WILDESCAPE EU

Final Report

Territorial Ecotourism Report: *Insights from Cyprus, Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Spain*

Abstract

This report presents key insights from qualitative and quantitative research conducted across partner countries participating in WILDESCAPE EU, a project dedicated to ecotourism practices. WILDESCAPE EU aims to identify trends, critical challenges, and replicable approaches in order to establish educational pathways and standards for those interested in ecotourism. The report draws on survey data, which explore current ecotourism experiences and perceptions, as well as Focus Groups that delve into community engagement, successful features, and existing challenges.

Findings confirm that a more sustainable and eco-friendly tourism model can significantly support biodiversity conservation by mitigating overexploitation, connecting communities with natural areas, and promoting healthier ecosystems. The research also underlines the socio-economic advantages of ecotourism, such as job creation and more resilient local economies. However, major barriers emerge such as insufficient public awareness, limited funding, and a lack of recognised certifications often foster scepticism toward the authenticity of ecotourism. Additionally, high seasonality and weak legislative frameworks create uncertainty for operators, restricting their capacity to maintain viable practices.

The report emphasises that engaged stakeholders, including local communities, are indispensable for ensuring long-term success and for shaping responsible visitor experiences. Education, clear policy support, and innovative financial mechanisms are highlighted as critical tools to overcome existing constraints. Ultimately, the study advocates for integrated strategies and standards that strengthen ecotourism's role in tackling biodiversity loss and climate change. Notably, younger generations demonstrate growing enthusiasm for this tourism model. Although the concept remains relatively unfamiliar, there is a clear shift toward adopting more sustainable and regenerative travel practices.

Research Methods

Survey, Focus Groups and Feedback

WILDESCAPE EU, centred on ecotourism and preserving biodiversity, aims to promote sustainable tourism practices and empower young people—especially those from rural areas—in the development of tools and mechanisms that protect nature and raise awareness of conservation among future generations. This phase of the project employed both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to investigate the experiences and perspectives of young stakeholders in each participating nation regarding biodiversity protection. The primary objective was to establish a shared baseline of knowledge for each country, with common definitions and alignment at the language level. Secondly, focusing on existing practices allowed the partners to pinpoint which paradigms of innovation and improvement should be introduced, as well as the mechanisms to be activated in various contexts.

The first tool was a survey comprising 21 questions, administered to two different groups: stakeholders engaged in ecotourism and biodiversity conservation—including local businesses, conservation organisations, and young people interested in ecotourism. The questionnaire was designed to:

- Collect current ecotourism activities and experiences
- Assess the perceived reliability and impact of ecotourism
- Identify the biggest challenges faced
- Examine economic considerations such as funding, sustainability, and willingness to pay
- Determine perceived political commitment and existing regulations at national and European levels
- Understand what ecotourism experiences entail and how to best implement them

The resulting quantitative data, followed by careful analysis, provided structured insights into the operational dynamics and challenges of the ecotourism sector. The responses also reflected young people's perspectives as potential participants or direct beneficiaries of ecotourism activities. To ensure sufficient data, each project partner gathered at least 45 responses.

In tandem with the survey, focus groups were held with a diverse range of stakeholders: young ecotourism providers, conservationists, local communities, and policymakers. These sessions probed the qualitative dimensions of ecotourism, exploring strengths, challenges, and ongoing efforts in biodiversity conservation. Through participatory methods, the discussions addressed community involvement, sustainability practices, and regulatory barriers. In order to align with broader policy targets and foster informed decision-making, policymakers were also involved.

The discussion covered three main areas:

- **Community engagement**, examining the role communities should play and how to enhance it
- **Best elements**, analysing which successful features could be replicated or adapted to local contexts
- **Challenges**, identifying the principal obstacles that biodiversity and ecotourism currently face

All topics were adjusted to match the distinct national frameworks and the existing legal context of each project country. They were approached with a clear focus on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, making it easier to build a unified working framework and streamline the final reporting process. Each project partner brought together at least 15 participants for focus group discussions, occasionally split into multiple sessions.

Data from both the questionnaires and focus group exchanges were synthesised and analysed to produce the preliminary findings, culminating in a robust SWOT analysis of the subject matter. The qualitative metrics served to illuminate trends, patterns, and correlations in the collected data, guiding the identification of critical insights and

potential actions. In addition to gauge participants' satisfaction and the clarity of the final assessment, a feedback process was initiated with the goal of gathering at least 100 responses per consortium, aiming for 80% positivity.

Regarding qualitative data, the depth of the focus group observations was evaluated to identify nuanced challenges and openings within ecotourism and biodiversity conservation. Thematic analysis and the review of each national report proved crucial in recognising recurring themes, participant perspectives, and directions for further study. Feedback from stakeholders—including ecotourism practitioners, conservationists, and policymakers—was vital for confirming the relevance and applicability of the research findings, offering qualitative insights into their perceived impact and value.

Table 1. Overview of Survey Responses and Focus Group Participation by Country

	Number of Responses *(Registered by Google Form or other tools)*	**Focus Group Participants** *(People and number of carried sessions)*
Cyprus	45	Participants: 18 Sessions: 1
Ireland	46	Participants: 16 Session: 2
Italy	45	Participants: 15 Sessions: 2
Portugal	168	Participants: 15 Sessions: 2
Spain	52	Participants: 15 Sessions: 2

Main findings

Analysing the National Reports, a widespread lack of awareness emerges regarding the definition and characteristics of ecotourism. This lack of understanding leads to general scepticism about the true impact of ecotourism practices. Distrust is further intensified by the frequent absence of clear certification or explicit criteria to distinguish genuine ecotourism from opportunistic practices aimed at exploiting the environment and benefiting primarily large tour operators. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that interviewees, despite their limited knowledge on ecotourism, tend to adopt more sustainable and low-impact tourism practices. They strongly believe such practices, even without explicitly naming them, significantly contribute to biodiversity conservation, though scepticism persists about their real effectiveness.

From the perspective of tourism operators, considerable challenges arise, particularly in legislative and economic contexts. Frequently, existing legislative frameworks and political discourse are perceived as inadequate in addressing contemporary challenges. Additionally, although attempts at improvement exist, high operational costs combined with limited funding create substantial uncertainty, threatening operators' sustainability. Seasonal fluctuations further compound these difficulties, affecting operators and tourists alike. Furthermore, high costs and limited accessibility to ecotourism destinations often discourage potential participants.

Nevertheless, ecotourism is viewed as an opportunity for immersive nature experiences, where originality and transparency are crucial indicators of quality. Local community involvement is also highlighted as critical, emphasising the importance of connecting tourists with the territory. Overall, interviewees demonstrated significant environmental awareness, advocating for tourism models that prioritise nature protection and provide sector operators with opportunities to responsibly maintain their environments.

ECOTOURISM PERCEPTION

Each National Report represents an accurate snapshot of the ecotourism perception and physiognomy in the different partner countries. Below, there is a brief description emphasising the highlights for each partner.

Cyprus: Ecotourism is perceived as a beneficial tool for biodiversity conservation and community engagement but faces significant distrust, with many initiatives viewed as greenwashing. Essential aspects include environmental education, low ecological impact, and genuine cultural interaction.

Ireland: Ecotourism is considered an environmentally conscious way to experience nature, including activities such as trekking, whale watching, camping, and agritourism. Despite this positive perception, the sector is challenged economically and environmentally through climatic challenges, and this is coupled with a limited public understanding; notably, one-third of respondents have never participated in ecotourism-related activities.

Italy: Ecotourism is envisioned as slow, experiential tourism closely connected to local communities. While still under-recognised, it is considered essential for balancing environmental conservation, economic development, and promoting local traditions. However, the fragmented sector lacks effective management models. Participants emphasise the need for enhanced operator training, clearer regulations, and incentives to make sustainable tourism broadly accessible.

Portugal: Ecotourism predominantly involves contact with nature and environmental education, although this practice is not always viewed explicitly as a conservation method. Popular activities include excursions, educational interactions, and community involvement. However, the weak regulatory environment and economic issues related to high operating costs and seasonality pose challenges.

Spain: Ecotourism is recognised as an authentic, sustainable, and relaxing tourism form that facilitates deep interaction with local communities. Nevertheless, low awareness of the concept and scepticism about sustainability claims remain

significant barriers. Participants associate ecotourism with immersive natural experiences and eco-friendly accommodations, which is not always the case, increased transparency and education on the topic could allay fears of participation.

Overall, in all examined countries, ecotourism is viewed as an alternative to mass tourism, strongly linked to nature and local communities. Yet, perceptions and understanding differ significantly across countries, with some struggling to differentiate authentic ecotourism from misleading marketing practices and others emphasising its immersive aspects rather than conservation potential.
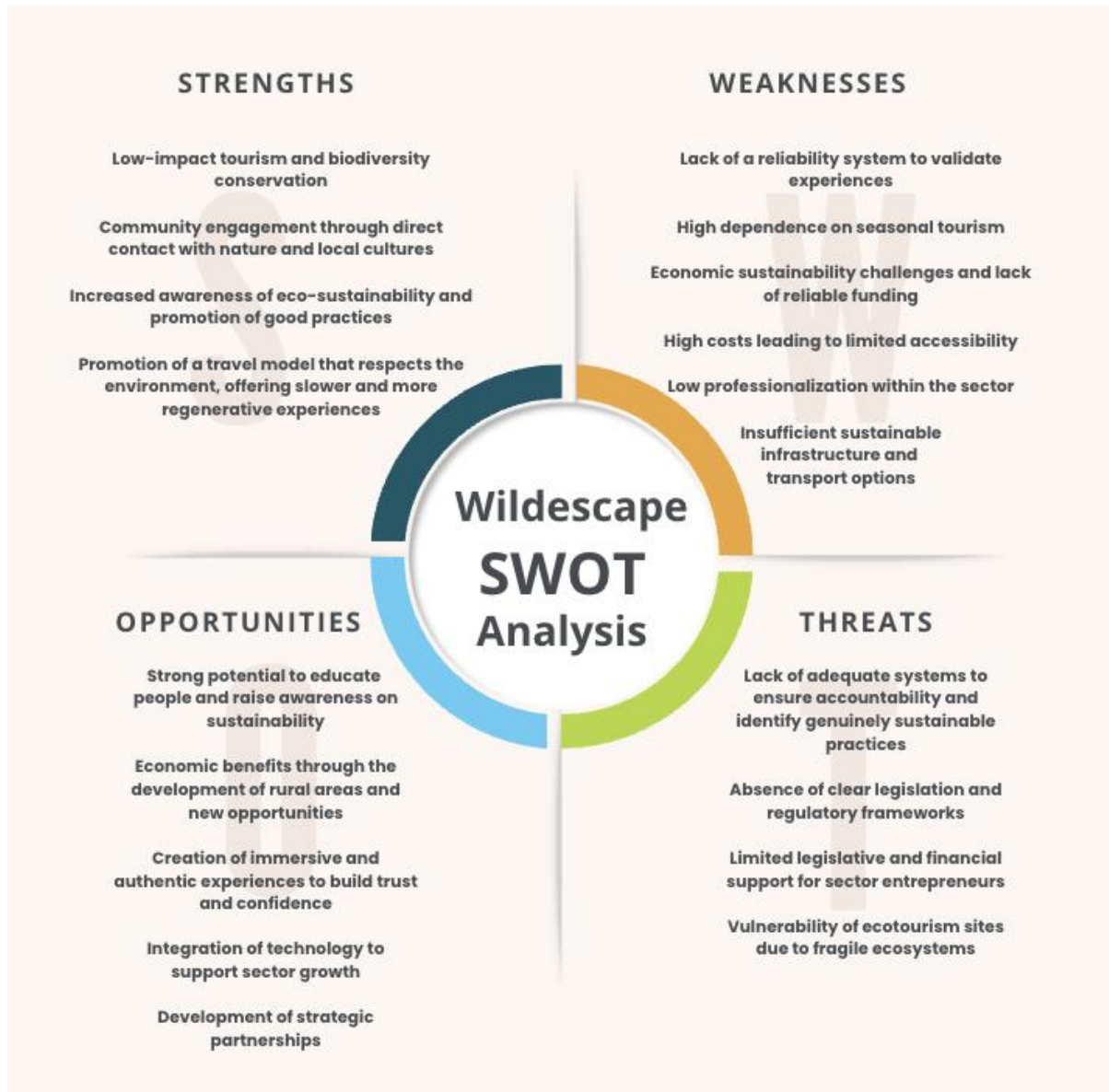
SWOT analysis on Ecotourism

STRENGTHS

Low-impact tourism and biodiversity conservation

Community engagement through direct contact with nature and local cultures

Increased awareness of eco-sustainability and promotion of good practices

Promotion of a travel model that respects the environment, offering slower and more regenerative experiences

WEAKNESSES

Lack of a reliability system to validate experiences

High dependence on seasonal tourism

Economic sustainability challenges and lack of reliable funding

High costs leading to limited accessibility

Low professionalization within the sector

Insufficient sustainable infrastructure and transport options

OPPORTUNITIES

Strong potential to educate people and raise awareness on sustainability

Economic benefits through the development of rural areas and new opportunities

Creation of immersive and authentic experiences to build trust and confidence

Integration of technology to support sector growth

Development of strategic partnerships

THREATS

Lack of adequate systems to ensure accountability and identify genuinely sustainable practices

Absence of clear legislation and regulatory frameworks

Limited legislative and financial support for sector entrepreneurs

Vulnerability of ecotourism sites due to fragile ecosystems

Wildescape SWOT Analysis

Figure 1. A Comprehensive SWOT Analysis on Ecotourism

STRENGTHS

The research highlights numerous strengths shared among the partners. The first notable element is that, although the concept of ecotourism is not yet fully developed, many interviewees prefer a more supportive and low-impact approach to tourism.

