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ECOSYSTEM PERSPECTIVES IN TOURISM: THEORETICAL ROOTS, CONCEPTUAL EVOLUTION, AND RESEARCH FRAMEWORKS

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Abstract

The tourism sector is undergoing significant transformation driven by intensified competition, growing uncertainty, and accelerated digitalization. In this context, long-term competitiveness increasingly depends not only on firm-level resources, but also on collaboration, knowledge exchange, network interdependencies, and institutional arrangements connecting multiple actors involved in shaping the tourist experience. Consequently, the concept of the "ecosystem" has gained prominence in tourism research. However, its widespread adoption has also resulted in conceptual ambiguity and inconsistent application, particularly when used interchangeably to describe destinations, digital platforms, business networks, or innovation environments.

This paper examines the theoretical relevance and analytical validity of the ecosystem concept within tourism-related economic and management research. It traces the emergence of the business ecosystem metaphor and discusses its conceptual roots, including debates concerning biological analogies and alternative interpretations linked to the notion of oikos. Drawing on organizational ecology, neo-institutional perspectives on coordination beyond the traditional "market–hierarchy" dichotomy, and the dynamic capabilities framework, the study demonstrates the suitability of the ecosystem perspective for analyzing tourism as a multi-actor, modular, and increasingly platform-mediated industry. The paper further systematizes the main ecosystem-related research streams relevant to tourism—business, innovation, entrepreneurial, and platform ecosystems—and outlines key implications for research design, ecosystem boundary definition, and measurement.

Keywords*: ecosystem approach; tourism management; business ecosystems; digital transformation; collaboration networks; platform economy*

JEL Codes: *Z30, L20, O33*

Introduction

The contemporary world is undergoing a profound transformation of social and economic relations, which directly affects the development of tourism as well. Under

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conditions of high turbulence in the business environment and increasing competition, the sustainable competitive advantages of tourism enterprises are increasingly less often based solely on individual resources and capabilities. Instead, they are formed through various forms of collaboration, including the sharing of resources and knowledge, access to markets, the use of network effects, and specific institutional conditions (D'Aveni, Dagnino, & Smith, 2010). In the tourism industry, these processes are particularly evident due to the high degree of interdependence among the actors involved in the creation of the tourism experience.

Digital transformation is taking place in all spheres of the modern economy, creating prerequisites for more efficient processes for generating economic value (Zlateva, 2020, p. 179). The development of breakthrough digital technologies is leading to a qualitatively new type of information exchange between tourism enterprises and their external environment. Digital platforms, online reservation systems, social media, and data analytics tools are transforming the way tourism services are designed, offered, and consumed. This creates prerequisites for rethinking traditional organizational models in tourism and for transitioning toward more flexible, network-based, and platform-oriented forms of coordination among the participants in the sector (Gretzel et al., 2015).

In this context, there emerges a need for a research concept that goes beyond the boundaries of the individual tourism firm and the immediate participants in the value creation chain. Such a concept should allow for the analysis not only of direct, but also of indirect effects arising from the interaction among various organizations, institutions, and consumers participating in the tourism system. It is precisely these conditions that lead to increased academic interest in the ecosystem approach, which offers an analytical framework for the study of complex, interconnected, and dynamic economic structures characteristic of tourism.

At the same time, the excessive popularity of the term "ecosystem" in academic and practical research has led to its frequent uncritical use and to a blurring of its content. In tourism studies, the term is applied to denote phenomena of differing nature—from tourism destinations and platforms to business networks and innovation environments—which raises the question of its conceptual clarity and scientific rigor (Oh et al., 2016).

The aim of the present study is to substantiate the appropriateness and scientific validity of using the concept of the "ecosystem" as an object of economic and management research in tourism. In this sense, the study seeks to contribute to a clearer conceptualization of the ecosystem approach and to its adequate application in the analysis of tourism-related interactions.

To achieve the stated aim, the following research objectives are formulated:

• to examine the origin and development of the "ecosystem" metaphor in its application to economics and business, and to assess the appropriateness of the use of the prefix "eco-" in the context of tourism;

• to substantiate the theoretical foundations of the ecosystem concept through an analysis of key theoretical approaches relevant to the tourism industry;

• to conduct a bibliographic analysis of the use of the "ecosystem" concept in tourism-related research, with the aim of identifying the main research approaches and interpretations.

