

Territorial Branding and Sustainable Tourism: Towards a Regenerative Destination in Dakhla-Oued Eddahab.

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Conflict of interest: The author reports no conflict of interest.

To quote this article: BOUSSIF LIMAM (2026) « Territorial Branding and Sustainable Tourism: Towards a Regenerative Destination in Dakhla-Oued Eddahab»,

IJAME : Volume 02, N° 20 | Pp: 409 – 428.



DOI : 10.5281/zenodo.21038545

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Abstract:

The global tourism industry now faces significant challenges imposed by climate change and the imperative of establishing sustainable and circular tourism practices. During this period of increased uncertainty, it is possible to use a territorial brand as a strategic lever to enable transformation of the tourist destination into a resilient and regenerative location capable of reconciling attractiveness with sustainability. This study examines how strategic management of the brand image of a territory will enhance the attractiveness of a destination to tourists and promote the adoption of more sustainable practices. The study employs the case of the Dakhla-Oued Eddahab region in Morocco as an illustration of this concept. A qualitative research methodology was chosen to examine the current practices and identify potential opportunities for incorporating circular and regenerative tourism in the brand identity of Dakhla-Oued Eddahab through semi-structured interviews with stakeholders involved in local tourism and sustainable economic development. The analysis of the qualitative data showed that the branding of the territory can; protect coastal ecosystems and biodiversity; promote the circular management of resources, stimulate the local economy; and improve the climate resilience of tourism-related infrastructure. Thus, the use of the concept of a territorial brand provides a significant strategic opportunity for the promotion of the Dakhla-Oued Eddahab region as an innovative, regenerative and resilient tourism destination that attracts international tourists, investors, and partners interested in contributing to the ecological transition.

Keywords: Territorial branding, sustainable tourism, climate resilience, regenerative destination, circular economy

1 INTRODUCTION

Tourism has grown into a significant contributor to economic and regional development throughout various geographical areas of the world and particularly for coastal and remote regions, over the last several decades. The ongoing expansion of the tourism sector has, however, led to increasingly complex challenges such as climate change, depletion of natural resources, and the necessity of redefining development models to incorporate more sustainable, circular and resilient practices for tourism development and implementation. Thus, tourist destinations have begun to expand beyond just trying to bring in visitor traffic by incorporating environmental, social and climate factors relative to their future development and marketing strategies. Currently, the use of "territorial branding" is becoming a useful method in how to govern territorial enhancement as a formative, structured process of creating and managing brand images of territories, as well as engaging and mobilizing all actors within the locality around a common self-image. Territorial branding, when applied to tourism, will add to the visibility and distinctiveness of the travelled destination, while including values such as sustainability, environmental protection and climate resiliency. Therefore, territorial branding can potentially support a transition of tourism destinations to more Circular and Regenerative Models. The considerations of "sustainable tourism" (minimizing the adverse effects of tourism activities while maximizing the local economic and social benefits of tourism), "circular economy" (a holistic approach to managing resources and reducing waste, with a focus on increasing the use of local sources) and "regenerative destinations" (to restore and enhance ecosystems and local communities through tourism activity) are now being debated extensively within academic and institutional discuss/transformations. This study examines how territorial branding can contribute to strengthening destination attractiveness while supporting sustainability, climate resilience, and the transition toward circular and regenerative tourism models. The central question guiding this research is:

How can territorial branding contribute to the development of a sustainable, climate-resilient, and regenerative tourism destination while maintaining territorial attractiveness in the Dakhla-Oued Eddahab region?

As an object of study, the Dakhla-Oued Eddahab region is of particular interest because of its unique geographic characteristics; its tourism is based primarily on water sport and eco-tourism and; it has been adversely impacted by climate change because of its location near the coast. In order to accomplish these aims, a qualitative methodology was selected. Semi-structured

interviews with key actors (tourism sector, territorial development and civil society) were utilized for this research. The semi-structured interviews were used to understand local dynamics, as well as the perception and practices associated with territorial branding, sustainability and resilience. Additionally, they clarified and identified potential opportunities and constraints in formally integrating circular and regenerative tourism into the territory's branding strategy. The intent is to make a contribution to the existing body of research related to territorial branding and sustainable tourism whilst also providing a useful resource for public officials and local stakeholders in facilitating the ecological transition of the tourist destinations.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 TERRITORIAL BRANDING AND DESTINATION BRAND IMAGE

In the literature, the terms *place branding* and *territorial branding* are often used interchangeably to describe the strategic process through which a territory develops, communicates, and manages its identity and reputation among target audiences (Anholt, 2007; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008). In this study, the term *territorial branding* is adopted consistently throughout the manuscript. Territorial branding refers to the process of creating and managing a territory's image and reputation. By contrast, the term *territorial brand* refers to the outcome of this process, namely the set of perceptions, associations, values, and meanings attached to a territory by its stakeholders. This distinction allows us to clearly differentiate between the branding process (*territorial branding*) and its resulting image and reputation (*territorial brand*).

