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From niches to regime: sustainability transitions in a diverse tourism destination

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ABSTRACT

Until the end of WW2, the Margaret River region (MRR) was a popular domestic destination based on cave explorations. A series of incremental innovations between the 1950s and 1990s reconfigured the destination into a thriving international tourism destination that offers diverse experiences based on wine, surf, and nature. Nonetheless, contemporary external and internal forces are stimulating another shift – one towards sustainability. Apart from the global pro-sustainability agenda, this sustainability transition in tourism is mainly driven by two emerging niches: eco-accreditation and grassroots organisations. This paper adopts the multilevel perspective (MLP) – a commonly adopted framework in the sustainability transitions research field – and combines it with a typology of tourism innovation to examine the evolution of the MRR as a tourist destination. The paper addresses the ongoing sustainability transition in the MRR and discusses both top-down and bottom-up initiatives that stimulate it. In order to provide a holistic view of this transition, the paper also pays attention to the first transition in the destination (i.e. from caves to wine, surf, and nature), and examines its influence on the ongoing sustainability transition. As such, this paper aims to help bridge the gap between tourism geography and the interdisciplinary field of sustainability transitions.

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Introduction

Sustainability transitions research (STR) is a growing multi-disciplinary field that focuses on the technical, economic, institutional, sociocultural, and political changes that are required for various contemporary challenges, such as resource scarcity, air pollution, global warming, and energy poverty, to be addressed (Grin et al., 2011; Köhler et al., 2019; Markard et al., 2012). STR utilises various theoretical frameworks such as the multilevel perspective (MLP), technological innovation systems, strategic niche management, transition management, and various evolutionary approaches (Köhler et al., 2019;

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van den Bergh et al., 2011). Despite being a relatively young field, STR has achieved outstanding progress, although so far it has mainly focused on energy, transport, water, and urban systems, with many important sectors yet to be tackled (Köhler et al., 2019). For instance, tourism, an important contributor to global warming that exhibits various unsustainable patterns (see Buckley, 2012; Burns & Bibbings, 2009; Lenzen et al., 2018), remains absent in STR. In that sense, responding to Niewiadomski and Brouder (2022) call for bridging the gap between STR and tourism studies, this paper adopts the MLP to address the emerging sustainability transition in a popular tourist destination in Western Australia (WA)—the Margaret River region (MRR).

Drawing from semi-structured interviews and various documentary sources, this paper addresses the shift to more sustainable practices in tourism which the MRR is embarking on. While before the 1950s the MRR, as a tourist destination, relied mainly on cave exploration, it is currently a popular international tourist destination based on wine, surf, and nature (Flood Chavez et al., 2023). Yet, the trade-offs between the economic, environmental, and social impacts of tourism have resulted in various local initiatives that aim to re-shape the MRR into a more sustainable destination (see e.g. Save Smiths Beach Again, 2020). As such, this paper utilises the MLP and Booyens and Rogerson's (2016) tourism innovation framework to address the sustainability transition currently taking place in the MRR.

The remainder of this paper consists of seven sections. The following three sections discuss the main bodies of theory which this paper utilises. In order to set the scene, the following section presents background information on the MRR as a tourist destination. This is followed by the methodology used in this research. The penultimate section (which consists of three distinct sub-sections) presents the research findings and a wider discussion, respectively, while the last section offers conclusions.

Sustainability transitions and the multilevel perspective

Sustainability transitions encompass multiple interdependent changes, involve various actors operating in different sectors, have a normative objective (i.e. sustainability), are highly uncertain, and tend to take decades to unfold (Geels & Schot, 2011; Köhler et al., 2019). Place-specific factors play an important role in sustainability transitions as they help to explain, for instance, why regional paths towards sustainability often differ (see Murphy & Smith, 2013; Truffer et al., 2015). By contrast to other frameworks used in STR, the MLP highlights the role of history in the evolution of sociotechnical systems (Geels & Schot, 2011; Niewiadomski & Brouder, 2022). As such, the MLP is useful in addressing not only sustainability transitions (e.g. Fuenfschilling & Truffer, 2014), but also historical sociotechnical transitions such as the transition from horse-drawn carriages to automobiles (see Geels, 2005a). As a theoretical perspective, the MLP conceptualises transitions in a dynamic way, using three analytical levels—regimes, niches and landscapes, and argues that sustainability transitions occur due to the alignment between these three levels (Essletzbichler, 2012; Geels, 2011; Geels et al., 2017).

A regime is a stable and well-structured core of a sociotechnical system that maintains a particular trajectory (Essletzbichler, 2012; Geels, 2005a; Grin et al., 2011; Verbong & Geels, 2007). It is a configuration of actors and networks, rules (cognitive, regulative,

and normative), and institutions that structure actors' decisions, the usage and development of artefacts and materials, and the production and reproduction of skills and procedures (Fuenfschilling & Truffer, 2014; Geels, 2005b). All elements within a regime tend to align their trajectories in a co-evolutionary manner, which increases their stability and persistence (Geels et al., 2017; Grin, 2016). As a result, regimes can only promote complementary and incremental innovation, rather than any radical changes that undermine their status quo too abruptly (Essletzbichler, 2012).

