

The Impact of Sustainable Tourism on the Economy and Environment of the Helsinki Region

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Abstract

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Title of the thesis The Impact of Sustainable Tourism on the Economy and Environment of the Helsinki Region		
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Abstract <p>This dissertation examines the impact of sustainable tourism on the economy and environment of the Helsinki region. Special attention is paid to sustainable tourism strategies and an in-depth analysis of various practices. The study examines and evaluates the role of Helsinki and Finland's programs that are related to the promotion of various beneficial practices in the field of smart and green travel. Attention is also paid to the application of digital innovations, smart urban mobility and the implementation of sustainability principles in the hotel industry. The thesis uses case study analysis and secondary data. The analysis helps to highlight a number of issues such as greenwashing, failures in sustainability adoption and achieving a balance between tourism growth and the well-being of local residents. The paper also explores in depth the benefits such as reduced carbon emissions, improved infrastructure and global recognition of sustainability. The thesis shows Helsinki as a role model that includes the study of social, economic and environmental goals in the field of sustainable tourism. The results and information presented in the text aim to advance knowledge on sustainable urban tourism.</p>		
Keywords sustainable tourism, Helsinki, urban mobility, hotel sustainability, green innovation, carbon footprint, digital solutions, visitor behaviour. tourists		

Contents

- 1 Introduction 2
 - 1.1 Thesis background..... 2
 - 1.2 Thesis topic, objective and delimitations..... 4
 - 1.3 Theoretical framework and research approach..... 6
 - 1.4 Research method 7
- 2 Sustainable tourism in the Helsinki region 8
 - 2.1 Overview of sustainable tourism policies in Finland and Helsinki..... 8
 - 2.2 Sustainable Travel Finland (STF) programme 9
 - 2.3 Environmental practices in Helsinki hotels 10
 - 2.4 Economic impact of sustainable tourism in the Helsinki region..... 12
 - 2.5 Greenwashing..... 14
 - 2.6 Stakeholders and collaboration in sustainable tourism..... 15
 - 2.7 Tourism and carbon footprint in urban context 16
 - 2.8 Visitor behaviour and attitudes toward sustainability 18
 - 2.9 Role of digitalization and innovation in sustainable tourism..... 19
 - 2.10 Urban mobility and sustainable transport for tourists 21
 - 2.11 Successes and remaining sustainability challenges in Helsinki..... 23
- 3 Analysis and discussion 25
 - 3.1 Key findings 25
 - 3.1.1 Economic impact of sustainable tourism in hotels 25
 - 3.1.2 Environmental initiatives in the Helsinki hotel sector 25
 - 3.1.3 Challenges in developing sustainable tourism in hotels..... 26
 - 3.2 Discussion..... 27
- 4 Conclusion..... 29
- List of References 30

1 Introduction

1.1 Thesis background

In Finland, where the preservation of the environment and the natural world are essential components of national identity, sustainable tourism is an important issue. Finland “has also established itself as a trailblazer in promoting sustainability and green skills development within the tourism industry” (Pantour 2023). The growing interest in sustainable development indicates that sustainable tourism is becoming increasingly important for the long-term survival of the Finnish tourism sector.

One of the main reasons for studying sustainable tourism in Finland is its economic and environmental importance. According to statistics, tourism is the main industry in Finland, which accounted for 2.7% of Finland's GDP until 2019. Due to the pandemic, this figure dropped to 1.4% in 2020, but recovered to 1.8% in 2022 (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2024). However, as the number of visitors increases, concerns about carbon dioxide emissions, the development of tourism and the depletion of natural resources are growing.

Nowadays, Helsinki is Finland’s main international gateway, attracting millions of visitors each year through its ports and airport. The combination of urban attractions, urbanism, cultural sites and presence to nature even in the city itself makes it a unique place to explore sustainable tourism in both urban and natural settings. For example, “On any day during the summer and autumn, in the last stretch of Fredrikinkatu towards the hill of the Rock Church in Helsinki, you will bump into a wall of tourists from China, Russia, Britain, Germany and the US. As tourists do all over the world, they block the street while taking photos and chatting to each other” (eSignals 2019). This can create a feeling of overcrowding, especially for locals who value personal space, and can be considered a form of overtourism in the city. Overtourism tends to be an increasingly serious problem in many cities around the world, including Helsinki, where excessive numbers of visitors can negatively affect the local population, urban infrastructure, and travellers’ experiences. In addition, Helsinki is facing difficulties in finding a balance between increased tourism and sustainable development as a rapidly developing city with substantial urban development. The Sustainable Travel Finland (STF) initiative was launched in Finland to help travel agencies implement environmentally

friendly processes. According to Visit Finland, the STF program “is designed to provide companies and destinations with a comprehensive toolkit for effectively adopting responsible practices. It offers a path for sustainable tourism development that is regularly audited by a third party” (Visit Finland 2023). This study will examine at the Helsinki Region's implementation of sustainable tourism practices, particularly in the areas of urban tourism, green tourist initiatives, and green infrastructure development. The influence of these sustainable practices on the local economy, jobs related to tourism and the protection of natural and cultural resources will all be studied in the thesis.

The thesis will also look at important issues in encouraging eco-friendly travel, like balancing environmental concerns with tourism and lowering transportation's carbon footprint. The efficiency of initiatives and policies, such as Sustainable Travel Finland certification and the Helsinki Climate Action Plan (City of Helsinki, Business Helsinki, Tourism and Destination Management Unit 2023), in promoting responsible tourism responsible travel will also be examined. The research will investigate tourism projects in Helsinki and explore ways to develop sustainable tourism that benefits both the economy and the environment.

In conclusion, this thesis aims to put light on how Helsinki could establish itself as a leader in environmentally friendly urban tourism while solving regional challenges. This study examines at Helsinki's tourism industry's successes and challenges, as well as the opportunities for sustained growth.

