

## REGIONAL TOURISM STRATEGIES DURING THE SARS-COV-2 OUTBREAK AND THEIR IMPACTS ON AZORES TOURISM BUSINESSES

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**Abstract:** In tourism activities, rural tourism has a critical function in reaching regional and territorial sustainability. Bearing in mind the actual sanitary crisis caused by the SARS-CoV-2 and its horizontal impacts, as is the case of the impacts on the tourism sector. This article aims to understand the perceptions of entrepreneurs of establishments related to tourism activities in the Azores Region, an ultra-peripheral territory of Portugal, regarding regional strategies for the rural tourism practice during and after the pandemic in the Azores Region, highlighting the role of the development of rural tourism for regional growth. Contextually, this empirical research is based on a survey, previously submitted to a pre-test, with several relevant questions, including some multiple answer questions, in order to gather further information about the perceptions of business managers of the touristic sector regarding regional strategies for the rural tourism practice during and after the actual pandemic crisis in the Azores Region. Thereby, the three main aspects in which the regional authorities of tourism in the Azores will have to bet with urgency in the short and medium terms are three types – i) Improving air accessibility in the Azores, attracting new scheduled airlines to operate to and from the Region; ii) Facilitate visits to all islands, improving the inter-island transport network; iii) Promote activities throughout the year, attracting specific segments of tourists to combat the seasonality.

**Key words:** islands, regional studies, regional strategies, tourism businesses, sustainable tourism.

DOI: 10.17512/pjms.2021.24.2.06

*Article history:*

*Received* October 08, 2021; *Revised* November 28, 2021; *Accepted* December 05, 2021

### Introduction

It is well-known that the rural environment has survived and continues to suffer various crises (Sigala, 2020). As some examples, we have the rise in unemployment, the aging of the population, depopulation, emigration and migration flows, or the advanced re-structuring of stock and farms (Koçak et al., 2020; Naranjo Gómez et al., 2020; Ulucak et al., 2020; Santos et al., 2020).

Contextually, many scholars defend that tourism is an activity significantly associated with companies that contribute to guaranteeing tourists' interest (Vargues

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and Loures, 2008; Morais et al., 2019; Santos et al., 2019). Moreover, tourism growth benefits tourism activities and other related structures to bring visitors, including the sustainability of those actions to assist tourists, communities, the touristic sector, and the destination itself. According to empirical studies as the ones conducted by Fleischer and Felsenstein (2000) or Labrianidis et al. (2003), it is feasible to comprehend the nexus of rural tourism in achieving regional sustainability. Furthermore, since several decades ago, science has shown that jobs related to tourism contributes to regional and national economic growths (Williams, 1984). In this regard, data confirms that spending on tourism produces more employment and gains than any other market niche or sector; besides, it creates and preserves opportunities and jobs in several other sectors of the all economy (Mazumder et al., 2009).

So, if we recognize the actual sanitary crisis caused by the new coronavirus and all its horizontal consequences on all of the economy and society field (Bakar and Rosbi, 2020; Espinoza, 2020; Fernández-Jeri, 2020; Wen et al., 2020) there is a negative relevance of the development of rural tourism for the regional growth (Mahony and Zyl, 2002; Santos, 2013; Lousada et al., 2019). Considering this statement, the following research question was designed: "The regional strategies are the proper solution to practice the tourism activity during and after the Covid-19 Pandemic - from the perspective of the regional tourism-related companies?".

Throughout this study, essential evidence has been provided for future research related to this particular issue, for example, the pointing to the need for a more representative sample both in the tourism business sector, covering other types of tourism businesses, in addition to accommodation and tourism entertainment. Also, better coverage at the level of the smaller islands of the Azores Archipelago or, still, designating the need for further research implemented in other temporal horizons, should be considered.

#### ***Peripheral Regions and the Associated Rural tourism***

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2008) explains Rural Tourism as: "(...) a typology of tourism activity where the traveler's experience is connected to a broad range of products typically related to outdoors activities - i.e., nature-based, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, angling, or sightseeing". Thereby, activities related to rural tourism are developed in rural (non-urban) areas with the consequent characteristics: a) low population density; b) landscape and land-use dominated by agriculture and forestry; and c) traditional social structure and lifestyle. Furthermore, focusing on the episodes of the SARS-CoV-2 sanitary crisis, UNWTO also supports that this typology of tourism is more relevant because tourists seek less populated destinations than outdoor activities and experiences (UNWTO, 2008; Santos, Castanho and Lousada, 2019).

