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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Greening tourism in the Giant Mountains: agency in new path development

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to contribute to research on sustainability transitions in tourism research by applying recent evolutionary economic geography concepts to understand the role of agency in new path development in tourism regions, focusing on the Eastern part of the Giant Mountains, the oldest National Park in Czechia. Utilising desk research, decade-long participant observation, and twenty-one interviews with key stakeholders, we highlight distinctive leadership and flagship initiatives for sustainability transitions in local tourism. Nevertheless, the tourism industry predominately follows one of less radical pathways – path renewal. Conceptually, first, we documented that the boundary between organizational-level and system-level agency can be blurred and, in some cases, even inseparable. Second, while the literature asserts that the primary obstacle in the operation of the agency-asset nexus is the absence of an interface between organizational-level and system-level agency, we discovered another major hindrance – the weak coordination mechanism between the types of system-level agency exerted by different stakeholders.

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Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to intensive recent efforts to connect research on sustainable tourism and sustainability transitions studies (Flood Chavez et al., 2024; Köhler et al., 2019; Niewiadomski & Brouder, 2022, 2024; Niewiadomski & Mellon, 2024) by applying several concepts that were recently developed within evolutionary economic geography and regional studies. Niewiadomski and Brouder (2022) argued convincingly that the literature on sustainable tourism has been largely tourism-centric, focusing primarily on minimizing environmental impacts while neglecting tourism's social and economic dimensions and, consequently, its important contribution to sustainability more broadly. Conversely, the sustainability transitions literature has largely overlooked tourism as a major sector for sustainability transitions. Therefore, Niewiadomski and Brouder (2022) called for a new integrated research agenda: sustainability transitions

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in tourism. Thus, we aim to contribute to this new agenda by providing a deeper understanding of the key drivers and mechanisms using recently developed evolutionary economic geography concepts.

Currently, two closely related streams of evolutionary economic geography are evolving with a particular dynamic. The first stream represents new path development studies that *inter alia* possess substantial potential to contribute to the sustainability transitions literature. This stream aims to unravel the evolutionary trajectories of regions reflecting specific features in their asset endowment and the grand societal challenges they face (Capasso et al., 2019; Coenen et al., 2012; Doloreux et al., 2025; Hansen & Coenen, 2015; Isaksen et al., 2022; Trippl et al., 2020). Overall, one of the key conclusions of this literature is the argument that there is a close relationship between the nature of regional innovation systems (in terms of the maturity of the institutional framework and diversification/specialization of the economic fabric) and their likely evolutionary trajectory as conceptualized by the new path development model (Isaksen & Trippl, 2016). Thus, this paper conceptualises the sustainability transition in tourism as a case of new path development in the study region.

The second, closely interrelated and swiftly evolving stream of evolutionary economic geography investigates the role of various types of actors and their specific types agency in regional renewal (Isaksen et al., 2019; Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020; Jolly et al., 2020; Benner, 2022; Benner, 2024; Blažek & Květoň, 2023). Recently, within this literature, a consensus started to emerge that to ensure the socio-economic transformation of industries in regions (or even the overall transition of regions to safeguard their sustainability and resilience), vigorous and sophisticated organizational-level and system-level agency is needed, and these two types of agency should be closely aligned to yield mutual synergies (Blažek et al., 2024). However, despite important exceptions (e.g. Doloreux et al., 2025; Gauna Ruiz de León et al., 2025; James et al., 2023), these studies are predominately focused on evolutionary dynamics in highly developed regions with advanced regional innovation systems and mostly deal with the transformation of manufacturing industries.

Consequently, this study seeks to interlink three strands of literature: (i) sustainability transitions in tourism, (ii) the evolutionary economic geography perspective of new path development, and (iii) evolutionary economic geography concepts of organizational- and system-level agency within the agency-assets nexus.

This conceptual framework enables us to contribute to the literature by investigating how organizational-level and system-level agency shape new path development associated with the transition from mass tourism to more sustainable forms of tourism in a peripheral micro-region located in the Giant Mountains National Park in Czechia. We selected this particular locality for a case study to address the following novelties. First, given the small scale of the locality, the number of actors is limited. This enables us to investigate in greater depth how actors exercise organizational-level and system-level agency in their struggles to support sustainability transitions in tourism. Second, all four major dimensions of system-level agency (legitimacy building, asset modification, market shaping as well as knowledge creation and anchoring—see Uyarra & Flanagan, 2022) can be investigated in detail. Third, tourism in the national park is inevitably shaped by a multi-level regulatory framework and multiplicity of actors operating at different scales. Therefore, we will be

able to reflect on recent calls to account for a multi-actor and multi-level approach (Hassink et al., 2019).

Therefore, our study contributes to the burgeoning literature on organizational-level and system-level agency and the new path development from a perspective of a less developed, peripheral and tourism-oriented micro-region in Czechia. Moreover, Czechia is a country where the general public is still largely unaware of the need for a deep societal transition to ensure sustainability and resilience. Thus, this study unravels the modalities of agency in an unfavourable context and shows how, despite many obstacles and barriers, progress toward greening tourism in the national park can be achieved. Consequently, in our study, we would like to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the main types of organizational-level and system-level agency performed by actors in the studied region to promote sustainability transition in tourism; (2) What are the major hindrances to the sustainability transition in tourism in the Eastern Giant Mountains; (3) Which type of evolutionary paths, as conceptualized in the new path development model, is being followed by the emerging sustainability transition in the region's tourism industry?

