 2009; Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014). Reasons include denial of environmental consequences, personal responsibility, and control when on vacation; downward comparison (i.e., other tourists doing less for the environment); vacation as an exception, compensation due to economic benefits (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014); lack of awareness of consequences, feelings of disempowerment, unwillingness to make significant changes (Miller et al., 2010); and infrastructural barriers preventing habitual behaviours (MacInnes et al., 2022), increased effort and habits (Albrecht et al., 2024).

The above barriers to the adoption of circular tourist practices and the complexity of the multi-actor involvement during the different stages of a holiday (pre-, during and after-vacation) pose additional challenges but also opportunities in the transformation to a CTE. The circular tourist practices as shown in Table 2 have the potential to create ecological value by reducing GHG emissions (e.g., by reducing air travel/private car use, recycling, reducing waste), economic value for the tourism provider (e.g. by reducing waste, water/energy use and reusing of materials), and social value for the local community, tourists and actors (e.g., by rethinking the type of tourist activities, time and location of holidays). Social value in tourism is created by the close relationships between tourists, tourist businesses and place-based actors in the co-creation of memorable tourism experiences. In particular, ‘rethinking’ current tourist practices can create social benefits from more inclusive local employment opportunities and supply chains, but also meaningful social interactions between tourists, place-based actors (e.g. local community) and tourist businesses leading to enhanced well-being, a sense of purpose, improved competences, social capital, and community cohesion.

To achieve economic, environmental and social value concurrently, CT needs to go beyond embedding sustainability by single actors or single tourist practices confined to one actor leading to a system-level

implementation transforming the (whole) tourism system. This might include tourism stakeholders collaborating in ‘new constellations’ (Sørensen & Bærenholdt, 2020). Importantly, to move to a CTE, it is crucial that tourists adopt sustainable and circular tourism practices at all stages of their vacation. Single tourism practices might be a good start, however, these ought to span to multiple and system-wide practices. Otherwise, places can experience rebound effects, i.e., where tourists travel by train and then indulge in high-carbon activities in the destination. Moreover, not only tourism businesses and tourists shape the ‘destination’, but destinations are also places where a range of actors live, work, invest, study and enjoy. In the CE more widely the importance of place is also beginning to gain traction, with Fehrer et al. (2024, p. 58) proposing that CE is a “‘a place-based concept’ that allows for inclusivity on the regional level, while also shaping ‘institutional infrastructure to make closed loops effective’ on the broader ecosystem level.”

3.3 Place-Based Tourism

Central to place-based approaches is a focus on the significance of the places where the tourism activity occurs and a prioritisation of the community actors, local initiatives, cross-sector enterprises and collaborations in building and projecting places that people want to live in as opposed to visit (Ooi, 2023; Romão et al., 2018).

Paying attention to the intersection of CE and place-based tourism activities highlights the significance of various actors’ involvement and their ability to generate social value across the CTE. This includes moves to empower local communities and civil society organisations to co-produce and co-deliver CE activities (EMF, 2024; Souza Piao et al., 2023; Wuyts & Marin, 2022). The breadth of activities incorporates exchange and repair cafes (Baden et al., 2020; Spekkink et al., 2022), community gardens (Huang, 2023), local waste management and upcycling initiatives (Tomassini & Cavagnaro, 2022; Wuyts & Marin, 2022) through to community energy projects (Mishra et al., 2022). It is already well-established that actors’ involvement in CE activities enables the diffusion of CE education and encourages knowledge exchange among multiple place-based actors (Ho et al., 2022). However, these fluid interactions and exchanges may also support the tourism sector in its attempts to educate its employees, visitors and actors across its supply chains.