Regional economic growth is one of the most indispensable catalysts for sustainable development (Meller, Marfán and Small, 1981; King, 1986; Bryden and Bollman, 2000; Kilkenny and Partridge, 2009). Thereby, various scholars have highlighted the prospect of rural tourism typology, along with entrepreneurship and Small and

Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs), including local business activity volume (Yesavdar, Belgibayav and Mersakylova, 2016; Croes and Rivera, 2017).

In this regard, we know that the rural world has prevailed and persists in suffering and overcoming several other crises, i.e., rise in unemployment, an aging population, population flows as emigration and migration, or the advanced stock and farm restructuring, those are just a few examples (Croes and Rivera, 2017).

This idea is supported by data of prior research associated to economic activities' influence on employment and income in ultra-peripheral regions. While focusing on the time just after World War II (WW-II), the agricultural sector's increase to the Gross National Product (GNP) and employment source diminished significantly. Thereby, the plans directed for rural growth and development started to be focused on industrial activities (Croes and Rivera, 2017). Nonetheless, multiple industry location choices are still looking for urban centers alternatively of rural areas.

Meller, Marfán and Small (1981) affirm that: (...) the industrial sector is not the most appropriate approach to initiate sustainable development strategies in all contexts of ultra-peripheral and insular areas". Furthermore, during the 1980s, the increase in employment in peripheral regions was principally due to increased services sectors Kim and Miller, 2017; Ruzic, and Demonja, 2017; Yashalova, Akimova and Aleksandrovich, 2017; Kaletová et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, not all tertiary sector business activities offer a similar capacity to generate employment and profit, acknowledging their decreasing value. Consequently, tourism has created a principal enhancement to the sustainability of the territories through development. So, several types of research conducted in these thematic fields have demonstrated that tourist spending produces more employment and profit than any other economic sector. Moreover, it produces and keeps employment in another sector of the economy that sustains and provides tourists and the associated companies (Pascariu and Ibanescu, 2018; Dogru, Isik, and Sirakaya-Turk, 2019).

### **Methodological Framework**

The study sample consists of 506 business managers of establishments of the touristic sector of Azores Region, one of the nine outermost regions of the European Union (EU). By the time of this study implementation, the authors evidenced that in the Azores Autonomous Region (RAA), there were 2527 establishments in this sector. Of the total, 100 Traditional Hospitality, 93 in Rural Tourism and the remaining (2334) in other tourism sectors.

This empirical research is based on a survey, previously submitted to a pre-test, with several relevant questions, including some multiple answer questions, in order to gather further information about the perceptions of business managers of the touristic sector regarding regional strategies for the rural tourism practice during and after the actual pandemic crisis in the Azores Region. The research was conducted among 506 business managers of establishments of the touristic sector of RAA provided valid responses to the online survey. The data collection was conducted by the

Azores Tourism Observatory (OTA) using Google Forms during December 2020. Table 1 shows the survey characteristics of companies.

**Table 1. Survey Sample Characteristics: Distribution of the Respondents (%)**

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage
Valid	Travel Agency/Tour Operator	17	3.4	3.4
	Local accommodation	310	61.3	61.3
	Tourist entertainment	74	14.6	14.6
	Hospitality	29	5.7	5.7
	Other (specify)	4	0.8	0.8
	Rent-a-car	6	1.2	1.2
	Restoration or similar	16	3.2	3.2
	Rural Tourism	50	9.9	9.9
	Total	506	100.0	100.0
		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage
Valid	Individual entrepreneurs	341	67.4	67.4
	Corporation	165	32.6	32.6
	Total	506	100.0	100.0
		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage
Valid	Faial	51	10.1	10.1
	Flores	13	2.6	2.6
	Graciosa	11	2.2	2.2
	Pico	35	6.9	6.9
	Santa Maria	15	3.0	3.0
	São Jorge	22	4.3	4.3
	São Miguel	287	56.7	56.7
	Terceira	72	14.2	14.2
	Total	506	100.0	100.0