1.2 Thesis topic, objective and delimitations

The thesis topic is the impact of sustainable tourism on the economy and environment of the Helsinki region. This theme was chosen because sustainable tourism, especially in metropolitan areas where demand for tourism is growing, is necessary to find a balance between environmental responsibility and economic prosperity. This applies to everyone who lives and spent time in a metropolitan area. As a popular travel destination, the Helsinki area needs to implement more sustainable strategies to balance tourism's negative environmental effects with long-term economic gains. Achieving this balance is mostly dependent on sustainable tourism activities including waste management strategies, eco-friendly transportation, and hotels that are environmentally friendly and carbon neutral.

As the initiatives of organizations such as Visit Finland have shown, successful sustainable tourism projects such as eco-friendly hotels and tourist flow management programs are already being implemented in Helsinki. This study will show how Helsinki can continue to develop as a leading city for sustainable tourism.

This study aims to assess how sustainable tourism practices in the Helsinki region impact the economy and environment. The thesis will assess the effectiveness of initiatives such as the Sustainable Travel Finland program and the Helsinki Climate Action Plan in promoting responsible tourism, as well as other practices that are applied in the ecosystem of sustainable tourism in the capital region. In addition, it seems that sustainable tourism contributes to job creation, supports local businesses and enhances the attractiveness of the region as an environmentally oriented destination.

The thesis will be delimited to a study of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area, including Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa, in order to provide a deeper analysis of sustainable tourism in an urban environment. It does not cover rural tourism or areas outside the region. Taking into account the existing problems and solutions related to the sustainable development of tourism in cities, the work offers recommendations for politicians, entrepreneurs and travellers interested in supporting eco-friendly tourism in Helsinki.

The main research question is:

What is the economic impact of sustainable tourism in the Helsinki region in hotels?

What environmental initiatives have been implemented in the tourism industry of the Helsinki region in hotels?

What are the main challenges in developing sustainable tourism in Helsinki region in hotels?

1.3 Theoretical framework and research approach

This section will provide a list of key concepts and theories that will help structure the research, it will also provide a basis for further data analysis and interpretation of the results.

Basic concepts and definitions:

Sustainability is a concept that aims to ensure a long-term balance between economic development, environmental protection, and social well-being. In 1987, the United Nations Brundtland Commission defined sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (Brundtland Report, 1987).

Sustainable tourism is defined by the UN Environment Program and UN World Tourism Organization as “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities.” (GSTC 2024). For urban environments such as in Helsinki, sustainable tourism includes not only environmentally friendly transportation and energy-efficient buildings, but also tourist flow management, which plays a key role in maintaining the quality of life of locals.

Urban Sustainable Tourism expands the traditional understanding of ecotourism to cities, ensuring that tourism development will contribute to environmental sustainability and the development of local communities.

Overtourism it is “the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitor experiences in a negative way” (UNWTO 2018)

“Greenwashing is defined as “disinformation disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image” (Concise Oxford English Dictionary 2010). Essentially, greenwashing is a deliberate act by an organization to obscure potentially harmful information or deliver information in a way that portrays a false image that the organization is green or eco-friendly” (Look How Green I Am! An Individual-Level Explanation for Greenwashing 2011).

1.4 Research method

The thesis uses a qualitative research approach, specifically, a regular review of the literature, to study sustainable tourism in the Helsinki metropolitan area. This approach was selected because it makes it possible to obtain an in-depth analysis of previous research, papers, and case studies, which helps in understanding the ways in which sustainable development is integrated into urban tourism.

The secondary data used in this study was gathered from a variety of sources, including government records, reports from international organisations, and scientific publications (Helsinki City Climate Change Action Plan for Tourism for 2023-26 2023) (Finland - a Sustainable Tourist Destination, Visit Finland 2022). Interviews and surveys will not be used to collect primary data, as the research is based on existing sources.

Content analysis will be used to examine the collected data in order to identify important topics and the logic behind the information. The main purpose of the analysis will be to identify significant issues related to sustainable tourism, such as financial benefits, environmental impacts, and legislative initiatives. After that, the results will be divided into groups such as difficulties, best practices, and suggestions.

2 Sustainable tourism in the Helsinki region

2.1 Overview of sustainable tourism policies in Finland and Helsinki

Global climate change and the pandemic have revealed the need to introduce new conditions and methods for the development of the tourism industry for its continued existence. Finland is famous for its advanced environmental regulations and focuses on sustainable growth, including traveling and tourism. As it turned out, this has been especially noticeable recently, not only the positive but also the negative effects of tourism have become significantly noticeable. Over the past decade, the country has developed and implemented several policies to integrate sustainable development in infrastructure, services and tourism planning. In addition to being promoted by national goals, these policies often consider the international sustainable development executives as the UN sustainable development goals (SDGS).

Thanks to the actions of the public and private sector, the Helsinki area has become a remarkable urban area, strongly promoting environmentally friendly tourism. Leaving a habitat in an even better condition than it was when it was inhabited is the type of ecotravel that is worth aiming for. Finland has become a role model to integrate sustainability into national and local tourism management. The country actively monitors its advancement through a set of national indicators for sustainable tourism, which assess economic, social, and environmental sustainability. The impact of tourism is measured not only in terms of economic value and job creation, but also in terms of its social and environmental effects.

Finland's tourism strategy is founded on a national plan that seeks to position the country as the most environmentally friendly tourist destination in the Northern region by 2028. To ensure that tourism contributes to the economy, society, and the environment within the confines of environmental limits, this plan, updated for the period 2022-2028, prioritizes economic expansion, sustainable growth, and competitiveness.

Helsinki is an excellent illustration of how environmental objectives can be incorporated into urban travel experiences, and overall, Finland's strategy shows a strong national commitment to sustainability in tourism. The nation keeps developing a tourism model that not only promotes economic growth but also safeguards natural and cultural resources for coming generations by fusing local initiatives with global frameworks.