An interesting model to highlight social value creation in CTE taking a more place-based approach is the Italian ‘albergo diffuso’. This example of sustainable and circular tourism has gradually attracted the interest from scholars and practitioners in the field (Cucari et al., 2019). Known in the literature as ‘scattered hotel’ or ‘widespread hotel’, ‘albergo diffuso’ is defined as “a sustainable and innovative form of hotel that originates in enhancing historical and cultural real estate heritage, characterized by original structures, places (rural areas or small urban centres) and persons involved (both residents and tourists) in the production-distribution process and with experiential authenticity” (Paniccia & Leoni, 2019, p. 1221). The ‘albergo diffuso’ consists of a central management unit and different accommodation solutions that are scattered across the territory, generally within 200–300 meters from the central unit (Confalonieri, 2011). This operating model represents an example where tourism management and the sustainable development of territories are reconciled: pre-existing buildings such as farmhouses, homes and factories are converted into tourist accommodation revitalising small centres and villages while preserving their cultural and historical heritage (*ibid.*). Why the ‘albergo diffuso’ can be considered an example of CT is emphasised by Nocca et al. (2023, p. 6) who argue that the ‘albergo diffuso’ is a “collaborative model ... [that] contributes to strengthening the sense of community and to valorize territorial characteristics, while reducing at the same time environmental impacts”.

Another area with some parallels to ‘albergo diffuso’ is placemaking, which centres around regenerating and (re)creating natural and built spaces for communities to access, protect and enjoy (Johnson-Woods & Feldpausch-Parker, 2022; Tomassini & Cavagnaro, 2022). Rather than working with unused spaces, a central component of placemaking processes relies on re-purposing and re-imagining otherwise overlooked, neglected or abandoned spaces (Karachalis, 2021). These transformations bring with them mutual opportunities for place-based tourism and the CE and bring together public sector and community actors (Karachalis, 2021). Tomassini and Cavagnaro (2022) set out examples of how placemaking can support circular activities of interest to residents and tourists alike. These include transformations of disused farmland into biodiversity beauty spots, regenerating forgotten infrastructure and heritage sites, and transforming overlooked leisure and hospitality facilities into community hubs. Importantly, these initiatives are proposed as one way in which tourism can begin to tackle its harmful footprint and move beyond a focus only on growth. Similarly, Johnson-Woods and Feldpausch-Parker (2022) recognise the potential value of placemaking activities for achieving CE strategies, while also cautioning communities’ concerns around gentrification, the reliance on good-will and volunteer labour and competition among sites.

Small to medium enterprises' (SMEs) and entrepreneurs' burgeoning role in CE activities is also gaining traction (Ahmadov et al., 2023; Howard et al., 2022a). Studies on other sectors, such as agri-foods, has documented overlapping environmental, economic and societal opportunities for SMEs when adopting cross-sector CE practices (Howard et al., 2022b). In addition to providing the tourism sector with an example of SME's CE collaborations in practice, there is mounting practitioner and policy attention on the ways in which sustainable business practices can feature in the tourism offering (Cavallo and Olivieri, 2022). Moreover, places are increasingly differentiating themselves based on their green credentials, with CE activities being a decisive way to support and differentiate their claims (Crippa et al., 2022). For instance, Rodrigues et al., (2023) investigates local artisans and their use of CE activities in their craft, showing how their work can strengthen a place's cultural heritage and build a favourable place identity (Rodrigues et al., 2023).

In line with these place-based developments, Tomassini et al. (2024, p. 4) propose that changes to tourist practices should be aligned with "deeper mental and systemic transformations of the tourism and hospitality sector." In this scenario, CT also has transformative potentials for tourists beyond the place based on immaterial, immersive, meaningful and socially engaging experiences and encounters with a range of place-based actors (Manniche et al., 2021). These transformational learning experiences also have the potential to trigger self-growth, change tourists' attitudes and values and ultimately lead tourists to reflect and integrate new knowledge and skills into their everyday lives (Pung et al., 2020).

