

Tourism Resilience: Theoretical Foundations, Frameworks and Critical Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Resilience has become one of the defining organizing concepts in tourism scholarship, propelled by a cascade of shocks culminating in the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet the concept is theoretically plural and frequently applied loosely. This review synthesizes the principal theories that underpin tourism resilience, tracing its migration from ecological and social-ecological systems (SES) thinking into tourism as a complex adaptive system, and setting out the tourism-specific frameworks that operationalize it from Faulkner's disaster lifecycle and Ritchie's strategic crisis management to Calgaro and colleagues' Destination Sustainability Framework, Lew's scalar account of community resilience, and Hall, Prayag and Amore's multi-scalar synthesis. It distinguishes the absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacities and the associated 'bounce-back' versus 'bounce-forward' debate. The review then advances a critical reading: that dominant framings can under-theorize power and agency, risk depoliticizing crises, and rest on a thin empirical base. It is concluded that agenda be acted upon as prioritized set of recommendations with responsible actors, resource requirements, context-specific indicators, implementation barriers and governance arrangements and with testable research questions attentive to African and other Global-South destinations.

Keywords: tourism resilience; social-ecological systems; adaptive cycle; crisis and disaster management; transformation; destination sustainability; context-specific indicators; governance.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is among the most crisis-prone of economic sectors. Because travel is discretionary, mobility-dependent and acutely sensitive to perceptions of safety, destinations are typically among the first to contract when a shock strikes and among the last to recover. A succession of events the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2008 global financial crisis, recurrent terrorism, and above all the COVID-19 pandemic exposed this fragility and elevated resilience from a niche idea to a central concept in tourism research and policy (Prayag, 2018; Gössling, Scott & Hall, 2021).

The pandemic in particular functioned as an unplanned, global stress test of every destination's coping capacity. International arrivals collapsed in 2020 before recovering to pre-pandemic levels by 2024, prompting the question that animates this review: recovery to what? A rapid return to a pre-crisis system that was itself over-touristic, carbon-intensive and inequitable may simply restore vulnerability (Sharma, Thomas & Paul, 2021). Answering that question requires theoretical clarity about what resilience is, where its concepts originate, and what they do and do not illuminate.

This study is a theoretical review. It first clarifies the core vocabulary of tourism resilience; it then sets out, in some depth, the theories and frameworks that underpin the field, organized from their ecological roots to their tourism-specific elaborations; it offers a comparative synthesis and a critical appraisal; and it concludes by translating that appraisal into a prioritized, actionable agenda attentive to Global-South contexts, together with testable research questions to guide subsequent empirical work.

Conceptualizing Tourism Resilience

Tourism resilience can be defined as the capacity of a tourism system an enterprise, a destination or the sector as a whole to anticipate, absorb, adapt to and recover from shocks and stresses while retaining its core function and identity. Two distinctions are foundational. First, shocks are sudden and discrete (disasters, pandemics, terrorist incidents), whereas stresses are slow-burn and cumulative (climate change, over-tourism, structural market shifts); a resilient system must contend with both. Second, resilience is defined relationally against vulnerability, the degree to which a system is exposed and sensitive to harm and unable to cope which is why leading tourism frameworks treat the two as a single analytical couplet (Calgaro, Lloyd & Dominey-Howes, 2014).

A further distinction concerns the three capacities that a resilient system may exhibit. Absorptive capacity is the ability to cope with and persist through a shock using existing buffers and reserves. Adaptive capacity is the ability to adjust practices, markets and structures in response to change. Transformative capacity is the ability to reorganize into a fundamentally new and more sustainable configuration when the prior model is no longer viable. This ladder from persistence, through adjustment, to reinvention, where much of the normative interest in resilience lies, because most policy stops at absorption and adaptation while transformation remains rarer and more contested (Lew, 2014; Hall, Prayag & Amore, 2018).

Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical architecture of tourism resilience is best understood as a series of nested borrowings: an ecological core, an extension into social-ecological and complex-systems thinking, and a set of tourism-specific frameworks that translate these ideas into models of crisis, disaster and destination management.