2.2 Sustainable Travel Finland (STF) programme

It is essential to understand the Sustainable Travel Finland certification concept before starting on a journey to new goals. Visit Finland launched the STF all over the country program to promote environmentally friendly travel throughout the nation.

Regional areas are those that satisfy a set of sustainable development criteria meant to preserve Finland's unique natural settings, cultural legacy, and local communities.

These sites take a comprehensive approach to ensure that the tourism products are environmentally friendly, financially feasible, and culturally appropriate.

Launched a national project called Sustainable Travel Finland (STF), Visit Finland de-signed to assist travel agencies and tourist destinations apply more eco-friendly policies. The initiative's primary objective is to assist in the shift of businesses and territories towards economically sustainable, socially conscious, environmentally friendly activities. From small businesses to major tourist attractions, all Finnish tourism industry participants - including all stakeholders can join the STF program free of cost. The program provides participants with a clear roadmap that will help them on their way to sustainable development. Despite the fact that the program is adapted to the specific requirements of Finnish tourism, it is based on international standards of sustainable development. This process begins when a company or travel destination commits to sustainable tourism, appoints a coordinator, and adopts national guidelines for sustainable development.

Following that, staff members get training and have their present sustainable development practices assessed. Armed with this understanding, they develop a real strategy for improving their operations and learn how to properly explain their sustainability initiatives to customers and partners.

Getting a third-party certificate attesting to the destination's or company's loyalty to sustainability standards is the most crucial component of the Sustainable Travel Finland program. To guarantee visible progress, the actions are also assessed. In addition, participants agree to continue their initiatives in the field of sustainable development, so this is an ongoing process, not a one-time event.

Upon successful completion of the program, companies and localities receive the Sustainable Travel Finland badge. This sign symbolizes their commitment to sustainable development and ethical travel. It also provides benefits such as marketing support and awareness raising through Visit Finland channels, which can help attract more environmentally conscious travellers.

STF participants can use resources such as the Carbon Footprint calculator, which promotes continuous learning and development to track and reduce environmental impacts.

In conclusion, Sustainable Travel Finland is an effective strategy for improving the environmental friendliness of travel in Finland. It helps companies and travel agencies protect the environment, promote the development of local communities, and guarantee responsible travel by offering clear guidance, training, and support. Finland's commitment to sustainable development is reflected in the growing appeal of the STF brand both today and in the future.

2.3 Environmental practices in Helsinki hotels

Many Helsinki hotels are trying to introduce eco-friendly practices to meet sustainability standards. A trend has emerged that has led many businesses to reduce carbon dioxide emissions using various methods, such as renewable electricity or central heating, which produce virtually no harmful emissions. Leisure venues from hotels to restaurants strive to promote sustainable consumption. There is also an interesting detail that hotels that have received the Sustainable Travel Finland (STF) certificate also prioritize waste sorting, reducing food waste, and purchasing seasonal products.

This method has been demonstrated by a number of hotels. For example, the Bella Roberts Hotel runs on biofuels, uses LED lighting, organic materials, and biodegradable cleaning products. Apart from using only renewable energy sources, the Fabian Hotel is known for its award-winning sustainability initiatives and eco-friendly cuisine. The Haaga Central Park Hotel has an eco-friendly restaurant that uses only environmentally friendly electricity. In addition, by offering organic breakfasts and installing a garbage disposal system on each floor, the Helka Hotel promotes equality and regional values. The U14 Hotel pays great attention to energy-efficient technologies, locally made goods and environmentally friendly toiletries. Helsinki's largest hotel brands demonstrate a strong commitment to the ideals of sustainable development. Using renewable energy sources and offering mainly Finnish, regional and

herbal cuisine, Sokos Hotels hopes to reduce carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere by 2025. Radisson hotels want to reduce emissions into the atmosphere, eliminate single-use plastic products and expand the range of plant-based products. Energy saving, minimizing the amount of garbage and using environmentally acceptable energy sources are all strictly observed by Scandic hotels, many of which have the ecological status of Nordic Swan.

Another example of sustainable hotel is VALO Hotel & Work Helsinki. This hotel has an unusual concept in that it can be used as an office building in addition to a hotel. This shows that, compared to most other buildings, the building is in use all day long rather than only at night or during the day. This uses less materials and energy. This solution lessens the environmental issues brought on by extended building problems.

Only eco-friendly energy sources, such as geothermal, solar, and wind, are used by VALO. Additionally, it makes use of clever systems that reduce electricity and water consumption. For instance, they gather and reuse the heat from air conditioners and saunas. The majority of the hotel's furniture and materials are made from recycled or natural materials, many of which are created by regional Finnish businesses. This increases the local economy and lessens environmental pollution during long-distance travel.

The hotel got a number of significant sustainability certifications, including Sustainable Travel Finland and Green Key. These demonstrate that VALO operates in line with strict environmental regulations. Their eco-friendly strategy includes even the smallest details, such as serving reusable soap bottles rather than single-use ones or selecting plant-based and locally produced breakfast options.

The Helsinki area is home to a number of hotels that have implemented creative and varied environmental practices. Table 1 compares a few chosen hotels and their sustainability attributes. The table demonstrates how sustainability is incorporated into regular operations by summarizing certifications, energy sources, waste sorting systems, and the use of local products in well-known hotels.

Table 1. Comparison of environmental practices in Helsinki hotels

Hotel Name	Certification (e.g. STF, Green Key)	Renewable Energy	Waste Sorting	Local Products Used	Notable Features
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VALO Hotel & Work	STF, Green Key	Yes	Yes	Yes	Hybrid building, heat recovery system
Hotel Helka	Green Key	Yes	Yes	Yes	Organic breakfast, Finnish design
Scandic Hotels	Nordic Swan	Yes	Yes	Yes	Zero single-use plastics by 2025
Sokos Hotels	STF	Yes	Yes	Mostly	Regional menu, energy saving measures

Its design is inspired by Finnish traditions, including sauna culture and local architecture. Overall, VALO shows how a hotel can be modern, environmentally friendly and socially responsible at the same time.