4. TOWARDS A CONCEPTUALISATION OF CIRCULAR TOURISM

Drawing our conceptualisation together, we propose that CT can be considered closer to Weber's 'ideal type' (Weber, 1904). According to Weber (2011, p. 90) an ideal type "is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct". Put simply, ideal types sit between 'kinds' (characteristics of things observed in the world) and 'types' (derived from conceptual and theoretical standpoints) (Baden-Fuller & Morgan, 2010). The concept of the 'ideal type' is particularly useful considering the complexity of the reality under investigation characterised by multiple actors and players. Hence, the concept allows for some abstraction, which is necessary given that we cannot over generalise.

As a starting point for our conceptualisation, we consider the definitions of sustainable tourism and CT proposed to date. To begin with, UN Tourism's definition of sustainable tourism strictly mirrors that of sustainable development. Accordingly, sustainable tourism development is "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities" (UN Tourism, 2024b). Turning more specifically to circularity, Rodríguez-Antón and Alonso-Almeida (2020, p. 15), define CT as "an economic system that tries to make the tourism sector, in all its manifestations, capable of supporting the economic development of tourist destinations without putting the sustainability of the planet at risk by reducing the use of energy factors and natural resources, reusing the waste generated in the activities carried out, either as products directly or as components of other products, and using waste as direct raw material after of a recycling process." While UN Tourism's definition of sustainable tourism hints to multiple value creation and takes a more systemic perspective, in a nutshell is more holistic, the definition of CT proposed by Rodríguez-Antón and Alonso-Almeida (2020) is more limited in scope, emphasising the ecological dimension only. We find this to be too narrow a definition of CT which mirrors the often-reductive conceptualisations of the CE, where the CE is understood as encompassing a range of end-of-life materials recovery strategies only. As put by Nocca et al. (2023, p. 5), CT is not simply about using resource more efficiently but it also involves "recovery, reuse, redevelopment (...) valorisation and regeneration". While we agree with Nocca et al. (2023), we posit that the conceptualisation of CT ought to acknowledge the full spectrum of CE principles, the multiple value creation resulting from its implementation as well as actors and places in the tourism ecosystem.

We build on these points by considering the businesses, consumers and places (inclusive of the actors within the place) in line with the CTE framework. We identify multiple forms of value creation, as tourists, businesses and places can work together to produce environmental, economic, and importantly, also social value. In doing so, our conceptualisation also recognises the underexplored social value of CT, building on the work of Manniche et al. (2021, p. 259) who argue that "CE within tourism (is) an interesting prism for developing the social aspects of CE, an aspect that is currently underdeveloped in the CE literature". Similarly, this aligns with the characterisation of the CE, which is viewed as offering "multiple value creation mechanisms decoupled from the consumption of finite resources" (EMF, 2015, p. 14).

Hence, we develop a conceptualisation of CT as follows:

More than the intersection of CE and tourism, CT is an embryonic part of the wider transition toward a circular ecosystem that connects tourism businesses, tourists, and an evolving remit of place-based actors when (re)imagining, (re)shaping and (re)delivering both sector and place-based CE principles and practices in the pursuit of environmental, economic and social value.

We build on our definition of CT and vision for a CTE in Figure 1 below.