Ecological resilience and social-ecological systems

The conceptual origin is Holling's (1973) work on ecological systems, which reframed resilience as the magnitude of disturbance a system can absorb before it shifts into a qualitatively different state, or regime. This displaced an earlier, engineering-inflected view that equated resilience with the speed of return to a single equilibrium. Holling's insight that systems can possess multiple stable states, and that persistence of function matters more than return time is the intellectual seed of nearly all subsequent resilience theory. Folke (2006) extended these ideas into the study of social-ecological systems (SES), foregrounding the roles of adaptive capacity, learning, memory and self-organization in the survival and transformation of coupled human natural systems. The SES perspective reframes a tourist destination from a static resource into an active system characterized by thresholds, feedbacks and the capacity to reorganize.

The adaptive cycle and panarchy

The adaptive cycle is a central concept within the SES framework, describing how systems move through four phases. In the growth phase (r), resources are exploited and the system expands; in the conservation phase (K), the system becomes increasingly efficient and rigid; a release phase (Ω) follows when a disturbance breaks that rigidity; and a reorganization phase (α) then creates the conditions for the next cycle. Panarchy explains how these cycles operate across nested scales, with disturbances propagating upward ('revolt') and accumulated experience constraining lower levels from above ('remember'). The theory has clear implications for tourism: destinations that pursue efficiency by maximizing throughput in the conservation phase become brittle and vulnerable to collapse when perturbed (Folke, 2006).

Engineering, ecological and evolutionary resilience

Building on this lineage, scholars distinguish three lenses that carry sharply different normative implications. Engineering resilience measures the speed of return to a pre-existing equilibrium, the ability to 'bounce back' and prizes efficiency and stability. Ecological resilience measures the amount of disturbance a system can absorb while retaining its essential function, allowing for multiple equilibria. Evolutionary (or socio-ecological) resilience abandons the idea of a fixed equilibrium altogether, treating systems as continuously

adapting and, where necessary, transforming the ability to ‘bounce forward’ into a new and better state. The distinction is consequential: a recovery strategy grounded in engineering resilience seeks to restore the prior system as quickly as possible, whereas one grounded in evolutionary resilience treats the crisis as an opening for deliberate reinvention (Folke, 2006; Sharma et al., 2021).

Complex adaptive systems

Closely related is the treatment of tourism destinations as complex adaptive systems (CAS): assemblages of many interacting agents tourists, operators, communities, regulators whose interactions produce non-linear, emergent and self-organizing behavior that cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts. Cochrane (2010) synthesized this view for tourism in her ‘sphere of tourism resilience’, in which resilience emerges from the interplay of three elements: the harnessing of market forces, the cohesion and involvement of communities and stakeholders, and adaptive management underpinned by effective leadership. The CAS lens explains why interventions in one part of a destination system produce unexpected effects elsewhere, and why prediction and top-down control are inherently limited.

Tourism disaster and crisis management frameworks

Alongside these systemic theories sits a more applied tradition of crisis and disaster management. Faulkner’s (2001) Tourism Disaster Management Framework was foundational, distinguishing crises which originate at least partly within an organization from disasters, which are sudden and externally imposed, and mapping a six-phase lifecycle running from a pre-event phase through prodromal, emergency, intermediate and long-term recovery phases to eventual resolution. Ritchie (2004) built on this to argue for a proactive, strategic-management approach rather than a reactive one, integrating prevention and planning, strategic implementation during the event, and resolution and organizational learning afterwards, and drawing explicitly on chaos theory to acknowledge the unpredictability of crises. Together these frameworks give the field its dominant process vocabulary; their limitation, discussed below, is that they are oriented toward restoring the pre-crisis system rather than transforming it.