By contrast, niches differ from regimes in terms of the size and stability (Geels & Schot, 2007). They can be conceptualised as protected spaces where radical innovations occur (Geels, 2004). Niches allow innovations to thrive as a result of economic stimuli, social networking, and enhanced learning processes (Geels, 2004; Raven, 2005). Universities, military institutions, and technological firms are usually considered as main niche actors; however, grassroot organisations can also serve as spaces where niche innovations are developed, for instance, as a result of social needs or alternative ideologies (Seyfang & Smith, 2007; Smith & Stirling, 2017). In that sense, niches can be understood as sources of upstream actions. At the same time, both regime and niches are influenced by a wider, slow-changing, external environment that is beyond their influence and that is usually referred to as 'landscape' (Geels, 2018; Geels & Schot, 2007).

The MLP assumes that the alignment of processes within and between the regime, landscape, and niches can result in windows of opportunity (Geels et al., 2017). Those windows of opportunity can allow niche innovations to reach the regime level and transform it (Derwort et al., 2022; Geels & Schot, 2007; Köhler et al., 2019). For instance, the growing environmental awareness is an important landscape factor that forces regime actors to revise their unsustainable ways of doing things, which, in turn, creates windows of opportunity for more sustainable niche innovations to emerge (Bridge et al., 2013; Essletzbichler, 2012). However, such pressure is not always automatic. According to Geels and Schot (2007, p. 404) 'landscape developments (...) need to be perceived and translated by actors to exert influence' on niches and regimes.

Geels (2004, pp. 39–42; see also Geels et al., 2017; Rotmans et al., 2001) proposed a four-phase framework for analysing sustainability transitions. The phases are not rigid, but can be adapted instead to the distinctive mechanisms taking place in any particular case (see e.g. Derwort et al., 2022; Fohim & Jolly, 2021). These phases are:

1. Emergence of novelty in an existing context (pre-development),
2. Technical specialisation in market niches and exploration of new functionalities (take-off),
3. Wide diffusion, breakthrough of new technology, and competition with established regime (acceleration),
4. Gradual replacement of established regime, wider transformations (stabilisation).

However, as some critics noted (see e.g. Berkhout et al., 2004), it is not clear in the MLP framework what the empirical equivalents of the three analytical levels are. In that regard, Geels and Schot (2007) advise researchers to first demarcate the empirical level of the object of analysis and then apply the analytical levels of the

MLP to that object. Although there is a clear tendency in MLP-informed research to associate regimes with the national level (Truffer et al., 2015), Geels (2011, p. 31) indicates that 'the MLP does not prescribe how broad or narrow the empirical topic should be delineated'. Due to the specific nature of the tourism sector, all these questions are also pertinent to tourism.

The multilevel perspective and tourism

As already indicated, sustainability transitions in tourism have not been widely addressed and therefore, the adoption of the MLP in tourism studies has been rather negligible. Yet, its applicability to tourism can be as high as in research on other industries. According to Hall (2016), tourism can be understood as a socio-technical system which consists of artefacts such as airports, rules such as regulations or standards, organisations such as destination marketing organisations, human resources (e.g. hospitality labour), natural resources (e.g. endemic species), economic capital, cultural meanings, knowledge, and technology. Within the tourism socio-technical system, it is as possible to identify features of the regime, landscape, and niches as in research on other sectors. In the case of tourism regimes, Hall (2016) suggests that they tend to be highly persistent and require upstream social and political action to be changed, which is a common characteristic of other socio-technical regimes (Geels et al., 2017). Without using the MLP terminology, Randelli et al. (2014) provide a key example of a tourism regime for rural tourism in Tuscany (Italy). They use the term 'rural configuration' which is defined as the 'semi-coherent set of rules that orient and coordinate the activities of the rural actors' (Randelli et al., 2014, p. 277). In relation to sustainability transitions, Falcone (2019) identifies excessive bureaucracy and a lack of technology and infrastructure as likely features of tourism regimes (see also Carson et al., 2014) that hinder sustainability transitions in tourism.

With regard to the landscape level, it is easy to infer that global processes such as the growing environmental awareness (Hall, 2016) or climate change (Becken & Wilson, 2013; Niewiadomski & Brouder, 2022) play an important role in influencing sustainability transitions in tourism. For instance, some of these landscape pressures can motivate residents and visitors to behave more responsibly in tourist destinations (see e.g. Li et al., 2023) and stimulate the development of innovative niches to manage or mitigate tourism-related carbon emissions (e.g. Buijtendijk et al., 2018). Indeed, as spaces where innovations for sustainable tourism emerge and unfold, niches are key for sustainability transitions in tourism (Niewiadomski & Brouder, 2022). However, incremental non-technological innovation is more frequent in tourism than radical innovation (Booyens & Brouder, 2022; Williams, 2014), which can represent a theoretical challenge as the MLP assigns more importance to radical innovations than incremental ones (see e.g. Geels & Schot, 2007; Köhler et al., 2019). Considering that challenge as well as the fact that, until recently, tourism has been traditionally deemed to be not a very innovative sector (Booyens & Rogerson, 2016; Niewiadomski & Brouder, 2022), especially in terms of technological innovations (Booyens, 2018; Niewiadomski, 2016; Williams, 2014), a wider discussion on innovations in tourism is required.