2.4 Economic impact of sustainable tourism in the Helsinki region

It is worth noting that after environmental protection, sustainable tourism in the Helsinki region really strengthens the local economy. Many companies in the tourism industry, especially in the hospitality industry, are trying to introduce eco-friendly procedures to attract smarter and more environmentally conscious tourists. These companies are increasing their competitiveness in the tourism industry, creating new ideas and improving their reputation by doing good deeds and helping not only themselves but also the planet Earth.

The rapidly growing trend of guests choosing accommodation that respects the environment and local traditions is encouraging hotels and travel agencies to focus on sustainable development. As a result, closer connections are being established with their customers. Since Covid, it has been widely observed that the tourism industry is increasingly collaborating with partners and local communities, which is already leading to a more stable and balanced economy. In addition, there is an increased demand for local cuisine, crafts, activities and cultural experiences. Sustainable tourism helps small businesses and local entrepreneurs to thrive. In addition, this type of tourism promotes innovation and creates new jobs, opening up opportunities in areas such as sustainable transport, circular services, green technologies and so on.

Although sustainable tourism has many advantages, economic difficulties may arise in the Helsinki region as a result. For example, many hotels, especially small ones or hotels that have

a family business, may find it difficult to pay the high costs associated with the transition to sustainable development.

Purchase of eco-friendly equipment, obtaining certificates, such as the Sustainable Travel Finland certificate. Or a complete change in the daily routine, aimed at making it more environmentally friendly, may require a lot of time. This can lead to financial difficulties, especially if the business has just opened or does not have a stable income.

The example of VALO Hotel & Work is a clear illustration of the financial benefits of sustainable tourism development. VALO has reduced the operating costs of using premises, heating and electricity by combining hotel and office operations into a single structure. According to the company's reports, compared to traditional hotel action plans, this hybrid model can save up to 30% on energy costs. In addition, thanks to analytics, it became clear that the implementation of intelligent and thoughtful energy technologies, including saunas with a certain air conditioning system, improved environmental performance and significantly reduced the energy costs of the hotel building. Such a reduction in costs shows how proper and logical economic efficiency and environmental friendliness can coexist in the hospitality industry. This helps not only to preserve nature, but also to improve the financial situation of entrepreneurs.

In this matter, it is noticeable that not all businesses have equal access to financial assistance or information related to sustainable development. This is due to many aspects that hotels begin to receive already from the moment of the prototype and construction of the hotel. You can draw an analogy with the knowledge base of a person, the longer the hotel exists, the more skills and tricks he receives. Large hotel chains may receive more attention or government support because they have shown reliability and stability, while smaller businesses struggle to keep up.

However, there are cases where some businesses claim to be eco-friendly but do not actually adhere to these true environmental principles. This practice, known as "greenwashing," can undermine consumer confidence and damage the reputation of truly eco-friendly companies.

Additionally, a strong focus on sustainable tourism can lead to cities like Helsinki becoming overly dependent only on one sector. In case of unforeseen crisis, such as a global pandemic or economic downturn, the tourism industry may suffer, negatively affecting numerous jobs

and local businesses. Therefore, the government should be especially careful to address not only the current issues, but also think about the future. The country must have a qualified team to properly and thoughtfully develop a sustainable tourism plan and take into account various situations to ensure a healthy living.

2.5 Greenwashing

Greenwashing can occur when companies try to achieve positive emotions from guests or consumers who care about the environment, instead of actually changing their behavior. Some companies use eco-friendly marketing to get customers to feel better about their purchase decisions, even if the product or service is not truly eco-friendly. In tourism, this can be observed in cases where travelers can choose a hotel or tourist leisure because they look eco-friendly, without knowing that there are no environmental practices in this case. Sometimes, as a result, the desire of people who are engaged in a tourist destination, the desire to express a fake ecological hotel, not only confuses customers, but also prevents honest and transparent companies from standing out in the market.

To reduce the risk of greenwashing, Finland has introduced several regulations and rules that help to confirm whether a tourism business is truly sustainable. One important example is the previously mentioned Sustainable Travel Finland (STF) program, which requires companies to follow clear steps and undergo strict audits before they can receive an official label. This process includes many aspects, for instance, such as staff training, developing a sustainability strategy, and regular progress checks. In addition, international certificates such as Green Key are also used by many hotels in Helsinki to show that they meet strict environmental criteria. These certificates are not based on self-declaration, but on external assessment, which increases their credibility and gives customers the opportunity to verify the genuineness of the intentions of the business's actions. By promoting these verified labels, Visit Finland and the City of Helsinki aim to increase transparency in the tourism market and, above all, help visitors make informed choices, since without people it is impossible to be environmentally friendly. These efforts play a key role in shaping a culture of responsible tourism and protecting Finland's reputation as a sustainable tourism destination.

2.6 Stakeholders and collaboration in sustainable tourism

Helsinki's tourism industry is supported by partnership-based practices in addition to city authorities. Helsinki Partners is one of the major participants, providing local tourism enterprises with global exposure and sustainability resources. Helsinki Partners offers businesses a clear framework to begin their sustainability journey, including a sustainable action checklist, communication guidelines, and promotional materials, according to the Sustainability Toolkit 2023. This collaborative model encourages businesses to align with the city's sustainability values as they expand. Local companies represent a broader effort to promote Helsinki as a people-centered and environmentally conscious tourism destination. They do this through overall branding and dissemination of information that can be useful and relevant to different types of people.

Achieving high-quality sustainable tourism in Helsinki also requires the participation of visitors and local communities. Residents are not just passive observers of tourism developments, but rather active participants whose values and experiences shape the image of the city. It is impossible to improve the city without taking into account the opinions of locals.