The Destination Sustainability Framework

Calgaro, Lloyd and Dominey-Howes (2014) advanced an influential integration of vulnerability and resilience thinking in their Destination Sustainability Framework (DSF). The DSF models a destination’s trajectory through the interaction of a shock or stressor with the destination’s exposure and sensitivity, its system addictiveness, and the feedback loops and root causes that shape outcomes over time. Crucially, the framework is oriented toward transformation: its explicit ambition is to trace how destinations might move ‘from vulnerability to transformation’ rather than merely surviving intact. In doing so it bridges the largely separate literatures on vulnerability and on resilience, and situates both within a sustainability agenda.

Scale and community resilience

Lew (2014) drew attention to the importance of scale and of the pace of change. He distinguished resilience to slow, incremental change the everyday pressures that gradually reshape a community from resilience to sudden, high-magnitude shocks, arguing that community tourism planning must address both and that the two call for different tools. This scalar and temporal sensitivity is a valuable corrective to a literature preoccupied with dramatic disasters, foregrounding the slow erosions and adaptations that constitute much of a destination’s lived experience.

Multi-Scalar, Organizational and Psychological Resilience

The most comprehensive synthesis is offered by Hall, Prayag and Amore (2018), who frame resilience as operating and interacting across three scales: the individual (the psychological resilience of workers, entrepreneurs and residents), the organizational (the resilience of firms and their management practices) and the destination (the social-ecological resilience of the wider system). Prayag (2018) similarly argues for treating resilience and crisis management as symbiotic rather than separate, and subsequent work has

examined the psychological and organizational resilience of tourism firms in the aftermath of specific disasters. Becken (2013) complements these by developing a framework for assessing the resilience of tourism sub-systems specifically to climatic factors, directly connecting the systemic theories above to the defining chronic stressor of the coming decades.

Comparative Synthesis of the Theories

The theories reviewed above are complementary rather than competing: they operate at different scales and address different facets of the resilience problem. Table 1 summarizes their proponents, core propositions and their principal value and limitation for tourism.

Table 1. Principal theories and frameworks of tourism resilience.

Theory / framework	Key proponents	Core proposition	Value & limitation for tourism
Ecological resilience & social-ecological systems (SES)	Holling (1973); Folke (2006)	A system can absorb disturbance and persist within a stability domain; beyond a threshold it flips to a new regime. Resilience = buffer capacity, not merely return time.	Reframes destinations as dynamic systems with thresholds; human agency and power remain under-specified.
Adaptive cycle & panarchy	Holling & colleagues; Folke (2006)	Systems cycle through growth (r), conservation (K), release (Ω) and reorganization (α), nested across scales.	Explains why rigid, over-optimized destinations collapse; hard to operationalize empirically.
Engineering vs. ecological vs. evolutionary resilience	Holling (1973); Folke (2006)	Three lenses: return-to-equilibrium (bounce back), persistence of function, and continuous adaptation/transformation (bounce forward).	Clarifies the normative choice in recovery; the three are often conflated in policy.
Complex adaptive systems (CAS)	Cochrane (2010)	Tourism as many interacting agents producing non-linear, emergent, self-organizing behavior — the ‘sphere of resilience’ of markets, community and leadership.	Captures interdependence and emergence; resists tidy prediction and control.
Tourism Disaster Management Framework	Faulkner (2001)	A six-phase lifecycle (pre-event → prodromal → emergency → intermediate → recovery → resolution) distinguishing crises from disasters.	Foundational process model; descriptive and largely reactive rather than transformative.
Strategic crisis & disaster management	Ritchie (2004)	A proactive, strategic-management approach prevention/planning, strategic implementation, resolution/evaluation informed by chaos theory.	Adds strategy and foresight; still centered on restoring the prior system.
Destination Sustainability Framework	Calgaro, Lloyd & Dominey-Howes (2014)	Integrates vulnerability and resilience: shock/stressor, exposure, sensitivity, system adaptiveness and feedback, oriented toward	Bridges vulnerability and resilience thinking; data-intensive to apply fully.