The article has the following structure. First, the conceptual framework for our study will be outlined. An outline of the socioeconomic and environmental profile of the studied region follows. After that, the methodology employed in our study is specified. The main empirical results are presented and discussed in the subsequent section. Finally, the concluding section summarizes the main conceptual and empirical findings and offers several policy recommendations.

Conceptual framework for studying organizational and system-level agency in sustainability transitions in tourism

In this section, we outline our conceptual framework for studying sustainability transitions in tourism based on recent advances in this field as well as in evolutionary economic geography.

Tourism research has been exploring pathways to sustainability and destination transitions for decades (see e.g. Butler, 1999), yet putting these ambitions for more sustainable tourism into practice remained a consistent challenge (Wilkinson and Coles, 2024). Nevertheless, recently, this research received a vigorous impetus by concerted efforts by a number of authors. As has been emphasized already above, Niewiadomski and Brouder (2022) and Niewiadomski and Brouder (2024) called for integrating the research on sustainable tourism and sustainability transitions studies into a new research stream—sustainability transitions in tourism. In the same quest, Magnusson et al. (2024) identified three streams of cross-fertilization between research on sustainable tourism and sustainability transitions studies: deep transitions (highlighting the importance of historical accounts of techno-economic patterns and pathways), transitions in practice (focusing on micro-level changes in behaviours and values), and the geography of transitions (examining the influence of local resources, power dynamics, and spatial factors). Niewiadomski and Brouder (2024) further underlined the importance of examining the actual processes and mechanisms that drive sustainability transitions in tourism, rather than treating sustainability merely as a goal to be achieved.

Importantly, while several authors have applied evolutionary economic geography concepts in sustainability transitions research (though not specifically in relation to tourism), Niewiadomski and Brouder (2022) were the first to argue that the conceptual framework of sustainability transitions in tourism could be strengthened substantially by utilizing the core concepts of evolutionary economic geography (EEG), including path dependence. In the EEG, path dependence denotes the tendency of regional economies to follow established industrial trajectories, reinforced by sunk costs, inertia of the institutional framework, and broader socio-cultural embeddedness (Hassink, 2005). Historical events and decisions thus have long-term consequences, meaning that the evolution of regional economies is shaped not only by actors' agency but also by inherited structures, routines, and institutions (Martin, 2010; Rekers & Stihl, 2021). Nevertheless, Brouder (2014) showed that substantial engagement between evolutionary economic geography and tourism studies dates back to 2011, and that the use of specific EEG concepts can be traced to as early as 2000, when Williams and Baláž (2000) applied the notion of path dependence to tourism transition in Central Europe. Furthermore, Brouder et al. (2017) argued that the three key notions of EEG – path dependence, generalized Darwinism and complexity theory – offer substantial potential for enhancing conceptual foundations of tourism studies, especially for understanding destination evolution as a non-deterministic process driven by human agency within enabling and constraining social, political and economic contexts. This argument has been taken further by Ioannides and Brouder (2017) who argue that EEG serves as a scholarship bridge for embedding tourism studies within mainstream economic geography, emphasizing that tourism should be understood as an element of a complex economic system rather than in isolation. Building on this insight, we leverage recent EEG conceptual advances to further deepen cross-fertilisation between EEG and research on sustainability transitions in tourism.

In recent EEG, micro-level concepts of organizational-level and system-level agency, along with organizational and regional (system-level) assets, have gained considerable traction, particularly in studies of new path development (Benner, 2022; Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020). Here, we provide only a brief overview of specific evolutionary pathways conceptualised in the new path development literature (see e.g. Frangenheim et al., 2020; Hassink et al., 2019). The key distinction among the main types of evolutionary pathways lies in the degree of incrementality or radicality of change of a given regional industry (Isaksen & Trippl, 2016). The most radical trajectory is new path creation, which involves establishing an entirely new industry. This is followed by unrelated and related branching, which entail diversification into industries that are either unrelated or related to existing regional activities. In contrast, path extension describes cases where regional industries follow established business models with only incremental modifications. Path renewal and path upgrading represent intermediate trajectories, involving moderately radical changes. Importantly, and directly related to our study, these evolutionary pathways also differ in the intensity of exerted organizational-level and system-level agency (Blažek & Květoň, 2023). Path delocalisation, contraction, and downgrading—where regional industries relocate, narrow their production portfolio, or move into lower value-added activities—constitute trajectories of regional decline (Blažek et al., 2020). Thus, regional development paths span incremental changes as well as radical

transformation, but also include trajectories of decline such as delocalisation, contraction, and downgrading (Figure 1).

Importantly, these trajectories differ substantially in the vigour and sophistication of two fundamental types of agency recently distinguished by Isaksen et al. (2019). These authors differentiate between firm-level agency (or more generally, organizational-level agency) and system-level agency. Organizational-level agency covers the activities of actors (firms, R&D institutes, universities, public administration bodies, NGOs, etc.) that are directed primarily inside the given organization. A company or public sector organization, could, for example, design a new incentive scheme to motivate employees and improve productivity. In contrast, system-level agency primarily aims to improve the quality of the broader environment beyond the boundaries of a single organization (Isaksen et al., 2019). This may involve representatives of companies, research institutes, or universities engaging in various networking activities, such as working groups, innovation platforms, or policy debates with public sector bodies. A distinctive example of a system-level agency represents place-based leadership (Beer et al., 2020; Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020; Lerfald, 2025; Sotarauta & Beer, 2017). Recently, the conceptualization of system-level change agency has been advanced by its breakdown into legitimacy building, market formation, asset modification and knowledge anchoring (Uyarra & Flanagan, 2022).

