

GENUINE ECOTOURISM VS GREEN MASS TOURISM FOR EFFECTIVELY DELIVERING EU GREEN DEAL TARGETS RELATED TO TOURISM

Petya Romanova

University of Chemical Technology and Metallurgy
8 St. Kliment Ohridski Blvd., Sofia 1797, Bulgaria
romanova@uctm.edu (P.R.).

Received 24 February 2026

Accepted 24 March 2026

DOI: 10.59957/jctm.v61.i3.2026.18

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine and distinguish the concepts of ecotourism and green mass tourism in the context of EU's environmental framework and their suitability to contribute towards delivering EU Green Deal targets in tourism, including 55 % emissions reduction by 2030, Natura 2000 biodiversity protection, and circular economy principles. Through systematic policy analysis of EU legislation, strategic frameworks, and case studies (EU4Prespa versus Interreg Euro-MED Ecolabel programme), ecotourism demonstrates superior alignment via binding LIFE funding instrument, density caps and multi-level governance. Green mass tourism achieves operational efficiency, but structural volume growth undermines achieving absolute environmental targets. SWOT analysis reveals that ecotourism is better aligned to the EU Green Deal but it falls short on scalability. Policy recommendations include binding conservation KPIs for Ecolabels, dedicated funding and multilevel governance to meet 2030 climate neutrality targets.

Keywords: ecotourism, green mass tourism, European green deal, tourism transition pathway, natura 2000, life programme, policy governance.

INTRODUCTION

While tourism represents over 10 % of EU's GDP accounting for 12 % of the EU jobs, it contributes immensely to increased emissions, loss of habitat and depletion of resources [1]. The disproportionate impact of tourism on the environment requires substantial investments for tackling pollution, increased Greenhouse Gas Emissions (GHGs) particularly from transport, pressure on water sources and biodiversity.

The substantial environmental footprint of tourism in Europe pushes the shift towards more sustainable practices. Yet, as tourism is not an exclusive EU competence many of the existing tools at EU level are cross-sectoral and on voluntary basis. The current EU policies are trying to balance the economic gains with environmental sustainability in the long run by providing a legal framework in some areas and soft tools in others.

EU's comprehensive strategy, the European Green Deal, aims at transforming the EU into a modern, resource-efficient, and competitive economy, while aiming to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 and reduce emissions by at least 55 % by 2030. Initiatives like Fit for 55, Transition Pathways, Natura 2000 push and support the tourism sector to transform as part of the broader goals in the framework of the Green Deal [2 - 5].

For the sake of this paper, it is important for set the definitions for ecotourism and green mass tourism as well as sustainable tourism, which are very often used interchangeably.

Sustainable tourism is not one of the concepts examined in this paper but it is important to define it for setting the frame as it is a broader term which does not refer to a specific type of tourism but rather to the practices of the tourism industry. Sustainable tourism searches for balance between economic growth, environmental health

and sociocultural aspects of tourism development to guarantee its long-term sustainability [6]. The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) has set the standards that make travel and tourism sustainable. They are outlined in four specific pillars that make tourism sustainable: sustainable management; socioeconomic impacts; cultural impacts, environmental impacts (including consumption of resources, reducing pollution, and conserving biodiversity and landscapes) [7].

Ecotourism is a niche segment of tourism or a subset of sustainable tourism which doesn't mean simply travelling in nature as opposed to the common belief. The first official definition of the term is from the 1980's by the Mexican architect Héctor Ceballos-Lascuráin, who associates it with education, conservation, and minimal impact to the environment and local communities. Since then, the concept has evolved and in 2000, the world's leading certification bodies reached an informal understanding, the Mohonk Agreement, which provides the framework and principles for certification of ecotourism and sustainable tourism and defines ecotourism as "sustainable tourism with a natural area focus, which benefits the environment and communities visited, and fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation, and awareness" [8]. This form of tourism is characterised by low volumes of tourists, conservation funding and focus on education [9].