(DSF)		transformation.	
Scale & 'slow' community resilience	Lew (2014)	Resilience to slow, incremental change differs from resilience to sudden shocks; community planning must address both across scales.	Foregrounds community and everyday change; less developed on acute-crisis response.
Multi-scalar resilience	Hall, Prayag & Amore (2018)	Resilience operates and interacts across individual (psychological), organizational and destination scales.	Integrates psychology, management and SES; a synthesis more than a testable model.
Climate sub-system resilience	Becken (2013)	Frames destination resilience to climatic factors through interacting resource sub-systems.	Directly links climate stress to tourism systems; sub-system boundaries are contestable.

The three strands cohere into a single storyline. Ecological and SES theory supplies a robust grammar of thresholds, adaptive cycles and multiple equilibria; complex-systems thinking accounts for emergence and the limits of control; and the tourism-specific frameworks translate these ideas into operational models of crisis lifecycle, strategic management, destination vulnerability and multi-scalar capacity. Their common thread is the progression from persistence, through adaptation, to transformation.

Critical Perspectives

For all its analytical reach, the resilience literature invites serious critique, and a doctoral engagement should hold the concept at arm's length rather than adopt it uncritically. Four lines of critique are especially pertinent.

Resilience of what, to what, and for whom. Dominant framings frequently leave the subject and the beneficiary of resilience unspecified. In practice, an undifferentiated call for resilience can privilege the continuity of firms and destination revenues while workers, informal enterprises and host communities absorb the losses first and recover last.

The risk of depoliticization. Treating crises as external shocks to be absorbed can naturalize the status quo and preserve existing inequities. Exhorting an under-resourced enterprise or community to 'be resilient' without commensurate support transfers risk downward rather than addressing its structural causes.

Under-theorized agency and power. Because the core metaphor is borrowed from ecology, human agency, power and politics are often under-theorized. Tourism actors do not merely self-organize; they deliberate, contest and make strategic choices, and any adequate account must treat resilience as a political as well as a systemic phenomenon.

A thin empirical base. The field remains predominantly theoretical and case-based. Agreed indicators are scarce, and longitudinal, comparative tests are scarcer still, which constrains both theory development and evidence-based policy (Wang et al., 2022).

These critiques converge on the field's central normative tension: the choice between bounce-back restoring the prior system with its vulnerabilities intact and bounce-forward using the crisis to build a more sustainable, equitable and diversified system. Although much recent scholarship advocates transformation, the industry's structural dependence on volume growth and long-haul mobility makes bounce-back the path of least resistance. This tension frames the agenda advanced.

Application: Global and African Contexts

Empirical application of these theories has expanded rapidly, and the literature has consolidated substantially since 2020. Research on reef-tourism enterprises in Phuket, Thailand demonstrated the importance of social

ties and informal networks in sustaining local operators through disaster and recovery, illustrating the adaptive flexibility of small enterprises under economic stress (Biggs, Hall & Stoeckl, 2012). More recent work identifies a ‘regenerative turn’, in which destinations seek not merely to recover but to adapt their products and markets toward more sustainable configurations (Tegelberg & Griffin, 2024; Kagisho & Sao Joao, 2025).

For Africa and the wider Global South, these theoretical debates carry particular practical weight. Kenya’s wildlife tourism, concentrated in destinations such as the Maasai Mara, depends heavily on long-haul international travel. When international mobility ceased during the pandemic, conservancies and the communities dependent on them were directly affected, and the shift toward domestic tourism proved an incomplete substitute (Ondicho, 2021). This case indicates that building local coping capacity is necessary but not sufficient: structural dependency on Global-North source markets is itself a source of vulnerability. Resilience in such settings is therefore inseparable from questions of equity and the distribution of tourism benefits precisely the dimensions that the systems literature tends to neglect.