The Helsinki City Government actively provides forums for citizens to exchange ideas, for example, by leaving feedback or participating in local events and initiatives. Such actions not only encourage responsible travel, but also inspire local residents to participate in decision-making. The Helsinki Partners Toolkit (2023) states that open and honest communication between residents and tourists improves cultural sustainability and fulfilling travel experiences. In response to these measures, visitors to Helsinki are encouraged to act responsibly and sustainably during their visit not only to Helsinki but also throughout Finland. This can be done in several ways, such as choosing environmentally friendly accommodation, reducing and sorting waste, respecting regional traditions and cycling or using public transport. Helsinki has quite a few real-life examples that demonstrate how cooperation between both stakeholders leads to effective sustainable tourism practices. One such example is Think Sustainably, a service created by the City of Helsinki in cooperation with local businesses and Helsinki Marketing. This online resource helps locals and visitors find a variety of environmentally friendly places to eat, shop, experience and stay. The platform's rating is based on social and environmental responsibility, meaning that the companies listed have

committed to continuously developing in the areas of ecology and sustainable tourism. These initiatives clearly show that sustainability is not just a policy, but a lived experience made possible by strong collaboration between people and companies that are open to communication on both sides. For example, hotels and event venues in Helsinki are collaborating to reduce waste, offer plant-based options, and minimize the carbon footprint of large gatherings. However, another well-known example is the Sustainable Meetings initiative, which promotes eco-friendly practices at conferences and business events. Hotels and event venues in Helsinki are collaborating to reduce waste, offer plant-based catering, and reduce the carbon footprint of large gatherings. There are several other initiatives that promote sustainability, for example, through community events such as Siivouspäivä (Clean Up Day) and Restaurant Day, locals are also encouraged to reuse materials, reduce consumption, and engage with guests in creative and natural ways. These kinds of projects demonstrate that sustainability is a lived experience as well as a policy, made possible by robust local collaboration and candid communication.

In conclusion, it can be noted that the joint efforts of multiple stakeholders from the city government, tourism enterprises to non-profit organizations, local residents and tourists ensure sustainable tourism in Helsinki. This is a difficult and long-term job that can only be done together. When organizations create a solid and reliable basis for conscious travel. Projects such as the Helsinki Partners Toolkit, the STF program and community-based events remind us once again of the importance of cooperation and shared responsibility. These examples also demonstrate that sustainability includes values for both people and the environment. Such models of cooperation also influence the practical results and effectiveness of sustainability initiatives.

2.7 Tourism and carbon footprint in urban context

Tourism in challenging environments, especially in countries like Helsinki, has a significant impact on carbon dioxide emissions. The transition part of these costs for transport, accommodation and energy use related to tourism services. As Helsinki receives millions of visitors every year, addressing the issues affecting this environmental sector becomes a key part of the city's climate policy. The City of Helsinki has set an ambitious goal of achieving

carbon neutrality by 2030, and sustainable tourism is one of the main goals of its roadmap to achieve this goal (City of Helsinki 2023).

The promotion of environmentally friendly activities at all levels of service is necessary so that the tourism industry can dramatically reduce emissions into the atmosphere, according to the Helsinki City Action Plan on Climate Change in Tourism for 2023-2026. This involves encouraging the use of environmentally friendly modes of transport such as hiking, cycling and public transport, which are already well integrated into the city's infrastructure. It also follows that many housing providers and other tourism-related businesses are reducing their demand for fossil fuels, reducing waste, and improving energy efficiency.

Helsinki has participated in the 6Aika: Carbon Neutral Tourism project, which is run by tourism and innovation companies, as well as cities like Helsinki, Turku, and Tampere, in order to support these changes. The creation of a carbon footprint calculator tailored for industrial tourism is one of the project's main outcomes. Currently run by Visit Finland, the tool enables businesses, particularly small and competent businesses, to evaluate their emissions in an organized and accessible manner. According to project manager Jonna Pytén, one of the goals set to lower the threshold has enabled businesses to start monitoring their emissions and support their long-term sustainability measures.

The calculator helps identify the main source of a company's activities and transforms complex data into understandable visuals, such as graphs and benchmarks. This involves businesses identifying where they can reduce emissions and tracking progress over time. Features such as industry benchmarking and cost comparisons also have practical value. For example, some companies can now estimate how much trees would need to grow in their area, or how much these emissions would cost under EU trading schemes.

Virium Helsinki also contributed to the project by conducting an experimental data collection on tourist mobility. Using mobile phone data and visitor surveys, the researchers gained new insights into transport-related emissions, especially taking into account transportation, local mobility and transfer routes. This information helped identify opportunities for developing low-carbon services and efficiency measures such as bicycle tourism and public transport campaigns.

In addition to technical tools, the City of Helsinki encourages innovation through initiatives such as virtual tourism. These use detection and augmented reality technologies to view landmarks digitally, reducing pedestrian traffic in sensitive areas and transport-related emissions. These measures reflect a larger impact, where cities are exploring how digitalization and data-driven tools can help tourism align with climate change.

Finally, Helsinki is closing international borders with tourism, an active joint effort between authorities, businesses and innovation partners. By offering specific tools such as a carbon footprint calculator and supporting data-driven experiments, the city aims to create a low-carbon tourism model that can serve to create other natural resources. These efforts are necessary not only to achieve Helsinki's carbon neutrality goals by 2030, but also to respond to changing visitors, as more tourists are now looking for sustainable and environmentally responsible solutions.

2.8 Visitor behaviour and attitudes toward sustainability

Sustainability has grown in importance as a determinant of visitor behavior in Helsinki and elsewhere in recent years. The City of Helsinki states that the tourism sector is essential to the city's public services and economy, but it must also grow in accordance with responsible development guidelines. Both locals and tourists from other countries have higher expectations now that Helsinki has been named the world's most sustainable destination in 2024 (City of Helsinki 2024). Travelers are increasingly selecting locations that minimize their negative effects on the environment, boost the local economy, and encourage moral business conduct.

