Community Participation and Environmental Stewardship in Small Tourism Destinations: A Governance Framework

Raden Roro Fatma Sari[1], Diah Fatma Sjoraida[2]

1. Universitas Sangga Buana YPKP | sarie801@yahoo.com

2. Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung | Diah.fatma@unpad.ac.id

Abstract

Purpose: This conceptual paper explains how community participation may support environmental stewardship in small tourism destinations. Approach: A purposive narrative synthesis connects participation theory, collective-action reasoning, and sustainable tourism guidance. No destination survey or environmental measurement is claimed. Framework: Participation is separated into access to information, influence over decisions, shared implementation, and the ability to challenge outcomes. The proposed mechanism links meaningful influence to legitimate rules, locally workable responsibilities, and feedback on environmental pressures. Conditions include representation, transparent allocation of benefits, monitoring capacity, and an effective response to breaches. Contribution: The framework distinguishes attendance at meetings from consequential participation and separates visitor growth from destination welfare. Practical implications include a decision register, explicit maintenance responsibilities, and a small set of locally meaningful indicators. The propositions require testing against ecological and social evidence across different destinations.

Keywords: community participation; sustainable tourism; environmental stewardship; destination governance; local benefits

1. Introduction

Small tourism destinations often depend on environmental qualities that can also be damaged by tourism activity. Clean water, attractive landscapes, accessible public spaces, and everyday community life can support visitor demand. Their maintenance requires decisions about use, investment, waste, access, and responsibility. A rise in visitor numbers does not reveal whether those decisions improve residents' welfare or protect the destination's ecological foundations.

Community participation is frequently proposed as a solution, yet the term can describe very different arrangements. Residents may receive information, attend a consultation, help maintain facilities, or hold a binding role in deciding access rules. These arrangements differ in their influence over outcomes. This paper asks which features of participation could connect local involvement with environmental stewardship, and under what conditions the proposed connection might fail.

The argument combines Arnstein's (1969) distinction between degrees of participation, Ostrom's (1990) reasoning about collective governance, and the UNEP and World Tourism Organization (2005) guide to sustainable tourism. These sources motivate a conceptual framework rather than an assessment of a named destination. The contribution is an explicit chain connecting representation, decision influence, workable responsibilities, monitoring, and corrective action. The chain can guide later empirical research and the design of a locally accountable governance process.

2. Participation, stewardship, and destination welfare

Participation is defined here by its relationship to decisions. A participatory arrangement identifies who may contribute, what information they receive, which choices remain open, and how their input can change an outcome. Attendance and consultation can be useful, but neither alone demonstrates influence. Arnstein (1969) provides a foundational warning against treating every participatory label as equivalent. The present framework uses that distinction without assuming that one institutional form suits all tourism settings.

Environmental stewardship refers to organised responsibilities for protecting, maintaining, and restoring the environmental resources on which the destination depends. It includes routine activities and decisions about acceptable pressures. Stewardship should not be reduced to voluntary cleaning after damage has occurred. Rules on visitor access, waste handling, infrastructure maintenance, and sensitive-site use can shape the production of that damage in the first place.

Destination welfare is broader than tourism revenue. Residents may gain income while experiencing congestion, unequal access, rising service burdens, or degradation of shared resources. UNEP and the World Tourism Organization (2005) provide a broad sustainability perspective; the analytical contribution here is to connect it to specific local decision rights. A destination should assess economic, social, and environmental consequences separately before judging whether their combination represents an acceptable outcome.

3. Method and limits of inference

This is a conceptual synthesis using a purposively selected set of foundational references. It does not claim a comprehensive search, a coded corpus of destination studies, interviews, focus groups, or ecological field measurements. The references establish conceptual starting points for participation, collective action, and tourism sustainability. The proposed framework is developed through logical comparison of their implications for a small destination's decision process.

The analysis traces a recurring decision cycle. A pressure or maintenance need is identified; stakeholders receive information; a rule or investment choice is made; responsibilities are assigned; outcomes are observed; and the decision is revised if necessary. The cycle is then examined for failure points such as excluded groups, unclear responsibilities, unavailable resources, or an inability to respond to breaches. Examples used in the discussion are hypothetical operating situations, not evidence of actual destination performance.

The framework assumes that relevant public authorities retain their lawful responsibilities and that participation does not remove basic protections for excluded or less powerful residents. It also assumes that environmental assessment uses suitable methods rather than public opinion alone. Residents can identify experienced problems, but a vote cannot establish water quality or ecological carrying capacity. The framework therefore treats local knowledge and technical evidence as complementary inputs whose differences should be examined openly.

4. The proposed governance mechanism

The first link runs from representation to credible problem definition. Residents, workers, small businesses, visitors, and public-service providers may experience the same destination differently. The process must identify who is absent and whether practical barriers prevent contribution. Representation does not require assuming that any individual speaks for an entire category. It requires a defensible way to hear different interests and record how competing claims were considered.

The second link runs from influence to legitimate and workable rules. A rule is more likely to command cooperation when affected people understand its purpose and have a meaningful way to question its consequences. That is a proposition, not a guarantee of agreement. Ostrom (1990) motivates attention to the design of collective arrangements; this article applies that reasoning to tourism pressures through explicit responsibilities and revision procedures.

The third link runs from implementation to evidence-based correction. A decision register can identify the problem, chosen action, accountable owner, expected resource requirement, and review date. Monitoring then asks whether the action occurred and whether the underlying pressure changed. Table 1 identifies the main governance questions. The framework can fail at any link: a well-attended meeting cannot compensate for an unfunded maintenance task, and a completed task cannot demonstrate environmental improvement without suitable evidence.