Niche innovation for sustainable tourism

According to the MLP, innovations (particularly radical innovation) can facilitate sustainability transitions by opening new markets, disrupting existing regimes, promoting public and private partnerships, and shifting public opinion (Geels et al., 2017; Köhler et al., 2019). However, in order to contribute to sustainability transitions, tourism innovations do not need to be novel, but have a degree of 'newness' (i.e. be new to a firm or destination—see Hall and Williams, 2019) (Booyens & Brouder, 2022). This means that new or significantly improved products, processes, or practices implemented by tourism firms and organisations have an important role in driving sustainability transitions in tourism, especially if their cumulative effects are considered (Booyens & Brouder, 2022; Hall and Williams, 2019). In that context, innovation for sustainable tourism refers to the incorporation of multiple and diverse practices that are new to tourism firms or the destination and that aim to enhance positive environmental, social, and economic impacts of tourism (Booyens & Brouder, 2022; Booyens & Rogerson, 2016). Importantly, innovation in tourism may include authorities, visitors, entrepreneurs, and labour force (Williams, 2014).

Identifying the niches where innovations for sustainable tourism emerge as well as the historical and place-specific factors that enable them are key to understand sustainability transitions in tourism (Niewiadomski & Brouder, 2022). A useful typology that contributes to this is Booyens and Rogerson (2016) categorisation of innovation in tourism. Not only does it consider the complex nature of innovation for sustainable tourism, but it also pays attention to the cumulative effects of incremental innovation. It distinguishes seven different categories of innovation:

1. Product: Improvements and upgrades in various tourism amenities and services,
2. Marketing: Shifts in marketing strategies in response to technological and demand changes,
3. Environmental: Development and adoption of environmentally friendly practices to minimise the environmental impact of tourist activities,
4. Organisational: Changes in tourism firms' structures to strengthen their presence in the tourist destination or to become more competitive,
5. Process: Implementation of novel processes to deliver better services to visitors (these innovations are mainly related to information and communication technology),
6. Structural: Inclusive, collaborative, and mutually beneficial innovations beyond tourism firms, with positive implications for the local community in a tourism destination (this category includes public policies and strategies),
7. Social: Development of novel tourism products, services, processes, or practices to efficiently deliver social benefits across the destination (including public policies and strategies)

(Booyens & Rogerson, 2016, pp. 518–521).

Among these categories, Booyens and Rogerson (2016) highlight structural and social innovations, which are often driven by passionate actors who envision a shift

of the destination and whose actions can re-shape the entire destination rather than any particular element of the tourism sector. As such, structural and social types of innovation can play an important role in sustainability transitions in tourism. Destination sustainability certifications are a good example here. Eide and Hoarau-Heemstra (2022) argue that destination certifications can promote innovations for sustainable tourism beyond the firm level, including authorities, destination management organisations, and residents. In turn, collective bottom-up actions driven by grassroots organisations in collaboration with authorities are an example of social innovation that can result in social—and in some cases also structural—changes at the destination level (Booyens, 2022; Guia et al., 2022; Smith & Stirling, 2017). For instance, Flood Chávez and Niewiadomski (2022) examined grassroots organisations in Peru that are leading innovative tourism initiatives to conserve fragile natural ecosystems in their destinations and improve the local economy at the same time.

Thus, Booyens and Rogerson (2016) innovation typology is well-placed to complement the MLP in addressing sustainability transitions in tourism. This paper uses both these frameworks to address the historical formation of the current regime in the MRR and to examine the sustainability transition which the region (and thus the tourism regime) is now gradually embarking on. The next section provides key background information on the area of study.

Area of study

The Margaret River region is an internationally recognised tourist destination based on wine, surfing, gastronomy, and various natural and cultural attractions (Jones et al., 2019; MRBTA, 2019). For instance, in 2019 the MRR was named the top destination in the Asia Pacific region (Business News, 2019). The region lies 250 km south of Perth in the southwestern corner of WA and encompasses two administrative areas—the City of Busselton (Busselton) and the Shire of Augusta Margaret River (AMR) (Figure 1). According to the last census data, the MRR has a population of 57,431 people (ABS, 2021).

Tourism has played an important role in the development of the MRR, especially since the 1960s when the MRR became an attractive destination for various new residents, including surfers and new lifestylers (Jones et al., 2019). Just like in other rural areas in Australia, tourism helped counter the depopulation process which the MRR was experiencing in that period (Sanders, 2006). Over time, the contribution of tourism to employment and investment in the MRR significantly increased. In 2018–2019, the MRR received 2.89 million domestic and international visitors, generating direct and indirect jobs for around 20% of the region's population (MRBTA, 2019). However, as a result, the MRR also began to witness various environmental and sociocultural challenges (Pancia, 2020; Wesley & Pforr, 2010) which fostered tourism stakeholders in the region to start rethinking how this development should continue.