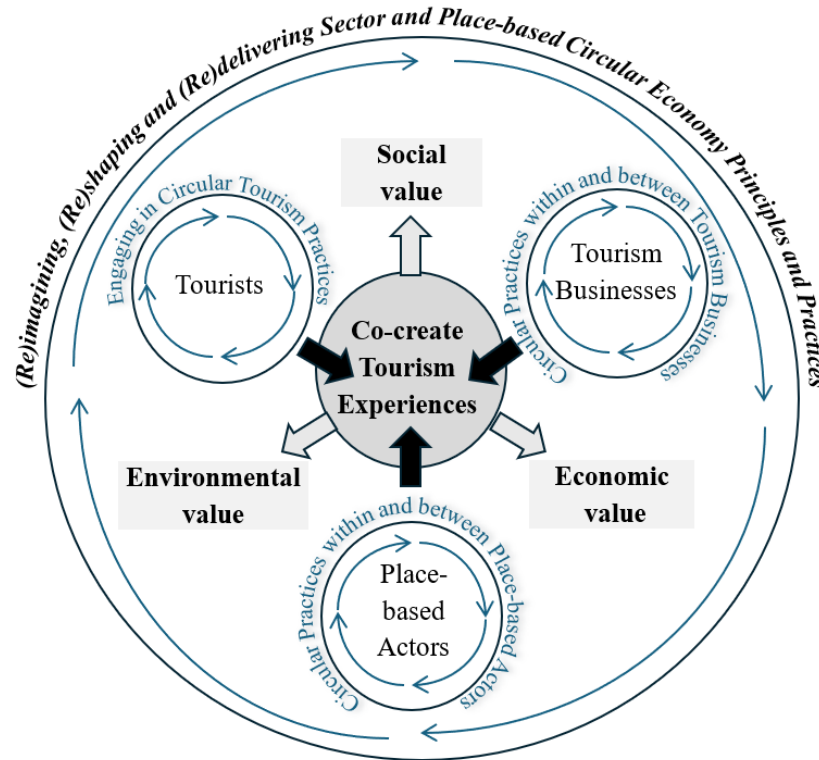


Figure 1. Visualisation of Circular Tourism Ecosystem (Source: Authors' Own Illustration)

5. CONCLUSION

While the CE is now an established research field, the literature at the intersection between the CE and tourism is still emerging. To contribute to this nascent research field and espousing Bosone and Nocca's (2022, p. 29) argument that "the first step towards the effective implementation of circular tourism is to clarify the concept itself", we developed a comprehensive and novel conceptualisation of CT. Central to our conceptualisation is the need to take a broader perspective of what and who can be transformed by circularity, which, overall, we encompassed within what we referred to as CTE. We also highlighted multiple value creation opportunities, paying particular attention to the mostly neglected aspect of social value creation in the CE literature. Novel in our approach is a recognition of the place-based nature of CT and a connection of tourism to other actors operating in the CE across the place. Value is therefore created as the tourist sector intersects with opportunities present across the place. While a place-based approach to CT comes with opportunities, trade-offs and challenges persist (Howard et al., 2022b). Studies continue to identify an underappreciation of local community actors' knowledge and skills (Wuyts & Marin, 2022) and an unevenness in terms of community access and resultant benefits (Souza Piao et al., 2023). The ways in which to govern CE systems also requires substantial consideration (Pratt, 2022) and new ways of organising (Howard et al., 2022b). Nonetheless, recognising that tourism is a part of the wider CE ecosystem and taking a holistic and place-based perspective invites the sector to consider how it can contribute towards these ongoing transformations.

Sustainable and responsible forms of tourism development are gaining momentum as scrutiny around the negative impacts of overtourism continues to grow (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). Concerns over the environmental degradation of natural environments (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019) is compounded by the societal impacts felt by local communities (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021). Recently, the calls for change have reached a critical point with protests against unsustainable tourism making headline news across Europe (BBC,

2024). The scrutiny also accelerated rapidly in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021) and tourism providers have begun to more actively discuss a “tourism of the future” (Pasquinelli & Trunfio, 2022, p. 238). Embroiled in these approaches are calls for tourism to connect more with CE activities, adopt bottom-up approaches and recognise the value of human capital (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019; Pasquinelli & Trunfio, 2022).

Through this conceptual article we highlight the many facets characterising CT and call for future research to expand on their relevance to the literature and in practice. We also call for more investigations that cast further light on the typification of CT; the multiplicity of value creation within an CTE; and the fluidity and interactions between the different entities within this evolving ecosystem. Transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary contributions bringing together the viewpoints of CE, service management and tourism scholars are particularly needed given the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Roberta De Angelis: conceptualisation, methodology, writing, editing.

Laura Reynolds: conceptualisation, methodology, writing, editing.

Nicole Koenig-Lewis: conceptualisation, methodology, writing, editing.

Carmela Bosangit: conceptualisation, methodology, writing, editing.

DECLARATIONS

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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