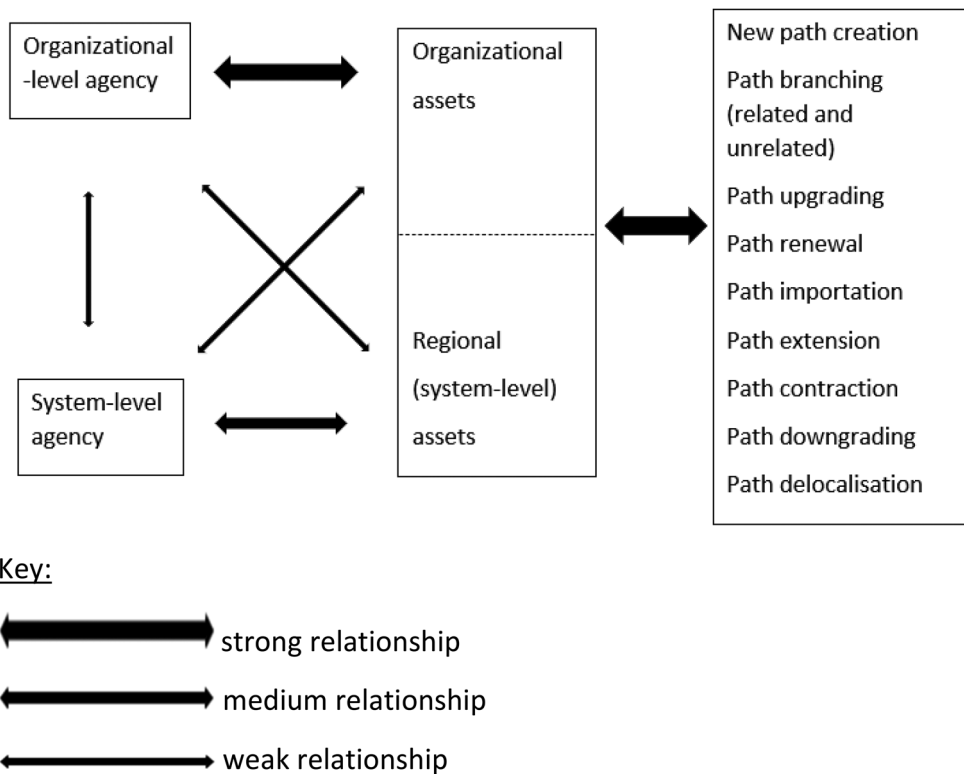


Figure 1. Agency-assets nexus and new path development. *Source:* Adapted from Blažek and Květoň (2025).

However, according to the best of our knowledge, organizational-level agency has (so far) not been further unpacked. This is surprising because, arguably, organizational-level agency is much more frequent than system-level agency (Blažek & Květoň, 2025). Organizational-level agency tends to be directed towards the improvement or modification of tangible organizational assets (e.g. labour, technology, and/or intangible organizational assets such as skills, know-how, and internal culture) (Baumgartinger-Seiringer et al., 2021).

In addition to organizational-level assets, regions possess distinct regional (system-level) assets—tangible as well as intangible. Key tangible regional assets include the economic structure and its degree of diversity/specialization, infrastructure, geographic position and the availability of (qualified) labour (Trippl et al. (2020). Prominent types of intangible regional assets include the institutional framework (in terms of both organizational set-up in the region and the quality of formal and informal institutions) (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013), the nature of localized learning (Malmberg & Maskell, 2006), the policy support framework (including the feedback mechanism) (Morgan, 2017) and regional identity (Semian & Chromý, 2014). Regional assets are not necessarily confined to those physically located within a region. They may also include trans-regional assets such as internationally recognized eco-accreditation schemes (and labels) or external financial sources that regional actors are able to mobilize due to their position within national or even global system (Flood Chavez et al., 2024; Saxenian & Hsu, 2001).

To start with, within the agency-assets nexus, a strong relationship exists between organizational assets and regional assets (Rypestøl et al., 2023). For example, labour qualifications and motivations are functions of both the educational system in the region and of internal training and culture within the organizations nested in the region. Moreover, organizational and regional assets (human resources, R&D capacities, institutional framework, etc.) inevitably strongly overlap (Blažek et al., 2024). While we concur with Isaksen et al. (2019) that system-level agency can significantly enhance regional assets, we argue that this relationship is generally weaker than the link between organizational and regional assets, given the intrinsic nature of these asset types.

In contrast, as recently argued by Blažek and Květoň (2025) weak (or even missing) link between organizational- and system-level agency can be considered as a crucial barrier to the efficient functioning of the overall agency-assets nexus. Therefore, a high level of social capital and a strong regional identity (Semian & Chromý, 2014) can contribute substantially to actors' willingness to engage beyond the boundaries of their organization, that is, to exert system-level agency. The weak link between organizational- and system-level agency cannot be compensated by diagonal relationships in the nexus, such as those between organizational-level agency and regional assets, or between organizational assets and system-level agency, as these tend to be similarly weak. An exception may be found in the presence of a dominant company, university or major R&D centre in the region, which might possess the capacity to shape or enhance regional assets. The functioning of this nexus has important implications for the evolutionary pathway(s) of key actors within a regional industry. In particular, a nexus that combines strong organizational and regional assets with vigorous organizational- and system-level agency enables local stakeholders to pursue more radical paths while simultaneously moderating the risks inherently associated

with such ambitious trajectories. Thus, we concur with Magnusson et al. (2024) and Flood Chavez et al. (2024) and argue that the functioning of micro-level practices in this nexus constitutes one of the important place-specific factors in sustainability transitions, helping to explain why regional pathways toward sustainability often differ.