Green tourism is another subset of sustainable tourism. Often confused with ecotourism, green tourism focuses only on the environmental aspects of tourism without looking into the economic and cultural sides. When we add "mass" to it, we add the large-scale and cost-efficient components. "Green mass" tourism is poorly defined as a term but when we combine the two concepts, we end up with the same model of high-volume tourism which uses operational improvements such as renewable energies, more sustainable waste management practices or ecolabels. This model looks rather into decreasing the individual impact of tourists, while it maintains environmental pressure and puts strains on achieving the EU Green Deal targets.

This paper aims at analysing the concepts of ecotourism and green mass tourism and examine how they can effectively contribute to delivering the EU Green Deal targets related to tourism in terms of policy alignment and implementation.

EXPERIMENTAL

The methodology used in this study includes systematic analysis of relevant EU and national policy initiatives, including screening and analysing specific EU legislation, content of EU strategic documents, roadmaps and action plans related to EU initiatives in support of reducing the environmental footprint of tourism (Green Deal, Tourism Transition Pathway 2023 - 2030, European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS)) as well as analysis of statistical data generated from the EUROSTAT Database [2 - 6, 10 - 18].

Cases selected:

1. "Genuine" ecotourism: EU4Prespa, EU funded Project covering the Prespa region (partly situated in North Macedonia, Greece and Albania) which links ecotourism to restoration of biodiversity [19].

2. "Green mass" tourism: Under the sustainable tourism mission of the Interreg Euro-MED Programme, projects in the coastal areas of Italy, Spain and France have been selected due to high level of adoption of EU Ecolabel while still struggling with pressure of overtourism [20].

Reproducibility:

All sources are available on the EU Open Data Portal, project repositories and evaluations and articles published on cited official websites.

The two models represented by the selected cases have been compared through SWOT Analysis. No primary data has been used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Both concepts are well positioned in the Tourism Transition Pathway strategy to deliver towards the targets of EU's Green Deal but they both fall short as policy instruments setting a clear direction to guide the green and digital transformation of the European tourist sector.

Genuine ecotourism addresses all four principles of GSTC: sustainable management; socioeconomic impacts; cultural impacts, environmental impacts, while green mass tourism relies on operational efficiency while maintain high volumes.

EU4 Prespa delivers towards the EU Green

Table 1. Green Deal Targets - contribution of ecotourism vs. green mass tourism [4].

Green Deal Target	Genuine ecotourism	Green mass tourism
Emissions cut by 55 % (Fit for 55)	Local mobility, caps (30 - 50 % lower CO ₂)	Efficiency gains, high-volume, aviation dominant
Biodiversity (Natura 2000)	Direct funding via fees, caps	Zoning but risk of overcrowding
Circular economy and pollution reduction	Low-impact design, Zero-waste operations	Partial recycling at scale, reduction of water consumption (up to 15 % per individual), incremental waste water treatment

Table 2. Policy governance comparison: ecotourism vs. green mass tourism [19 - 23].

Governance Aspect	Ecotourism (EU4Prespa)	Green Mass Tourism (Interreg Euro-MED Programme)
Legal basis	LIFE Regulation (binding) + tri-national MoU (NMK, AL, GR)	Regulation (EC) No 1980/2000 - Volunray instrument (non-binding)
Funding mechanism	€13M dedicated LIFE programme (2021 - 2027)	Market-driven, no central EU allocation
Monitoring system	Annual KPI reporting to European Commission (DG ENV)	Self-certification + 10 % on the spot checks
Stakeholder scope	national governments (NMK, AL, GR) + 120 local communities	Operators + national tourism authorities
Coordination level	EU-Member State-local (multi-level governance)	EU-national-operator (market-based)
Performance metrics	SMART KPIs (emissions t _{CO₂} km ⁻² , €/ha conserved)	ETIS efficiency ratios (kWh m ⁻² , % recycling)
Scalability	Niche (15 000 visitors/year capacity)	Mass (> 40M bednights Ecolabel capacity)
Green Deal alignment	High (biodiversity + emissions absolute cuts)	Medium (per-visitor efficiency gains only)

Deal Targets through EU funding mechanism (EU Life Programme). This ensures policy continuity through dedicated budget allocations, as it requires mandatory deliverables, regular reporting and multi-level governance that encourages cross boarder cooperation between the two Balkan nations and Greece and over 120 local communities. Interreg Euro-MED Programme promotes EU Ecolabel standards. Due to the non-binding nature of the EU Ecolabel regulation, this model is entirely reliant on market incentives and respectively on the profit margins of the economic operators and leads to uneven implementation. “Green mass” tourism considers per-visitor efficiency while ignoring the impact of tourist volume growth.