Methodology

The paper draws from 51 semi-structured interviews with 54 respondents directly or indirectly involved with tourism in the MRR. The interviews were conducted online



Figure 1. The Margaret River region in Western Australia. *Source. Authors.*

between February 2021 and March 2022 (Table 1). At the initial stage, respondents were selected according to the rule of purposive sampling (i.e. based on their knowledge of and involvement in the local tourism industry), while at the later stage the snowballing rule was adopted (Valentine, 2005). Interview questions focused on the evolution of the MRR as a tourist destination and the main factors promoting and/or hindering the region's transition to sustainability. All interviews were transcribed, coded in NVivo, and analysed using Miles et al.'s (2013) approach. The analysis initially

Table 1. List of interviewees. *Source. Authors.*

Type of interviewee	Respondent code	Number of interviewees
Independent experts (e.g. academic)	1 to 4	4
Representatives of non-for-profit organisations	5 to 7	3
Representatives of destination marketing organisations	8 and 9	2
Representatives of the UNWTO Australia's Southwest Tourism Observatory	10 and 11	2
Representative of an ecotourism certification organisation	12	1
Representatives of local industrial organisations	13 and 14	2
Representatives of community organisations	15 to 25	11
Federal authorities	26 to 28	3
WA authorities	29 to 36	8
Local authorities	37 and 38	2
Representatives of tourism-related businesses	40 to 54	16

used preestablished codes (i.e. historical factors, current tourism drivers and challenges, tourism innovation, and factors promoting/hindering a transition to sustainability). As the analysis continued, new codes emerged such as sustainable initiatives, grassroots movements, and eco-accreditation. Various publicly available historical sources such as press articles, institutional reports, and websites of tourism-related institutions and firms were also interrogated.

Following Geels and Schot (2007) suggestion that the empirical level of analysis should be delineated prior to identifying the three MLP levels, this research focused on the tourism sector in the MRR. As such, the dominant tourism industry in the MRR (including its structure and multi-actor configuration) is considered as the regime, while various emerging initiatives which aim to disrupt the regime 'from within' are conceptualised here as niches. In turn, the landscape level encompasses external processes taking place outside the MRR tourism sector. In this respect, most of the interviewees represented the regime or niche levels. However, a small number of interviewees were found to operate at both levels (e.g. interviewees who owned accommodation establishments and were also members of sustainable tourism initiatives).

One destination, two transitions

This section presents findings and discussions. Two transitions can be distinguished in the history of the MRR—a historical transition and an ongoing sustainability transition. This section has three sub-sections. To set the scene, the first sub-section addresses the historical transition. The second one analyses the tourism regime that resulted from the first transition and examines the interplay of challenges and sustainability initiatives at the destination level that have triggered the ongoing sustainability transition. The third sub-section addresses the sustainability transition in more detail.

The historical transition towards a diverse destination

Tourism in the MRR can be traced back to the late nineteenth century when it mainly relied on limestone caves as tourist attractions, and the related services, infrastructure, and firms that developed accordingly to serve visitors (Battye, 1912; Sanders, 2006).

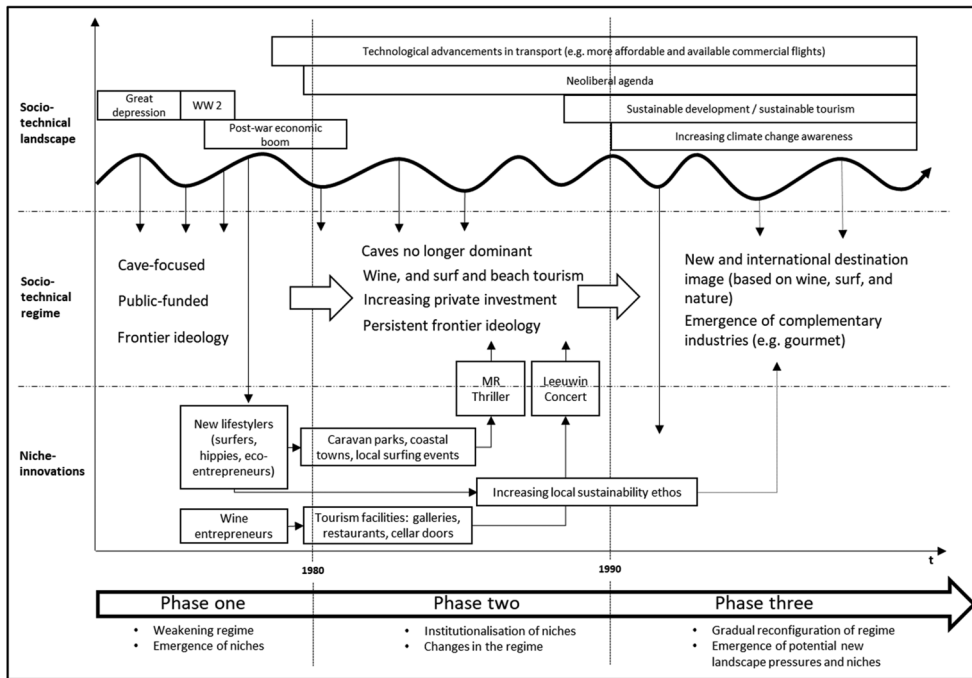


Figure 2. First transition in the MRR. Source: Author based on Derwort et al. (2022).

However, a set of dramatic changes which ensued after WW2 transformed the MRR from a cave-focused domestic destination into a diverse international one (see Flood Chavez et al., 2023). This subsection uses the MLP—specifically the transition phases framework—to briefly address the historical development of the MRR as a famous international tourist destination (see e.g. Augusta - Margaret River Mail, 2019). As such, this sub-section sets the scene for a discussion of the contemporary sustainability transition in the MRR which is the main focus of this paper. The paper adapts Geels (2004) four-phase framework and distinguishes three phases in this sub-section with the first two phases from the framework merged into one (see Figure 2).