The concept of territorial branding, also referred to in the literature as place branding, originates from research on destination and place marketing. In this study, the term territorial branding is used consistently to designate the strategic process of managing a territory's image and reputation. Kotler, Haider, and Rein (1993) cited in their work (*Territorial Branding as a Tool for the Development of Canada's Regions*), that since the 1990s, all territories are in competition with each other to attract tourists, investors, businesses and talent (also referred to as 'knowledge workers') and therefore have utilized elements of strategic marketing to enhance their appeal and visibility and attract these populations.

As such, each territory must also be seen as having a total offer, requiring that it is positioned clearly and distinctly. As the literature around the concept of territorial branding has expanded, scholarly perspectives have turned to the transactional nature of creating, maintaining, and

managing a territory's image. Anholt (2007) defines territorial branding as a collection of coordinated activities that contribute to the development of a territory's reputation through a consistent and integrated approach to branding with regard to the territory's identity, its public policies, and its communication efforts. This implies that the reputation of the territory is the result of communications established by the territory as a whole, and is not simply based on promotional campaigns. Kavaratzis (2004) states that the branding of a territory is a multidimensional process, where the brand of the territory is influenced through institutional communications, the behavior of people that reside and do business in the territory, and the experiences of those users that interact with the territory. Therefore, it is clear that branding a territory is a complex process that engages more than simply developing a brand.

In the field of tourism, territorial branding plays a decisive role in building destinations' brand image. Destination image is defined by Echtner and Ritchie (1993) as the set of perceptions, beliefs, and impressions that an individual associates with a given tourist destination. This image is built from multiple sources, including institutional promotional campaigns, media, word-of-mouth, and visitors' personal experiences. Gartner (1993) shows that destination image directly influences tourists' decision-making process, their satisfaction level, as well as their intentions to revisit and recommend.

The literature further emphasizes that the effectiveness of territorial branding relies on the coherence between the projected image and territorial reality. Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) highlight that the credibility of a territorial brand depends on the alignment between promises made in promotional discourses and experiences actually lived in the territory. This coherence implies active involvement of local stakeholders, including public institutions, tourism businesses, economic actors, and civil society. Territorial branding thus becomes a collective and participatory process based on the co-construction of the destination's image.

Beyond its promotional function, territorial branding also contributes to the structuring of territorial identity and the strengthening of a sense of belonging. According to Zenker and Braun (2010), the territorial brand plays a central role in constructing a shared territorial narrative, allowing for the valorization of local specificities and giving meaning to the development strategies implemented. This identity dimension is particularly important for emerging or peripheral territories, which seek to assert their positioning on the national and international tourist scene while preserving their uniqueness.

Finally, in a context marked by the emergence of environmental and climatic issues, several authors highlight the evolution of territorial branding towards the integration of values related to sustainability and environmental responsibility. Hankinson (2010) highlights that territorial brands tend to progressively integrate ethical, environmental, and social dimensions in order to meet the growing expectations of visitors and other stakeholders. Territorial branding can thus be considered as a strategic lever favoring the articulation between tourist attractiveness, sustainability, and the transition towards more resilient territorial development models.

2.2 SUSTAINABLE TOURISM, CIRCULAR ECONOMY, AND REGENERATIVE DESTINATION

Sustainable tourism is a model that seeks to balance economic, ecological, and social benefits in tourism destinations, minimizing negative impacts on the environment and local communities (Hui et al., 2023). It operates within a framework of reducing negative impacts and maintaining balance, focusing on mitigating the ecological footprint of tourism while supporting local economies and cultural heritage (Hui et al., 2023).

Faced with these limitations, the circular economy appears as a complementary framework to rethink tourism production and consumption modes. According to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2013), the circular economy aims to optimize resource use, reduce waste, and promote reuse and recycling. Applied to tourism, it particularly concerns the management of water and energy, waste reduction, local sourcing, and the valorization of short circuits (Girard & Nocca, 2017). The integration of these principles allows for strengthening the operational sustainability of destinations and supporting the local economy.