Ecotourism meets the need for authenticity and immersion emphasised by the interviewees, promoting direct contact with nature and local cultures. It encourages biodiversity conservation and territorial protection through visitor awareness and the involvement of local communities in sustainable practices. Often, **the direct engagement of communities and the creation of experiences closely tied to them are perceived as an initial "certificate" of reliability—even if not always entirely accurate.**

Moreover, this involvement acts as a key driver in raising awareness about contemporary issues. Across all reports, the importance of educational pathways was underlined, both from a general perspective for understanding the need for greater awareness of environmental issues, climate change, and biodiversity protection and from a more practical angle, showing how these experiences can respond to critical issues and inspire sustainable practices in daily life.

If implemented effectively, ecotourism can also reduce pressure on overcrowded tourist destinations, better distribute visitor flows, and promote a travel model that respects both the environment and local communities. Finally, it aligns with the growing demand for slower, more regenerative experiences that allow people to rediscover the value of time and connection with nature, encouraging a more balanced and conscious lifestyle.

Regenerative Travel
Aligns with the growing trend for sustainable and restorative travel.

Low-Impact Tourism
Emphasizes minimal environmental footprint and support for local communities.

Overcrowding Reduction
Alleviates pressure on popular tourist sites by dispersing visitors.

Ecotourism Benefits

Authenticity Demand
Meets travelers' desires for genuine cultural and natural experiences.

Environmental Awareness
Increases understanding and appreciation of ecological issues.

Conservation Efforts
Promotes activities aimed at preserving biodiversity and ecosystems.

Figure 2. Mapping the Core Strengths of Ecotourism

WEAKNESSES

Despite its many advantages, especially in a time when demand for slow and immersive tourism experiences is rising, ecotourism is subject to several criticisms. One of the main issues is the lack of a clear certification system with shared standards, which leads to greenwashing or experiences that mimic ecotourism but are not genuinely sustainable. This contributes to travellers' distrust regarding the true sustainability of such initiatives.

Additionally, high seasonality poses a significant economic challenge, making financial stability difficult for operators and limiting employment to specific periods of the year. A further obstacle is the absence of reliable funding focused on ecotourism. From the operators' perspective, this makes sustaining the activity difficult and creates high entry barriers, limiting access primarily to audiences with greater financial resources and potentially excluding a wider range of travellers. This issue is particularly relevant for younger audiences who often have limited financial means. Many young people report that some experiences are not designed or updated to suit their needs.

A lack of awareness and training among both tourism operators and visitors also hinders the development of effective and conscious ecotourism. Experiences that lack professionalism and user care reduce the chances of repeat visits and risk turning visitors into unintentional threats to the environment.

Moreover, poor sustainable infrastructure and transport in many destinations make access to ecotourism experiences difficult. Resorting to using private vehicles can cause heightened levels of pollution. Lastly, weak collaboration between stakeholders including institutions, local communities, and businesses impede the development of long-term strategies, leaving the sector fragmented and less competitive compared to traditional tourism.

Infrastructure
Poor options impede sustainable travel.

Certification Issues
Lack of clear standards leads to greenwashing.

Professionalism
Inadequate care deters repeat engagement.

Economic Instability
Seasonality and funding constraints affect stability.

Awareness Deficits
Insufficient training hinders effective practices.

Accessibility Problems
Limited access for younger audiences with fewer resources.

Figure 3. Mapping the Key Weaknesses of Ecotourism

OPPORTUNITIES

Ecotourism offers numerous opportunities that, if well harnessed, can drive positive environmental, economic, and social impacts. As emphasised by all partners, ecotourism is a powerful tool to raise environmental awareness, through educational experiences that inform travellers about nature conservation and biodiversity, while also promoting practices that can be adopted in daily life.
The sector has the potential to diversify tourism offerings, reduce dependence on mass tourism, and enhance lesser-known destinations, thereby supporting the economic development of rural and marginal areas.

As highlighted by some partners, an appropriate approach to ecotourism can become a growth driver in certain regions by creating jobs and promoting suitable training for tourism operators. It can also support the emergence of related experiences (e.g., sustainable agriculture) that contribute to long-term development. Community involvement plays a vital role. Engaging local communities and fostering partnerships to co-create experiences ensures these are felt as meaningful and authentic. When communities participate in both the design and management of ecotourism experiences, they help transmit local traditions and practices, thereby increasing the trustworthiness and accountability of the offering, while also promoting local ownership. Digital tools and online platforms can further professionalise the sector by enhancing visibility, promoting offers and discounts, and simplifying booking processes.

All reports describe ecotourism as a collective process. Thus, fostering partnerships among stakeholders—both top-down and bottom-up, involving institutions, tourism operators, local communities, and environmental organisations is essential. This collaboration can strengthen the sector, support the sharing of good practices, and promote more balanced and lasting development models, especially by addressing economic challenges and legislative gaps.

Figure 4. Mapping the Key Opportunities of Ecotourism

THREATS

Key threats identified include the absence of certifications, clear sustainability guidelines, and effective communication of ethical practices, all of which undermine the sector's credibility and accountability.

A lack of defined legislation and supportive policies—capable of guiding ecotourism's controlled and standardised growth—is a critical issue. This regulatory vacuum allows for unsustainable practices and fuels over-tourism, leading to unchecked exploitation of resources, environments, and even local populations.

This once again underscores the importance of defining professional skill sets and managerial structures for ecotourism, as well as creating frameworks that support entrepreneurs entering the sector.

From a financial standpoint, instability and seasonal dependency represent concrete risks. Without stable economic support, ecotourism businesses often struggle to survive, particularly given the high operational costs required for basic functioning.

Finally, climate change and biodiversity loss are direct threats to the sector, as many ecotourism destinations rely on fragile ecosystems that are increasingly vulnerable to extreme environmental events and lack long-term adaptation strategies.

Figure 5. Mapping the Key Threats of Ecotourism

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, ecotourism stands out as a sustainable alternative to traditional tourism, with strong potential to promote environmental conservation, engage local communities, and foster the economic development of underappreciated areas.

According to interviewees, especially younger generations, environmental concerns are increasingly top of mind, and many demonstrate a commitment to choosing eco-sustainable or low-impact practices, sometimes even unconsciously.

They often seek or shape experiences that are more accessible and aligned with new paradigms and evolving needs.

Despite this, the sector still faces several structural challenges, including the absence of clear regulations, issues of seasonality, and high costs, which can hinder both accessibility and growth.

However, rising demand for responsible tourism, the development of digital tools, and innovation present promising opportunities to transform ecotourism into a driver of development in off-the-beaten-path areas.

At the same time, serious threats remain—such as greenwashing, the pressures of mass tourism, and the impacts of climate change on fragile ecosystems.

To ensure a sustainable future for ecotourism, it will be essential to implement supportive policies, foster stakeholder collaboration, and invest in infrastructure and training. Only then can ecotourism become a truly virtuous model of sustainable development.

Appendix: National Reports

Appendix A: Cyprus National Report

The tourism and hospitality industry is one of the largest economic sectors in Cyprus, with a GDP contribution close to 15%. Being an established tourist destination and of general interest in tourist infrastructure, it often neglects what is considered to be its most valuable asset, which can be promoted through ecotourism. Ecotourism has emerged in the broader tourism industry, emphasising sustainable travel practices that promote environmental conservation, cultural heritage, and local community engagement. As destinations across Europe tend to balance tourism development with ecological preservation, Cyprus, yet presents a unique case for exploring the potential and challenges of ecotourism

By analysing the collected data, this report sheds light on the current state-of-the art on ecotourism in Cyprus.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY

Questionnaires
This report examines key findings on ecotourism in Cyprus, based on primary research conducted as part of the European project WILDESCAPE EU: Connecting Nature and Eco-Tourism in Europe. The research involved a survey, which was sent via mail communication to more than 70 people, professionals in the tourist industry, students, policymakers and 'green' entrepreneurs, where a total of 45 questionnaires were completed.

MAIN FINDINGS

Trust in Ecotourism and Greenwashing

The survey results indicate a moderate level of scepticism toward ecotourism experiences. A significant portion of respondents expressed concerns about greenwashing, with many feeling "somewhat cautious" about whether ecotourism businesses genuinely follow sustainable practices. Only a small number of participants exhibited full confidence in ecotourism providers, suggesting that transparency and credibility remain major challenges.

Familiarity with Ecotourism among Young People

The younger generation demonstrated a moderate level of familiarity with ecotourism, with the average self-assessed understanding rating at approximately 2.7 out of 5. While some respondents displayed enthusiasm, a considerable number (38 out of 45) admitted to having limited knowledge of the sector. Despite this, there is a general openness to learning more, indicating an opportunity for increased education and awareness initiatives.

Economic Sustainability and Willingness to Pay More

Participants were divided on whether ecotourism can be economically sustainable. A large portion identified high operational costs and seasonal fluctuations as the main economic challenges. However, a notable percentage of respondents (7) stated they would be willing to pay extra for an authentic ecotourism experience, though most preferred a slight price increase rather than a substantial one.

Ecotourism as a Tool for Biodiversity Protection

The majority of participants agreed that ecotourism can contribute to biodiversity conservation, with many recognising its potential to protect natural environments and raise awareness about sustainability. However, some remained doubtful about the effectiveness of current ecotourism initiatives in making a real impact.

Encouraging Community and Youth Involvement

To increase participation, respondents emphasised the need for hands-on experiences and educational opportunities. Community engagement strategies such as incentives, workshops, and direct involvement in conservation projects were identified as effective ways to foster a stronger connection with ecotourism activities.

Ideas for Stimulating Youth Participation
Some key ideas that emerged included offering student discounts, integrating ecotourism activities into university programs, and promoting volunteer opportunities in conservation projects. Interactive campaigns and digital engagement were also suggested as means of attracting younger audiences.

Perception of the Legal Framework
Opinions on the legal framework surrounding ecotourism were mixed. While some respondents felt that existing policies support ecotourism initiatives, others believed that regulations are either insufficient or poorly enforced. There was a shared sentiment that governmental support and financial incentives could be improved.

Discrepancy between Stakeholders and Users on Regulations
A noticeable gap was observed in how different groups perceive ecotourism regulations. While some participants believed that legal measures are restrictive and hinder development, others viewed them as necessary but ineffective due to lack of enforcement. This divergence suggests a need for clearer and more balanced regulatory approaches.