These questions enabled us to verify that a large part of the entrepreneurs who participated in this study (more than 60%) operate in local accommodation companies. Besides, 67.4% of the participants are "Individual entrepreneurs." Also, more than 50% of the tourism sector companies are located on São Miguel Island. Once the used sampling method was a non-probability sampling (some members of the population have a greater but unknown chance of selection, compared to others), the data were analyzed mainly in a descriptive perspective (descriptive methods, mainly frequency tables and multiple response analysis) for summarizing data. However, although the generalization of the results is conditioned in these conditions (that is, the used sample method does not allow statistical inferences to be made from the data), the authors applied the hypothesis test for one population proportion, only

for indicative purposes, in order to assess empirical pieces of evidence to support the formulated hypotheses.

## Results

Table 2 shows the degree of satisfaction with the incentive "*VIVER OS AÇORES*" for taking holidays in the high season of 2020 in the Azores for residents. In this regard, the most frequent answer was "Indifferent," which 42.5% (valid %) of the respondents shared.

**Table 2. Satisfaction with the incentive “VIVER OS AÇORES” – closed-ended question.**

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage
Valid	Very unsatisfied	49	9.7	10.7
	Unsatisfied	44	8.7	9.6
	Indifferent	194	38.3	42.5
	Satisfied	122	24.1	26.8
	Very satisfied	47	9.3	10.3
	Total	456	90.1	100.0
Missing	99	50	9.9	-
Total		506	100.0	-

\* Question: How satisfied are you with the “*VIVER OS AÇORES*” incentive for vacationing in the high season of 2020 in the Azores for residents?

According to 40.6% of the entrepreneurs, the volume of residents looking for their tourism offer (compared to 2019) has been equal. These results could be explained by the incentive granted by the Regional Government to take holidays in the Azores by residents. Therefore, in the perceptions of respondents, this incentive was equal. However, in the perception of 40.1%, this volume was lower, and in 19.3%, it was higher (Table 3).

**Table 3. Number of residents looking for tourism offer the result of the incentive granted by the Regional Government of Azores - closed-ended question.**

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage
Valid	Lesser	183	36.2	40.1
	Equal	185	36.6	40.6
	Higher	88	17.4	19.3
	Total	456	90.1	100.0
Missing	99	50	9.9	-
Total		506	100,0	-

\* *Question: What has been the volume of residents looking for your tourism offer, compared to 2019, as a result of the incentive granted by the Regional Government to the taking of holidays in the Azores by residents?*

After, a multiple-choice question was made (Table 4). Of the 381 surveyed entrepreneurs who pointed out at least one of the three main aspects in which they believe that tourism in the Azores will have to bet with urgency in the short and medium terms, the most relevant outcomes were 51.4% indicated “Improving air accessibility in the Azores, attracting new scheduled airlines to operate to and from the Region,” 43.3% indicated “Facilitate visits to all islands, improving the inter-island transport network” and 40.4% indicated “Promote activities throughout the year, attracting specific segments of tourists to combat the seasonality.”

**Table 4. The three main aspects that tourism in the Azores will have to consider in the short and medium terms (Multiple response analysis).**

Multiple choices	Responses		% of cases
	Frequency	%	
Improve the air accessibility of the Azores, attracting new scheduled airlines to operate to and from the Region.	196	17.1%	51.4%
Improve air accessibility in the Azores, attracting new low-cost airlines to operate to and from the Region.	127	11.1%	33.3%
Facilitate visits to all islands, improving the inter-island transport network.	165	14.4%	43.3%
Focus marketing actions on attracting tourists with high purchasing power and high expenses.	142	12.4%	37.3%
Promote activities throughout the year, attracting specific segments of tourists to combat seasonality.	154	13.5%	40.4%
Implement communication and promotion actions with emigrant communities in the USA and Canada.	41	3.6%	10.8%
Betting on other complementary products, in addition to nature tourism, diversifying the offer.	32	2.8%	8.4%
Support the constant enhancement of the quality of the visitor's tourist experience through the training of workers.	54	4.7%	14.2%
Prioritize the granting of support by the Regional Government aimed at improving the quality of the offer.	65	5.7%	17.1%
Encourage entrepreneurs to open new innovative and quality tourism businesses.	20	1.7%	5.2%
Support the use of new technologies to increase productivity and competitiveness.	17	1.5%	4.5%
Invest in the formation of assets aimed at the new needs resulting from the pandemic.	8	0.7%	2.1%
Preserve local communities by applying the principles of sustainability.	69	6.0%	18.1%