Consequently, building on the evolutionary economic geography literature, our conceptual framework centres on the agency-assets nexus, encompassing organizational- and system-level agency, organizational- and regional-level assets, and their interrelationships, as well as their link to the evolutionary paths of regional industries (Blažek & Květoň, 2025) (Figure 1). We argue that this conceptual framework can be usefully applied not only to studies of new path development (Hassink et al., 2019), and to the drivers of sustainability transitions in tourism, but also more broadly to research on sustainability transitions in general (Markard et al., 2012).

Therefore, our research will devote particular attention to the investigation of both system-level agency – which has received growing attention in recent studies (Benner, 2024) – and organizational-level agency. A key focus will be on exploring whether any linkages exist between these two levels of agency as we consider the weakness of this relationship a critical rupture within the overall agency-asset nexus that hinders the evolution of new paths in the regions.

Investigation of key actors and their organizational-level and system-level agency in sustainability transitions in tourism allow us to identify which of the trajectories conceptualized in the new path development model (see Figure 1) is being followed in the studied region. Given the above-mentioned relationship between the level of socioeconomic development of a region and likely evolutionary trajectory, we foresee one of the less radical pathways such as path extension, path renewal or path upgrading as the most likely trajectory of sustainability transitions in tourism in the studied region.

Evolution of the Giant Mountains into a prime tourist destination

The Giant Mountains is the highest mountain range in Czechia (the highest peak being Sněžka 1603 m) with an area of 631 km². It is situated at the northern Czech-Polish border (Figure 2), and, within the territory of Czechia, its area is 454 km². In the Quaternary period, the first mountain rocks were modelled by valley and continental glaciers—the remnants of which are trogs and cirques (Balatka & Kalvoda, 2006). The summits are flattened and there is a valuable arctic-alpine biotope with several valuable relict and endemic species above the forest boundary, mainly plant species (Dvořák & Štursa, 2009). Therefore, the Giant Mountains became the first national park in Czechia in 1960 and were declared a Biosphere Reserve in 1992. The foothills of the Giant Mountains have been inhabited since the fourteenth century, when its original mixed forests were used in the Czech silver mines. The Giant Mountains were inhabited in the sixteenth century mostly by logging families from Tyrol, Styria and Carinthia who brought with them specific knowledge for mowing mountain meadows and for the modes of their fertilization as well as distinctive cultural and architectural features that were discernible in the Giant Mountains until the eighteenth century. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the landscape was influenced by the ‘lodges’ economy (i.e. family self-contained economic units, disposing with farm animals and ensuring

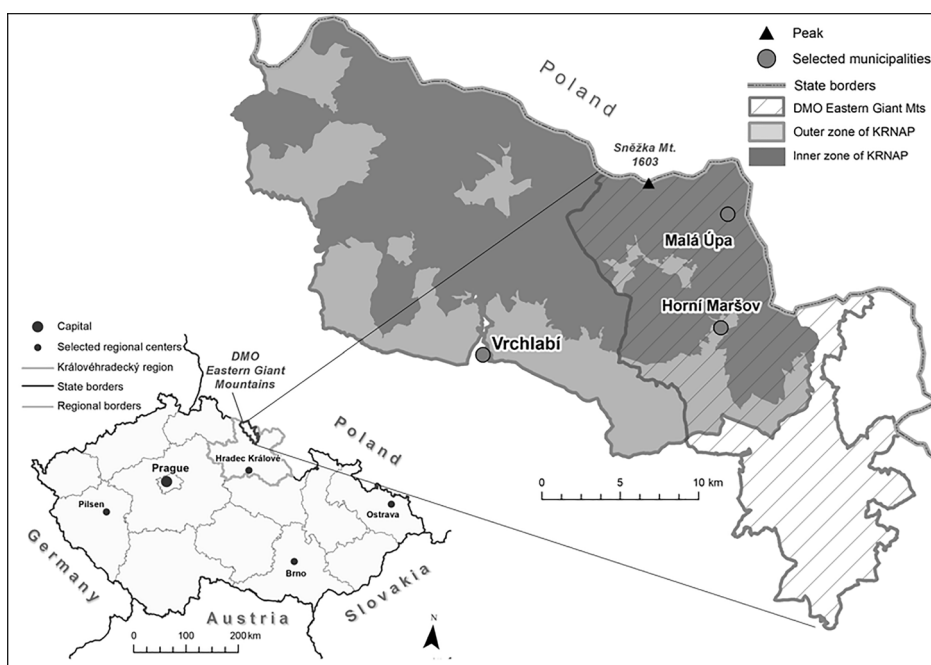


Figure 2. Location of Giant Mountains National Park (KRNP) in Czechia. Note: DMO: Destination Management Organization. Source: own.

a specific care of mountain meadows) (Flousek et al., 2007). In the nineteenth century, the lodges were the birthplace of tourism infrastructure. After World War II, the original population of the Giant Mountains was evicted and replaced partly by internal migration within Bohemia and by immigration from Slovakia. Since WWII, tourism has grown and gradually become the dominant economic sector. The Giant Mountains NP stands out for its high density of human settlements (villages and chalets), which is one of the factors limiting the transfer of knowledge and good practices, given that few other mountain national parks exhibit similar settlement pattern.