Key Elements in an Ecotourism Experience
Certain elements were consistently highlighted as desirable in ecotourism experiences, including environmental education, minimal ecological impact, and authentic cultural interactions. Other recurring factors included affordability, accessibility, and comfort in eco-friendly accommodations.

Effectiveness of Communication in Ecotourism
There was a consensus that communication about ecotourism experiences could be improved, particularly in terms of online promotion. 13 people noted that the lack of

awareness about available options discourages participation, emphasising the need for better digital marketing and informative content.

Challenges in Ecotourism

The most commonly cited challenges for ecotourism included climate change, financial sustainability, and regulatory inconsistencies. Other concerns involved the difficulty of maintaining authentic experiences while attracting a broad customer base.

Common Ideas about Ecotourism

Overall, participants shared a vision of ecotourism as an immersive, nature-focused experience that balances environmental conservation with community engagement. Many emphasised the importance of slow, mindful travel and direct interaction with nature, indicating a preference for experiences that go beyond traditional tourism.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY

Focus groups

A focus group discussion was also organised on the 10th of February held with the collaboration of the GC School of Careers, involving 13 participants primarily first-year university students specialising in Hospitality studies, 3 professors and 2 professionals in the tourism industry, one agent and one organiser for outdoor excursions. The study aimed to spark young people's awareness, attitudes, and perceptions regarding ecotourism, as well as to explore potential strategies for sustainable tourism development on the island.

TOPIC 1: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Experiences in Community Engagement

The focus group highlighted several instances of community involvement in ecotourism, such as local-led hiking tours, volunteer-based conservation programs, and eco-lodging initiatives where locals actively participate in providing authentic

experiences. Participants discussed how these initiatives contribute to both environmental protection and socio-economic benefits for the community.

Weaknesses and Strengths

Strengths identified included the ability of local communities to create unique and immersive experiences, fostering cultural exchange and contributing to local economies. However, weaknesses emerged regarding the lack of structured collaboration between larger tourism stakeholders and local communities, as well as a gap in professional training for locals to be more involved in ecotourism services.

Opportunities and Threats

Opportunities highlighted included government incentives to support local ecotourism businesses, educational programs to enhance community participation, and the potential for digital platforms to connect tourists with local guides. Threats included the risk of commercialising protected areas, lack of proper infrastructure, and limited funding for community-based projects. This also led the discussion on how easily the big tourist providers take over the market in Cyprus, and how easily authorities support mainstream tourist experiences, although a general agreement was how this leaves space for smaller enterprises or initiatives to spark though ecotourism experiences.

Debate and Outcome Challenges

While there was a consensus on the importance of community engagement, debates emerged around the best ways to ensure long-term sustainability. Some participants argued that government intervention is necessary, while others favoured grassroots initiatives. Defining clear outcomes proved somewhat challenging due to differing perspectives on financial feasibility and policy implementation.

TOPIC 2: WINNING FEATURES

Key Winning Elements

Participants identified direct environmental impact and direct customer approach, offering unique local interactions as the core features of successful ecotourism

experiences. Transparency in sustainability practices and authentic storytelling were also recognised as key to gaining tourists' trust.

Related Topic Areas

Winning features were categorised into four main areas:

- Workflows: Streamlined booking systems and clear guidelines for tourists.
- Direct Experience: Hands-on activities such as wildlife conservation, organic farming, and guided nature walks.
- Customer Care: Personalised services, knowledgeable tour guides, and eco-friendly accommodations.
- Places: Destinations that showcase biodiversity, cultural heritage, and sustainability in action.

Replicability

While some elements, such as digital marketing strategies and customer service improvements were seen as universally applicable, others like the specific types of ecotourism experiences were more dependent on Cyprus's natural and cultural characteristics.

Weaknesses, Strengths, Opportunities, and Threats

Strengths included Cyprus's rich biodiversity and cultural heritage, while weaknesses focused on logistical challenges, such as insufficient marketing and inadequate infrastructure. Opportunities arose from growing eco-consciousness among travellers and the possibility of leveraging European Union funding. Threats included mainstream tourist providers and inconsistent regulatory enforcement.

Debate and Outcome Challenges

There was broad agreement on the importance of authenticity in ecotourism, but debates emerged over whether digitalisation (such as virtual tours) could enhance or dilute the experience. Some stakeholders feared that increased commercialisation might compromise environmental goals.

TOPIC 3: CHALLENGES

Three Major Challenges were identified:

- Economic Viability: Ensuring long-term financial sustainability without compromising ecological integrity.
- Regulatory Frameworks: The need for clearer, better-enforced policies supporting ecotourism.
- Community Awareness: Educating both tourists and locals about the benefits and responsibilities of ecotourism.

Policy and Public Debate Perception

There was a consensus that while ecotourism is acknowledged in public policy discussions, concrete actions remain insufficient. Bureaucratic hurdles and inconsistent enforcement were cited as key concerns.

Role of Future Generations

The group strongly believed that young people would play a crucial role in shaping the future of ecotourism by advocating for sustainability, developing innovative business models, and leveraging social media to promote responsible travel.

Future Opportunities

Sustainable certifications, eco-friendly transport initiatives, and collaborative partnerships between businesses and conservation groups were highlighted as major opportunities for growth.

Successful Future Ecotourism Experiences

The most promising future experiences were identified as those that integrate education with adventure, such as marine conservation tours and regenerative tourism initiatives that contribute directly to the ecosystem.

Policy Directions

Participants emphasised the need for policies that provide financial incentives for eco-friendly businesses, establish stricter sustainability criteria, and create more protected areas accessible to responsible tourism.

IN GENERAL

Most Proactive Stakeholders

Tourism professionals and students emerged as the most engaged stakeholders, contributing practical insights and innovative ideas. Policymakers were viewed as less proactive, reflecting a perceived gap between governance and grassroots efforts.

Comparisons with Other EU Countries

Discussions referenced successful ecotourism policies in countries such as Sweden and Slovenia, emphasising their government-supported sustainable tourism models as examples for Cyprus to consider.

Focus Group Presenter Observations

Presenter noted that while enthusiasm for ecotourism is high, concrete policy actions and financial frameworks remain lacking. It is recommended that increased collaboration between universities, businesses, and governmental bodies to ensure the sector's sustainable development.

Appendix B: Ireland National Report

This report aims to describe the main findings on the topic of ecotourism in Ireland by delivering at least 45 questionnaires and conducting a Focus Group with at least 15 participants within the European project WILDESCAPE EU: Connecting Nature and Eco-Tourism in Europe.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY

Questionnaires

- How many people did the survey reach: The survey was designed to gather insights from local tourism providers. It was distributed directly to 200 tourism businesses via email, targeting key stakeholders in the local tourism industry. In addition, the survey was featured in the Boyne Valley Tourism Newsletter, which has 600 receivers.

- What dissemination channels were chosen: To ensure a broad outreach of the survey, multiple dissemination channels were used. The survey link was promoted through our company social media channels, and the project media platforms.

- How many responses there were: In total, the survey received 46 completed responses.

MAIN FINDINGS

Based on the responses gathered through the survey in Ireland, one-third of the respondents reported that they had never participated in an ecotourism experience. Among the 30 individuals who have taken part in ecotourism activities, a diverse range of eco-focused experiences was mentioned, including hiking, cycling, camping, whale watching, and guided nature walks in various locations such as Ireland, Britain, Iceland, Australia, Italy, and the Maldives. These experiences included visits to heritage sites, national parks, caves, cliffs, and wetlands, along with engagement in sustainable practices like eco-glamping, agritourism, foraging tours, and conservation efforts. Some responses came from tourism providers who operate bike rental services and other ecotourism businesses, all of which support local culture, history, and sustainable travel. Most respondents felt they had an average to good understanding of the concept of ecotourism. Furthermore, there was a general consensus that minimising environmental impact should be the main priority for

ecotourism providers. However, over half of the respondents expressed scepticism about whether some ecotourism agencies truly follow sustainable practices.

When evaluating the sustainability of various ecotourism projects, opinions are more divided. The primary challenge is the reliance on seasonal tourism, along with high operational costs and a lack of reliable funding sources. On a positive note, only 15% of respondents believe that ecotourism is not financially viable. In contrast, an impressive 83% are willing to pay more for experiences that benefit the environment. Many people believe that habitat loss caused by human activities is the most urgent threat to biodiversity, followed by climate change and insufficient government funding. Despite these challenges, 85% of individuals express a strong sense of optimism about the potential impact of conservation projects on protecting biodiversity. This optimism highlights the effectiveness of conservation efforts in safeguarding natural ecosystems.

When analysing the factors that would motivate communities and youth to create and participate in ecotourism experiences, the responses were fairly evenly split. Forty percent of participants valued economic incentives, such as job creation and the introduction of eco-friendly businesses. Just under a third appreciated education and awareness programs, while another third recognised the long-term benefits to the community. A significant majority of respondents (76%) agreed that the most effective way to engage people in ecotourism is by offering dedicated activities for groups and young people. These activities could include crafting nights, workshops, and similar events.

Most ecotourism providers who participated in this survey believe that current laws and regulations slightly hinder ecotourism and conservation efforts. A majority of these providers agree that the most important policy change would be to introduce financial incentives for sustainable practices. They all acknowledge that ecotourism plays a crucial role in conserving biodiversity and protecting the environment. However, only a few providers felt that there is adequate economic support, accessibility, and outreach for ecotourism entities. In contrast, most ecotourism users believe that there is not enough public discourse regarding support for ecotourism. Both tourism users and providers largely agree that there should be additional incentives, such as discounts and tax rebates.

There were many elements that many people look for in ecotourism experiences:

- Educational opportunities – learning about the local environment, history, geography, and biodiversity.
- Sustainability practices – low environmental impact, waste management, carbon offset programs, no greenwashing.
- Local community involvement – supporting local businesses, hiring local guides, and benefiting the community.
- Authenticity & ethical practices – genuine ecotourism, not greenwashing, and ethical treatment of wildlife.
- Interactive & memorable experiences – hands-on learning, new skills, and immersive activities.
- Closeness to nature & scenic beauty – enjoying landscapes, wildlife, and natural settings.
- Affordability & accessibility – realistic pricing, public transport access, and cost-effectiveness.
- Fun & enjoyment – engaging and entertaining activities.

Connecting ecotourism experiences appear to influence the growth of these activities; however, it is not identified as a primary concern by either users or providers. Most ecotourism users agree that the biggest challenge for providers is rising costs, while interestingly, most providers believe that the main challenge is the impact of climate change.

Many ecotourism participants feel that the experience should be relaxing and spent in nature. About a third of respondents expressed a desire to learn something new during their travels, while others emphasised the importance of connecting with nature and disconnecting from technology.

Based on the open-ended question regarding any other comments on the topic the survey responders shared a mix of positive and critical thoughts on the state of ecotourism in Ireland. Some praised current efforts and suggested leveraging technology like Augmented Reality to enhance visitor experiences while preserving heritage sites. Others criticised the government's approach, arguing that policies often serve to meet EU requirements rather than genuinely addressing sustainability. Concerns were raised about the overuse of plastics and the need for sustainable

materials in production. Respondents acknowledged the challenge of balancing business interests with environmental responsibility, highlighting the impact on local communities. Rather than financial resources, a lack of political will and empowerment was seen as a major barrier to progress.

Survey respondents shared a mix of positive and critical thoughts about the state of ecotourism in Ireland. Some praised current efforts and suggested using technology like Augmented Reality to enhance visitor experiences while preserving heritage sites. However, others criticised the government's approach, arguing that policies often prioritise meeting EU requirements rather than genuinely addressing sustainability. Concerns were raised about the overuse of plastics and the need for sustainable materials in production. Respondents also acknowledged the challenge of balancing business interests with environmental responsibility, highlighting the impact on local communities. They identified a lack of political will and empowerment, rather than financial resources, as a major barrier to progress.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY

Focus groups

- Focus groups were held on two separate dates one on 6th February 2025 and the other on 12th February 2025
- The Focus groups were held at: Teach Oscail Family Resource Centre, and Foroige Group and also at Virginia Library Cavan
- Number of participants present: 16 participants.
- Who participated: We included 11 young ecotourism users, 2 local politicians, one local Development Officer, as well as 2 policymakers

- **What experiences have emerged in community engagement?**
  Based on the discussion held with the participants, it has been observed that all of the participants were engaged in ecotourism, either locally or nationally, in Ireland. Both events highlighted that Ireland is a country rich in natural beauty, featuring numerous preserved national parks, forests, lakes, and greenways. Some participants mentioned well-known eco-tourism

experiences they have enjoyed in Ireland, including the Cliffs of Moher, the Giant's Causeway, and Powerscourt Waterfall.