Table 1. Proposed framework

Governance link	Question to document
Representation	Who is affected, heard, and absent?
Influence	Which decisions can participants change?
Responsibility	Who has authority, resources, and a completion date?
Monitoring	Which evidence can reveal progress or deterioration?
Response	Who can revise the rule or correct non-performance?

5. Environmental pressures and local responsibilities

Different pressures require different responses. Litter at a visitor site may involve collection schedules, vendor practices, disposal capacity, and visitor behaviour. A cleaning event addresses only part of that system. Water stress may depend on seasonal demand, household needs, accommodation facilities, and infrastructure reliability. The framework requires the destination to specify the pressure before selecting an activity and to distinguish visible symptoms from the mechanisms producing them.

Responsibilities should be assigned to actors with the authority and resources to carry them out. Community volunteers should not become an indefinite substitute for essential public services. A workable arrangement identifies recurrent costs, access to equipment, safety responsibilities, and a fallback when a participant cannot perform the task. The distribution of environmental work should be considered alongside the distribution of tourism income.

Rules also need a proportionate response to breaches. An operator ignoring an agreed waste procedure creates costs for others. The response should follow an established process and provide an opportunity to explain circumstances. Consistency matters because selective enforcement can weaken cooperation. These are proposed governance principles rather than a description of a legally applicable sanctioning system.

Implementation should respect the competent authority's mandate and the rights of affected parties.

6. Indicators and evaluation

Monitoring should distinguish participation quality, implementation, and environmental outcomes. Participation quality concerns information access, representation, and demonstrable influence. Implementation concerns whether agreed responsibilities were fulfilled. Environmental outcomes require suitable physical or ecological indicators. Combining these into a single promotional score would conceal important differences. A destination might perform well on meeting attendance while failing to maintain essential infrastructure.

Candidate indicators include decisions with a recorded response to community input, funded maintenance tasks completed as agreed, recurrent waste problems at defined locations, and water-quality measures obtained through an appropriate technical protocol. Table 2 gives examples with safeguards. None has an observed value in this study. Thresholds and sampling schedules require local baseline evidence, seasonal interpretation, and competent technical advice.

Evaluation should also consider benefit distribution and displacement. Restricting access to a sensitive site may reduce environmental pressure while shifting visitors or costs to another neighbourhood. An apparent improvement within one boundary can therefore conceal a new problem elsewhere. Future studies should define the destination boundary explicitly and examine who gains, who bears costs, and whether outcomes persist beyond a short project period. Resident experience and physical measures should be reported together without treating one as a substitute for the other.

Table 2. Candidate indicators and interpretation safeguards

Candidate indicator	Interpretation safeguard
Decisions with documented responses to input	Record rejected suggestions and reasons as well.
Funded maintenance tasks completed on schedule	Distinguish completion from environmental effect.
Recurrent waste at specified observation points	Use a consistent protocol and seasonal context.
Distribution of benefits and maintenance burdens	Examine excluded residents and displaced costs.

7. Discussion and research propositions

Proposition 1 states that participation contributes to stewardship when residents can influence consequential rules rather than only receive information. The relationship should be weaker when decisions have already been fixed before consultation. Proposition 2 states that agreed responsibilities support implementation when actors possess the required resources and authority. Voluntary enthusiasm alone cannot make an unfunded infrastructure obligation feasible.

Proposition 3 states that monitoring supports environmental improvement when evidence can trigger a decision revision or a corrective response. Data publication without a response mechanism may increase visibility while leaving the pressure unchanged. Proposition 4 states that perceived fairness in the distribution of tourism benefits and environmental burdens conditions willingness to cooperate. These propositions describe plausible mechanisms and require empirical examination; the paper does not establish their relative strength.

Competing explanations include destination wealth, public-service capacity, pre-existing social cohesion, and the severity of tourism pressure. Successful destinations may find participation easier because resources are already available. Conversely, severe environmental problems can stimulate participation, producing reverse causality. A future

comparative study should examine institutional history and changes over time. It should include unsuccessful arrangements and groups whose participation was limited, rather than selecting only visible examples promoted as best practice.

8. Implications and limitations

A practical starting point is one consequential and observable problem. The destination can document the decision, identify affected groups, explain the available choices, allocate responsibilities, and set a review date. This makes the relationship between participation and action reviewable. A long list of aspirations is less useful when no one can identify which decision changed or who is responsible for implementation.

Communication should distinguish consultation from shared decision making. Promising influence that the institution cannot provide may damage trust. Equally, technical uncertainty should be stated openly. An environmental observation may require further investigation before a specific cause is assigned. The purpose of transparency is to support informed scrutiny and adaptation, not to give every initial judgement an appearance of final certainty.

The study is limited to conceptual reasoning from a selective literature base. It does not identify a universal participation model, calculate carrying capacity, or estimate the economic value of conservation. Institutional and ecological contexts vary considerably. Future work should examine whether the proposed decision cycle improves both environmental conditions and the fairness of local outcomes, while documenting its administrative costs and the risks of capture by well-connected participants.

9. Conclusion

Meaningful community participation is a relationship to decisions, responsibilities, and correction. Its contribution to environmental stewardship depends on what participants can influence and whether the resulting choices can be implemented and reviewed. A destination should therefore assess the substance of participation rather than the frequency of meetings alone.

The proposed framework connects representation, decision influence, workable responsibilities, monitoring, and response. It distinguishes tourism growth from destination welfare and encourages explicit attention to the distribution of benefits and burdens. The framework offers control questions and candidate indicators; it does not claim that these have already improved any destination's performance.

Future research should combine institutional analysis, resident experience, and appropriate environmental measures. Longitudinal evidence could show whether participation changes decisions and whether those changes persist. Comparative work should examine alternative explanations and include arrangements that fail. The practical test is whether a destination can identify a shared problem, make a defensible choice, perform the agreed work, and revise its approach when the evidence warrants it.

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