Nowadays, the Giant Mountains are a part of the Královéhradecký Region, which is the most visited region in terms of inbound tourism after the capital city Prague. Furthermore, it is the second most intensively visited region in terms of domestic tourism in Czechia (Tourdata, 2022). The Giant Mountains represent the most visited locality and the number of overnight stays has been rising continuously since 2014, except between 2020 and 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Tourdata, 2022). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, strict restrictions were imposed on tourist accommodation and related infrastructure (such as the operation of chair lifts), while urban residents were eager to escape into nature. As a result, the Giant Mountains landscape experienced an unprecedented burden, with just a single day's influx of visitors causing extreme congestion at easily accessible tourist hotspots.

The presented study is devoted to the Eastern Giant Mountains (as delineated by DMO Eastern Giant Mountains—see CzechTourism, 2023), characterized by year-round tourism. Winter tourism is represented by the mass use of ski infrastructure, summer and off-season tourism by hiking, cycling and other (mainly adrenaline) attractions

offered in the resorts. In recent years, efforts have been made to offer environmentally friendly and sustainable forms of tourism. One of the basic features of the area under study is the decline in the permanent population and the increase in tourist infrastructure, especially in the form of new accommodation such as holiday apartment houses. The huge intensity of tourist use of the area is documented by the tourism intensity (the ratio of tourist overnight stays to the population of a given location): the Královéhradecký Region had an intensity of 8.45 in 2022, the Giant Mountains tourist area 38.8 and the investigated region of Eastern Giant Mountains 92.0 (Tourdata, 2022).

Methodology

In addition to more than a decade-long participant observation by one of the authors, we employed two main methods to answer our research questions. First, we performed extensive desk research of existing written materials ranging from strategic documents to regional chronicles to media reports on the region. Second, we performed semi-structured interviews with key regional stakeholders. Interviewees were selected on the basis of desk research and the personal familiarity of one of the authors with the region due to her long-term engagement with local tourism. Consequently, from April 2022 to April 2023, we performed twenty-one interviews with representatives of major regional stakeholders (including the KRNAP Administration), as well as with stakeholders who represent diverse interest groups in the region, to gain multiple perspectives on the perception of the sustainability transition in tourism in the region. All interviewees were invited by email or telephone and informed about the research themes. Consent with interview was obtained *via* email or during the initial call. At the start of each interview, participants were also asked for permission to record, which all granted. Overall, stakeholders participated willingly in this research. Only a representative of the largest ski areal declined to be interviewed, so we interviewed a representative of the second-largest tourist service provider in the region. Because the study focused solely on participants' professional perspectives and did not involve sensitive personal data, with all interviews conducted on a voluntary basis, informed consent obtained, and responses anonymized, formal ethics approval was not sought.

Our interviews covered the following issues. First, we ascertained the respondent's knowledge of sustainability transitions in tourism in general and specifically in the region. Next, we focused on the barriers to the development of sustainable tourism. This was followed by questions about specific actions (organizational-level and system-level agency) by individuals or organizations to promote the sustainability transition in tourism in the region. Finally, we asked about their main working partners and collaborators and investigated if there was any common platform facilitating the sustainability transition in tourism. The interviews lasted from 65 to 120 min. In specific cases, such as when a need emerged to clarify conflicting opinions, we contacted the selected respondents again by phone for clarification.

We conducted a content analysis of the transcripts of these interviews. Using Atlas.ti software, we extracted 140 codes, which were organized into 11 thematic categories: housing, demographics, education, barriers to sustainability transitions in tourism, support for these transitions at local, regional and supra-regional levels, transportation,

visitor numbers, criticism of mass tourism, attitudes toward national parks, lack of a shared vision, and tourism regulation. Within these codes, we identified economic benefits, unbalanced economic development and other adverse tourism impacts, support for more sustainable forms of tourism, and the demand for comprehensive/broader education.

Empirical research: the role of agency in path development for the sustainability transition in tourism in the Eastern Giant Mountains

In this section, first, we will elaborate the primary types of organizational-level and system-level agency exerted by stakeholders to foster (more) sustainable tourism. Next, we will explore the key obstacles hindering advancement of the sustainability transition in tourism in the region. Lastly, we will determine which of the pathways outlined within the new path development model best aligns with the evolving trajectory of the sustainability transition in tourism in the region.

Organizational-level agency and assets

The main organizational-level agency of actors with employees involves training and educating their staff on sustainability. The strongest drive to self-educate employees and to strive for sustainable management of their own offices has been documented in the cases of prominent local NGO, the KRNAP Administration and one of family firms. Lecturers of the prominent NGO developed their own training methodologies in sustainable development, place-based education and active citizenship. They educate students, train teachers and other lecturers and actively disseminate this know-how to other organizations. The KRNAP Administration is also striving to develop its own unique expertise in nature protection and national park management because there are not many other densely populated national parks that could serve as a model to the Giant Mountains. Additionally, the local community development provides training for its staff on the sustainable development of the region.

Educational/training activities are also provided by public sector entities, which, especially when using European funds or state grants, are required to follow the principles of sustainability in their projects. For example, local municipalities are encouraging their inhabitants towards greater sustainability (waste sorting, support for community events, publication of 'The Ten Commandments' for lodge keepers). Thus, municipalities train not only their own employees (organizational-level agency) but partly also citizens and local entrepreneurs (system-level agency). Private businesses provide sustainability training only exceptionally, in cases where these businesses are led by visionary entrepreneurs. In contrast, an important entrepreneur in the region does not consider sustainability an issue and intends to address it only when economical:

...if someone says to me 'come on, it can be done more economically, it can be done for less money, it can be done more greenly', I'll listen to them and maybe we can say that it's actually not such a big deal.

