

SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGIES FOR HEALTH AND WELLNESS TOURISM DESTINATIONS

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Abstract

Health and wellness tourism is expanding within a policy environment focused on sustainability, resilience, and quality of life. This paper examines how sustainable destination management can integrate wellness demand with environmental stewardship, community wellbeing, governance, and long-term competitiveness. A structured secondary-data review used evidence and conceptual guidance from the Global Wellness Institute (GWI) and UN Tourism, supplemented by established literature on nature-based wellbeing and destination management. GWI data indicate that wellness tourism expenditures reached US\$894 billion in 2024, while the wider wellness economy reached US\$6.3 trillion in 2023, demonstrating the sector's relevance. UN Tourism guidance emphasizes coordinated destination governance, stakeholder participation, measurement, and responsible resource management. Results support an integrated management framework linking natural and therapeutic assets, resident participation, service quality, safety, innovation, and sustainability indicators. Sustainable wellness destinations should therefore manage tourism as a system that creates visitor value, protects place-based resources, strengthens local wellbeing, and supports resilient development.

Keywords: *sustainable tourism; wellness tourism; health tourism; destination management; wellbeing; GWI; UN Tourism*

INTRODUCTION

Health and wellness tourism occupies a strategic intersection between tourism, preventive health, quality of life, and sustainable development (4-8, 18). The Global Wellness Institute (GWI) describes wellness tourism as travel associated with maintaining or enhancing personal wellbeing and distinguishes between trips in which wellness is the primary purpose and trips in which wellness is a secondary motivation (2, 19). This distinction matters for destination management because wellness demand is not limited to specialized resorts: it can influence accommodation, food, mobility, outdoor recreation, culture, thermal resources, and everyday destination design (9-12, 15). GWI reports that global wellness tourism expenditures reached US\$894 billion in 2024, compared with US\$439 billion in 2012, illustrating the increasing economic significance of wellness-oriented travel (16). The growth of wellness tourism occurs within a much larger wellness economy. GWI estimated the global wellness economy at US\$6.3 trillion in 2023, equivalent to 6.03% of global GDP, and projected it to approach US\$9.0 trillion by 2028, with annual growth of approximately 7.3% between 2023 and 2028 (17). These figures

suggest that destinations are competing not only for tourists but also for consumers whose travel choices increasingly reflect expectations concerning healthy lifestyles, prevention, restoration, nature, meaningful experiences, and personal transformation (13, 14, 22). A sustainable destination perspective is essential because the economic attractiveness of wellness tourism can create pressures on the environmental and social resources that generate their value. UN Tourism positions destination management as a field combining planning, governance, competitiveness, product development, marketing, and quality management. Its health-tourism work provides a taxonomy and practical planning tools for national tourism organisations and DMOs, recognizing wellness and medical tourism as growing segments requiring coherent management rather than isolated promotion (21). Sustainable management therefore requires a shift from a narrow emphasis on visitor numbers and infrastructure toward a system-wide approach that protects ecological integrity, strengthens host communities, and improves visitor and resident wellbeing. Nature is particularly relevant to this transition (23). Exposure to natural environments can support restoration from stress and mental fatigue and improve mood (18). Contact with nature may generate positive affect and emotions such as awe, associated with happiness and wellbeing (McMahan & Estes, 2015). Physical activity in nature can strengthen connectedness and meaning, while aquatic environments may enhance restorative experiences (1, 3). Consequently, wellness destination development can combine thermal and mineral resources, forests, trails, water landscapes, healthy food, movement, relaxation, cultural practices, and contemplative experiences. The COVID-19 crisis reinforced interest in proximity tourism, biosafety, open-air environments, resilience, and forms of travel perceived as supportive of health. It also demonstrated the vulnerability of tourism-dependent economies. Sustainable wellness tourism can respond by diversifying local economies, encouraging year-round demand, and connecting tourism with health, agriculture, culture, recreation, and environmental management. Thermal spa resorts are particularly relevant because many are located in peripheral or less-developed regions, where they can operate as anchor products stimulating accommodation, gastronomy, recreation, transport. UN Tourism's sustainability agenda emphasizes that tourism must address climate change, biodiversity loss, unsustainable consumption, and resilience (22, 23). Its sustainable-tourism observatory work highlights destination-level indicators such as local satisfaction, economic benefits, employment, seasonality, energy, water, waste, governance, accessibility, and carbon emissions. These dimensions are directly relevant to health and wellness destinations, whose credibility depends on clean environments, trustworthy services, safe infrastructure, authentic place-based experiences, and the continued availability of natural therapeutic resources. This paper asks how destination management can integrate the economic opportunities of health and wellness

tourism with sustainability and community wellbeing. Its objective is to synthesize GWI market evidence and UN Tourism destination-management principles into a practical scientific framework (16-17, 21-23). The paper proposes six mutually reinforcing dimensions: natural and wellness assets; governance and stakeholder coordination; quality, safety and visitor experience; environmental stewardship; community wellbeing and inclusion; and economic resilience and innovation.