The idea behind regenerative tourism is a relatively new concept relating to the evolution of sustainable travel. Where sustainable tourism efforts are focused on limiting/conserving the negative effects of tourism; regenerative travel is aimed at creating/adding positive impacts to Eco-System and the surrounding community (Pollock, 2019). Creating a regenerative destination is creating a system in order to restore natural resources in addition to promoting and strengthening local capacity and improving the resilience of territories in consideration of national/global climatic and environmental impacts (Bellato et al., 2023). Creating a regenerative destination also encourages collaborative governance, anchored in the territory, and co-creating value offers a framework for analysis of the sustainability trajectories of various destinations.

2.3 CLIMATE RESILIENCE AND TOURIST ATTRACTIVENESS

Tourist destinations, particularly coastal areas, are among the territories most exposed to the effects of climate change. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, coastal regions face increased vulnerabilities related to sea level rise, coastal erosion, the increased frequency of extreme climatic events, and pressures on marine ecosystems (IPCC, 2014). These risks directly affect the tourist attractiveness of destinations by degrading natural resources, landscapes, and the quality of the tourist experience.

As a result, one of the most important concepts relevant to understanding tourism development is climate resiliency. Climate resiliency, with respect to a specific territory, is defined as that territory's ability to anticipate, absorb and/or adapt to climate-related events and continue to respond to the overall economic and social purposes of that territory (Folke et al., 2010). In terms of tourism, this means the ability of tourism infrastructure in the public sector to be resilient to climatic events, adapt to new environmental requirements, and include sustainable solutions in the areas of design, energy utilization, and resource utilization (Becken & Hay, 2012). Consequently, resilient tourism infrastructure is a key element in the long-term competitiveness and sustainability of many tourist destinations.

Quite recently, the current literature places high importance on the integration of climatic issues into territorial branding strategies. Aall et al. (2015) show that the integration of climate change consideration in tourism planning and territorial communication enhances a destination's credibility; further, the attractiveness of the destination will also improve as tourists become increasingly aware of environmental issues. Thus, it is possible for territorial branding to play a strategic role by valorizing climate resilience initiatives, creating an image of a responsible destination, and supporting the transition to more sustainable and adaptable tourism models.

3 METHODOLOGY

Research reliability relies heavily on how clearly the research methods have been defined. The following section describes our methodological choice, which ensures that a satisfactory degree of rigor and credibility exists in these findings.

3.1 RESEARCH APPROACH

Based on the purpose of this study, we have chosen to use qualitative researcher and methodology through an exploratory research and the use of the case study method to achieve our objective on several levels:

- Qualitative research is a particularly useful form of inquiry for the social sciences because it allows researchers to explore and understand phenomena within their natural context and by looking at the meanings and feelings that a participant has towards an experience or situation (Patton, 2015).
- Our research objective focuses specifically on exploring how the concept of territorial branding contributes toward enhancing tourist attractiveness by implementing sustainable or regenerative tourism practices in the Dakhla-Oued Eddahab region.

3.2 DATA COLLECTION METHOD

To collect our data, we utilized semi-structured interviews due to their flexible nature which allows the researcher to further explore the perceptions and experiences of the participant, while at the same time being provided with enough structure to allow the researcher and the participants to compare notes to determine their own similarities and differences. The sample for this study contained four primary groups:

- Entrepreneurs operating in the tourism sector;
 - Public actors who are responsible for developing the tourism sector;
 - Financial entities that support the development of tourism and other sustainable initiatives;
 - Local associations that promote the local territory and responsible practices.
- The interview guide was organized around three primary themes in order to:
- Understand the current practices of managing the image of a brand in relation to the local region;
 - Determine what strategies are now being used to improve the attractiveness of a destination to tourists;

- Determine what opportunities exist to implement circular and regenerative practices within local communities.

3.3 DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

The data gathered from the interviews was then analyzed using a thematic analysis approach that is common in qualitative research. Thematic analysis can help to identify broader themes and trends in the data that are related to issues around territorial branding and sustainable tourism. They will also identify and present all the collected data organized into coded themes; analyze trends; integrate findings into an overall framework relative to creating an attractive, innovative & sustainable Dakhla Oued Eddahab.