The historical transition started approximately in the 1950s. During the first phase (late 1950s—late 1970s), new niches in the form of the surfing and wine industry emerged in the MRR as a wave of new lifestylers (e.g. surfers, hippies, eco-entrepreneurs) moved into the region alongside wine-entrepreneurs. Both groups took advantage of affordable and cleared land left by a declining dairy industry (Flood Chavez et al., 2023; Sanders, 2006). As a result, galleries, cellar-doors, and restaurants related to the wine industry, and caravan parks and coastal towns related to surfing developed (Cresswell, 2003; Forrestal & Jordan, 2017). All these facilities represented product innovation (see Booyens & Rogerson, 2016). This phase encompassed pre-development and take-off, as per Geels's (2004) framework (see also Rotmans et al., 2001).

The second phase of the historical transition (1980s) witnessed an increasing popularity of surfing and the wine industry which positively influenced the levels of visitation to the MRR (Sanders, 2006; Thompson, 2015). As such, this phase represents the acceleration of the transition (see Geels, 2004; Rotmans et al., 2001). Surf and

beach tourism, wine tourism, and cave tourism conveniently co-existed during this phase (Cresswell, 2003), however, by the end of the 1980s cave-tourism had been relegated to a secondary position while wine-tourism had become dominant (Interviews 4, 10, and 11). Two major events that took place in the MRR at that time (i.e. the MR Thriller surfing competition and the Leeuwin Estate concert) (Augusta - Margaret River Mail, 2013; Caccetta, 2014) helped the niches to break through into the regime and position the MRR as an international destination based on wine and surfing. From that point onwards, wine and surfing events, festivals, and conferences in the destination proliferated. The increase in the number of events and related businesses reflected incremental product and marketing innovation (see Booyens & Rogerson, 2016; Hall and Williams, 2019) as they continued to build on wine and surf tourism.

The last phase of the historical transition (1990s—early 2000s) (i.e. stabilisation—see Geels, 2004; Rotmans et al., 2001) was characterised by a new destination image that relied on wine, surfing, beaches, and cave experiences, all of which attracted even more visitors (Thompson, 2015). Zekulich (2004) characterised the beginning of the twenty first century in the MRR as a ‘tourism boom’ driven mainly by wine-tourism. During this period, the tourism regime reconfigured itself by adopting wine and surf tourism as its main pillars (e.g. wine tourism conferences received public grants, while surf competitions gained an international outreach) (Malpeli, 1999; WA Government, 1998). In turn, wine-tourism contributed to the emergence of a local gourmet industry, whose development could be viewed as an incremental product innovation (Taverner, 2018; WA Business News, 2003). Likewise, the local tourism body became an important sponsor of wine and surf tourism events without compromising cave-based tourism (MRBTA, 2019).

The historical transition was facilitated by important factors at the landscape level (see Figure 2). One of those factors was the global development of air transport (see Niewiadomski, 2020). For instance, by 1980 flight times from Perth to Adelaide (South Australia) had reduced considerably from 25 to 3 h (Department of Treasury and Finance, 2004; Forrestal & Jordan, 2017). This landscape change allowed, for example, the popularisation of the region’s wine which, in turn, contributed to positioning the MRR as a national—and international—destination (see also Flood Chavez et al., 2023). As Keith Mugford, owner of Moss Wood—an iconic wine estate in the MRR—indicated: ‘[in the late 1970s] the opportunity to get MRR wines selling to the wider world was good. It seemed you could just turn up in Melbourne and Sydney and sell your wine’ (Forrestal & Jordan, 2017, p. 254). Another landscape factor was the deregulation of the Australian economy in the 1980s—a direct result of global neoliberal measures (see Harvey, 2007)—which furthered private investment in WA resulting in higher levels of employment, mainly in the service sector including tourism (Department of Treasury and Finance, 2004). For instance, Cresswell (2003, p. 236) indicates that ‘the 1980s have been a period of immense growth within the shire of AMR (...) Farming areas have been taken over by vineyards and the development of tourist accommodation has multiplied.’ Such deregulation also allowed more participation of national and international corporations in the MRR’s wine and tourism industries (Sanders, 2000, 2006).

In sum, the historical transition of the MRR into an international tourist destination brought three key outcomes. First, the region developed a highly diverse image relying

mainly on wine-tourism, beaches, and surfing. Second, investment in the tourism sector significantly increased, leading to the 'tourism boom'. And third, the region started developing an incipient, although quickly growing, sustainability ethos (i.e. a mindset focused on achieving a balance between development and environmental conservation—see Sanders, 2006).

A transition to sustainability: the beginning

The 'tourism boom' in the MRR in the first two decades of the twenty first century (Charlick, 2018; Rylance, 2000) encompassed increased private investment in luxury accommodation (including resorts, spa hotels, retreats, glamour camping or 'glamping' sites) and an increase in surfing-related events and competitions (see e.g. Gregory, 2003; Murray, 2020; Trigger, 2013). Local tourism bodies also contributed to the 'tourism boom' by improving their structure (e.g. AMR's and Busselton's tourism organisations merged into the Margaret River Busselton Tourism Association—MRBTA), developing booking systems, and opening information centres in Perth (MRBTA, 2019; Scourfield, 2008). In addition, public money was invested in the regional airport and other means of access to the region (Bailey, 2005; Kirk, 2020a). Interviewee 17, a resident and member of a grassroots organisation in the MRR, commented on the 'tourism boom':

[The] region has experienced a huge boom in the 2000s and a lot of people from all over the world have come here with all sorts of different interests and agendas and the whole fabric of the population has changed massively, that has only happened because of tourism, not necessarily because of the employment opportunities but because of the reputation. (...)