- **What weaknesses and strengths have emerged?**

One of the main strengths identified for promoting ecotourism in the local community is the potential for job creation. Local restaurants, cafes, pubs, and shops would benefit from a boost in the local economy. Additionally, promoting local ecotourism would provide opportunities to explore and celebrate the area's history, creating a positive atmosphere and potentially leading to local events such as celebrations/festivals based on the local heritage. For example, Lisdoonvarna in County Clare, located in the naturally beautiful Burren and known for its matchmaking history, now hosts a festival that attracts nearly 40,000 visitors each year.

However, several weaknesses were also noted. Some areas lacked adequate accommodation for tourists, which could result in a rise in Airbnb rentals, taking apartments and houses away from the local residents and exacerbating the current housing crisis. Furthermore, Ireland's cold and wet climate for much of the year means that a high volume of visitors could pose significant challenges to the preservation of local sites. The groups expressed concerns that this increase in foot traffic could damage grasslands and animal habitats.

- **What opportunities have been outlined?**

During the group discussion, several potential opportunities were brought to light that could benefit the community and promote environmental awareness. Among these opportunities were the establishment of local birdwatching and hiking groups, which would not only encourage outdoor activities but also promote a greater appreciation for local wildlife and natural landscapes. These groups could serve as platforms for individuals to connect with one another, share their experiences, and learn more about the biodiversity in their area. By combining leisure activities with education on sustainability, we can strengthen community engagement, which not only enhances the quality of life but also promotes a stronger commitment to conserving our environment.

- **What threats have been defined**?

There is a concern among the group that over-tourism could pose problems for Ireland, which is primarily a rural country with many small villages and towns. A significant increase in infrastructure would be necessary to accommodate tourists, and this could lead to a divide between locals and outsiders. Additionally, it was noted that relying too heavily on eco-tourism in small areas may have negative consequences. In Ireland, tourism may not provide a stable source of income during the off-season or in bad weather, potentially resulting in economic instability for those who depend on tourism as their primary income source.

- **Was the debate homogeneous, or were there elements of discord? If so, list the issues that created the debate**.

  The debate was civilly ambiguous; everyone was respectful of each other's views and took part in a proactive way.

- **If so, list the issues that created debate.**

  The issues that sparked the debate were outlined earlier. While it was widely acknowledged that ecotourism offers numerous strengths and benefits for local communities, there are also notable weaknesses and threats to consider. In conclusion, with appropriate regulations and support, including funding and relevant training for local communities, eco-tourism could provide significant benefits to the community as a whole.

- **Was it difficult to define the outcomes of the topic? If yes, why?**

  The discussion was very engaging and open, with all participants actively contributing their opinions. The trainer facilitated the conversation by prompting challenges to their views, which sparked various debate topics. However, the participants seemed more focused on the discussion itself rather than considering how it might lead to change or impact others.

TOPIC 2: WINNING FEATURES

- **What are the elements defined as winning?**
  Promoting eco-tourism also supports sustainable energy, biodiversity, and positive climate action within the community.

- **What topic areas (workflows, direct experience, customer care, places) are the winning elements related? And who outlined them?**

  Young tourists highlighted various local topics, such as popular places, customer support services, job creation, and their personal experiences. Meanwhile, policymakers and politicians provided detailed insights into future plans and available funding to achieve objectives related to these issues.

- **What weaknesses and strengths have emerged? What opportunities have been outlined? What threats have been defined?**

  It is evident from both groups that Ireland already has many ecotourism destinations, and that tourism is a significant sector of our economy. Both groups agree on the need for increased investment in small, local community ecotourism, which would provide visitors with an authentic experience of our culture. This need for investment is reflected in the funding and policies mentioned, as well as in the interests noted.

TOPIC 3: CHALLENGES

- **What are the three biggest challenges highlighted by the group and why?**

  The first challenge discussed was the cost of visiting certain eco-tourism areas. It was noted that these areas are increasingly being developed as tourist attractions, complete with gift shops and guided tours. The high prices of ticket sales can discourage local residents from visiting. These places can also often be overcrowded, which removes from the peaceful experience. The second challenge highlighted was that many of these natural eco-tourism sites are located in rural areas. In Ireland, the lack of public transport makes it nearly impossible to travel to these destinations unless one pays a significant fee for a private bus or drives a car, which is not environmentally friendly. Lastly, a significant issue raised was the lack of funding and regulations. The group concluded that the government should implement stricter regulations to protect eco-tourism areas across the country. For instance, it was mentioned that many forest walks have been severely damaged in a recent storm in

Ireland. "Coillte," the organisation responsible for managing these forests, has been criticised in the discussion for failing to maintain them adequately. There are concerns about how long it will take to clean up and reopen these areas, especially given the absence of funding and support from the government. Meanwhile, local communities that depend on amenities such as coffee shops or weekly events in or near these forests are struggling because no one is using their services.

- **How is policy and public debate perceived in relation to future challenges?**

  The discussion highlighted existing policies related to eco-tourism, notably "The Tourism Policy Framework for Irish Tourism to 2030." This policy aims to strike a balance between economic development and environmental and social considerations. It was finalised after extensive consultations with tourism stakeholders, industry representatives, and the public.

  Key guiding principles of the policy include the protection of Ireland's natural environment as well as a focus on maximising the economic value generated by each visitor rather than simply increasing the volume of tourists. Additionally, it was noted that €10.5 million has been allocated to a "Climate Action Plan" over the next five years in Cavan, Ireland. The public has been invited to contribute ideas, and a draft plan is currently in progress. Areas of focus in this plan include nitrate regulations, pollution, energy, and wastewater treatment.

- **Will future generations play a role in addressing future challenges? If yes, which ones?**

  The participants in the focus group were young individuals who openly shared their opinions and concerns regarding eco-tourism and biodiversity at both local and national levels. However, none of them felt that there was sufficient interest in discussing these issues with their local politicians. They expressed that there was a significant lack of communication between young people and elected officials. Many in the group noted that politicians rarely approach them to hear their views, which discourages young people from becoming proactive and involved in these matters. This situation led them to believe that future

generations would struggle to address environmental challenges. In contrast, when we spoke with local politicians, they insisted that they were actively engaging with young people and community groups. They highlighted various projects aimed at promoting ecotourism and sustainability in our area.

- **What are the greatest opportunities from a future perspective?**
There are numerous potential ecotourism ideas, especially considering how Irelands approach to ecotourism can be seen as lagging behind to other European countries. It was suggested that there should be more options for eco-friendly public transport, such as e-scooters and bikes, made available in all counties to encourage both visitors and locals to use environmentally friendly modes of transportation. While these options are available in major cities, they should be expanded to more areas. Additionally, it was noted that many local small organisations struggle to access funding, which is often allocated to larger groups or infrastructure projects. Young people are eager to engage in ecotourism once they understand its benefits, so educating the community on this topic would be very beneficial.

IN GENERAL

- **What were the most proactive stakeholder (policymakers, operators, users…)?** The young tourism users were the most passionate group with their thoughts and opinions, it was mentioned that they are the people living in the local areas who are a part of the community. They felt the results of eco-tourism would have the biggest impact on them rather than policymakers and politicians. However, they feel they are not represented correctly as they feel they are not approached about these topics. The policymakers, however, would be the most proactive as they were able to provide information about current and future goals on a local and national level surrounding climate, sustainability, biodiversity and eco-tourism issues.
- **Did comparisons with other member countries emerge**?
 Yes, it was mentioned how other European countries are much more advanced concerning ecotourism as it was felt they had better infrastructure and support from their government. An example given was the use of trams,

metros and bicycles in Holland, compared to Ireland, as we have a very weak public transport system for tourists to use. It was also mentioned that if we as Irish tourists were to visit other countries, we are respectful of natural areas as they are a part of our daily lives such as local rivers, lakes, forests etc. It was mentioned that more signs and restations should be used here as visitors from more built-up countries may not be familiar with our societal expectations.

- **Comments and observations from the focus group presenters**:
As the focus group was held with the young ecotourism users and the policymakers/ politicians separately, I do feel the debate would have been more beneficial if it had been held altogether, but we unfortunately could not arrange a time that would suit both groups to meet due to education and work schedules. The youth group had many opinions and were quick to find the challenges and threats, such as costs, overpopulation, lack of funding, etc. However, they were not as open to discuss why the costs were so high and what these prices may be used for, such as wages of a maintenance staff, biodiversity protection as such. If the focus groups had been held in one place, the young people would have felt empowered to have their voices heard by policymakers, and the policymakers could have also educated them on current and future goals and policies, which could have possibly changed their perspectives.

Appendix C: Italy National Report

This report aims to describe what are the main findings on the topic of ecotourism in *country* by delivering at least 45 questionnaires and conducting a Focus Group with at least 15 participants within the European project WILDESCAPE EU: Connecting Nature and Eco-Tourism in Europe.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY

Questionnaires

- How many people the survey was sent to: 150
- What dissemination channels were chosen: WhatsApp, E-mail and newsletter
- How many responses there were: 45 answers

MAIN FINDINGS

Looking at the questionnaire results, the first thing we note is that less than 60% of respondents participated in ecotourism experiences.

The most chosen listed ecotourism experiences are cycling trips, overnight stays on farms and trekking in the mountains.

On the other hand, over 35% of those who say they have not experienced ecotourism say they do not know what it is. This figure is interesting because counting the general focus on environmental issues at the moment it could also indicate that this sample has participated in such experiences without knowing they actually were ecotourism experiences.

Certainly, the first finding to observe concerns the knowledge of ecotourism and its concrete declination.

Looking at the correlation between greenwashing and ecotourism, over 58% of the respondents are sceptical about the real sustainability of ecotourism practices and the impacts they have on the environment. This response must be read in the light of what was said earlier: 40% of respondents have not experienced ecotourism and a sub-set of these claim not to know what it is: 1 in 2 of the respondents 'somewhat sceptical' belong to this category. However, more than 36% of respondents see ecotourism practices as actions truly aimed at sustainability. We find it particularly valuable that only 4% of respondents see ecotourism practices as related to greenwashing.

What emerges is a general tendency of the younger generation to repute ecotourism experiences as potential allies of eco-sustainability and biodiversity protection when known. This "accountability" is often lacking when the experience is not reputed to be ecotourism or there is not a clear definition of ecotourism itself. Looking at the

general trend of "sustainable travel," also present in several responses, we can say that even if not clearly stated, ecotourism is becoming a "normalised" practice in tourism itself.

From an economic point of view, the greatest challenges regarding the financial sustainability of ecotourism are found in the high costs and the heavy dependence on the seasonality of experiences as two compromising elements. In addition to this, which covers more than 65% of the participants, the absence of reliable funds and the difficulty of the investment target are perceived as less impacting.

These elements pose major threats to the financial sustainability of ecotourism experiences, especially if linked with the fact that our respondents see the possibility of ecotourism producing real profits as extremely uncertain. In fact, when asked, more than 60% of respondents answered that "maybe ecotourism produces profits" while 20% that "they have doubts that ecotourism produces results."

However, the majority of our respondents would be willing to pay more to experience ecotourism, and this finding is fascinating when correlated that a similar percentage see ecotourism experiences as one of the real ways that protect biodiversity.

As regards youth involvement in ecotourism experiences, the methods considered as more involving are those that see the construction of targeted experiences for young people, from tufting to coworking to moments dedicated to groups. The general perception that derives from this phenomenon is that young people, more and more, see nature as a space to reconquer and make their own in order to escape from the daily frenzy and have a more balanced lifestyle.