Support municipal strategic plans to combat the current crisis and to define tourism strategies.	53	4.6%	13.9%
Total	1143	100.0%	

Subsequently, a closed-ended question was made (Table 5). In this regard, the majority (55.1%) of the surveyed entrepreneurs who answered this question (valid cases) reported rethinking their tourism offer. This attitude is expected and particularly important in the course of the SARS-CoV-2 period.

**Table 5. The tourism offer – closed-ended question.**

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage
Valid	No	166	32.8	44.9
	Yes	204	40.3	55.1
	Total	370	73.1	100.0
Missing	99	136	26.9	-
Total		506	100.0	-

*\*Question: Are you rethinking your tourism offer?*

Concerning how entrepreneurs are taking advantage of the partial or total stop to innovate their offer (Table 6), the majority (62.1%) of the 253 participants who chose at least one of the options related to this issue marked the option “Introducing new pro-motion/communication channels,” 40.3% indicated the option “introducing new products” 18.6% indicated the option “Introducing new markets” and the rest (15%) indicated the option “Other ways”.

**Table 6. Advantage of the partial or total stop to innovate their offer (Multiple response analysis).**

		Responses		% of cases
		Frequency	%	
Multiple choices	Introducing new products	102	29.7%	40.3%
	Introducing new markets	47	13.7%	18.6%
	Introducing new promotion/communication channels	157	45.6%	62.1%
	Other forms (please indicate)	38	11.0%	15.0%
Total		344	100,0%	

Table 7 shows the grouped answers, taking into account the respective contents, regarding the entrepreneurs' perception of the fields that should be priorities to invert during and after the Covid-19 sanitary crisis. The obtained results show that invert on new strategies (28,9%), restructuring or renewal interventions (26,3%) and training (21,0%) are the most relevant fields from the perspective of the entrepreneurs.

**Table 7. Priority fields to invert during and after the Covid-19 sanitary crisis - grouped answers.**

Options	Valid percentage
Maintenance work	15.7%
Restructuring or renewal interventions	26.3%
Invert on new strategies	28.9%
Lower prices	5.2%
Training	21.0%
Other	2.6%

Table 8 reflects the company's dependency on governmental support measures in the perception of the participants. Thus, a large part (45.4%) of the respondents (valid cases) states that their company depends on support measures to survive the pandemic. Moreover, using the hypothesis test for one population proportion, it was found that the proportion (0.454) estimated from the sample is statistically significant ( $Z=0.0021$ ;  $p=0.9991$ , see Table 8, where  $Z$  is the statistic test, and  $p$  is the corresponding  $p$ -value). In this case, the formulated hypotheses were  $H_0: p=0.454$  (null hypothesis) versus  $H_1: p \neq 0.454$  (alternative hypothesis).

**Table 8. Company dependency on governmental support measures – closed-ended question.**

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	No	202	39.9
	Yes	168	33.2
	Total	370	73.1
Missing	99	136	26.9
Total		506	100,0

\* *Question: Does your company depend on support measures to survive the pandemic period?*