The following analysis is based on the two selected cases EU4Prespa and Interreg Euro-MED Programme [19, 20].

Strengths

Ecotourism in the case of EU4Prespa, the binding nature of funding under the LIFE Programme sets the conservation obligation unlike voluntary incentives. Promoting low density tourism aligns with the conservation objectives and measures under Natura 2000 [24]. The multilevel governance approach ensures alignment of environment sustainability goals at EU and national level by engaging also local communities, thus helping to bridge policy gaps between top-down targets

Table 3. SWOT analysis: Ecotourism vs green mass tourism policies [19 - 23].

	Ecotourism (EU4Prespa) Policy	Green Mass Tourism (Interreg Euro-MED Programme) Policy
Strengths	Binding, funding through LIFE Programme, low density tourism, cross boarder cooperation, multi-level governance	Scale efficiency, Ecolabel market recognition, private investment
Weaknesses	Limited scalability, high coordination costs	Volume-driven impacts, uneven implementation, greenwashing risks
Opportunities	Green Agenda, replication in the Western Balkan region, Natura 2000 funding	Digital booking optimisation, aviation fuel taxes
Threats	Political discontinuity, overtourism spillover	Economic downturns reduce green investments

and bottom-up action.

The major advantage of “green mass” tourism is the market recognition of the EU Ecolabel, which is a driver for private investment without the need for public expenditure. Economies of scale due to its volume allow for cost-effective technology adoption.

Weaknesses

Major constraint of ecotourism is its niche scale, which limits its contribution to the EU Green Deal targets. The multilevel coordination has high costs and can cause delay in implementation.

The “green mass” tourism model, which is based on growing volume is fundamentally incompatible with achieving the absolute emission targets. High risk for greenwashing exists as nearly 50% of EU ecolabels have weak or no independent verification procedures [26].

Opportunities

Ecotourism is strategically positioned through the Green Agenda in the context of EU’s (€6B 2024-2027) Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, which provides a mechanism for replication across all 6 Western Balkan countries [27]. Natura 2000 funding streams (€5.1B 2021-2027) can further support scaling through protected area networks.

For “green mass” tourism the major leverage points are the existing digital platforms which enable real-time capacity management and the EU proposals for aviation fuel tax which could fund for example improving the energy efficiency of buildings, reducing carbon emissions, and lower environmental impact.

Threats

External factors like political instability in the Western Balkans can threaten the long-term funding and policy implementation for ecotourism. Mass tourism in nearby areas can undermine the density control.

The fragility of the “green mass” tourism model is that competitive pressures favour cost cutting over sustainability and the slightest economic downturn can have disproportionate impact.

CONCLUSIONS

- In terms of policy design, ecotourism is better aligned to the EU Green Deal through funding under the LIFE programme which implies binding deliverables, density caps and multi-level governance, though scalability remains an issue due to its niche application.
- Green mass tourism is well positioned to produce efficiency gains yet its continuous growth in volume undermines achieving the absolute emission targets.
- Stronger binding indicators (for example ETIS reporting for Ecolabels) and dedicated funding are needed for maximizing impact beyond the niche of ecotourism.
- Green Agenda for the Western Balkans provides opportunity the EU4Prespa model to be replicated to other EU candidate countries using EU’s LIFE programme’s annual funding calls to create multiple low-density, conservation-focused tourism centers in Natura 2000 sites across priority biodiversity areas.
- To meet the 2030 climate neutrality target, the

policy approach should shift from voluntary self-certification toward stronger regulatory framework with mandatory deliverables.