(business owner, April 21, 2023)

The only major identified example of the application of sustainable technology was identified in the case of headquarters of a prominent NGO in the region, which is a unique reconstruction of a baroque rectory building into an eco-friendly house. The sensitively renovated baroque building contains the latest technological solutions for heating (heat recovery ventilation and a biomass boiler), wastewater treatment, water flow control, water heating (photothermal solar panels) and energy production (photovoltaic solar panels). The data outputs of these technologies are centralized in an information system that is also used for education activities. Inside the building, there is a permanent exhibition on the environmental problems of the contemporary world at local, regional and global levels. The local kitchen uses only organic and local products, and cleaning is done without chemicals. In 2016, this building was the first in the Giant Mountains (and the last so far) to receive two prestigious 'ecolabels': the European Ecolabel 'The Flower' and the Czech 'Eco-friendly service' awarded by the Czech Ministry of the Environment. The building also houses a specific tourist information centre, which, in addition to local and fairtrade products, offers unique 'trips to touch' that lead to less-known locations and introduce the natural and cultural history of the region. Thus, this house functions as a base for educating not only the employees of this NGO and its clients (e.g. students, lecturers of other eco-NGOs, public administration and local entrepreneurs) but also the local inhabitants (hosting various community events) and random tourists (entrance to the house is free and open every day).

The spectrum of functions and activities performed in this headquarters provides an interesting, yet in this region rare, example of a close connection between organizational- and system-level agency, which, in some cases, are inseparable. The existence of this building substantially enhances regional assets (esp. infrastructural) and enables actors to exert a substantial system-level agency. This is evident in three key areas: legitimacy building (this house is widely perceived as a good practice that inspires other tourism providers in the region), knowledge anchoring (through the integration of the region's historical, cultural and environmental heritage into the services and exhibitions) and market shaping (albeit locally, the building stands as a valued tourist attraction in the municipality and a notable asset for local stakeholders). Substantial infrastructural and material assets for tourism are owned by the powerful business, which, however, clearly prefers mass tourism.

System-level agency and assets

The most powerful actor capable of performing substantial system-level agency is the KRNP Administration. It holds substantial regulatory authority over municipal development and governs access to specific areas of the national park. It also has the right to issue binding opinions on infrastructure projects, ranging from tourism infrastructure to waste-water treatment plants. On the other hand, it does not have legal power to effectively enforce its decisions (for example, it cannot regulate the number of visitors to the national park). KRNP also contributes to shaping the market through its own touristic attractions (e.g. guided walking tours and the promotion of little-known places on its website – www.neznamekrkonose.cz) as well as by permitting attractions (e.g. children's playgrounds, observation towers) and various mass events on the territory of the national park.

The KRNAP Administration exerts an important system-level agency in terms of nature protection, including the legitimization of the sustainability transition in tourism among entrepreneurs, municipalities and tourists. Effort to legitimize a shift towards the sustainability transition in tourism is also an important priority for the prominent NGO (as explained above) and for one of family firms. Both organizations approach the legitimization of the sustainability transition in tourism from different angles and target several groups of actors—NGO focusing on environmental education and family firm on historical and cultural heritage. These three organizations use special facilities and tools to spread their values. For example, in addition to several information centres, the KRNAP Administration prepared a new exhibition ‘Stone and Life,’ which uses modern interactive technology to provide its viewers with an authentic experience of the Giant Mountains, located on the historic premises of the baroque monastery in Vrchlabí. Moreover, the family firm owns two information centres and a historic guesthouse. To promote its activities and to inform the public about the past, present and future of tourism in the Giant Mountains, it publishes its magazine twice a year (Czech, Polish and German versions).

Thus, overall, organizational-level agency of main stakeholders is directed predominately towards human resources (e.g. educating employees on sustainability) or greening their facilities and services (e.g. waste separation, local food, renewable sources of energy). System-level agency is directed predominately at two major spheres: (1) tourism management, moderating over-tourism at traditional destinations and, more broadly, (2) raising tourists’ awareness of the principles of sustainable tourism. Local NGO was the only case in which we identified a dedicated focus of its agency also on technology, exemplified by the eco-friendly headquarters, which provides a spectrum of activities of both an organizational-level and system-level nature. Paradoxically, while about a half of our interviewees considered the KRNAP Administration as the most powerful yet also most challenging stakeholder, its representative expressed a sense of being ‘left holding the short end of the stick’ (manager at KRNAP, May 13, 2022).

Conceptually, our research shows that organizational-level and system-level agency cannot always be separated and, in some cases, are being performed either in tandem or with various synergies between the two—as exemplified by the activities performed in the prominent local NGO. Moreover, while the literature on agency in regional development asserts that the primary obstacle in the functioning of the agency-assets nexus is the absence of an interface between organizational-level and system-level agency, we revealed a more complicated pattern. Specifically, we identified an additional critical barrier: the absence of an effective coordination mechanism among the system-level agency performed by different stakeholders, which leads to incoherence or even open conflicts among them. The overall intensity of the relationships within the agency-assets nexus in the Eastern Giant Mountains indicates [Figure 3](#). From the figure it follows that, in the Eastern Giant Mountains, the relationship between organizational-level agency and organizational assets is considerably stronger than the relationship between system-level agency and regional (system-level) assets. Moreover, the coordination mechanisms among system-level agency exerted by various stakeholders are largely absent. Consequently, the sustainability transition in tourism tend to follow a path renewal trajectory, as these weaknesses constrain the potential for evolution along more radical paths.