The main features of ecotourism experiences, most of the interviewees list relaxation, experiences, sustainability and personal growth.

This data is further confirmed by the fact that interviewees are attracted to ecotourism as a means to experience a slower lifestyle and direct contact with nature away from the daily routine and technology. If for users the ecotourism experience is 100% experience, for operators and communities the incentive to expand and structure ecotourism experiences indicated by the majority of interviewees is mainly economic: over 40% of interviewees see financial incentives as the only policy to protect the environment through ecotourism.

This element stands out in an important way, looking at politics. Both ecotourism users and operators strongly believe that politics is pursuing neutral or ineffective policies, some even consider, the 100% of the operators sees that legal framework as neutral regards to the ecotourism, while over 40% of users perceives the public debate totally unprepared towards environmental issues. The political absence on the environment topic is also listed among the main challenges for the future of ecotourism.

In conclusion, the findings highlight a major lack of awareness about ecotourism, with many unknowingly participating in such experiences. However, growing interest among young people in nature-based lifestyles and immersive experiences presents an opportunity for expansion. Despite this, policy support remains weak, with financial incentives seen as crucial for ecotourism's growth. Ultimately, the lack of awareness around ecotourism—not its communication methods—remains the biggest challenge, underscoring the need for education, engagement, and policy intervention.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY

Focus groups
- When it was held: 31/01/2025 and 6/02/2025
- Where: Online and Università di Scienze Gastronomiche (Pollenzo)
- Number of participants: 15, (11 people from University of Scienze Gastronomiche and 4 from the online masterclass)
- Who participated: Environmental Sustainability Manager, part of the LAG (Local Action Group) working on sustainable rural development, management of national and European calls for tenders, municipal councillor Giaveno
  - Environmental Hiking Guide, founder of 'Cammini Creativi.'
  - Administrative professional works at the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Pollenzo.
  - Young participant interested in ecotourism

- 3 post-doctoral researchers at the university
- Director of the university's teaching gardens
- 7 students from various programmes, mainly from the master's programme in Agroecology and Food Sovereignty
- Total of 6 policymakers, 9 young agents of ecotourism

- Eventual Partnerships that has been used to implement it: Partnership with Local Action Group of Valli Valdesi and Escartons and with Università di Scienze Gastronomiche (Pollenzo)

TOPIC 1: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- What experiences have emerged in community engagement?
- What weaknesses and strengths have emerged?
- What opportunities have been outlined?
- What threats have been defined?
- Was the debate homogeneous, or were there elements of discord? If so, list the issues that created debate.
- If so, list the issues that created debate.
- Was it difficult to define the outcomes of the topic? If yes, why?

A recurring theme in community engagement was the strong connection between locals and their natural environment. Participants mentioned that this bond fosters a sense of stewardship, encouraging sustainable practices and conservation efforts. However, economic pressures can challenge this relationship, as the drive for short-term profit, combined with limited awareness of environmental carrying capacities, often leads to overexploitation of resources. This is especially problematic in seasonal tourism, where businesses and communities feel compelled to maximise revenue during peak months, sometimes at the cost of long-term environmental and social sustainability. Both focus groups identified a lack of training and competencies among tourism operators, particularly in managing visitor interactions with local communities. Without proper preparation, ecotourism can become invasive, creating friction between residents and tourists. In extreme cases, locals may feel alienated, contributing to depopulation in rural areas.

To mitigate these challenges, participants emphasised the need for structured, community-driven ecotourism strategies:

- Creating structured engagement mechanisms to involve communities from the planning stages, ensuring tourism aligns with local needs.
- Investing in education and training programs for both operators and visitors, fostering responsible tourism practices.
- Encouraging partnerships among operators to move away from a competitive model toward one of collaboration, enhancing economic stability and sustainability.

The discussions in both groups were cohesive, reinforcing the idea that community engagement must be at the core of ecotourism planning and management to ensure its long-term success.

TOPIC 2 : WINNING FEATURES

- What are the elements that could be defined as winning?
  What topic area (workflows, direct experience, customer care, places) are the winning elements related to? And who outlined them?
- Are they replicable or closely related to the target environment?
- What weaknesses and strengths have emerged?
- What opportunities have been outlined?
- What threats have been defined?
- Was the debate homogeneous, or were there elements of discord? If so, list the issues that created debate.

Both focus groups agreed that embedding ecotourism practices within local communities is fundamental to ensuring environmental sustainability and fostering

strong partnerships. Community involvement is essential for creating authentic and immersive experiences, making it one of the most critical success factors.

A key theme that emerged was the importance of small-scale tourism, which allows for a direct, personalised relationship between visitors and hosts. This approach enhances visitor experiences, deepens cultural exchanges, and promotes sustainability. However, it also presents challenges:

- Higher operational costs and reduced accessibility make it difficult to scale ecotourism while maintaining affordability.
- Seasonality remains a major issue, as many destinations struggle to attract visitors outside peak months, creating economic instability.

Another key factor identified was the need for stronger credibility and accountability in ecotourism. Certifications, clear sustainability guidelines, and better communication of ethical practices were all cited as essential for building consumer trust and reinforcing responsible tourism standards.

Despite these challenges, the personalised, community-centred nature of ecotourism remains its greatest strength. Participants emphasised the importance of:

- Developing social innovation models, such as Living Labs, where tourism operators, local stakeholders, and visitors co-design sustainable experiences.
- Tailoring ecotourism strategies to each specific location, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all model.

The discussions were aligned, with participants consistently highlighting the need to balance authentic, small-scale tourism with long-term sustainability.

TOPIC 3: CHALLENGES

- What are the three biggest challenges highlighted by the group and why?
- How is policy and public debate perceived in relation to future challenges?
- Will future generations play a role in addressing future challenges? If yes, which ones?
- What are the greatest opportunities from a future perspective?

- Looking at the ongoing future challenges in ecotourism, which ecotourism experiences will work best? Thanks to which elements?
- Have directions for the policy framework emerged?

One of the most significant challenges identified was the exclusivity of ecotourism, which often caters to wealthier tourists, limiting accessibility and reducing its potential impact. Direct engagement with nature and local communities is key to fostering environmental awareness, yet high costs and limited availability can exclude a broader audience.

The financial sustainability of ecotourism businesses was another major concern. Many operators struggle with funding and lack business skills, making it difficult to maintain long-term operations. This often results in a short-term, profit-driven mindset, which can contribute to overexploitation of resources and environmental degradation.

Additionally, bureaucratic and regulatory challenges were highlighted as barriers to sustainable ecotourism. Excessive administrative burdens, complex regulations, and a lack of financial incentives make it difficult for operators to balance visitor engagement with conservation efforts. Participants noted that existing policies do not adequately support ecotourism as a biodiversity protection strategy, creating gaps in funding, legal frameworks, and governance.

However, participants also identified key opportunities for overcoming these challenges:

- Fostering structured collaboration between ecotourism operators, policymakers, and local communities to improve regulations and funding structures.
- Empowering future generations to drive ecotourism innovations by providing them with the necessary tools, education, and policy support.
- Developing new ecotourism models that balance economic, social, and environmental sustainability, moving away from luxury-focused tourism (e.g., glamping) toward:
  - Agritourism initiatives that integrate sustainable farming and local food systems.

- ○ Immersive nature experiences that actively involve visitors in conservation efforts.
- ○ Co-designed tourism models based on collaboration, dialogue, and shared governance among operators, local communities, and visitors.

The role of future generations was identified as crucial in reshaping ecotourism. With growing awareness of sustainable lifestyles and responsible travel, young people are increasingly seeking alternatives to mass tourism, prioritising local engagement, environmental responsibility, and authentic experiences.

Participants agreed that the future of ecotourism lies in slow, experiential, and community-led models, ensuring that sustainability remains at the forefront while enhancing the accessibility and economic viability of ecotourism initiatives.

IN GENERAL

- Who was the most proactive stakeholder (policymakers, operators, users…)?
- Did comparisons with other member countries emerge?
- Comments and observations from the focus group presenters

Answered in the texts.

Appendix D: Portugal National Report

This report aims to describe what are the main findings on the topic of ecotourism in *Portugal* by delivering at least 45 questionnaires and conducting a Focus Group with at least 15 participants within the European project WILDESCAPE EU: Connecting Nature and Eco-Tourism in Europe.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY

Questionnaires

- How many people was the survey sent to:167
- What dissemination channels were chosen: Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn
- How many responses there were:168 (35 completed questionnaires up to the age of 35 and 133 over the age of 35)

MAIN FINDINGS

1. **Looking at the level of trust people have in ecotourism experiences and the growing phenomena of greenwashing, what are the major findings?**
   57% of respondents say they have 'little confidence' that ecotourism agencies follow sustainable practices.

2. **How familiar is the younger generation with the world of ecotourism? Do they consider it trustworthy?**
   59% of respondents said they had not taken part in any ecotourism experience to date, it can be seen that there is little familiarity with this concept.

3. **Can the world of ecotourism be economically sustainable? Are users willing to pay more?**
   On the question of financial sustainability, 30% of respondents believe that the biggest challenge for ecotourism projects when it comes to financial sustainability is 'operating costs', followed by 'dependence on seasonality', with 29% of responses.

1. **Can ecotourism be a real tool to protect biodiversity?**

The majority of respondents believe that ecotourism experiences can play an important role in conserving biodiversity and protecting the environment, accounting for 64% of responses.

2. **Let's talk about involvement: how to stimulate the participation of communities and young users?**

   With regard to community involvement, 36% of respondents said that the main reason for increasing it would be 'through economic incentives', 36% said it would be 'through presenting the long-term benefits to the community' and 31% said it would be 'through education and awareness programmes.

3. **Have any ideas emerged to stimulate the participation of young users?**

   To the question 'what is the best way to experience ecotourism', 60%of respondents answered 'by implementing sustainable lifestyles.

4. **Looking at the framework: what are the perceptions of users and what are the perceptions of ecotourists?**

   When asked 'what do you look for in an ecotourism experience', 36% answered 'nature'. Other answers were given, such as: 'learning', 'protection', knowledge'.

5. **Is there a discrepancy on how ecotourism regulations are perceived by stakeholders and how they are perceived by users?**

   Respondents have a dim view of the concept of ecotourism, associating it mainly with exploring activities in nature, without considering environmental conservation aspects or existing laws. This may indicate a lack of awareness of the importance of sustainability and the preservation of ecosystems in the context of ecotourism.

6. **Are there recursive elements that a person looks for in ecotourism experiences? (List elements highlighted by at least two people)**

Connecting with nature, environmental learning and awareness, sustainability, contributing to the preservation of the environment / enabling the integration and economic development of local communities / promoting the well-being of all stakeholders through the interpretation of the environment.

7. **Is communication an element best used or to be improved in ecotourism experiences?**

   The majority or 60% of respondents consider that the way ecotourism is communicated and conveyed to the public is just one of the problems. This indicates that there are other more important factors to consider when talking about the difficulties in disseminating ecotourism.

8. **What are the biggest challenges for ecotourism and those who choose to do it?**

   According to 30% of respondents, the operating costs of tourism are the biggest challenge for ecotourism, followed by 29% of respondents highlighting the dependence on seasonality and finally 20% selecting sources of funding.

   The majority of respondents associate ecotourism with contact with nature and relaxation, with only a small percentage of people associating ecotourism with environmental conservation.

Are there significant elements that emerged from the comments section? Outline them in a paragraph.

There was no great influx of comments, but some respondents highlighted some negative points regarding the structure of the questionnaire, saying it was a bit confusing, and the questions unclear.

There was a clear predominance of responses from people over 35, compared to those under 35. This imbalance in age distribution may suggest that young people are less interested in the issues being

addressed, also reflecting the phenomenon of youth exodus from rural areas

DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY

Focus groups

- When it was held: Two focus groups were held, the first on 04/02/2025, in person, and the second on 06/02/2025, online.

- Where: The face-to-face focus group took place at CRESAÇOR's headquarters at Rua D. Maria José Borges, 137, 9500-466 Fajã de Baixo, Ponta Delgada, Azores, while the second took place via online teams.