## Discussion

Based on the UNWTO data, tourism contributes with 7 percent of worldwide trade, hires one in every ten people and gives subsistence to millions of people in developed and emerging countries through a complex value chain of related industries. As borders locked, resorts and hotels closed, and air travel decreased dramatically, foreign visitors dropped by 56%, and \$320 billion in exportation from the tourism sector was lost in the first five months of 2020 (Yavas and Babakus, 2005). In fact, three times more in comparison with the Global Economic Crisis of 2009. So, authorities and governments strive to make up for the reduced resources needed to support public services, i.e., social and environmental protection and face debt compensation obligations. UNWTO outlines for the sector register that foreign visitor numbers could decrease from 58 to 78 percent in 2020, turning into a decrease



in visitor spending from \$1.5 trillion in 2019 to almost \$310 and \$570 billion in 2020. Those events jeopardize over 100 million tourism jobs (UNWTO, 2008). Thus, several of them are in MSMEs (micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises). Those MSMEs employ a large percentage of women and young people. In this regard, it can be assumed that the informal workers are the most exposed to this happening. According to Varzaru, Bocean, and Cazacu (2021) or Higgins-Desbioles (2021), the studies reveal that: “(...) the pandemic generated by COVID-19 will change the tourism industry and the environment in which it operates. This global crisis may be a source of opportunity to identify new possibilities, and the problematic situation is an additional argument for accepting changes in tourism business models towards sustainability”. One of the significant consequences that the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic had on tourism was stimulating the digital economy with digitizing processes in the tourism industry, as stated by some authors (Pimentel et al., 2020; Niewiadomski, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021; Antonio and Rita, 2021). This sanitary crisis also could be perceived as an occasion to rethink sustainable tourism models. Nevertheless, a more efficient and sustainable tourism strategy seems insufficient to address the possibilities that make such a reset of tourism possible. In fact, tourism must be redefined and redirected regarding the benefits and profits of regional and local communities and their territorial interests (Castanho et al., 2021; Couto et al., 2021). Contextually, based on this scenario, this article explores the regional tourism strategies during the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak and their impacts on regional tourism businesses, using known and appropriate research methodologies based on a questionnaire with some multiple answer questions. In fact, this study used a sample of 506 business managers of establishments of the tourism sector mainly operating tourist accommodation units located on the nine islands of the RAA with a large concentration of responses on the island of São Miguel, where the largest share of tourism activity in the Azores is located in 2021. The profile of the online interviewees reveals that the majority are individual proprietors who operate a tourist accommodation unit, followed by entrepreneurs in the tourist entertainment sector. More precisely, the article investigates the perceptions of local tourism entrepreneurs about the effectiveness of tourism policies adopted by the Regional Government of the Azores, given the current Covid-19 pandemic.

The study shows that the incentives aimed at promoting internal domestic tourism, promoted by the regional government (VIVER OS AÇORES), did not have the desired impact of increasing demand for their business by residents in the region (40.6%). In fact, it was even lower to 40.1% of them. Given that the impact of this policy had asymmetric effects on the various islands of the archipelago, this research points to the need of conducting future research, i.e., by increasing the number of questionnaires applied on the various islands, where the impact of this policy was lower.

About the measures considered to be a priority to combat the current crisis in the regional tourism sector, it is essential to highlight the improvement in accessibilities

to the destination guaranteed by more regular airlines flying to the Azores. This is an exciting conclusion, in the sense that only 33.3% advocate an increase in low-cost airline connections. The need to increase direct air connections is in line with other publications on island tourism, i.e., as in the case of the vast majority of remote and small islands destinations, tourism is dependent on air connections. Another recommendation (43.3% of respondents) is to improve inter-island transports. Besides, for 40.4% of respondents, there is a need to combat the high seasonality that affects Azorean tourism by promoting events.

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, this article is based on an exploratory study of applied scientific research, which is very relevant in the current situation of the Covid-19 pandemic. It provides various implications for policies and strategic actions, based on knowledge, to improve the competitiveness of the Azores tourist destination.

Thereby, it is possible to say that the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak modified the model of tourism worldwide. In the beginning, we assisted in several transformations in demand, causing a delay in the delivered changes in the supply chain to adapt to the current requirements of tourists. Contextually, modern tendencies prove that there is a higher demand for the subsequent experiences: safe tourist destinations, in the most general sense of the safety concept, including psychological, physical, food safety, and certifications with "clean and safe" stamps; nature destinations, whether by tourists traveling on holiday, or by transient tourists, as is the example of the digital nomads, or even by residential tourism; privacy, associated to less massified destinations; comfort in the accommodation, although the differentiating aspect is no more the quality of the establishments and equipment, which everyone envisions to encounter in all types of accommodation, the outstanding and unforgettable experiences, tied to the local culture; less fractional and more extended vacations (in time); and proximity, attainable destinations, meaning frictionless travel, either at airports or at the destination.