Origin and meaning of the Concept of "Ecosystem"

James F. Moore (1993) is generally regarded as the pioneer of the application of the concept of "ecosystem" in the economic and managerial context. Moore proposes examining the interdependence among firms and the complex nature of the interaction between competitive and cooperative strategies. He defines an ecosystem as "an economic community supported by a foundation of interacting organizations and individuals" (Moore, 1997, p. 26).

This definition finds direct application in tourism, where the final tourism product is created through the coordination of numerous autonomous yet interrelated participants, including tourism enterprises, public institutions, local communities, and end consumers.

Over the past decade, against the backdrop of profound changes in the business environment and accelerated digitalization, there has been a sharp increase in academic publications devoted to the ecosystem concept. The popularity of this metaphor has grown not only among business practitioners and representatives of the public sector, but also within academic circles. One of the main explanations for its widespread adoption lies in its conceptual breadth and interdisciplinary nature, which allows for the integration of economic, social, institutional, and technological dimensions within a single analytical framework (Autio et al., 2018). In tourism, this approach is particularly relevant, as the sector by its very nature represents a complex system of interdependent activities and interests.

At the same time, the use of the metaphor "ecosystem" has given rise to a number of academic debates and critical discussions. The main concerns relate to the appropriateness of employing the prefix "eco-," the validity of direct analogies with biological ecosystems, and the level of scientific rigor in applying the term within economic and management research. In tourism studies, the concept is often used to describe phenomena of a very different nature—such as tourist destinations, digital platforms, business networks, or innovation environments—which further contributes to its conceptual ambiguity.

The source of these concerns lies in the observed tendency toward bio- and eco-mimicry within the conceptual apparatus of the economic sciences. On the one hand, this tendency stems from the effort to reinterpret established objects of analysis from a new perspective, while on the other hand it reflects the desire to emphasize socially significant issues through the use of concepts with a positive normative connotation. In a substantial share of the literature, the ecosystem approach is constructed through analogies with biological ecosystems, without sufficiently accounting for the specific characteristics of socio-economic systems, such as the tourism industry.

The classical definition of a natural ecosystem describes it as a set of co-functioning organisms that interact with the physical environment within a specific territory. In this sense, the prefix "eco-" refers to the environment, while "system" denotes a set of interconnected elements functioning as a whole. Transferred to the economic and tourism context, this understanding implies viewing the tourism ecosystem as a combination of exogenously given environmental elements (institutions, infrastructure, regulations, natural and cultural resources) and endogenously acting actors (tourism enterprises, intermediaries, consumers) that coordinate their actions and derive benefits from their mutual interrelations (Acs et al., 2017).

In a critical review of the application of the ecosystem metaphor in innovation management, it is emphasized that in many cases the use of the prefix "eco-" is redundant, and that the ecosystem is not sufficiently clearly distinguished from already established analytical concepts such as networks, clusters, or value chains (Oh et al., 2016). These critiques are also applicable to tourism research, where there is often a lack of clarity regarding the boundaries, participants, and coordination mechanisms within so-called tourism ecosystems.

Proponents of the analogy with natural ecosystems justify its applicability by pointing to the presence of interdependence and co-evolution among participants in artificial ecosystems, including those in tourism (Ritala & Almpanopoulou, 2017). They emphasize the need to simultaneously account for micro- and macro-level interactions among actors, as well as for the coexistence of cooperation and competition within the same system. In the tourism sector, this is manifested through the simultaneous collaboration and rivalry among hotels, restaurants, tour operators, and digital platforms within a single destination.

At the same time, the differences between natural and artificial business ecosystems are substantial. Research highlights the teleological nature of business ecosystems and the necessity of deliberate management and coordination. Additional characteristics are also emphasized, such as the intentional design and structuring of artificial ecosystems, their potential lack of spatial localization, the dynamic change of participant roles over time, and the limitations of innovation policy as a tool for continuous co-evolutionary adaptation (Oh et al., 2016). These arguments are particularly relevant for tourism, where digital ecosystems often transcend the territorial boundaries of destinations.

In an effort to provide a more convincing justification for the use of the "ecosystem" metaphor in economic and tourism contexts, a number of authors turn to the historical roots of the prefix "eco-" in the works of the ancient Greek philosopher Hesiod (Audretsch et al., 2019). The concept of oikos (οἶκος) describes the autonomous household as the basic economic unit, within which resources are allocated in order to create value and maximize economic, technological, and social benefits. It is precisely from oikos that the terms "ecology" and "economics" are derived, which lends deeper meaning to the use of the prefix "eco-" in contemporary economic and tourism research.