CONCLUSION

From Agenda to Action

Tourism resilience is best understood not as a fixed state a destination attains, but as a continuous capacity to absorb, to adapt and, when necessary, to transform. Its theoretical foundations are rich and coherent, running from Holling’s ecological resilience and the adaptive cycle, through social-ecological and complex-systems thinking, to the tourism-specific frameworks of Faulkner, Ritchie, Calgaro and colleagues, Lew, and Hall, Prayag and Amore. The field’s principal weakness is empirical rather than conceptual: it needs agreed indicators and longitudinal, comparative evidence before its claims can be tested with confidence. The remainder of this section converts that diagnosis into a prioritized and actionable agenda specifying what should be done, how, by whom and with what resources, with explicit attention to resource-constrained destinations and closes with testable research questions.

A prioritized, actionable agenda

The recommendations below merge the review’s implications into five priority actions, ordered by sequence and foundational importance: indicators and diversification come first because they enable everything else, while governance and longitudinal evaluation institutionalize the gains. Each action specifies responsible actors, method and resource requirements, including a lower-cost pathway for settings where funding, data and institutional capacity are limited. Table 2 gives the at-a-glance prioritization; the structured items that follow provide the detail.

Table 2. Prioritized actions, lead actors and time horizon.

P	Strategic focus	Lead actor(s)	Horizon
1	Context-specific resilience indicators and baselines	National tourism authority / DMO; universities	0–18 months
2	Market and ownership diversification for equity	Tourism & finance ministries; DMOs; community institutions	1–4 years
3	Climate resilience of destination sub-systems	Environment & tourism ministries; protected-area authorities	1–5 years
4	Proportionate digital monitoring and early warning	DMOs; national statistics office; tech partners	1–3 years
5	Multi-level governance and longitudinal evaluation	National government; regional bodies; research councils	Ongoing

Priority 1 Co-develop and validate context-specific resilience indicators and baselines

What. Define a minimal, adaptable core set of resilience indicators for each major destination type, and establish pre-shock baselines against which change can be measured.

How. Convene participatory workshops with operators and communities; structure indicators around the DSF dimensions of exposure, sensitivity and adaptiveness (Calgaro et al., 2014); pilot in two or three contrasting destinations before scaling.

Who National tourism authorities and destination management organizations (DMOs) lead; universities supply method and validation; operator and community associations co-define what is measured; regional bodies (e.g., UNWTO, the African Union and sub-regional economic communities, county governments) harmonize definitions. Resources and the resource-constrained pathway. Full implementation is data-intensive.

Where capacity is limited, begin with eight to ten proxy indicators built from data already collected bed-nights, employment, occupancy volatility and source-market concentration rather than bespoke surveys, and expand the set only as capacity grows.

Priority 2 Reduce structural market dependency and strengthen distributional equity

What. Diversify source markets and products, expand community ownership and local supply chains, and extend social protection to informal tourism workers.

How. Develop domestic and regional markets; set local-procurement and local-employment targets; strengthen benefit-sharing in conservancy and community-tourism models; link seasonal and informal workers to social-protection schemes.

Who. Ministries of tourism and finance; DMOs; conservancy trusts and community institutions; private operators; development partners.

Resources and the resource-constrained pathway. Much can be achieved by reallocating existing marketing budgets. Regional and intra-continental campaigns typically cost less per arrival than long-haul promotion and reduce exposure to single-market collapse; diaspora and domestic segments offer further low-cost diversification (Ondicho, 2021).

Priority 3 Build the climate resilience of destination sub-systems

What. Assess the exposure and sensitivity of the water, energy, biodiversity and transport sub-systems on which each destination depends, and embed adaptation within destination planning.

How. Conduct sub-system vulnerability assessments in the manner proposed by Becken (2013); prioritize nature-based solutions; diversify climate-exposed products (for example, reducing reliance on a single reef or a single peak season).

Who. Environment and tourism ministries; protected-area and water authorities; operators; climate-finance facilities.

Resources and the resource-constrained pathway. Adaptation can draw on dedicated climate finance (for example, the Green Climate Fund and national adaptation funds). To avoid duplicative processes, small destinations should integrate tourism adaptation into existing National Adaptation Plans rather than establishing parallel structures.

Priority 4 Deploy proportionate digital monitoring and early-warning capacity

What. Establish real-time monitoring, early-warning and digitized indicator collection appropriate to local capacity.