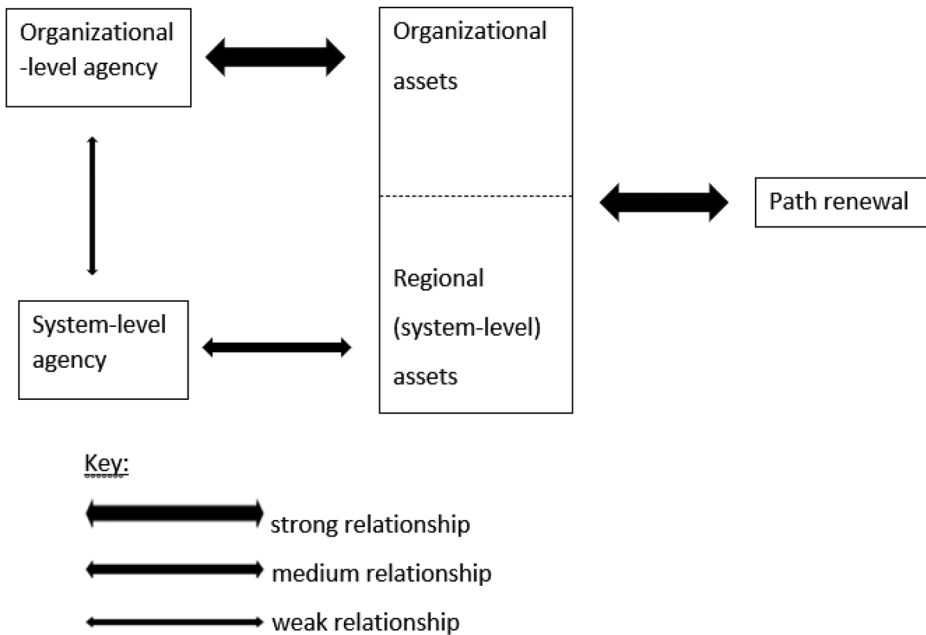


Figure 3. Agency-assets nexus in path development for the sustainability transition in tourism in the Eastern Giant Mountains. *Source:* own.

The major hindrances to the sustainability transition in tourism in the Eastern Giant Mountains

Our research has revealed several hindrances to sustainability transition in tourism in the region. The region has been suffering from depopulation since the turn of the millennium (CSO., 2022) leading to a decline in essential services such as healthcare, elementary schools, and local shops. Surprisingly, the major push factor driving local population away is the lack of accessible housing. The widespread conversion of family houses into apartments, Airbnb rentals or guesthouses has significantly inflated housing prices. Moreover, the restrictions by the KRNP Administration limit the construction of new houses on greenfield locations:

This is a disaster. Everyone is facing it [the housing crisis] in the same way. Everyone knows that this is the biggest limit and it may completely strangle the whole tourism industry one day.

(family business owner, August 29, 2022)

The limited variety of jobs on offer is another factor forcing people to leave the region. The transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy has profoundly changed the economic structure of the region. From what was originally a relatively diversified economy (agriculture, glass, textiles, lignite mining), the economic base has, over the last 30 years, become specialised only in tourism, which has moved from its original complementary role to a pivotal sector. Depopulation means that local businesses cannot find workers for basic professions (cooks, ski lift operators, maids) and often have to hire seasonal workers from other regions. This reduces, for

example, the quality of services and tax revenues of municipalities (which depend primarily on the number of permanent residents). Human resources as well as the quality and diversity of material assets are, therefore, weak in the region under study and this trend is worsening.

We observed only limited agency directed at the enhancement of institutional assets. At the state level, tourism law has been missing for decades and would, among other things, define the role of destination management organizations as well as set the rules for digitization, data collection and sharing. At the regional and district levels, there are public sector stakeholders who are trying to create and promote a common vision, but they do not have enough financial resources or legislative power to enforce their visions. Finally, even municipalities in the national park cannot make decisions about their territory without the consent of the KRNP Administration. However, the Administration does not enjoy a positive reputation among municipal representatives and businessmen, who often consider KRNP representatives to be overconfident and rigidly promoting one-sided approaches. This tension between this powerful actor and the remaining stakeholders represents another hindrance to the development of this region.

(KRNP's) hardline approach has recently polarized many people against each other unnecessarily, which I see as a huge problem when a more subtle rhetoric would bring far more people to consensus with KRNP and would be far more beneficial for the region.

(public sector stakeholder, May 11, 2022)

Due to weak national and regional support frameworks, most of the activities towards the sustainability transition in tourism are bottom-up in nature (e.g. prominent local NGO, one of family firms and several other visionary entrepreneurs). However, they are few and not strong enough to make substantial changes. One significant initiative in recent years, based on requests from municipalities, created a promising project to digitalize tourism services in the studied region. Thanks to the introduction of the electronic Guest Card and Citizen Card, there was, among other things, to be an increase in the collection of tourist accommodation fees for the municipalities, a reduction in the number of accommodations not reported to the Tax Office and the creation of a unified website and e-shop with a wide range of all types of (both mass and sustainable) tourist attractions. After two years of preparation, it became clear that after the project manager left the region for personal reasons, the hard-earned trust and commitment of the actors to move tourism in the region may have been lost for a long time.