METHODS

The research **objective** is conceptual and managerial: to integrate market evidence on wellness tourism with international guidance on sustainable destination management.

Study design

The study adopted a structured narrative review and secondary-data synthesis. No primary survey or experimental data were generated; therefore, results are interpreted as an evidence-informed synthesis rather than causal estimates.

Data collection

Sources were purposively selected from two authoritative institutional bodies. GWI materials were used for market definitions, wellness-tourism expenditure estimates, and the scale and projected growth of the wellness economy. UN Tourism materials were used for health-tourism taxonomy, destination-management principles, sustainability priorities, stakeholder participation, and destination-level monitoring.

Established literature

Cited references concerning restorative natural environments and wellbeing was also incorporated. The analytical procedure consisted of four stages: extraction and checking of quantitative headline indicators; thematic coding into environmental, social, economic, governance, health/experience, and innovation categories; comparison of those themes with characteristics specific to health and wellness tourism; and construction of an integrated framework and indicator set to translate the synthesis into destination-management practice.

Study limits

This study has limitations. GWI market data do not establish destination-level causal relationships between management interventions and wellbeing outcomes. UN Tourism guidance is internationally applicable but requires adaptation to local governance structures and resource conditions. Future research should test the framework empirically through longitudinal destination studies, resident and visitor surveys, environmental monitoring, and comparative analysis of thermal, rural, coastal, and urban wellness destinations.

RESULTS

Market relevance

The evidence confirms that wellness tourism has moved from a niche position toward a major tourism segment. GWI's historical series shows global wellness tourism expenditure rising from US\$439 billion in 2012 to US\$894 billion in 2024. The broader wellness economy reached US\$6.3 trillion in 2023 and is projected to approach US\$9.0 trillion by 2028. This expansion strengthens the business case for destination investment, while increasing the importance of resource governance so that growth does not undermine the environmental and social conditions on which wellness experiences depend (fig.1).



Source: Global Wellness Institute.

Figure 1. Global wellness tourism expenditure, 2012 and 2024. Source: Global Wellness Institute.

Destination-management priorities

UN Tourism guidance indicates that competitiveness and sustainability are complementary. Effective destination management connects planning, product development, governance, market intelligence, quality, and branding. For health and wellness tourism, therapeutic and restorative resources should therefore be embedded in a destination-wide system including mobility, public space, accommodation, food, outdoor recreation, cultural assets, workforce skills, safety, and resident participation.

Integrated framework

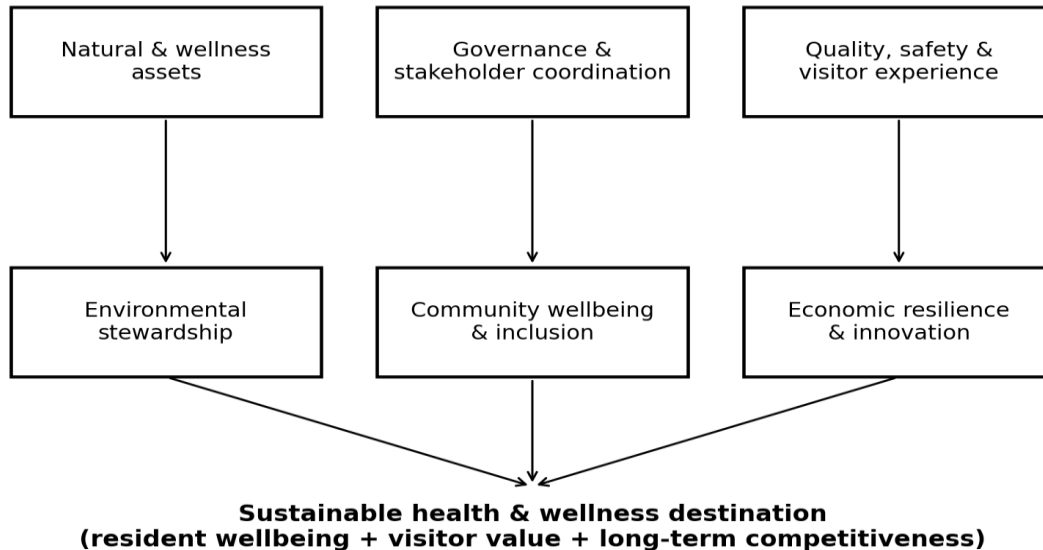
Resident wellbeing and visitor value are placed within the same outcome logic: a destination cannot credibly market restoration and health while degrading ecosystems, excluding residents, or producing unsafe and low-quality experiences (tab.1).