4 RESULTS

4.1 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS

The sample size was determined according to the principles of purposive sampling and theoretical saturation commonly used in qualitative research. The objective was not statistical representativeness but rather to obtain rich and diverse insights from stakeholders directly involved in tourism development and territorial governance. The selected participants represented different categories of actors, including public institutions, tourism professionals, development agencies, and civil society organizations, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. During the data collection process, theoretical saturation was progressively reached, as the final interviews generated recurring themes and confirmed previously identified patterns rather than producing substantially new information. Consequently, fifteen interviews were considered sufficient to achieve the objectives of this exploratory qualitative study.

Table N° 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participant

Participant	Age	Gender	Education Level	Type of Actor / Institution	Experience (Years)
1	28	Male	University	Tourism Entrepreneur	5
2	32	Female	University	Tourism Entrepreneur	7
3	26	Male	Secondary	Local Association	3
4	40	Female	University	Public Institution	10
5	35	Male	University	Public Institution	8
6	30	Female	University	Tourism Entrepreneur	6
7	45	Male	University	Financial Institution / Bank	12
8	29	Female	University	Local Association	4
9	38	Male	University	Public Institution	9
10	33	Female	University	Financial Institution / Bank	5
11	31	Male	University	Tourism Entrepreneur	6
12	27	Female	Secondary	Local Association	2
13	50	Male	University	Public Institution	15
14	36	Female	University	Tourism Entrepreneur	7
15	42	Male	University	Financial Institution / Bank	11

Source: Author's elaboration based on survey data (2026)

4.2 CURRENT PRACTICES IN TERRITORIAL BRANDING

Through evaluating participant comments on the various discussions that took place, it was determined that the Dakhla-Oued Eddahab region provides an essential basis for developing an image as a brand. However, there continues to be a lack of formal and structured components associated with this base. The various participants in each group had divergent opinions regarding the perception of the destination's image; while some expressed that the range of natural resources (such as coastline, beach and recreational water sports) currently available in the region were attractive, others stated that there should be some effort made toward coordinating the region's communication and promotional activities to effectively highlight the opportunities available at both a national and global scale. Currently, the marketing of this destination has occurred largely through local entrepreneurs and associations working independently, and in very limited interaction with institutional marketing campaigns; therefore, there is no integration of brand strategies. Primary means of marketing the region include participating in tourism exhibitions, showcasing the region on social networking sites,

and hosting local events to promote tourism (heritage & nautical activities). Notably, several respondents stated that the methods used for marketing the region lack cohesion and continuity; thereby limiting the potential for increasing the region's overall notoriety.

"... Efforts for Dakhla's economic development are primarily being initiated through the private sector and not government efforts; thus, development of Dakhla is lack institutional foundations." (Participant 4)

The local actors involved in developing a regionally-based brand image are integral to the process. On one hand, the tourism entrepreneurial segment views branding as an important means to increase both visitor attraction and investment, while on the other hand, local associations attempt to enhance the cultural and environmental character/images of those areas. There are also public institutions, which could be able to provide much-needed assistance; however, given their limited human and financial resources, their level of contribution is minimal. The breakdown of responsibilities among these three parties results in a situation in which private and associative initiatives are the catalyst for branding the region. Yet, even with that, for the region's brand image to maintain its integrity/ integration, the brand image has to become more integrated into the public institutions' ongoing strategic efforts for that region.

"... The individual effort plays a large role in the success of promotional activity. If there was some coordination, the brand of the region would be significantly stronger than what it is at the moment." (Participant 6)

In conclusion, the momentum created by the entrepreneurial activity of young people is one of the most significant factors contributing to the promotion of the region's territorial brand. Participants believe that there is a strong desire to undertake, and to promote the specific local products that are available (such as beaches, water sports, cultural activities, etc.), however, this momentum is fragile because of obstacles such as access to financing, the size of the market, and the complexity of administrative processes. On the other hand, some participants indicated that the success of local entrepreneurs (for example through digital products and exporting cooperatives) creates a domino effect thereby strengthening the culture of territorial branding, and the confidence that stakeholders have in the region's tourism ability.

"... The first successes create an injection of dynamic and demonstrate to potential entrepreneurs that through persistence, and an infusion of encouragement they can transform their business ideas into tangible projects." (Participant 14)

In summary, to date existing practices of territorial branding for the Dakhla-Oued Eddahab region include a mix of private, association act, and at times institutional actions. These actions have potential; however, they require more effective structuring, coordination, and professionalization in order for the region to develop its brand image and be positioned as a viable and sustainable tourist destination.