From this perspective, viewing tourism ecosystems as systems for the joint use and allocation of resources, knowledge, and competencies appears more theoretically grounded than the direct application of a biological metaphor. Nevertheless, the biological analogy may still serve as a valuable source of conceptual inspiration, supporting the search for alternative models of interaction and coordination within the tourism industry.

Theoretical foundations of the use of the "Ecosystem" Concept in tourism

The ecosystem concept makes it possible to analyze agglomeration interactions and network interdependencies in a new way, which are particularly characteristic of tourism as a complex system of services and actors. Within the ecosystem perspective, agglomeration processes can be examined through several complementary dimensions:

– regional, including national, sectoral, and municipal ecosystems, as well as tourism ecosystems at the destination level;

– sectoral, referring to ecosystems within different industries, including tourism and hospitality as closely related sectors;

– activity-based, encompassing entrepreneurial, innovation, and digital ecosystems, which in tourism are manifested through networks of suppliers, intermediaries, complementary services, and digital platforms.

The attempt to explain the effects of agglomeration interaction has a long tradition in economic thought. As early as Alfred Marshall drew attention to the benefits of concentration and the mutual "reinforcement" of economic activities within specific territories. Later, the idea of competitive advantages arising from regional and sectoral concentrations was further developed in research on clusters and competitiveness (Porter, 1990), while the evolutionary perspective on technological change and organizational development emphasized the role of routines, knowledge, and innovation trajectories (Nelson & Winter, 1982). Ideas of purposeful cooperative adaptation and coordination are also linked to early contributions on the role of organizational cooperation and coordination mechanisms under conditions of dispersed knowledge.

In tourism, this line of reasoning is particularly applicable because tourism value is rarely "produced" by a single actor. Instead, it is created through the coordinated actions of multiple organizations operating within a shared environment and drawing on common infrastructural, institutional, and informational resources.

The theory of ecosystems is currently in a stage of active development, with ongoing efforts to establish clearer definitions, boundaries, and coordination mechanisms (Jacobides, Cennamo, & Gawer, 2018). Although a large share of the research on business ecosystems remains predominantly theoretical, in the context of tourism this approach provides a productive analytical framework for examining multilateral interactions that cannot be reduced either to purely market-based relations or to hierarchical integration.

From a theoretical perspective, the emergence and development of the business ecosystem concept have been most strongly influenced by three major streams of thought: organizational ecology, neo-institutional theory, and the theory of dynamic capabilities of the firm. The selection of these theoretical approaches is also well justified in tourism research, as they make it possible to analyze: (1) the conditions for the "survival" and development of tourism organizations in a competitive environment; (2) the institutional constraints and incentives shaping coordination among actors; and (3) the capacity for adaptation and renewal of competencies in response to technological change.

Organizational Ecology and Ecosystems in Tourism

The concept of ecosystems initially developed within the organizational-ecological tradition, but gradually acquired an independent status. Indicative in this respect is its connection with ideas of population dynamics, including the reference in the title of J. F. Moore's seminal work to "predator–prey" models developed in mathematical biology (Moore, 1993). Organizational ecology as an approach to describing the dynamics of organizational communities emerged in the 1970s, with its theoretical foundations laid by Hannan and Freeman. At its core are processes such as the emergence, stabilization, and "death" of organizations, analyzed within populations and ecological niches.

Applied to tourism, this perspective makes it possible to analyze how, within a given tourism destination or market segment, different types of enterprises (e.g., hotels, tour operators, providers of complementary services) emerge and are subsequently "selected out," sharing a common resource space and competing for access to tourist flows. Key propositions that support the ecosystem logic include:

- viewing the organization and its environment as a decisive factor for strategy formulation and survival in a competitive environment;

• the use of the concept of an "ecological niche" as a resource space that sustains the reproduction of a population, and the possibility of describing evolutionary processes through characteristics such as population density and niche width.

Within the framework of organizational ecology, the ecosystem concept can be further enriched through the analysis of hybrid forms of interorganizational relationships, mechanisms of selection and pressures toward consolidation, as well as through a rethinking of the role of niches in strategic management. These themes have clear analogues in tourism, manifested in partnerships between enterprises, jointly developed service packages, and network-based organizational forms that reduce risk and improve access to resources.