(Interview, March 2021)

This boom was also marked by an increase in population and private housing in the MRR. For instance, between 2001 and 2021 the population in AMR increased by 73.9% while Busselton's population grew by 85.9%. In the same period, the number of private properties (including unoccupied properties) in AMR and Busselton increased by 78.8% and 94.3%, respectively (ABS, 2021, ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics), 2001). Amongst other factors, this growth was largely driven by tourism innovation (Thompson, 2015) which could be classed as product, marketing, process, and organisational as per Booyens and Rogerson (2016) typology. As it often happens in tourist destinations, the growth of the tourism sector in the MRR exerted pressure both on its environment and its residents (see Stoffelen & Ioannides, 2022; Williams, 2009). As a result, the sector faced a number of complex challenges, including pressures on sensitive coastal areas due to tourism development, disruptions to the local social fabric, a housing crisis and a shortage of staff due to the proliferation of short-term accommodation, and problems with water supply. Similar observations were also made by Thompson (2015).

As a response to those challenges, several niche activities have emerged (both top-down and bottom-up). According to 50% of the interviewees, the main driver of these initiatives is the local sustainability ethos (see also Jones et al., 2019; Sanders, 2006); however, the paper also identifies the increasing global awareness of climate

change as a key driver at the landscape level. For instance, negative effects of climate change on the tourism industry in the MRR include water shortages, biodiversity loss, and an increasing occurrence of bushfires, all of which also affect the region’s wine industry (Jones et al., 2010).

Towards a diverse sustainable destination

This subsection adopts the MLP and Booyens and Rogerson’s innovation typology (2016) to analyse the role of emerging niches in fostering the sustainability agenda in the MRR, and their influence on the existing tourism regime under the pressures coming from the changing landscape. Following the same four-phase framework as with regard to the historical transition, this section argues that the sustainability transition in tourism in the MRR has entered the acceleration phase, although the COVID-19 pandemic caused disruptions to this process (see Figure 3).

The first phase of the second transition took place between 2000 and 2019, which naturally overlapped with the stabilisation phase of the historical transition. During this phase the tourism regime in the MRR became aware of the sustainability and climate change related challenges. For instance, the MRBTA doubled its efforts to establish a diverse, attractive, sustainable, inclusive, and distinctive destination image (Block, 2015). The tourism regime also helped to achieve a blanket ban on coal mining in the MRR in 2012 (Loney & Kerr, 2012). As such, the new regime exhibited marketing

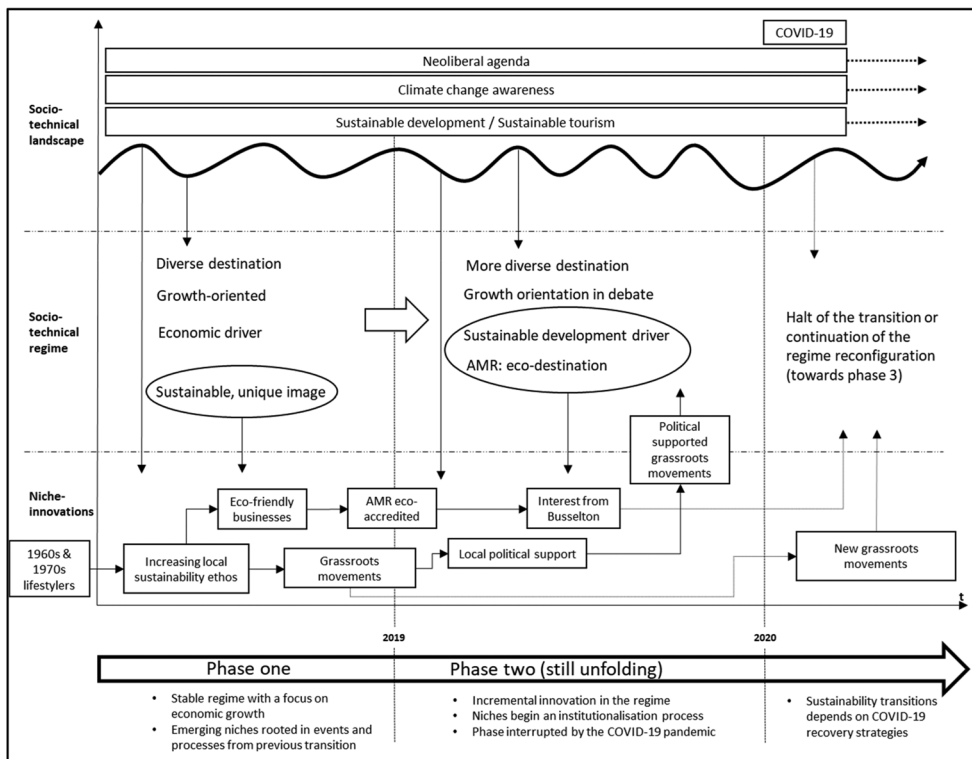


Figure 3. Second transition in the MRR. Source: Authors based on Derwort et al. (2022).

innovation (e.g. new branding) and structural innovation (e.g. the ban on coal mining). Yet, these innovations did not sufficiently shift the destination away from its economic growth orientation. As Interviewee 6, a representative of a local NGO, stated:

[T]here is always going to be a drive [for numbers]. I mean a hindering factor [for a sustainability transition] will be this notion that we must get thousands more tourists here every year, so there is always a drive to increase the numbers. I think we do not know whether that is just natural, or we want to see growth in the economy down here. So, that mentality is what I would call a hindering factor in moving towards a more sustainable [destination].