According to recent citywide questions, almost one in two visitors to Finland is actively working to reduce their carbon footprint, and three out of four are showing a growing interest in sustainable services. In addition, two out of three respondents expect the tourism sector to offer greener choices, such as certified hotels, low-emission transportation, and locally produced organic food. As a result of increased awareness of how companies in Helsinki create and promote their products, approaches have changed. Currently, many operators emphasize environmental friendliness as part of their corporate identity.

A greater willingness to pay more for environmentally friendly goods and services is also reflected in the behavior of visitors. According to a survey conducted by the Finnish Trade

Federation in 2024, 71% of Finns said they would be willing to pay more for recyclable and environmentally friendly goods, especially in areas such as furniture, electronics and durable clothing. Many people still value ethical and environmental responsibility, although price-based choices are still important, especially for younger consumers. This is especially true when these values are clearly stated and linked to local advantages. When gaining access to the company's responsibilities, young people do not take into account factors such as human rights, fair employment practices, and minimal environmental impact. This mindset is also evident in the travel and travel industry, where local travel, leisure, and second-hand goods are becoming increasingly popular.

International visitors frequently look to Finnish resorts as models of sustainability, and Helsinki meets these expectations with its public infrastructure (for example, effective public transport and waste management systems) and private sector innovations. Expectations are not just environmental, though, visitors also value a welcoming and secure environment, easy access to cultural experiences that reflect local life, and clear signage. There is still a disconnect between desire and action despite the increased interest: not all tourists are fully aware of what sustainable tourism actually entails or how to make the best decisions when travelling. This emphasizes the value of unambiguous information, open labelling, and resources like the carbon footprint calculator, which can increase knowledge and enable better-informed travel choices. In response, Helsinki regularly collects guest and resident reviews and uses them.

In conclusion, Helsinki's sustainable tourism is greatly impacted by the evolving attitudes and habits of tourists. Travelers from Finland and other countries are becoming more conscious of their responsibility to lessen environmental effects and promote socially conscious travel. The city's capacity to live up to their expectations enhances its standing as a leader in sustainable urban tourism as it keeps making investments in climate-friendly infrastructure and transparency.

2.9 Role of digitalization and innovation in sustainable tourism

Helsinki is actively using digital platforms and data-based tools to guide both locals and visitors towards more responsible travel behavior. As the city works towards reaching the goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2030, technology and innovation are becoming powerful tools to

reduce the environmental impact of tourism and improve the quality of visitor experience. As a result, tourism in Helsinki is becoming more and more digitalized.

The Think Sustainably online service, developed by Helsinki City Hall in partnership with Helsinki Marketing and local businesses, is among the most notable examples. This tool assists users in locating restaurants, shops, hotels, and events that adhere to stringent sustainability guidelines. Every business on the platform abides by the values of environmental and social responsibility and is supported in its expansion. This makes it possible for tourists to make well-informed choices and select more ecologically friendly accommodations while they are there.

In addition, Helsinki's sustainable development plan is increasingly focused on virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR) tourism. City of Helsinki and the World Economic Forum (2023) claim that virtual and augmented reality allow tourists to explore the city's attractions, such as museums or the Suomenlinna sea fortress, without endangering the environment. Since the average visitor emits about 480 kg of CO₂ during a visit, virtual tourism provides a low-emission alternative that reduces air travel and helps preserve important historical sites (Helsinki Times 2023). The city is also using increased reality to improve visitor flow, reduce a need for printed materials and increase the flow of visitors during peak hours by offering digital layers of content.

The Helsinki Innovation ecosystem, supported by Forum Virium Helsinki, promotes the growth of smart tourism by means of pilot projects in smart mobility and environmental data collection. For instance, the city may investigate how visitors travel and find opportunities for greener services like encouraging bike sharing or public transportation by using mobile phone data and transportation research. VR/AR technology also helps fight against overtourism. Popular tourist spots like Suomenlinna are.

In conclusion, innovation and digitalization are critical to Helsinki's sustainable tourism industry. The city employs technology to provide high-quality tourism while lowering environmental stress, from online platforms and smart hotel systems to immersive virtual experiences. These resources establish Helsinki as a global leader in environmentally conscious urban travel by assisting both tourists and businesses in making better, more ecologically friendly decisions.

2.10 Urban mobility and sustainable transport for tourists

Urban mobility is crucial for the development of a sustainable tourism industry in Helsinki. The city has taken this issue wisely and developed a convenient and environmentally friendly transport system that reduces the amount of hazardous or harmful waste emitted into the atmosphere and offers tourists easy ways to move around the city. It is also important that in order to offer people new ways of moving, these upgrades need to be well thought out so that people understand why they are sacrificing one for another. Electrification of the transport system and the introduction of smart and sustainable mobility options that reduce harmful emissions from transport are part of Helsinki's city strategy.

The public transport system in Helsinki is well designed and convenient, making it popular with both residents and tourists. Buses, trams, metro, ferries and commuter trains are all managed by the Helsinki Regional Transport Centre (HSL). The process is simple and convenient for travelers, as they can use a single travel card or mobile ticket to access all of these modes of transport. The company claims that HSL plans to reduce public transport emissions by more than 90% in 2025 compared to 2010 levels. They are trying to achieve this goal by reducing CO2 emissions by having at least 30% of their bus fleet be electric. The city also actively promotes walking and cycling as eco-friendly modes of transport, as they do not have a motor. Helsinki boasts an extensive network of bike paths that are well maintained, reasonably safe and clearly marked. One of the most popular services is CityBike, a bike-sharing program that runs from spring to autumn and allows tourists to easily travel from one attraction to another without producing any emissions. Additionally, combining public transport, bicycles, taxis and car rentals into one flexible service, the app promotes the use of eco-friendly modes of transport.