Neo-institutional perspective: "market–hierarchy" and ecosystems in tourism

Neo-institutional theory makes it possible to explain why ecosystems emerge as sustainable forms of coordination and what their distinctive characteristics are. Within the "market–hierarchy" paradigm, the ecosystem is viewed as an intermediate coordination mechanism that is not merely an unstable hybrid between the firm and the market, but rather possesses a specific and distinctive set of properties. Scholarly debates on the existence of multiple coordination mechanisms beyond the market and hierarchy—including stable forms such as networks—have a long tradition. The emergence of new, sustainable coordination mechanisms that respond to contemporary conditions (for example, "bazaar" governance) further demonstrates that coordination can take diverse institutional forms.

In tourism, such an intermediate position is clearly observable in stable partnerships and networks among hotels, restaurants, tour operators, transport services, and other actors. These participants remain organizationally autonomous, yet they share rules, standards, and infrastructure in order to achieve joint value creation. In this context, the concept of coopetition—simultaneous cooperation and competition among actors who collaborate in certain areas while competing in others—becomes particularly important. Ecosystems are characterized by a relatively higher density of cooperative relationships, which generate network effects that exceed purely individual benefits, while competition for resources and customers is not eliminated.

From this perspective, an ecosystem can be defined as a set of autonomous organizations that produce complementary components of value and establish coordination mechanisms without the need for vertical integration (Adner, 2017; Jacobides et al., 2018). This definition is highly applicable to tourism, where the final value for the tourist is "assembled" from multiple complementary services—accommodation, food and beverage, transport, and experiences—provided by different organizations.

Dynamic capabilities and platform-oriented tourism ecosystems

The theory of dynamic capabilities focuses on how firms build and sustain competitive advantages by adapting to changes in the external environment. Dynamic capabilities reflect a firm's ability to modify its competencies in response to environmental change and differ from "operational" or "ordinary" capabilities, which primarily support day-to-day activities. From this perspective, the ecosystem represents the environment that firms must monitor, and their responses to it directly influence their competitiveness (Teece, 2009).

Within platform-based ecosystems, dynamic capabilities are particularly important, as platform leaders are able not only to create but also to "capture" value through the formation of ecosystems and the development of appropriate business models, while providers of complementary services also extract significant value within the system (Teece, 2017, 2018). Helfat and Raubitschek highlight several key capabilities that are critical for platform leaders, including innovative capabilities, capabilities for scanning and sensing changes in the external environment, and integrative capabilities for coordinating and "orchestrating" interactions among ecosystem participants (Helfat & Raubitschek, 2018). Applied to tourism, this perspective provides a theoretical framework for analyzing platform-based intermediation and the modular organization of complementary services.

Modularity represents an important structural principle of ecosystems: organizations can operate autonomously on individual "modules" (products or services) that are connected through shared standards, interfaces, and rules (Baldwin, 2008). This logic enables the co-creation of value, whereby value for the customer is generated beyond the boundaries of a single product through the coordination of complementary components (Adner, 2017; Jacobides et al., 2018).

Despite the differences between the organizational-ecological, neo-institutional, and dynamic capabilities perspectives, these approaches should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. Rather, it is more appropriate to speak of their convergence in the process of constructing a comprehensive analytical framework for ecosystems—one that is highly applicable to tourism as a complex, network-organized, and increasingly digitalized industry (Jacobides et al., 2018; Teece, 2018).

Main approaches to defining the Ecosystem in the context of tourism

The interpretation of the concept of an "ecosystem" in the academic literature is characterized by considerable heterogeneity and inconsistency. This simultaneously demonstrates the flexibility and high explanatory potential of the concept, but also complicates its precise application in economic and management research. This is particularly evident in tourism, where interactions among participants are multi-layered and the boundaries of the system are often defined by the destination, technological infrastructure, or the consumer experience. In the tourism context, the term "ecosystem" may refer either to a local network of organizations within a destination or to a digital environment in which platforms integrate services and data, which creates additional grounds for terminological ambiguity (Gretzel et al., 2015; Xiang, Magnini, & Fesenmaier, 2015).