- Number of participants: Total of 15

- Who participated (indicating them by category - policy maker, young tourist agent, 2 young members of the Azores Regional Assembly; 1 young biologist, environmental activist and leader of a local environmental community collective; 4 tour operators; 5 Regional Civil Service workers; 1 young tour operator; 1 young biologist; 1 biologist and teacher at the University of the Azores; 1 teacher and tour operator

- Eventual Partnerships that has been used to implement it: Not applicable

TOPIC 1: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- **What experiences have emerged in community engagement?**

It was argued by some participants that ecotourism projects are more successful when they create a strong connection with the local community. The role of communities should not just be limited to providing tourism services but should be an integral part of designing and managing tourism projects. Some participants confirmed that the territory still retained its authenticity, albeit in decline in some places. Many agreed that it is necessary to offer authentic experiences and

alternatives to mass tourism. The following experiences of community involvement were identified during the focus group:

- Life Snails Project, a government initiative linked to biodiversity and nature, focused on the conservation of the endemic snails of the island of Santa Maria (Azores). The project features volunteer actions for snail conservation which, following the lack of participation by local communities, welcomes a group of volunteers from other countries, allowing for a different type of tourism linked to nature conservation.

- The Priolo project linked to conservation is an example of success in the field of biodiversity and conservation, as it has involved local communities for many years.

- The project carried out in the Laurissilva Forest on the island of Madeira, linked to the production of honey, valuing endemic species and creating products with added value.

- Community gardens and school gardens, which encourage a sense of community, the learning of traditional techniques, the preservation of crafts, the introduction of ecotourism concepts, environmental conservation and its importance for the future.

- A company in Santa Maria Island (Azores) that produces jewellery by reusing garbage collected from beaches to create products with added value.

- The Regional Natural Parks that the archipelago offers, that celebrates Azores' endemic species and their importance to the ecosystem.

- The partnership between Melo Abreu Travel Agency and

SPEA (Portuguese Society for the Study of Birds) to support environmental conservation projects.

- Melo Abreu Travel Agency organizes Training vocational courses for schools, one per municipality, on sustainability.

- The Blue School on the island of Santa Maria engages young people in the themes of biodiversity and nature conservation.

- Chalet da Tia Mercês. It carries out activities with small groups by appointment, taking visitors to learn about the geothermal environments of a particular area of São Miguel Island (in the Furnas municipality), including tea tasting with thermal water. Contributing to a better interpretation and transmission of knowledge.

- Banco de Condor, a protected area in the Azores Marine Park for the management of fishing resources. Its main objectives are the annual monitoring of the abundance and biomass of demersal fish and their recovery after fishing ceased, where a 40% increase in the species of red seabream and other important species for marine biodiversity was observed after the area was restricted.

- Whale watching activities. The transition from the extractive activity of whaling to the activity of whale and cetacean watching has taken place in the Azores, leading to the emergence of tourist companies that have contributed to the creation of added value in the region. A representative of a whale watching tourist company mentioned in the focus group the investment the company made in the community, with initiatives with schools, investment in international training for employees and scientific research in the region by international experts.

- Algar do Carvão, located on the island of Terceira, is a Geotour that provides tourists with a range of relevant scientific information about the island and its geology.

- Birdwatching company, in Graciosa Island (Azores): an activity that combats seasonality in the region, while also creating specific birdwatching niches.

- Sail Azores (carbon footprint compensation for environmental conservation)

Which weaknesses and strengths have emerged?

The following strengths were identified by the focus group participants:

- The territory's natural and cultural potential and the particularities of each island in the Azores. The Azores have a vast territory made up of nine islands, each of which has different realities, cultural, environmental and social aspects
- that should be valued for the emergence of ecotourism activities that respect nature and local culture.

- The geodiversity of the Azores.

- The great potential of the oceans. In October 2024, the Azores passed its own legislation in the Legislative Assembly to protect 30% of the Azores Sea, almost 300,000 km2, half of which is fully protected. The next step will be to plan and manage the area. This example demonstrates the potential of the Azores Sea for preserving marine biodiversity. This action in the Azores is an example for the European Union.

- The Azores have established themselves as a laboratory for

biodiversity and nature conservation projects.

- Ecotourism can enhance culture and the environment. It should be viewed positively and consciously.

- Authenticity of the Azores, it was argued that we are a region "frozen in time", which, from a positive point of view, presupposes the permanence of local traditions and customs.

- The variety of Azores endemic fauna and flora (e.g.,*Azorina vidalii*)

The weaknesses identified by the participants were as follows:

In Education:

- Lack of political and financial literacy among young Azoreans. Curriculum programs are not prepared for the current reality. The education system does not encourage student participation and critical thinking. The discrediting of professional courses that guarantee the continuity of jobs linked to traditional trades.

In the community:

- Little interest on the part of the resident population in community initiatives, coupled with growing individualism.

- Azorean cultural reality does not keep pace with Europe ("Region frozen in time" from a negative point of view).

- The insularity and the different realities and particularities of the 9 islands are sometimes an obstacle to the development of ecotourism.
- Greenwashing, which leads to a misunderstanding of what ecotourism activities really are. This uncertainty was visible during the focus-groups.

At government and administrative level:

- Dispersion of communication and dissemination in the Regional Public Administration; obsolete internal system and lack of internal organization. An ageing civil service. The lack of coordination between entities and islands, combined with too many events in the high season.

- Lack of training for tourism professionals.

- Precariousness of tourist agents.

- Seasonality, more tourists in the high season compared to the low season.

- Lack of infrastructures and parking facilities need improved accessibility that would allow for the further development and improvement of ecotourism in the Azores.

- The Azores don't know what their "purpose" is. There is no "defined direction".

- Inability to guarantee the preservation of natural reserves for the future, balancing it with the development of tourism.

- Deregulation and lack of certification ("Anyone can legislate a tourism company").

- Lack of organisation in tourism development ("This is what gives the feeling that there are too many people. There aren't.").

- **What opportunities have been outlined?**

- Through ecotourism, regional traditions and crafts can be recovered, promoting the search for other spaces and relieving those under greater pressure.

- More non-formal education initiatives (raising environmental awareness; training communities to understand the issues in their entirety, not simplifying information).

- Young entrepreneurship and projects in partnership with educational structures that encourage student proactivity (e.g. partnership between the university and local tourism companies to monitor tourism activity by students on internships).

- Making the Azores a living laboratory in the areas of conservation and biodiversity, promoting tourism initiatives that involve the community in decision- making.

- Volunteering in ecotourism and biodiversity activities.

- Creating added value for Azorean products, allowing for greater appreciation of the community, instilling the need for environmental conservation and investing in "quality tourism, not mass tourism".

- Investing in the enhancement of vocational courses in order to deconstruct prejudices against a number of professions that are essential for ecotourism.

- Training for tour guides to certify ecotourism activities.

- The symbiosis between different areas: culture, tourism and the environment. "Tourism is above all a cultural encounter".

- Regenerative tourism.

- Creation of community discussions on regeneration and the future of tourism (tourism company proposal).

- **What threats have been defined?**

  The group identified the following threats:

- "Lack of political courage" in making decisions ("Political inconvenience of scientifically proven truths").

- "Swapped" priorities in the promotion of regional initiatives (e.g. the events like rallying and bullfighting are "mostly promoted" by the government).

- The loss of authenticity over the last few years.

- Exclusive focus on short-term government investment. There is no long-term strategic planning to guarantee the sustainability of the region and ensure the conservation of its natural and cultural heritage.
- A world that is too fast-paced and over-stimulated.

- Lack of participatory culture in local communities (individualism).

- The growing polarisation of society.

- Tourism that preserves a stereotype of regional culture (preservation of cultural authenticity in the tourism development process).

- Disregarding the negative consequences of tourism when

assessing its impact.

- **Was the debate homogeneous, or were there elements of discord?**

  There were elements of discord.

- **If so, list the issues that created debate.**

  There was disagreement about the concept of ecotourism and the respective experiences at regional level. The path that the Azores should take with regard to the future of tourism was also not entirely consensual (with more and less investment in small-scale tourism).

- **Was it difficult to define the outcomes of the topic? If yes, why?**

  No.

TOPIC 2: WINNING FEATURES

- **What are the elements that could be defined as winning?**

- The territory's potential for promoting value-added tourism that values and preserves the archipelago's geodiversity, local traditions and crafts, and regional heritage as a whole.

- Cross-sector initiatives seeking long-term investment.

- Formal and informal educational action to train children and young people in ecotourism.

- **What topic area (workflows, direct experience, customer care, places) are the winning elements related to? And who outlined them?**

- **Are they replicable or closely related to the target environment?**

They can be replicated, but it is necessary to observe the reality of each island and adopt measures and actions suited to the resident population. It is essential to personalise ecotourism. All activities must be designed and analysed to respect and enhance the characteristics of the territory, thus ensuring benefits for the local economy and the environment. It is also necessary to involve the local community and create a network of ecotourism operators so that resources, experiences and successful strategies can be shared and replicated in other contexts.

- **What weaknesses and strengths have emerged?**

The weaknesses identified by the participants were as follows:

- Lack of interest on the part of communities, poor management in publicising and communicating initiatives. Lack of coordination between entities and between islands, lack of investment in the environment and culture by regional government bodies. Lack of legislation on ecotourism certification.

- Lack of appreciation of natural and cultural heritage. Lack of entrepreneurial initiatives that align this appreciation with the development of quality tourism initiatives.

The strengths identified by the participants were as follows:
- The Azores covers a large area (made up of nine islands), which

makes the Azores a region so rich in diversity of cultural, geological and natural heritage, thus contributing to the emergence of various activities linked to ecotourism.

- Authenticity of the nine islands of the Azores.

- **What opportunities have been outlined?**

  - Collaboration between tourism agencies and local craft programs,

  - Volunteer programs for environmental conservation,

  - Support for conservation projects by tourist agencies,

  - Partnerships between educational structures and tourism companies to train young people and monitor tourism activity and impact in the region,

  - Creation of participatory cultural and environmental awareness programs in schools and local institutions (professional courses and entrepreneurs).
  - Training and capacity-building programs for tour operators, encouraging the transfer of knowledge.

  - Combating seasonality in tourism.

  - Create   collaborative networks by encouraging dialogue between tour operators, political bodies and local associations.

  - Structuring a coordination platform to share resources and strategies.

- **What threats have been defined?**

  - Banalisation of the terms "ecological" and "sustainability",

  - An economic model designed exclusively for the short term,

  - Prioritising tourists over locals,

  - The over-capitalisation of tourists ("We now see tourists as dollar signs"),

  - Lack of training on the part of tour operators,

  - Lack of legislation on the creation and monitoring of tourism businesses,

  - The preservation of the region's authenticity in the development of tourism initiatives,

  - Resistance to change on the part of local communities, which hinders the introduction of new ideas and the development of ecotourism initiatives.

- **Was the debate homogeneous, or were there elements of discord?**

  The group was aligned in this definition of winning characteristics.

TOPIC 3: CHALLENGES

- **What are the three biggest challenges highlighted by the group and why?**

  - Sectoral segmentation: education as a separate sector from the environment, culture, tourism and the economy.

  - Disjointed communication between local entities and between islands.

  - Low appreciation of regional heritage.

The implications of these challenges for the conservation of biodiversity on the one hand and regional traditions, customs and knowledge on the other are significant, according to the focus group participants. The solutions they presented always involved the need for greater coordination between sectors, between entities and between islands, mentioning the resistance and difficulties of these understandings in the region's past and present. These challenges are therefore the ones that stand out, since they touch on a number of others, of greater or lesser magnitude, raised by the participants.

- **How is policy and public debate perceived in relation to future challenges?**

The group recognised that there is no political space for conservation and biodiversity issues. There is little talk in party circles about ecotourism, which leads to a lack of legislation and certification (e.g. the Azores brand - a government initiative - has an invasive species as its symbol). It was observed that regional political action is often guided by party political agendas, neglecting the needs of local communities and overlooking the importance of setting a long-term course for the region.