Sustainable mobility is broadly improved by Helsinki's urban planning and use. By focusing on compact urban structures near train stations and tram lines, the city encourages walking and cycling and reduces the need for long-distance travel. This planning model is supported by cooperation with nearby municipalities and the MAL planning process, which prioritizes regional land use, housing and transport. There are 4,600 city bikes and 460 bike stations in Helsinki and Espoo.

Ferries, such as the one to one of the most popular attractions, the sea fortress Suomenlinna, are also part of the public transport system. These ferries provide tourists with access to famous historical and cultural sites without using private motorboats or other environmentally harmful options.

In Helsinki, walking is an important aspect of the city's tourist life. Numerous pedestrian areas in the city center are designed for comfortable and leisurely travel. With the help of navigation tools, guided tours and tourist maps, walking is the main way to experience the history, architecture and culture of the city. Walking not only reduces emissions, but also creates a stronger connection between visitors and the environment, as not all places are accessible by transport.

Helsinki's well-connected and sustainable transport system is a key part of its sustainable tourism strategy. The city provides environmentally friendly travel options by combining smart digital solutions, easily accessible walking and cycling routes and clean public transport. By reducing the carbon footprint of tourism and offering a first-class tourist experience, these programs serve as an excellent example for other cities. The trend of emission reductions from 1990 to 2023 is illustrated in Figure 1.

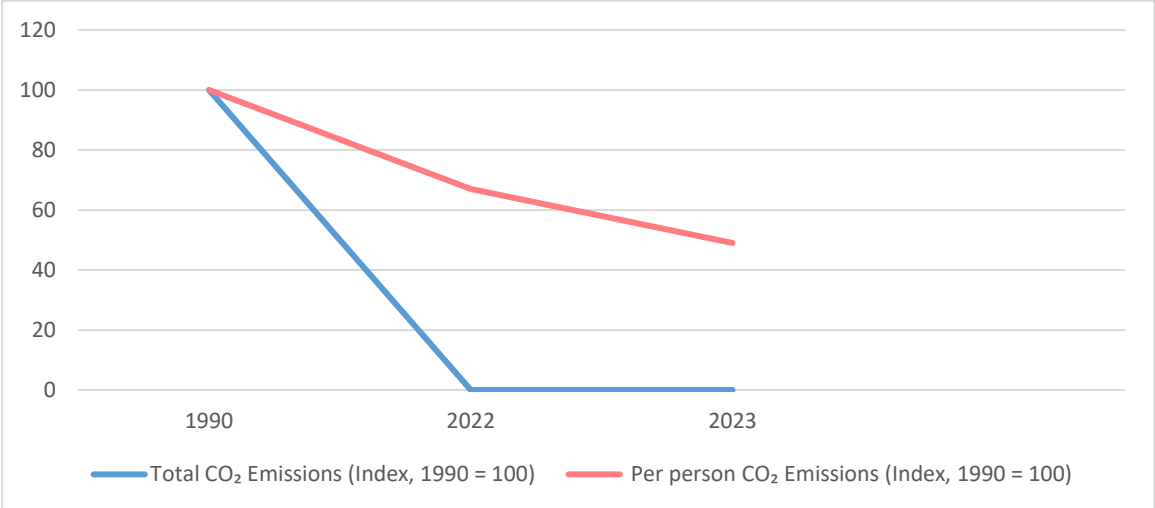


Figure 1. CO₂ emissions in Helsinki from 1990 to 2023 (indexed, 1990 = 100). Source: City of Helsinki, 2024.

2.11 Successes and remaining sustainability challenges in Helsinki

Voluntary Local Review 2025 shares that Helsinki continues to develop as a sustainable destination that includes environmental, social and cultural goals. The report covers many areas and aspects of the city's development, but some points are directly related to tourism. One of the most notable and honorable achievements it is Helsinki's first place in the Global Destination Sustainability Index 2024, which measures the sustainability of tourism destinations and events around the world. This reward and recognition are a very important indicator that the city, from residents to government, is committed to the city's environmental goals, unique tourism and responsible, sustainable event planning. Such a significant award helps to improve Helsinki's sustainable image internationally and attracts environmentally conscious travelers all over the world.

In terms of environmental protection, the report shows that the city has reduced its carbon emissions by 17% between 2021 and 2023 and created 17 new nature reserves. That kind of actions support sustainable tourism, as natural spaces for recreation and other tourism purposes are preserved. It is worth noting that protecting biodiversity also adds to Helsinki's long-term value as a green tourism destination, as well as being a magnet for nature and fauna tourism. However, the review also points to challenges that the government shared with readers. For example, there is a conflict or confusion between the issue of urban growth and the protection of green areas. This issue is becoming increasingly visible, especially with regard to new construction and expansion projects. For tourism, this will have implications in several ways, such as concerns about maintaining a balance between the expansion of infrastructure (hotels, transport, services) and the preservation of the beauty, charm and green identity of the city.

The question of how to cope with the growing number of tourists in well-known tourist spots such as Senate Square or Suomenlinna is also an important point raised in the review. Despite Helsinki's emphasis on social sustainability and inclusiveness, overcrowding undoubtedly affects local life as well as the experience of foreign visitors to Helsinki. However, there are still challenges facing the tourism industry, such as a shortage of experienced workers who have more than just superficial and in-depth knowledge of not just tourism but sustainable tourism. Or a lack of funding, which may hinder the development of sustainable tourism. For

example, the government invests more in large and established businesses. This is why a wider use of sustainability labels such as the Sustainable Travel Finland (STF) certificate or others remains an important step towards the industry adopting more ethical practices.

3 Analysis and discussion

3.1 Key findings

This chapter presents the main findings from the literature review and resources presented in Chapter 2 and explains their implications for sustainable tourism in the Helsinki region, with a focus on the hotel sector.