The literature reveals different approaches to the classification and differentiation of ecosystems. Some researchers use the terms "business ecosystem" and "innovation ecosystem" as closely related or interchangeable concepts. In tourism, such overlap is observed when an ecosystem is described simultaneously as a coordination environment for participants (a business perspective) and as an environment for the creation and diffusion of new solutions (an innovation perspective), for example through the implementation of digital services, new distribution channels, or new experience-based business models. In other studies, these terms are clearly distinguished by emphasizing different objectives and coordination mechanisms—such as ecosystems built around a specific value proposition, around an innovation project, or around a platform serving as a coordination infrastructure (Adner & Kapoor, 2010; Valkokari, 2015).

A distinct focus in the debate concerns the platform-based foundation of ecosystems. In the study by Valkokari (2015), so-called focal ecosystems are examined, in which a "core" (a focal actor or solution) exists around which complementary participants and activities are organized. In tourism, this perspective is particularly relevant when analyzing ecosystems in which a specific integrator plays a leading role—such as a dominant digital platform or a key actor within a destination—setting standards, interfaces, and rules for interaction. At the same time, a substantial body of literature treats platform-based ecosystems as a separate research stream, since platforms function not merely as participants but as infrastructures for coordination, information exchange, and service aggregation. In the tourism industry, this is reflected in digital ecosystems that integrate booking systems, payments, recommendations, reputation management, and the personalization of offerings (Gretzel et al., 2015; Xiang et al., 2015).

Numerous attempts have been made to systematize the wide range of interpretations of the ecosystem concept. Adner (2017) proposes a distinction between an "ecosystem as structure" and an "ecosystem as affiliation." The first perspective directs attention to the architecture of complementary components and the coordination required to deliver a specific value proposition. In tourism, this can be associated with the "structure" of the tourist experience as a set of complementary services—such as accommodation, transport, attractions, and events—whose coordination directly affects quality and customer satisfaction. The second perspective, "affiliation," conceptualizes the ecosystem as a community or environment to which an actor belongs and within which it interacts and co-creates value (Adner, 2017). This logic is applicable to tourism destinations understood as "environments" in which firms operate under shared institutional and infrastructural conditions and are mutually interdependent with respect to tourist flows and destination reputation.

Jacobides, Cennamo, and Gawer (2018, pp. 2256–2258) identify three main research streams: business ecosystems, innovation ecosystems, and platform-based ecosystems. This distinction is particularly useful in tourism, as the sector simultaneously:

- functions as a network of interdependent business actors (business ecosystem);
- is transformed through the adoption of innovations (digital solutions, new service and experience models) (innovation ecosystem);
- is increasingly coordinated through platform infrastructures (platform ecosystem), which alter the logic of intermediation and competition (Gretzel et al., 2015; Xiang et al., 2015).

In the tourism context, such a distinction is also important for practical reasons, as the different discourses imply different units of analysis and different performance criteria. For example, in the case of a destination ecosystem, the analytical focus may be placed on coordination and the sustainable management of resources, whereas in a platform-based tourism ecosystem the emphasis may be on network effects, participation rules, and the dependencies between platforms and service providers. Precisely because of this polysemy, tourism research requires clearer specification of "in which sense" the ecosystem concept is being used, as well as clearer delineation of its boundaries and participants (Baggio & Del Chiappa, 2014; Jacobides et al., 2018; Valkokari, 2015).

Main discourses of the Ecosystem Concept in tourism

Business Ecosystem in Tourism

The "business ecosystem" stream in economic and management research focuses on how an individual firm interacts with its environment in order to achieve sustainable competitive advantages and maximize economic performance. In this context, the ecosystem is viewed as a community of interconnected actors that mutually influence one another and, through their actions, exert a direct impact on customers, resources, and value creation mechanisms (Teece, 2009).

In tourism, this approach is particularly relevant, as the tourism product is inherently complex and cannot be created and delivered by a single firm alone. Value for the tourist emerges as a result of interaction among multiple economic actors—hotels, restaurants, tour operators, transport companies, providers of complementary services, cultural and entertainment institutions, as well as digital intermediaries. Consequently, the competitiveness of an individual tourism enterprise is closely linked to the effectiveness of the ecosystem within which it operates.