Table 1. Integrated management dimensions for sustainable health and wellness destinations.

Dimension	Management objective	Illustrative actions	Suggested indicators
Natural & wellness assets	Protect therapeutic, landscape and cultural resources	Conservation; carrying-capacity rules; nature-based product design	Water/air quality; habitat condition; visitor pressure
Governance	Coordinate public, private and community actors	DMO partnerships; health-sector links; resident forums	Participation; implementation; resident satisfaction
Quality & safety	Build trust and memorable experiences	Training; hygiene; certification; service standards	Visitor satisfaction; complaints; repeat intention
Environmental stewardship	Reduce resource intensity	Energy/water efficiency; circular procurement; low-carbon mobility	Energy, water, waste and CO2 per guest-night
Community wellbeing	Ensure local benefits and inclusion	Local hiring; SME sourcing; accessibility; shared amenities	Employment; procurement; accessibility; quality of life
Economic resilience & innovation	Create diversified, year-round value	Wellness packages; thermal/nature integration; entrepreneurship	Spend; length of stay; seasonality; SME creation

The synthesis produced a six-dimension framework in which health and wellness assets are linked to governance, environmental stewardship, community wellbeing, service quality, and resilient local value creation. (fig. 2).

Integrated Framework for Sustainable Health and Wellness Destination Management

**Figure 2.** Integrated framework for sustainable health and wellness destination management.

Authors' synthesis based on GWI and UN Tourism.

Monitoring scorecard

The proposed scorecard contains area, core metric, why it matters and directions for assessing the sustainability and wellbeing scorecard for destination management (tab.2)

Table 2. Proposed sustainability and wellbeing scorecard for destination management.

Area	Core metric	Why it matters	Direction
Wellness economy	Visitor expenditure and average stay	Tracks value creation rather than volume alone	Increase responsibly
Residents	Resident satisfaction with tourism	Tests social license and shared wellbeing	Increase
Environment	Water and energy per guest-night	Measures resource efficiency	Decrease
Climate	CO2-equivalent per visitor-night	Links growth with decarbonization	Decrease
Seasonality	Share of visits outside peak season	Assesses year-round resilience	Increase
Inclusion	Accessible wellness products/services	Supports universal access	Increase
Local economy	Local employment and procurement	Measures retained local benefits	Increase
Experience	Satisfaction and repeat/recommend intention	Signals quality and trust	Maintain high

The findings suggest that the strongest strategic opportunity lies in managing wellbeing as a destination capability rather than as a single commercial product. Rapid market growth creates incentives to expand the segment, but a wellness label alone does not create sustainable competitive advantage. Long-term differentiation depends on resource integrity, authentic experiences, professional human resources, trust, and the ability of communities to share tourism benefits. This interpretation is consistent with UN Tourism's emphasis on coordinated destination governance. DMOs should evolve from organizations primarily concerned with promotion toward organizations capable of convening stakeholders, managing evidence, coordinating standards, and supporting sustainability transitions. This requires collaboration among tourism authorities, municipalities, health professionals, spa and hospitality operators, environmental agencies, community organizations, transport providers, farmers, cultural actors, and educational institutions.

DISCUSSION

The nature–wellbeing relationship has direct strategic implications. Forests, water bodies, thermal springs, clean air, quiet landscapes, and walkable environments can be core wellness assets, but commodifying them without limits can reduce their restorative value. Crowding, noise, water stress, habitat disturbance, waste, and excessive construction contradict the promise of wellness. Carrying-capacity thinking, visitor dispersal, seasonal management, ecosystem monitoring, and low-impact infrastructure are therefore essential. Resident wellbeing should be treated as an outcome, not merely a condition for visitor satisfaction. Public walking routes, green and blue spaces, thermal heritage, healthy food systems, cultural activities, and

accessible recreation can serve residents as well as tourists. Shared-use approaches can strengthen local support and reduce the risk that wellness development becomes an enclave economy. The proposed scorecard combines economic indicators with resident, environmental, climate, accessibility, and experience indicators. This reflects the logic of sustainable tourism observatories: destination performance should be assessed through multiple dimensions and overtime.

CONCLUSION

Sustainable destination management for health and wellness tourism requires integration of economic opportunity with ecological protection, social inclusion, quality, and measurable wellbeing. GWI evidence demonstrates the growing scale of wellness-related demand, while UN Tourism guidance shows that destination competitiveness increasingly depends on coordinated governance, sustainability, evidence, and stakeholder participation. Destinations should not simply market wellness; they should manage the conditions that make wellness possible. Natural and therapeutic assets must be protected, residents should participate in and benefit from development, service systems must deliver safety and quality, and performance should be monitored through economic, social, environmental, and wellbeing indicators. When these elements are coordinated, health and wellness tourism can support year-round economic resilience while strengthening quality of place for visitors and residents.

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