The government system was considered "too bureaucratic", leading to greater difficulty in setting up new programs, actions and projects.

The centralisation of activities in local and regional government bodies was mentioned (too many events), which stifles private, collective and community initiatives.

- **Will future generations play a role in addressing future challenges? If yes, which ones?**

Yes, it is necessary to educate and involve young people as the "guardians" of the territory. To do this, it is necessary to promote training, capacity-building and awareness-raising programs that include young people, preferably with them as protagonists and ambassadors.

- **What are the greatest opportunities from a future perspective?**

Looking at technology as a tool for monitoring, disseminating and raising awareness of environmental issues in the field of conservation and biodiversity, thus promoting greater active participation by young people and the community in general.
Adding value to local products to instil the need to conserve the Azores' natural and cultural heritage.

- **What ecotourism experiences will be best shaped in relation to future challenges?**

Recovery of regional crafts and traditions in the development of tourism programs that include communities from their conception to their evaluation. Creating intersectoral synergies that promote a balance between companies, government bodies, the scientific community and local communities.

- **Have directions for the policy framework emerged?**
Give more space to political debates in the areas of the environment and culture. Pay attention to the importance of preserving the Azores Nature Reserves, promoting long term conservation initiatives. More precise and concrete

legislation. More investment in cultural and environmental areas (and more sustained investment that doesn't depend on biannual European support). Enhancing education, particularly in vocational courses. More monitoring of tourist activities to get a better idea of their "real" impact. Promoting the search for other spaces for tourist enjoyment to relieve the spaces that are under the greatest pressure.

IN GENERAL

- **What were the most proactive stakeholder (policymakers, operators, users…)?**

  Participation levels were homogeneous. There was, however, greater difficulty in attracting the participation of political decision-makers.

- **Did comparisons with other member countries emerge?**

Initiatives in the Nordic countries related to investment in environmental literacy was mentioned. Latin American countries and Canada were also seen as driving ecotourism initiatives.

- **Comments and observations from the focus group presenters**

Some participants found it difficult to define the concept of ecotourism, which led to less identification of ecotourism activities and experiences. On the other hand, the diversity of sectors represented in the focus group led to a heterogeneity of perspectives regarding notions of ecotourism and how it should be implemented in the region. In any case, investment in education and intersectoral coordination were

points of consensus, along with the need to create added value in order to ensure the preservation of regional heritage.

The focus group showed that quality ecotourism requires the active involvement of the local community. Only in this way will it be possible to create effective experiences that make the most of the area's resources, offering authentic and sustainable experiences with added value.

During the preparation of the focus group, we had great difficulty in getting young people from the region to participate more in this type of event, which demonstrates the lack of interest in the field of ecotourism and biodiversity and the increase in young people leaving rural areas.

It should be noted that during the two focus groups, three of the nine Azorean islands were represented: São Miguel, Terceira and Graciosa.

Tourism should be seen as an economic opportunity, but above all it should be seen as an instrument for strengthening the region's cultural and environmental identity.

Appendix E: Spain National Report

This report aims to describe what are the main findings on the topic of ecotourism in *Spain* by delivering at least 45 questionnaires and conducting a Focus Group with at least 15 participants within the European project WILDESCAPE EU: Connecting Nature and Eco-Tourism in Europe.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY

Questionnaires

- How many people was the survey sent to:

  70 people from sectors including policymaking, tourism, and youth.
- What dissemination channels were chosen:

  Tourism-focused WhatsApp groups, email-lists, and personal messages utilising existing networks.
- How many responses there were:

  52 answers.

MAIN FINDINGS

The survey results reveal limited familiarity with ecotourism among respondents from Aragón, Spain, with over half uncertain about its definition or whether they have participated in such activities. Despite this, there is notable interest in hiking, wildlife observation, and eco-friendly accommodations, suggesting an underlying curiosity that could be nurtured. Its strengths were often articulated in terms of "authenticity", "relaxation", "sustainability", and "accessibility". As one participant put it: "Ecotourism is interesting to me, due to not having an excessive impact on the environment, getting to know the surroundings and establishing social connections with the local people".

However, trust in ecotourism providers remains low, with a sizable group of respondents sceptical about whether these initiatives genuinely reduce environmental impact or merely serve as greenwashing efforts. This scepticism presents a major barrier to ecotourism's growth in the region: a lack of transparency and clear sustainability metrics.

Among younger generations, awareness is even lower, with only 20% claiming familiarity with ecotourism. This demographic is also highly distrustful of sustainability claims, suggesting that without targeted education and engagement, they may struggle to distinguish authentic ecotourism from conventional tourism with a green label.

Economic sustainability is another key concern. While ecotourism can generate local revenue and jobs, willingness to pay a premium for sustainable experiences remains uncertain. Many respondents acknowledge the need for financial incentives for conservation and community involvement but hesitate to assume higher costs themselves. This reflects a broader issue in Aragón's tourism economy, where sustainability initiatives often depend on external funding rather than consumer-driven demand. Along this line of thinking, many respondents argued that public support is insufficient.

Despite these challenges, ecotourism is widely recognised as a tool for biodiversity protection, though not a standalone solution. Habitat loss due to human activity is considered the most pressing threat, followed by governmental inaction and climate change. Respondents suggest that for ecotourism to be effective, it must be integrated into broader environmental policies and community strategies rather than treated as an isolated industry. As one participant argued: "nature is fragile, and respecting it is essential to guarantee its survival and ours. Although nature may seem powerful and infinite, it is delicately balanced, and our actions can have terrible and lasting impacts.

Encouraging participation, particularly among younger generations, requires a new approach. Respondents suggest group-based activities, financial incentives, and educational experiences tied to rural life as key motivators. Beyond direct incentives, psychological and cultural benefits such as a sense of belonging, relaxation, and reconnection with nature also play a role. This indicates that outreach efforts should highlight personal enrichment alongside environmental messaging.

Regulations are another divisive issue. While over half of respondents believe legal frameworks could support ecotourism, a significant portion feels current policies hinder conservation efforts. Many argue that policymakers lack direct experience with rural and ecological matters, leading to ineffective regulations. Greater involvement of local voices in policymaking could help bridge this gap.

Respondents most value sustainability, local cultural integration, learning opportunities, and relaxation during ecotourism experiences. Recurring themes such as immersion in nature, gastronomy, and hands-on engagement with local traditions

suggest that successful ecotourism initiatives in Aragón should emphasise authenticity and direct community involvement. The following passage seems to summarise the general attitude rather well: "I am looking for ecotourism activities that allow me to get to know the reality of a particular territory. On the one hand, its natural values and biodiversity, but also its socio-economic activity and any problems that may exist".

Communication remains an area needing improvement. While many believe ecotourism should be promoted online, awareness efforts are insufficient. This is particularly relevant given that 62% of respondents see sustainable lifestyles as key to experiencing ecotourism, yet few feel empowered to actively advocate for it. More engaging and interactive communication strategies could help bridge this gap. The acute need for all parties to work together was explicitly mentioned in several free-form answers.

The biggest challenges facing ecotourism in Aragón include weak governmental enforcement of environmental protections, limited awareness of sustainable tourism options, and climate change's growing impact on natural landscapes. While many respondents see ecotourism as a way to reconnect with nature and tradition, concerns about affordability, accessibility, and regulatory effectiveness persist.

Open-ended responses further highlight concerns over excessive urban-based regulation, financial accessibility, and the need for deeper, experience-based education. Some emphasise the importance of community-driven initiatives, while others stress the fragile balance of natural ecosystems and visitor responsibility. Ultimately, the survey suggests that while Aragón has the potential to develop a thriving ecotourism sector, it must address issues of trust, accessibility, and policy coherence to truly succeed.

Are there significant elements that emerged from the comments section? Outline them in a paragraph.

The comments section highlights several recurring themes regarding ecotourism in Aragón, reflecting both opportunities and challenges for its sustainable development. A significant concern is the need for better infrastructure that is both sustainable and informative, such as eco-friendly viewpoints in rural areas that provide educational content on local biodiversity and conservation efforts. Respondents also emphasise the importance of fostering a sense of community, particularly through local festivities, which not only strengthen social ties but also serve as an opportunity to showcase rural traditions and attract visitors interested in authentic cultural experiences.

Environmental fragility remains a core theme, with calls for greater respect and awareness of nature's delicate balance. Many stress the need for ecotourism initiatives that prioritise conservation over mass tourism and advocate for more education on the environmental impact of human activities. Collaboration emerges as another key factor, with respondents advocating for inclusive decision-making that involves all stakeholders, including local residents, policymakers, and tourism providers. The importance of working collectively to ensure long-term sustainability is frequently mentioned, with some calling for structured dialogue between rural communities and decision-makers.

Economic accessibility is also a major issue, as some believe ecotourism remains financially out of reach for many. The perception that sustainable tourism options are often more expensive limits participation, leading to suggestions for government subsidies or incentives that could make these experiences more inclusive. Lastly, there is criticism of urban-based regulation, with suggestions that policies should be more attuned to the realities of rural areas. Many respondents feel that decision-makers in cities lack a deep understanding of rural life and conservation needs, leading to regulations that may be impractical or even counterproductive. A greater focus on bottom-up governance, where local voices have more influence in shaping ecotourism policies, is seen as essential for the sector's success.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY

Focus groups

- When was it held: 30/01/2025
- Where: Daroca (Zaragoza, Spain)
- Number of participants: 15
- Who participated (indicating them by category - policy maker, young tourist agent, or others)
  - 4 Tourism Technicians
  - 2 Rural Development Agents
  - 2 Tourist Guides
  - 4 Tourism Entrepreneurs
  - 1 Worker in the Tourism Sector
  - 1 Politician
  - 1 Agri-food Entrepreneur with a Pastry Museum

- Eventual Partnerships that has been used to implement ecotourism.
  ADRI and IKIGAI, local development organisations, partnership with a large network of people working in sustainability and tourism in the region of Aragon. The majority of the participants are well-integrated into local and regional sustainability initiatives and have previously contributed to the EU-funded "LEADER"-Programme.

TOPIC 1: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- What experiences have emerged in community engagement?
- What weaknesses and strengths have emerged?
- What opportunities have been outlined?
- What threats have been defined?
- Was the debate homogeneous, or were there elements of discord?
- If so, list the issues that created debate.

- Was it difficult to define the outcomes of the topic? If yes, why?

Community engagement in ecotourism has proven to be both a strength and a challenge. A key success is the strong connection between local communities and their cultural and natural heritage, exemplified by self-organised events such as the Festival of the Cranes and the Battle of Cutanda. These events generate local economic benefits and reinforce community identity. However, sustainability remains an issue, as associations struggle with leadership turnover, burnout, and a lack of structured planning. The absence of a cohesive regional tourism strategy further weakens engagement efforts.

Key threats include reliance on external event organisers, inconsistent funding, and fragmented promotional efforts. Without a centralised approach, some local experiences remain underutilised, and tourism potential goes unrealised. Opportunities exist in better coordination, such as establishing an annual event calendar, creating a regional tourism network, and developing shared promotional materials. These measures would improve visibility and collaboration among villages.

While there was broad agreement on the importance of community-led initiatives, debates arose over the level of institutional involvement. Some participants favoured independent grassroots efforts, while others emphasised the need for regional government support to ensure long-term viability. Ultimately, defining outcomes was challenging due to differing perspectives on balancing autonomy with structured governance.

TOPIC 2 : WINNING FEATURES

- What are the defining elements, and what would be considered as winning?
- What topic areas (workflows, direct experience, customer care, places) are the winning elements related to? And who outlined them?
- Are they replicable or closely related to the target environment?
- What weaknesses and strengths have emerged?
- What opportunities have been outlined?

- What threats have been defined?
- Was the debate homogeneous, or were there elements of discord? If so, list the issues that created debate.

Successful ecotourism models in the region rely on immersive, community-driven experiences that highlight local history, nature, and culture. Periodical events, guided tours, and outdoor sports have been identified as key winning elements, offering visitors both structured activities and authentic interactions. These experiences foster deeper engagement and local economic growth. However, sustaining these initiatives requires overcoming logistical and financial challenges.