Participants (actors) in a tourism business ecosystem include all entities that influence, or are influenced by, the value proposition of the tourism firm. This group comprises service and resource suppliers, distributors and intermediaries, outsourcing companies, producers of complementary products, technological and digital partners, regulatory and public institutions, as well as mass media, which shape the image of the destination and tourism enterprises. According to Zlateva (2021, p. 119) the growing direct access to audiences is accompanied by intensified strategic and communicative challenges for firms, as the digital environment reshapes and broadens business opportunities. In support of this, we can say that in the context of digitalization, online booking platforms, marketplaces, and social media are increasingly becoming part of the ecosystem, fundamentally transforming traditional models of interaction between companies and consumers.

G. B. Kleiner's approach further expands the understanding of the ecosystem by including, alongside actors, business processes, individual projects, and infrastructural systems that "interact with one another in the process of creating and circulating material and symbolic goods and values." In a tourism context, this means that the ecosystem encompasses not only firms, but also transport, communication, and tourism infrastructure, destination marketing, the institutional framework, and mechanisms for managing tourist flows. Of particular importance is the ability of these elements to function autonomously and sustainably over the long term through the reproduction of resources, knowledge, and stable partnerships.

Within this discourse, research focuses on how the overall effectiveness of the tourism ecosystem influences the performance of its individual participants, as well as on processes of joint co-evolution among them. It is emphasized that, much like an individual's development depends on their social and economic environment, tourism enterprises likewise share the "common fate of the community" in which they are embedded (Iansiti & Levien, 2004, p. 69). In this sense, weaknesses in a single element of the ecosystem—such as transport, service quality, or regulation—can negatively affect the overall tourism experience and the competitiveness of the destination.

At the same time, the key role of the ecosystem leader in maintaining stability and coordination is highlighted. In tourism, this leadership function may be performed by leading tourism companies, destination management organizations, or public institutions that set the strategic framework and stimulate cooperation among participants.

An analysis of academic publications indicates a decline in the number of studies explicitly labeled as "business ecosystem" after 2015. However, this trend is more plausibly interpreted as a result of increasing depth and specialization of research within more specific areas—such as tourism ecosystems, digital platforms, and destination management—rather than as a decline in the relevance of the ecosystem concept itself.

Innovation Ecosystem in Tourism

Within the innovation discourse, attention is focused on examining how interdependent actors interact in order to create, implement, and commercialize innovations. The primary focus is not on the individual firm, but rather on the system or environment that creates the conditions for the emergence and realization of innovation projects. This approach is particularly applicable to tourism, where innovations are rarely the result of the activities of a single actor and more often emerge as the product of joint efforts among multiple organizations, institutions, and consumers.

In the academic literature, an innovation ecosystem is defined as a coordinated structure of multiple partners that must interact in order to deliver the core value proposition (Adner, 2017, p. 40), as well as a set of actors that interact in the process of innovation commercialization and, through their interconnections, accumulate human, financial, and other resources in order to increase the efficiency of the innovation process. In a tourism context, these definitions encompass interactions among hotels, restaurants, tour operators, technology companies, start-ups, research organizations, and public institutions that collectively contribute to the creation of new tourism products, services, and experiences.

Within this approach, the concept of the innovation ecosystem develops along two main directions. The first emphasizes processes of co-creation of customer value, in which customers, suppliers, and partners actively participate in the development and improvement of tourism services. The second direction views the innovation ecosystem as a set of institutional conditions that support the formation of territorial ecosystems, including tourism clusters at regional and national levels. In tourism-related research, this second direction is particularly significant, as innovations are often closely linked to destination development, public policies, and regional competitiveness.

In value co-creation processes, a central role is played by the understanding of the relationship between the creator of the core product or service and its complementary elements—the so-called "complementors." In tourism, these may include transport services, digital platforms, cultural and entertainment attractions, as well as technological solutions that together enhance the value of the tourism experience. Empirical studies show that different forms of collaboration between the innovator and its complementors have a significant impact on the participants' ability to coordinate investments in innovation and on the successful commercialization of these innovations (Kapoor & Lee, 2013). Moreover, the exchange of knowledge and information among participants strengthens inter-firm relationships and contributes both to the development of the ecosystem (Alexy, George, & Salter, 2013) and to its long-term survival (West & Wood, 2013).

In the tourism industry, innovation ecosystems are increasingly associated with the concept of open innovation, whereby firms deliberately use external sources of knowledge and technology. Research indicates that such an approach can accelerate the adoption of digital solutions, sustainable practices, and new business models, while at the same time enhancing the adaptability of tourism ecosystems to dynamic changes in demand and the external environment.

Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

Research in this area is closely related to the innovation discourse discussed earlier, including consideration of the territorial component (technopolises, innovation clusters, etc.).

There are significant differences among scholars regarding whether entrepreneurial and innovation ecosystems should be regarded as the same type of ecosystem, as different types, or whether the concept of the "entrepreneurial ecosystem" is broader and includes, among other elements, innovation ecosystems as well.

In the present text, innovation and entrepreneurial ecosystems are distinguished as separate discourses, since research on innovation ecosystems usually focuses on the innovation project around which interactions among participants are structured (which may be implemented within a start-up or a large corporation), whereas in entrepreneurial ecosystems the entrepreneur occupies a central position as the key actor within the ecosystem.

This line of research emphasizes the creation of new firms and related issues of entrepreneurial development, including the realization of entrepreneurial potential and access to resources and markets.

In this context, the ecosystem is understood as "a set of interconnected actors, organizations, institutions, and processes of entrepreneurial activity that are formally and informally combined in order to ensure coordinated and mediated governance in the local entrepreneurial environment" (West & Wood, 2013, p. 27).

Both formal institutions (government initiatives, institutional investors) and informal institutions that support the emergence and development of new firms are examined (Acs et al., 2017).

Researchers of both entrepreneurial and innovation ecosystems acknowledge the key importance of the environmental context for their effective functioning. As a result, in empirical studies the boundaries between the two discourses are often highly blurred. Typically, ecosystems located in specific geographical areas and/or industries are analyzed (e.g., the Silicon Valley ecosystem, the digital entrepreneurship ecosystem). Empirical studies of this type of ecosystem are primarily focused on high-technology and internet-based start-ups.

The innovation–entrepreneurship discourse of ecosystem research also includes the popular stream devoted to university ecosystems, which, on the one hand, serve as environments for the development of innovation projects and, on the other, create educational programs for entrepreneurship training.

Research on entrepreneurial ecosystems is particularly popular among Russian scholars. Although it largely builds on the work of international authors, it also exhibits a specific emphasis on the role of the state as a key participant or major stakeholder in the ecosystem.

An analysis of publications shows a decline in the number of studies explicitly focused on the topic of the "business ecosystem" observed after 2015. This trend is likely due to the deepening and specialization of research within other related fields rather than to a decrease in the significance of the concept itself.

Entrepreneurial Ecosystem in Tourism

Research on entrepreneurial ecosystems is closely linked to the innovation discourse and shares a number of common theoretical foundations and analytical approaches. A key characteristic of both types of ecosystems is the acknowledged territorial component, which is of particular importance in tourism. Tourism activity is inherently spatially embedded, which determines the role of destinations, tourism clusters, and local networks of firms as a basis for the development of entrepreneurial initiatives.

In the academic literature, there are significant differences in the interpretation of the relationship between entrepreneurial and innovation ecosystems. Some authors consider them to be the same type of ecosystem, while others emphasize their differences and treat them as distinct analytical categories. A third position holds that the entrepreneurial ecosystem represents a broader concept that includes, among other elements, innovation ecosystems as well.

In the present analysis, innovation and entrepreneurial ecosystems are distinguished as separate discourses. This distinction is particularly applicable in the tourism context, since studies of innovation ecosystems usually focus on a specific innovation project or technology—for example, a digital platform or a new tourism product or service. In entrepreneurial ecosystems, by contrast, the entrepreneur plays a central role as the key actor who identifies market opportunities, mobilizes resources, and coordinates interactions among various participants in the tourism environment.

This line of research emphasizes the processes of new firm creation and the factors that stimulate or constrain the development of entrepreneurship. In tourism, this includes small and medium-sized enterprises such as family-owned hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, start-ups in the field of digital tourism services, as well as entrepreneurial initiatives aimed at sustainable and alternative tourism. Key research issues include the realization of entrepreneurial potential, access to financial, human, and informational resources, and opportunities for integration into broader tourism markets.

In this context, the entrepreneurial ecosystem is defined as “a set of interconnected actors, organizations, institutions, and processes of entrepreneurial activity that are formally and informally combined in order to ensure coordinated and mediated governance in the local entrepreneurial environment” (West & Wood, 2013, p. 27). Applied to tourism, this definition highlights the importance of interaction among entrepreneurs, local authorities, educational and cultural institutions, investors, and tourism organizations for the sustainable development of destinations.