(Interview, April 2021)

While the research identified a number of innovative practices, two specific initiatives (conceptualised here as niche activities) emerged that began steering the destination away from the imperative of economic growth towards more innovations for sustainable tourism. Therefore, far from being mere minor sustainability-related measures, both niches represent the beginning of an ongoing sustainability transition. As such, the emergence of these niches became the key factor stimulating the first phase of the sustainability transition in the MRR.

The first niche was initiated by the arrival of an eco-destination accreditation scheme—a top-down initiative led by the national organisation Ecotourism Australia (Ecotourism Australia, 2022). Guided by Ecotourism Australia, the MRBTA and AMR Council created a protected space (i.e. a niche) for local tourism firms to become eco-certified, although the most ambitious objective, i.e. to certify the destination as a whole, has yet to be achieved. Such certification would require a significant improvement of sustainability-related practices, including the engagement of Aboriginal people, the promotion of local produce, and the enhancement of natural capital (Ecotourism Australia, 2022). The AMR council, aware of the negative impacts of climate change on its key industries (i.e. tourism and wine), firmly committed to achieving the eco-destination certification by means of developing various projects around sustainability (e.g. to support agricultural and energy transitions, promote local consumption, help provide low-carbon tourist transport) (Green Destinations, 2021; Shire of AMR, 2022). Due to the holistic scope of these projects (see Shire of AMR, 2022), the eco-destination initiative falls into the structural innovation category (see Booyens & Rogerson, 2016; Eide & Hoarau-Heemstra, 2022). However, during this phase concrete action in this respect was taken only by AMR (Shire of AMR, 2022).

The second niche is constituted by various grassroots advocacy movements, with a number of bottom-up initiatives usually led by resident organisations. These movements are intermittent and responsive in nature. For instance, Save Smith's Beach and Preserve Gnarabup advocated for stopping resort development in sensitive coastal areas (Kruijff, 2020; Wesley & Pforr, 2010). Although they did not fully succeed, they managed to reduce the project's impact on the landscape and thus raise environmental awareness across the destination. Since these organisations aim to give voice to the local community, their activities (whether successful or not) have had an important positive social influence on the destination. As such, it is possible to place the activities of such grassroots organisations in the social innovation category (see Booyens & Rogerson, 2016; Guia et al., 2022). As Interviewee 18 mentioned:

[I] think those groups and activities are aiming at trying to preserve the natural environment (...). In that sense, they are definitely supporting the tourism industry. Even though it sounds like they are against the tourism industry [because they are against tourism development], but not really. [They are looking forward to] keeping the environment in such a state that tourists will still want to come here.

(Interview, March 2021)

During this phase (i.e. pre-development; Geels, 2004; Rotmans et al., 2001) the growing sustainability ethos in the MRR was a key factor. For instance, Interviewees 4, 11, and 37 indicated that various members of the AMR Council were informed by the sustainability ethos gradually brought by the influx of new residents since the 1960s and 1970s. In the case of the grassroots movements the sustainability ethos is more evident which is often the case for this type of organisations, as indicated by Seyfang and Smith (2007, see also Smith & Stirling, 2017).

The year 2020 marked the beginning of the second phase of the sustainability transition (i.e. take-off) when both niches achieved an incipient institutionalisation. As in the previous phase, the regime continued to manifest its engagement with sustainability in the form of a progressive implementation of solar panels, recycling practices, water reuse, and a focus on local products, all of which fall into the environmental innovation category (see Booyens & Rogerson, 2016). These incremental changes responded to various public and private incentives linked to the growing sustainability ethos in the region and wider landscape factors (e.g. climate change awareness). Yet, these innovations did not attempt to steer the destination away from its economic growth orientation.

In turn, both niches continued to develop their networks and increase their impact. Busselton showed interest in engaging with the eco-destination accreditation (Interviewees 12 and 51), although no formal application has been made yet. Meanwhile, grassroots organisations strengthened their linkages with external and more resourceful institutions such as Surfrider Foundation and WA Forest Alliance (Interviewees 4 and 19). In addition, they also developed strong links with local politicians who support sustainability initiatives in the AMR Shire Council, which attests to the fact that an incipient institutionalisation has commenced (Interviewee 4). All these developments reaffirm the relevance of grassroots initiatives in the transition towards a sustainable destination.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted tourism globally (Niewiadomski, 2020), interrupted the second phase of the sustainability transition in the MRR and influenced regime and niches in various ways. For instance, the pandemic reinforced the economic growth orientation of the regime as it fostered a redirection of public and private investment (see ABC Regional News, 2020; Kirk, 2020b). In turn, the pandemic brought up both pessimistic and optimistic perceptions about tourism and sustainability in the MRR. On the one hand, interviewees—mainly those related to grassroots organisations and resident associations—highlighted that the pandemic intensified social challenges in the destination such as the housing crisis and shortages of labour (see also Augusta - Margaret River Mail, 2020; Lefebvre, 2020). On the other hand, optimistic perceptions saw the pandemic as an opportunity for change. As Interviewee 37, a member of the AMR council, mentioned:

[I] am hoping that the experience of going through an unexpected shock (COVID-19), has helped wake people up to the fact that there are other shocks that we've been talking about for a long time, and that we can't ignore, and we actually need to address them. So, hopefully, maybe there's a more realistic sense that we need to actually be doing something properly about the environmental crisis.
(Interview, March 21)

Yet, despite the impact of the pandemic, the niches managed to continue unfolding. For instance, in 2022 AMR officially became an eco-certified destination (Ecotourism Australia, 2023). Likewise, Preserve Gnarabup has continued to manifest against luxury tourism developments (see e.g., Schlesinger, 2022). While it is too early to assess the long-term effects of the pandemic on the destination, it appears that the sustainability transition in the destination has restarted. Plus, it is possible to notice that the two niches even started to compete with the regime, which might suggest that the transition is gradually entering—or re-entering—an acceleration phase (see Geels, 2004; Rotmans et al., 2001). Nonetheless, the emerging niches continue to face strong barriers in the form of the differentiated engagement of both local government administrations (AMR and Busselton), a lack of clear leadership at the destination level, the proliferation of short-stay accommodation, a risk of overreliance on tourism, and visitors' unsustainable practices.

Hence, while the progress made so far places the sustainability transition in tourism in the MRR at the beginning of the acceleration phase, further commitment is still required from federal, WA, and local political actors; local firms; residents; and even visitors for the transition to unfold further. Such commitment, together with landscape pressures (e.g. climate change), could create a window of opportunity for a more significant breakthrough of niches into the tourism regime level. All in all, the ongoing sustainability transition in the MRR allows a degree of optimism about the future of the destination. Yet, further research is needed to follow the trajectory of this transition.

Conclusions

The paper adopted the multi-level perspective (MLP) to analyse the sustainability transition in tourism in the Margaret River region (MRR). First, the paper examined the historical interplay of landscape pressures, regime forces, and niche developments that shaped the current tourism regime in the region and the emerging niches where innovation for sustainable tourism started unfolding. Second, the paper explored the conditions that explained the unfolding of a sustainability transition in tourism in the MRR as a result of economic, environmental, and social challenges. And third, the paper, analysed the ongoing sustainability transition within the tourism industry of the MRR by focusing on two destination-wide innovations—an eco-accreditation scheme and grassroots advocacy movements. As such, the paper's findings have empirical and theoretical relevance. Empirically, this paper identifies two transitions in the MRR and unpacks the type of innovations that drove each transition. The first transition, although not fully intentional, reconfigured the entire tourism regime through various product and marketing innovations. In turn, the sustainability transition (i.e. the second one), which is currently unfolding in a purposeful manner in order to foster a major shift towards sustainable tourism (i.e. away from its economic growth

orientation), is mainly relying on structural and social innovations. In both transitions, the paper highlighted the influence of landscape factors (e.g. global technological development, neoliberal agenda, climate change awareness) as well as of place-specific elements such as the MRR's growing sustainability ethos.

In theoretical terms, this paper re-confirms the usefulness of the MLP in research on sustainability transitions at the tourist destination level. It also demonstrates that Booyens and Rogerson (2016) typology of tourism innovation can conveniently complement the MLP in fostering the understanding of niche innovation in tourist destinations. Given that tourism innovations are complex and predominantly incremental (rather than radical or entirely novel), Booyens and Rogerson's framework can serve as a promising extension of the MLP in its applications to tourism. (Booyens & Brouder, 2022; Hall and Williams, 2019; Williams, 2014). This 'tourism innovation typology-informed MLP' helps address both the interplay of landscape pressures, regime forces, and niche developments towards a more sustainable destination, and, the historical and place-specific factors that enable the emergence of innovations for sustainable tourism (as suggested by Niewiadomski & Brouder, 2022). As such, this paper demonstrates that: first, the tourism regime presents similar patterns as other sociotechnical regimes (e.g. persistence, stability, and self-reinforcing mechanisms); second, eco-destination accreditation schemes and grassroots organisations represent structural and social innovation, respectively, and have the potential to trigger sustainability transitions in tourism destinations; and third, innovations for sustainability transitions are both history- and place-dependent. Indeed, as shown above, niches in sustainability transitions in tourism build on historical events (e.g. former transitions, imported knowledge) and place-specific factors and assets such as local culture and ethos, destination image, natural environment, and local authorities' engagement.

This theoretical contribution furthers the research on geographies of sustainability transition (see Murphy & Smith, 2013; Truffer et al., 2015) and helps reduce the gap between tourism geography and STR, although the paper is not free from some limitations such as comparisons to other tourist destinations and more nuanced attention to the interactions between tourism and other sectors in the MRR. Therefore, further research is needed, including comparative analyses of various tourism destinations undergoing sustainability transitions as well as the interactions between sustainability transitions in tourism and other regional industries.

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