How. Draw on mobile-positioning, card-spend and booking data, open-source dashboards and interoperable data standards; enable smartphone-based reporting by operators where bespoke systems are unaffordable.

Who. DMOs and national statistics offices; universities; telecommunications and technology partners.

Resources and the resource-constrained pathway. Favor shared, regional data platforms over per-destination systems, and open-source over proprietary tools; a single interoperable regional dashboard is far cheaper than many bespoke ones and improves comparability.

Priority 5 Institutionalize multi-level governance and longitudinal evaluation

What. Create a standing mechanism to coordinate resilience across scales, and a longitudinal, comparative research program that distinguishes genuine transformation from mere recovery.

How. Establish a resilience governance body or task force linking national, county and community levels (reflecting the cross-scale logic of panarchy and multi-scalar resilience); adopt a standard evaluation protocol; fund research consortia to track destinations over time.

Who. National government coordination; regional bodies; research councils; DMOs; universities.

Resources and the resource-constrained pathway. Embed the coordinating function within existing crisis-management or tourism-board structures rather than creating a new agency, and pool research funding regionally so that no single destination bears the full cost of longitudinal monitoring.

Operationalizing context-specificity: example indicators by destination type

Context-specific indicators are the practical answer to the critique that resilience is measured too generically. Universal metrics obscure the very differences that determine vulnerability: a metric that captures dependency in a wildlife conservancy may be irrelevant to an urban conference destination. Table 3 offers illustrative indicator sets for five common destination types, organized so that each set spans exposure or sensitivity, adaptive capacity and a transformative or distributional dimension. The indicators are proposed as a starting point for local validation, not as a finished instrument.

Table 3. Illustrative context-specific resilience indicators by destination type.

Destination type	Example context-specific indicators
Wildlife / safari conservancy (e.g., Maasai Mara, Kenya)	Source-market concentration: share of arrivals from the top three long-haul markets (exposure) Conservancy lease and benefit payments as a share of community income; months of cash reserves (absorptive) Ratio of domestic and regional to international bed-nights (adaptive) Wildlife and habitat integrity index; land under conservancy versus converted to other uses (transformative / ecological)
Small island developing economy	Tourism share of GDP and of total employment (sensitivity / dependency) Air-connectivity redundancy: number of independent routes and carriers (exposure) Freshwater and energy self-sufficiency for the tourism load (climate sub-system) Share of critical assets above projected storm-surge and sea-level lines (climate exposure)

Coastal / reef mass-tourism destination (e.g., Phuket)	Reef-health index; days of site closure due to bleaching or degradation (ecological / climate) Occupancy volatility and seasonality concentration (sensitivity) Informal-sector employment share and social-protection coverage (distributional) Diversification index of activities and products beyond the reef (adaptive)
Urban / heritage / business-and-MICE destination	Business-and-MICE versus leisure mix; concentration of corporate bookings (exposure) Digital booking penetration and remote-work-friendly infrastructure (adaptive / digital) Heritage-site carrying-capacity utilization (sensitivity / over-tourism) SME liquidity: months of operating reserves among tourism firms (absorptive)
Community-based / rural cultural tourism	Share of tourism revenue retained locally (distributional) Number of independent income streams per household (livelihood diversity / adaptive) Strength of local networks and cooperative membership as social capital (absorptive; cf. Biggs et al., 2012) Land-tenure security and youth retention (transformative)

Anchoring the climate and digital recommendations in theory

The climate and digital priorities are not ad hoc additions; each follows directly from the theoretical framework set out in Section 3, which is what distinguishes them from generic policy prescription.

Climate. The climate priority operationalizes Becken's (2013) sub-system framing by treating water, energy, biodiversity and transport as interacting resources whose thresholds determine destination resilience. It maps onto the DSF's exposure-sensitivity-adaptiveness logic (Calgaro et al., 2014), and it is normatively evolutionary rather than engineering-oriented: because climate change is a chronic stressor rather than a discrete shock, adaptation must 'bounce forward' toward a reconfigured product and resource base rather than restore a climate-exposed status quo (Folke, 2006). In adaptive-cycle terms, it is a deliberate guard against rigidity accumulating in the conservation (K) phase.