Research within this discourse examines both formal institutions—such as government programs, regulatory frameworks, public investments, and institutional investors—and informal institutions, including entrepreneurial culture, networks of contacts, and local traditions that support the emergence and development of new tourism firms (Acs et al., 2017). In tourism, these factors often determine entrepreneurs’ ability to create authentic and competitive products based on local identity and natural resources.

Researchers of both entrepreneurial and innovation ecosystems acknowledge the key importance of the environmental context for their effective functioning. As a result, in empirical analyses the boundaries between the two discourses are often blurred. In tourism research, ecosystems localized in specific geographic areas or sectors are most commonly examined—for example, ecosystems of mountain, coastal, or cultural tourism, as well as ecosystems of digital entrepreneurship in tourism.

The innovation–entrepreneurship discourse also includes the increasingly popular research stream on university ecosystems. In the tourism context, universities perform a dual function: on the one hand, they provide an environment for the development of innovation and entrepreneurial projects in tourism, and on the other hand, they contribute to human capital formation through educational programs and training in entrepreneurship and tourism business management.

Research on entrepreneurial ecosystems is particularly popular among Russian scholars. Although it is largely grounded in the work of international authors, it is characterized by a specific emphasis on the role of the state as a key participant or principal stakeholder in the ecosystem. This perspective is especially relevant for tourism, where public policy, public investment, and destination development strategies can have a decisive impact on the dynamics and sustainability of entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Conclusion

Although the ecosystem concept is characterized by a certain degree of terminological ambiguity and a diversity of interpretations, it has become an increasingly important analytical framework for describing interactions among economic agents in the process of value creation for consumers. In the field of tourism, this concept proves to be particularly applicable, as the tourism product is inherently the result of coordinated interaction among multiple participants—tourism enterprises, local communities, public institutions, infrastructure providers, and end consumers.

At the same time, several relatively distinct discourses have emerged in the academic literature that further develop the ecosystem concept—namely business, innovation, entrepreneurial, and platform-based discourses. This makes it necessary, when applying the ecosystem approach in economic and management research on tourism, to clearly specify the particular analytical focus, since different discourses emphasize different aspects of interaction, coordination, and value creation.

The ecosystem perspective makes it possible to describe contemporary structures of the tourism business and destination management by extending the scope of analysis beyond the individual tourism enterprise and directing attention toward the network of interdependent actors. In this way, it substantially complements and partly substitutes the traditional sectoral approach, which often proves insufficient for explaining the complex nature of tourism interactions.

Given the dynamic nature of the tourism environment, its high sensitivity to technological, social, and economic changes, and the accelerated development of digital platforms, understanding the mechanisms underlying the functioning and success of tourism ecosystems is of not only theoretical but also significant practical importance. This is particularly relevant for destination management, the sustainable development of tourism, and the competitiveness of tourism enterprises.

The need for the ecosystem approach becomes especially evident under conditions of structural transformation in tourism—both in the emergence of new forms of tourism consumption (digital, sustainable, experience-based tourism) and in the adaptation of traditional tourism sectors to processes of digitalization. In this sense, the transition toward a technology- and data-driven economy can be interpreted as a process of formation and development of tourism ecosystems in which “smart” enterprises and digital platforms play a key coordinating role.

At the same time, the application of the ecosystem concept in tourism is constrained by a number of methodological and empirical challenges. Among the most important are:

- the need for more in-depth research into the factors determining the success and failure of participants in tourism ecosystems, as well as the question of the reproducibility of ecosystem models under different destination and institutional conditions;
- the need to clearly define the boundaries of the tourism ecosystem in order to identify participants, their roles, contributions, and interactions, and to adequately assess the overall effectiveness of the ecosystem;
- the need to develop appropriate analytical metrics, since traditional indicators of performance at the level of individual enterprises, sectors, or regions do not sufficiently capture the processes of co-creation of value that are characteristic of tourism ecosystems, which are currently analyzed mainly at a conceptual level or through individual empirical case studies (Ketonen-Oksi & Valkokari, 2019).

In summary, the ecosystem approach offers considerable potential for a deeper understanding of the complex processes taking place in tourism; however, its effective application requires further theoretical refinement, empirical validation, and adaptation to the specific characteristics of tourism activities and destination management.

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