The winning features identified relate primarily to direct visitor experience and place-based tourism. For example, medieval festivals and agricultural fairs effectively blend entertainment with cultural preservation, while activities such as Astro tourism and trail running showcase the natural landscape. The success of these initiatives depends on their ability to maintain authenticity while adapting to visitor expectations. However, replicability varies—some elements, like periodical markets, can be standardised across locations, whereas others, like heritage-driven tourism, require site-specific adaptation.

Weaknesses include the lack of professional tour guides, inconsistent training, and the difficulty of maintaining events beyond peak seasons. Regulatory challenges, such as strict food market laws, further complicate efforts. To counter these threats, participants suggested strengthening collaboration between tourism operators, investing in skill development, and leveraging digital tools for promotion. While most agreed on the need for locally driven ecotourism, discussions emerged on how to balance commercial viability with sustainable, small-scale tourism models.

TOPIC 3: CHALLENGES

- What are the three biggest challenges highlighted by the group and why?
- How is policy and public debate perceived in relation to future challenges?
- Will future generations play a role in addressing future challenges? If yes, which ones?
- What are the greatest opportunities from a future perspective?

- Looking at the ongoing future challenges in ecotourism, which ecotourism experiences will work best? Thanks to which elements?
- Have directions for the policy framework emerged?

Three primary challenges were identified in sustaining and expanding ecotourism in the region: (1) the need for structured tourism management, (2) the financial viability of ecotourism businesses, and (3) overcoming logistical and regulatory barriers. Many initiatives currently operate on a short-term, event-based model, lacking continuity and scalability. Without improved coordination and funding, even successful experiences risk stagnation.

Policy frameworks were seen as insufficient in supporting sustainable ecotourism, with participants highlighting bureaucratic inefficiencies and inadequate financial incentives. Public debate remains focused on traditional tourism rather than the specific needs of ecotourism operators, creating gaps in governance and resource allocation. Addressing these challenges requires both institutional support and grassroots innovation.

Future generations are expected to play a crucial role in shaping ecotourism through digital engagement, entrepreneurship, and sustainable business models. Opportunities exist in leveraging local gastronomy, guided outdoor activities, and conservation-based tourism. Wildlife experiences, such as those at Gallocanta Lagoon, along with immersive heritage tourism, were highlighted as key areas for growth. The discussion emphasised the need for policies that promote long-term investments rather than short-term subsidies, ensuring that ecotourism remains both economically and environmentally viable.

IN GENERAL

- Who were the most proactive stakeholders (policymakers, operators, users…)?
- Did comparisons with other member countries emerge?
- Comments and observations from the focus group presenters

During the focus group, the most proactive stakeholders were clearly the tourism operators: guides, technicians, and entrepreneurs. These individuals, directly involved in the daily workings of tourism, demonstrated a keen awareness of the sector's challenges, and their insights revealed the practical limitations they face, from a lack of infrastructure to insufficient resources for promotion and training. This direct engagement provided a unique perspective, highlighting gaps and opportunities that policymakers may overlook, and underlining the critical need for coordinated efforts between all parties involved.

Comparisons with other countries emerged during the discussion, with participants noting that Spain lags behind in ecotourism development compared to other nations. The focus group presenters highlighted a sense of frustration and scepticism, as many participants feel that despite years of effort, there has been little tangible progress in improving tourism infrastructure or initiatives. Overall, the consensus was that there is still much work to be done to advance the sector.

APPENDIX F: RESEARCH TOOLS

Survey questions

1) **Have you ever participated in an Ecotourist experience?**
   - Yes
   - No

2a) Briefly list the ecotourism experiences in which you have participated

Open ended short

2b) What ecotourism experiences would you like to participate in

Open ended short

3) On a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is the least and 5 is the most, how well do you know ecotourism?

4) Imagine you're leading an ecotourism agency: What would be your top priority when balancing tourist experiences and environmental protection?

- Maximising visitor satisfaction
- Ensuring minimal environmental impact
- Creating immersive educational experiences
- Other: [Please specify]

5) Based on the assumption that the United Nations defines Greenwashing as *"Greenwashing presents a significant obstacle to tackling climate change. By misleading the public to believe that a company or other entity is doing more to protect the environment than it is",* how confident are you that ecotourism agencies follow truly sustainable practices, rather than just "greenwashing"?

- Not confident at all
- Somewhat sceptical
- Confident
- Completely confident
- Other

6) What do you think is the biggest challenge for ecotourism projects when it comes to financial sustainability?

- Lack of reliable funding sources
- High operational costs
- Dependency on seasonal tourism
- Difficult target of investing funds
- Other: [Please specify]

7) Do you think it's possible for ecotourism to generate enough profit to sustain itself without sacrificing its mission to protect the environment?

- Definitely not
- Doubtful
- Maybe
- Yes, absolutely

6) Are you willing to pay more for an ecotourism experience?

- Yes, much more
- Yes
- Yes, but not too much
- No
- Other

8) What do you believe is the most pressing threat to biodiversity in ecotourism regions/sector today?

- Habitat loss due to human activities
- Climate change impacts
- Lack of government action
- Over-tourism
- Other: [Please specify]

9) How would you motivate local communities to get actively involved in biodiversity protection?

- Economic incentives (jobs, eco-friendly businesses)
- Education and awareness programs
- Showcasing the long-term benefits to their community
- Other: [Please specify]

10) How would you involve other young people like you?

- With discounts for groups
- With dedicated activities for groups
- By building ad hoc moments for young people (e.g. tufting night, workshops, coworking spaces)
- By experimenting with foods
- Other: [Please specify]

11) How optimistic are you that conservation projects can make a real impact in protecting biodiversity?

- Not optimistic
- Somewhat pessimistic
- Neutral
- Somewhat optimistic
- Very optimistic

12) You are…

- a user of ecotourism experiences
- an association or small business involved in ecotourism

FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

13) Do you think politics, in terms of public debate, is paying enough attention to environmental issues?

- Yes, absolutely
- Yes, but not enough
- No
- The political debate is unprepared for environmental issues

SMALL BUSINESS

13) In your opinion, do current laws and regulations support or hinder ecotourism and conservation efforts?

- Strongly hinder
- Slightly hinder
- Neutral
- Somewhat support
- Strongly support

14) In your opinion, is there enough support for those ecotourism entities in terms of economic support, accessibility and outreach?

- Yes, but could do better
- No
- The political debate is unprepared for environmental issues
- Other

15) If you could advocate for one new policy to better protect the environment through ecotourism, what would it be?

- Stricter environmental standards

- Financial incentives for sustainable practices
- More transparency in project operations
- Other: [Please specify]

16) As an ecotourist experience taker, do you think there should be incentives such as discounts and tax rebates?

- Yes
- Maybe
- No
- I think you should pay the right amount for the experience you enjoy
- Other

17) What do you look for in an ecotourism experience? Outline only three elements

Open ended short

18) What is the best way to experience ecotourism?

- By having an active role in their definition
- By telling friends and family about them
- By supporting them with donation
- By implementing sustainable lifestyles
- Other

19) Do you think ecotourism experiences can play an important role in conserving biodiversity and protecting the environment?

- Absolutely
- Yes, but only in part
- No
- Other

20) Do you think one of the problems in spreading ecotourism activities is due to how they are communicated online?

- Yes
- No
- Partly but not the main problem
- Only some of them
- Other

21) In the future, what are the biggest challenges for those involved in ecotourism? (more answers)

- Climate change that will make it increasingly difficult to access some areas
- The poor standards of governments in protecting some areas
- Rising costs for owners
- The lack of awareness of ecotourism experiences
- Other

22) What is your idea of an ecotourism experience?

- A relaxing experience in the midst of nature
- Learning something new that reconnects you with your inner self
- Living in contact with nature away from technology and everyday life
- A slower-paced routine that reconnects you with traditions
- Other

23) How old are you?

- <18 years old
- 19-15 years old
- 26-31
- 32-35
- >35

24) Do you have any further comments or suggestions?

Open ended question

25) Do you want to be contacted for the Focus Group? Please leave your name and your e-mail address

Open ended question

Focus groups topic

The focus groups will have three elements as discussion topics: community involvement, the best elements, challenges.

With **community engagement**, we want to study what is the role of target communities in promoting and implementing ecotourism activities. In this sense, the different stakeholders within the communities themselves must be highlighted in order to understand what role they may play.

Building a list of the **best elements,** analysing their characteristics and interdependencies, aims to extrapolate which elements are successful and can be replicated in other contexts. This topic will be investigated though participants' experience highlighting the winning elements encountered and understanding their main features (e.g., context, promoting body, places).

Finally, looking at the **challenges**, present and future, from a symptom and critical perspective will allow for the construction of a final report that succeeds in providing tools or skills to best address them, and if possible, build applicable and scalable solutions.

National Report

Country

This report aims to describe what are the main findings on the topic of ecotourism in *country* by delivering at least 45 questionnaires and conducting a Focus Group with at least 15 participants within the European project WILDESCAPE EU: Connecting Nature and Eco-Tourism in Europe.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY

Questionnaires

- How many people the survey was sent to:
- What dissemination channels were chosen:
- How many responses there were:

MAIN FINDINGS

Enter the link of Google Sheet copy prepared from the Google Form:

Considering the answers to the survey, write paragraphs to describe the main findings, <u>not exceeding more than 1.5 pages</u>, in which you answer the questions below as honestly as possible.
The following queries are designed to follow the order of the questions in the questionnaire

1. Looking at the level of trust people have in ecotourism experiences and the growing phenomena of greenwashing, what are the major findings?

2. How familiar is the younger generation with the world of ecotourism? Do they consider it trustworthy?

3. Can the world of ecotourism be economically sustainable? Are users willing to pay more?

4. Can ecotourism be a real tool to protect biodiversity?

5. Let's talk about involvement: how to stimulate the participation of communities and young users?

6. Have any ideas emerged to stimulate the participation of young users?

7. Looking at the legal framework: what are the perceptions of users and what are the perceptions of ecotourists?

8. Is there a discrepancy on how ecotourism regulations are perceived by stakeholders and how they are perceived by users?

9. Are there recursive elements that a person looks for in ecotourism experiences? (List elements highlighted by at least two people)

10. Is communication an element best used or to be improved in ecotourism experiences?

11. What are the biggest challenges for ecotourism and those who choose to do it?

12. Are there similarities in people's ideas of ecotourism?

Are there significant elements that emerged from the comments section? Outline them in a paragraph.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY

Focus groups

- When was it held:
- Where was it held
- Number of participants:
- Who participated (indicating them by category - policy maker, young tourist agent, users and others)
- Collaborative partnerships that has been used to implement it:

Keeping in mind the description of **focus group topics** defined in the *"Survey and Focus Group"* document, describe what the main findings are in **1/2 page per topic** by answering the questions highlighted below.

TOPIC 1: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- What experiences have emerged in community engagement?
- What weaknesses and strengths have emerged?
- What opportunities have been outlined?
- What threats have been defined?
- Was the debate homogeneous, or were there elements of discord?
- If so, list the issues that created debate.
- Was it difficult to define the outcomes of the topic? If yes, why?

TOPIC 2 : WINNING FEATURES

- What are the elements defined as winning?
- What topic areas (workflows, direct experience, customer care, places) are the winning elements related? And who outlined them?

- Are they replicable or closely related to the target environment?

- What weaknesses and strengths have emerged?

- What opportunities have been outlined?

- What threats have been defined?

- Was the debate homogeneous, or were there elements of discord? If so, list the issues that created debate.

TOPIC 3: CHALLENGES

- What are the three biggest challenges highlighted by the group and why?

- How is policy and public debate perceived in relation to future challenges?

- Will future generations play a role in addressing future challenges? If yes, which ones?

- What are the greatest opportunities from a future perspective?

- Looking at the ongoing future challenges in ecotourism, which ecotourism experiences will work best? and which elements would be favourable?

- Have directions for the policy framework emerged?

IN GENERAL

- Who were the most proactive stakeholders (policymakers, operators, users…)?

- Did comparisons with other member countries emerge?

- Comments and observations from the focus group presenters

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