3.1.1 Economic impact of sustainable tourism in hotels

The results show how the local economy, which is focused on the Helsinki region, benefits greatly from sustainable and eco-friendly tourism practices. It can be concluded that travelers who care about the environment are drawn to more eco-friendly hotels, especially if there is a special certificate. This increases competition, brand awareness and significantly increases the demand for regional services, and also supports local businesses. In addition, by increasing the demand for regional culture, which includes many aspects such as cuisine, crafts and experiences, it is noticeable that sustainable tourism positively contributes to the expansion of small businesses. Speaking of environmental responsibility, it can be financially feasible, although it may seem like an impossible task, but examples such as VALO Hotel & Work show that integrating sustainable solutions with forward-thinking business models can reduce a large share of various costs. However, it is important to remember that not all participants have equal access to the transition to sustainable practices, which is the reason why all hotels in Helsinki have not gone green. Small hotels often face financial difficulties when trying to implement green technologies, obtain certificates and redesign daily life. Therefore, there may be a clear lack of support of various types, from financial to informational, between large hotel chains and small or new companies.

3.1.2 Environmental initiatives in the Helsinki hotel sector

Helsinki's hotel industry shows a fairly wide range of environmental initiatives. Many hotels have decided to take the green route and have implemented energy-saving technologies, special waste sorting systems and renewable energy sources.

One of the important findings is that in the Helsinki hospitality industry, sustainability is seen as an ongoing process, not a one-off project. This is a major advantage for both Helsinki and

Finland. Long-term and well-thought-out strategies that include environmental goals that are aligned with city and national action plans that are supported by various climate targets, such as the SDGs. Many companies in the tourism industry try to adhere to formal sustainability frameworks that are supported by certificates that guarantee transparency and external assessment. Many wonder why these programs are particularly successful, the answer lies in the direction that the government is taking. They incorporate local values into everything from design and cuisine to communication with guests. Sustainability covers both social and cultural aspects, as well as technical ones, which include strengthening local identity and encouraging tourists to behave responsibly.

However, adopting these practices often requires significant investment, training and systemic changes not only from businesses or governments, but also from foreigners and locals. It is undoubtedly a complex process that requires management. Therefore, it is good that the City of Helsinki is not postponing this situation, because if we do not start now, it may be too late. However, the overall situation shows that green thinking is becoming the standard in the hotel sector, not the exception.

3.1.3 Challenges in developing sustainable tourism in hotels

The growth of sustainable tourism in the Helsinki hotel industry still faces a number of obstacles, despite the achievements that Finland has made. For example, financial constraints are still a significant barrier, especially for smaller hotels. In addition, the problem of greenwashing, which primarily threatens consumer trust and undermines the sincere efforts of the industry, is also a rare occurrence in Finland, so any new case of this situation is very memorable and makes headlines.

It is worth mentioning that the lack of qualified experts with special knowledge in the field of sustainable tourism is another serious problem. Therefore, it may be difficult for businesses to maintain sustainable practices without the necessary knowledge and training.

Finally, overpopulation from tourism is a more general and broader problem. While sustainable tourism increases economic stability, a city that is too dependent on one industry is more sensitive to external problems such as pandemics or wars. It is important for Helsinki to find a balance between long-term planning, broader economic diversification and tourism growth to reduce this.

3.2 Discussion

The results of the study show the improvements and challenges of sustainable tourism that can arise in the Helsinki hotel industry. For example, many hotels are becoming more environmentally friendly and consider sustainability to be a really important and right aspect of their business. However, some hotels are primarily concerned with profit and do not even have plans to have a more environmentally friendly way of doing business.

The fact that many hotels incorporate sustainability into their daily operations is one of the most important findings. This not only helps the local environment, but also increases the competitiveness of the tourism industry in the future for the city of Helsinki and Finland as a whole.

But in reality, not every hotel can easily follow this path to a successful future for the planet. For example, small hotels or new businesses often lack the financial or human resources needed to implement significant changes. It is essential that different services provide them with additional help, such as financial support, partnership, training or other.

One of Helsinki's greatest strengths is teamwork. A sustainable tourism system must be developed in cooperation with the city, local companies, tourism associations and citizens. This is all one whole organization, which has a synergy and is subsequently the state of Finland. However, it is worth remembering that there is always room for improvement. This can be expressed in different ways, for example, it is important to provide feedback frequently.

The following steps are advised in order to further enhance sustainability in the hotel industry:

- Give small hotels more funding and guidance so they can begin or continue their green initiatives.
- Provide sustainability training to employees to ensure that environmentally conscious thinking permeates every level.
- Make better use of technology by, for instance, monitoring energy consumption or assisting visitors in locating eco-friendly transportation options.
- Encourage the use of recycled materials, prevent waste, and purchase from local vendors as examples of the circular economy.

- Use applications or hotel materials to teach visitors how to behave responsibly.

Finally, it's critical to keep in mind that flexible travel is essential to sustainable tourism. Tourism must adapt to the changing world. Helsinki is already making significant strides in sustainable tourism, but the city must continue to learn, develop, and collaborate if it hopes to maintain its position as a leader.

4 Conclusion

The economic and environmental effects of sustainable tourism in the Helsinki region are explored in detail in this dissertation with an in-depth analysis of the hotel and tourism sectors. This paper shows that smart consumerism and changing visitor preferences in Helsinki have led to a greater emphasis on sustainability in the hospitality industry. The study found that adopting sustainable practices has a truly positive effect. Promoting both local goods and services and the city's image. Improved environmental performance, increased brand awareness and stronger ties with communities are what push Finland to the top of the sustainability charts. In addition, when the government or other organizations encourage innovation, it helps small businesses by creating employment opportunities and other benefits.

In conclusion, responsible and well-designed urban development in Helsinki directly depends on sustainable tourism. Helsinki has all the resources and data to continue to position itself as a model for other cities where sustainable tourism is thriving and improving significantly.

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