The short-termism of the transformation efforts, as well as the short-sightedness of most involved, does not give much hope for an early change. Key leadership abilities such as forging a vision, a feeling of (co)responsibility for the region and an ability to achieve a consensus among stakeholders (Beer, 2014; Sotarauta & Beer, 2017) are, thus, clearly underdeveloped in the region.

The evolutionary path of the emerging sustainability transition in tourism in the Eastern Giant Mountains

Based on the results of our research, the sustainability transition in tourism in the Giant Mountains most closely resembles the trajectory of 'path renewal' typical by

the transformation of an existing industry by injecting new practices, models and technologies (Hassink et al., 2019). The conclusion that the sustainability transition in tourism in the Eastern Giant Mountains follows path renewal—one of the less radical paths—is not surprising, given the above-described weakly developed relationships within the agency-assets nexus (Figure 3). The renewal of a traditional tourism towards more sustainable industry proved to be gradual, incremental and highly variegated among particular stakeholders.

We observed that organizational changes dominate over technological ones. The only major change in terms of technology involves a newly reconstructed headquarters of prominent local NGO, which also functions as a tourist accommodation based on sustainability principles.

During our research, we were able to document an increased activity of path advocates (MacKinnon et al., 2019), such as the KRNAP Administration, NGO and several local community development associations who are the drivers of the whole renewal process. According to them, the region should address the housing crisis to stop depopulation and the responsible organizations (esp. the KRNAP Administration) should establish clearer and simpler rules for everyday life and the businesses. Additionally, there is a need to promote a common vision for the future of the region through enhanced destination management.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we aimed to contribute to research on sustainability transitions in tourism by applying several micro-level concepts that were recently developed within evolutionary economic geography and regional studies. Through this approach, we aimed to advance the understanding of key actors and drivers of new path development in tourism regions. Empirically, our research was set in the Eastern part of the Giant Mountains National Park, the oldest national park in Czechia, notable for its relatively dense settlement structure. In these circumstances, strong tensions arise between the requirements of residents and municipalities on the one hand and the preservation of the environment in the area on the other.

We documented the distinctive leadership of a few key stakeholders (both public and non-governmental) as well as several flagship initiatives directed at the sustainability transition in tourism in the region. Nevertheless, their efforts are hindered substantially by three major factors. First, the acceptance of the paradigm of the sustainability transitions in tourism is limited not only at the local level but also at regional and national levels. Consequently, a policy that would be supportive of the sustainability transitions in tourism is missing at both national and regional (kraj) levels. This is predominately attributable to the fact that tourism does not represent an important priority—neither at the national nor the regional level—and that, more generally, sustainability transitions are still not widely accepted as pressing challenges within the Czech national discourse. The current predominate orientation towards mass tourism fits most local businesses, which are primarily focused on the cost-efficiency of their ventures.

Second, and more broadly, the sustainability transition in tourism is also hindered by the fact that the area represents a periphery suffering from depopulation and the

loss of the diversification of a local economic structure (one can even talk about a collapse of the former textile, glass and lignite mining industries). Third, this peripheral region lacks not only human resources but also a suitable institutional framework that would facilitate change.

The trajectory of the new path development followed by the tourism industry in the Eastern Giant Mountains aligns most with the path renewal. This pathway, which can be considered one of the less radical pathways, is typified by introduction of organizational or technological innovations within the existing industry (Hassink et al., 2019). Given the region's broader socioeconomic framework, the emergence of a more radical path would be rather surprising.

Conceptually, we make two contributions. First, our research shows that the boundary between organizational-level and system-level agency can be blurred and, in some cases, even indistinguishable. This is exemplified by the headquarters of one of the major environmentally oriented NGO, whose diverse activities exhibit features of both types of agency.

Second, the literature on agency in regional development claims that the main hindrance in the operation of the agency-asset nexus is the absence of an interface between organizational-level and system-level agency (Blažek et al., 2024). Our findings support this view but also reveal another major obstacle within the agency-assets nexus: the weak, or even non-existent, coordination mechanism among the various forms of system-level agency performed by different stakeholders. Both of these hindrances are closely linked to the region's weak institutional framework.

From a policy perspective, targeted support, at least from the level of the self-governing region (kraj), would be needed to accelerate the shift towards more sustainable forms of tourism. Such support might start with a definition of a 'green tourism provider' and, subsequently, a coherent support framework for such providers should be developed. Municipalities should receive support for infrastructure upgrades induced by tourism, as the number of daily visitors during the high season often far exceeds the resident population. Next, given excessive tourism in some localities, the demarketing of the most visited (and often environmentally the most fragile) destinations is needed. It would be desirable to facilitate the transfer of knowledge from other national parks on how to develop and manage the sustainability transition in tourism in the Eastern Giant Mountains. Given the two cleavages identified in the agency-assets nexus, namely, the weak interface between organizational-level and system-level agency, and the absence of coordination mechanism among the system-level agency activities of different stakeholders, the establishment of a platform for key regional stakeholders would be particularly valuable. Such a platform, especially involving stakeholders exerting substantial system-level agency, could facilitate experience sharing, the formulation of a shared regional vision, and the coordination of future activities.

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Authors contributions

CRedit: **Jiří Blažek**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft; **Anna Čtvrtníková**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft; **Dana Fialová**: Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft.

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