As final remarks, it should be mentioned that even if several articles regarding the impact of the Covid-19 crisis affected the economies and the regional development, this study differs once it centers on a specific and remote region and focuses on a particular group of participants.

### **Acknowledgments**

This paper is financed by Portuguese national funds through FCT–Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., project number UIDB/00685/2020 and also by the project GREAT-Genuine Rural Experiences in the Azores Tourism, with the code: ACORES-01-0145-FEDER-000089.

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## REGIONALNE STRATEGIE TURYSTYCZNE W OKRESIE WYBUCHU SARS-COV-2 I ICH WPLYW NA AZORY PRZEDSIĘBIORSTWA TURYSTYCZNE

**Streszczenie:** W działalności turystycznej turystyka wiejska odgrywa kluczową rolę w osiągnięciu zrównowżenia regionalnego i terytorialnego. Mając na uwadze rzeczywisty kryzys sanitarny wywołany przez SARS-CoV-2 i jego oddziaływania horyzontalne, podobnie jak w przypadku oddziaływań na sektor turystyczny. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu zrozumienie postrzegania przez przedsiębiorców przedsiębiorstw związanych z działalnością turystyczną w regionie Azorów, ultraperyferijnego terytorium Portugalii, w odniesieniu do regionalnych strategii praktyki turystyki wiejskiej podczas i po pandemii w regionie Azorów, podkreślając rolę rozwój turystyki wiejskiej na rzecz wzrostu regionalnego. Kontekstowo, to badanie empiryczne opiera się na ankiecie, uprzednio poddanej testowi wstępnemu, z kilkoma istotnymi pytaniami, w tym kilkoma pytaniami z wieloma odpowiedziami, w celu zebrania dalszych informacji na temat postrzegania przez menedżerów biznesowych sektora turystycznego w odniesieniu do regionalnych strategii praktyka turystyki wiejskiej podczas i po faktycznym kryzysie pandemicznym w regionie Azorów. W związku z tym trzy główne aspekty, o które władze regionalne ds. turystyki na Azorach będą musiały postawić w trybie pilnym w perspektywie krótko- i średnioterminowej, to trzy rodzaje: i) Poprawa dostępności lotniczej na Azorach, przyciągnięcie nowych regularnych linii lotniczych do obsługi i z Region; ii) ułatwienie wizyt na wszystkich wyspach, usprawnienie międzywyspowej sieci transportowej; iii) Promowanie działań przez cały rok, przyciągając określone segmenty turystów w celu zwalczania sezonowości.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wyspy, studia regionalne, strategie regionalne, przedsiębiorstwa turystyczne, turystyka zrównowżona.

## SARS-COV-2爆发期间的区域旅游战略及其对亚速尔群岛旅游业的影响

**摘要：**在旅游活动中，乡村旅游在实现区域和领土可持续性方面具有关键作用。牢记 SARS-CoV-2 造成的实际卫生危机及其横向影响，就像对旅游业的影响一样。本文旨在了解亚速尔群岛（葡萄牙的超外围领土）中与旅游活动相关的机构的企业家对亚速尔群岛大流行期间和之后的乡村旅游实践的区域战略的看法，强调了发展乡村旅游促进区域增长。在上下文方面，这项实证研究基于先前提交给预测试的一项调查，其中包含几个相关问题，包括一些多项回答问题，以收集有关旅游部门业务经理对区域战略的看法的更多信息亚速尔群岛实际大流行危机期间和之后的乡村旅游实践。因此，亚速尔地区旅游当局在中短期内必须紧急押注的三个主要方面是三类：i) 改善亚速尔群岛的空中可达性，吸引新的定期航空公司往返运营该区域；ii) 促进对所有岛屿的访问，改善岛际交通网络；iii) 全年开展活动，吸引特定部分的游客以对抗季节性

**关键词：**岛屿，区域研究，区域战略，旅游企业，可持续旅游