Digital. The digital priority follows from the complex-adaptive-systems view: real-time information flows are what allow a destination's many agents to self-organize and adapt without central control (Cochrane, 2010). It also gives practical effect to Ritchie's (2004) proactive, foresight-oriented crisis management, since monitoring and early warning are the instruments of anticipation. Most directly, digital data infrastructure is the concrete remedy for the empirical weakness identified in Section 5: without timely, comparable data, the indicators of Section 7.2 cannot be populated and the field's claims cannot be tested (Wang et al., 2022).

Implementation barriers and governance

An actionable agenda must confront the conditions under which it will be implemented. Three barriers recur, particularly in resource-constrained settings, each with an associated governance response.

Funding. Resilience and adaptation are chronically under-funded, and a revenue model dependent on long-haul volume resists the very diversification that would reduce vulnerability. Access to international climate and

resilience finance is often too complex for small destinations to navigate. Governance response: pool demand regionally, build shared capacity to access climate finance, and ring-fence a modest share of tourism levies for resilience.

Data. Data are frequently sparse, fragmented and non-comparable; official statistics rarely capture the informal sector; and baselines are typically absent, so change cannot be measured. Governance response: mandate a minimal common indicator set (Section 7.1), invest in the statistical capacity of DMOs and national statistics offices, and adopt shared data standards to make destinations comparable.

Governance. Responsibility for resilience is fragmented across ministries and across national, county and community scales; DMO mandates seldom include it explicitly; community voice is often weak; and short political cycles sit awkwardly with the long horizons of resilience-building. There is also the depoliticization risk identified in Section 5, whereby ‘resilience’ becomes a way of devolving risk without resources. Governance response: establish an explicit, multi-level coordinating mandate (Priority 5), guarantee community representation in decision-making, and treat the distribution of costs and benefits as a first-order governance question rather than a technical afterthought.

Limitations of this review

Several limitations should temper the conclusions drawn here. First, this is a narrative and theoretical review rather than a systematic one; its selection of frameworks is purposive and inevitably partial, and it foregrounds canonical works, which introduces a degree of citation bias toward established, largely Anglophone scholarship. Second, the empirical base for the Global South remains thin, so the illustrative cases, the Maasai Mara and Phuket among them are indicative rather than representative, and should not be generalized without further evidence. Third, the concepts synthesized here are themselves contested, and the indicator sets proposed in Section 7.2 are illustrative and not yet validated. Finally, the review presents no primary data; its agenda is conceptual and requires empirical testing which is the purpose of the research questions that follow.

Testable research questions to guide the study

To move from agenda to action, the review concludes with three testable research questions. Each is framed to be operationalizable with the context-specific indicators proposed above and to discriminate between genuine transformation and mere recovery.

RQ1. Across comparable Global-South destinations, does post-shock investment in transformative capacity diversified markets, expanded local ownership and climate-adapted sub-systems predict lower vulnerability and faster, more equitable recovery from subsequent shocks than investment in absorptive and adaptive capacity alone, when measured with the context-specific indicator?

RQ2. To what extent does reducing source-market concentration (long-haul dependency) improve recovery speed and the local retention of tourism benefits in wildlife-conservancy and small-island destinations, and through what mechanisms?

RQ3. Does the adoption of proportionate digital monitoring and early-warning infrastructure improve the timeliness and accuracy of resilience indicators and, in turn, measurable recovery and adaptation outcomes in resource-constrained destinations?

Pursued together, these questions would help the field move beyond borrowed vocabulary toward an evidence-based, operational and equitable account of tourism resilience one capable of guiding practice in exactly the resource-constrained destinations where the stakes are highest.

“The goal is not to survive the next crisis unchanged, but to emerge from it better.”

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