REFERENCES

1. WTTC, The World Travel & Tourism Council, 9 April 2025. <https://wttc.org/news/travel-and-tourism-to-create-4-5mn-new-jobs-across-the-eu-by-2035>
2. The European Green Deal, 2019. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en
3. Fit for 55, 2023. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/fit-for-55/>
4. European Commission, Tourism transition pathway: the EU strategy to boost green and digital transformation, EU Policy Pap., 2022. <https://transition-pathways.europa.eu/tourism/ttp-reports/tourism-transition-pathway-eu-strategy-boost-green-and-digital-transformation>
5. Natura 2000, Biodiversity Information System for Europe. <https://biodiversity.europa.eu/europes-biodiversity/protected-areas/explore-natura-2000>
6. UN Environment Program and UN World Tourism Organization, Making Tourism More Sustainable - A Guide for Policy Makers, 2005, p. 11-12. <https://wedocs.unep.org/rest/api/core/bitstreams/51294584-60aa-4c5f-88e2-77445e704015/content>
7. GSTC, Ecotourism and sustainable tourism, GSTC. https://www.gstc.org/gstc-criteria/#:~:text=The%20GSTC%20Standards%2C%20previously%20known%20as%20GSTC,impacts**%20**%20**Cultural%20impacts**%20**%20**Environmental%20impacts**
8. Mohonk Agreement, A framework and principles for the certification of sustainable and ecotourism, 2000. <http://www.globalecotourismnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/mohonk.pdf>
9. The International Ecotourism Society, What is Ecotourism? Definition, 1991. <https://ecotourism.org/what-is-ecotourism/>
10. 'Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy' together with an Action Plan, 2020. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0789>
11. Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS). https://green-forum.ec.europa.eu/green-business/emas_en
12. EU Ecolabel Tourist Accommodation. https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/circular-economy-topics/eu-ecolabel/eu-ecolabel-tourist-accommodation_en
13. Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/biodiversity-strategy-2030_en
14. EU Adaptation Strategy, 2021. https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/adaptation-and-resilience-climate-change/eu-adaptation-strategy_en
15. The EU Pact for Skills - Skills Partnership for the Tourism Ecosystem, 2021. https://transport.ec.europa.eu/tourism/transition-eu-tourism/skills-eu-tourism-workforce_en
16. Unbalanced tourism growth at destination level root causes, impacts, existing solutions and good practices, EU 2022. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/e7b8a00e-39ba-11ed-9c68-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>
17. European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS). <https://www.green2growproject.eu/sustainabilities/european-tourism-indicators-system-etis/>
18. EUROSTAT Databse. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>
19. EU4Prespa, Implementation reports, EC MoU, 2021. <https://www.undp.org/north-macedonia/projects/eu-prespa-restoration-natural-resources-and-enhancing-sustainable-agriculture-and-tourism>
20. Interreg, MED sustainable tourism eval., Interreg Rep., 2024. <https://sustainable-tourism.interreg-euro-med.eu>
21. Regulation (EU) 2021/783 of the European Parliament and of the Council, establishing a Programme for the Environment and Climate Action (LIFE), and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1293/2013 (Text with EEA relevance), 29 April 2021. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L_.2021.172.01.0053.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AL%3A2021%3A172%3ATOC
22. LIFE Programme, EU's funding instrument for the environment and climate action. https://cinea.ec.europa.eu/programmes/life_en
23. Regulation (EC) No 1980/2000 of the European Parliament and of the Council on a revised Community eco-label award scheme, 17 July 2000. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2000/1980/oj/eng#>
24. Rules and guidance on managing and protecting Natura 2000 sites. <https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/natura-2000/>

- managing-and-protecting-natura-2000-sites_en#overview
25. EU Tourism Dashboard. <https://tourism-dashboard.ec.europa.eu/?lng=en&ctx=tourism>
26. European Environmental Bureau, EU Commission prepares to crack down on greenwashing: almost half of 230 EU ecolabels have very weak or no verification procedures, EEB Policy Brief, 2023. <https://eeb.org/en/eu-commission-prepares-to-crack-down-on-greenwashing-with-new-green-claims-law/>
27. Communication from the Commission to the Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: New growth plan for the Western Balkans, 2023. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52023DC0691>