4.3 EXISTING SUSTAINABLE AND REGENERATIVE INITIATIVES

The examination of conversational data suggests that Dakhla-Oued Eddahab is at the beginning stages of up-and-coming sustainable tourism development, however, such activities remain limited in scope and primarily experimental. Dune, beach, and marine area protection were identified by a number of participants as a particularly high priority in respect to the protection of coastal ecosystems. Although some local associations and entrepreneurs are launching awareness-raising and cleaning initiatives, these initiatives are sporadic and rely heavily on the motivation of individuals rather than on a strong institutional framework.

"...Locals are concerned with protecting our beaches and lagoons; however, this effort primarily involves local initiatives." (Participant 8)

"... The youth are organizing beach clean-up campaigns as well as raising awareness with visitors; however, we cannot sustain that effort without institutional support." (Participant 3)

Ecotourism, and responsible water sports, were also mentioned as having high potential for growth, as these types of activities include kitesurfing, sailing, and marine wildlife observation and are increasingly regulated by regulations designed to minimize their ecological footprint. Participants believe that activities such as this help build the popularity of Dakhla as a destination to an audience that is concerned about sustainability and enable the development of a unique positioning for the Dakhla-Oued Eddahab region in International Tourism.

"... An increasingly popular draw for visitors from around the world is an interest in environmental protection. Therefore water-related sports require regulation to ensure preservation of the natural ecosystem as well as the continued maintenance of the destination's reputation for being environmentally green." (Participant 5)

"... Increasingly there are more and more businesses adding sustainable components or sustainable practices into what they provide; kitesurfing schools using recycled materials for their equipment and limiting numbers of kitesurfers to ensure the sustainability of the kitesurfing locations." (Participant 11)

The involvement of local communities is a key component in the success of these types of initiatives. As such, participant accounts referenced cooperatives, associations, and other collaboration efforts to promote local products and educate visitors regarding sustainable practices, as well as being involved in responsible tourism projects. However, participation was not equal among the various villages due to heavily relying on how effectively the actors involved could leverage available resources and obtain financial support.

"...We are working to ensure that all residents in Dakhla-Oued Eddahab can play a role in protecting and promoting the region; however, currently some of them don't believe or have confidence and have not been trained yet." (Participant 13)

In summary, there is a significant amount of sustainable and regenerative initiatives within Dakhla-Oued Eddahab but they are disjointed and uncoordinated. There is strong commitment to conserving the environment, and there is involvement from the local communities; however, there is a definite need for these sustainable and regenerative initiatives to have a more coordinated and integrated approach as part of the overall regional branding strategy. With this coordinated and integrated approach, tourism can be developed so that it will be attractive and respectful of both the ecosystem and community of the area.

4.4 OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITS FOR INTEGRATING CIRCULAR AND REGENERATIVE TOURISM INTO TERRITORIAL BRANDING

There are many opportunities and challenges that can be found when trying to incorporate circular and regenerative tourism into Dakhla-Oued Eddahab's territorial branding promotion strategy. These opportunities and challenges have been identified through interviews with key stakeholders. Key stakeholders believe there are numerous ways to use the natural resources found within Dakhla-Oued Eddahab, such as the coastal environment, recreational water-based activities and the local cultural heritage to develop a distinctive and sustainable branded identity. This could position Dakhla as a leader within Morocco in the recreation of regenerative

tourism and would serve to draw tourists who are conscious of the environment and differentiate Dakhla from traditional mass tourism destinations.

"... Dakhla has unique resources to create a sustainable tourism example by using the principles of circularity to demonstrate that tourism can recreate the destination instead of destroying it." (Participant 2)

There are also a number of limits that were identified by participants, including financial constraints, limited expertise, and a lack of institutional coordination. Entrepreneurs and community-development organizations express a desire to develop innovative projects but face problems with obtaining funding and meeting regulatory requirements when trying to expand their business. Many public sector stakeholders admitted there is a need for better coordination, but also identified lack of resources and a need for capacity development in order to build an economy that is entirely based upon circular and regenerative tourism.

"...Despite the numerous ideas available there are challenges in implementing circular models on a large scale due to lack of funding and training." (Participant 9)

"...Getting institutional support is important, but many of the current policies do not fully merge branding strategies with sustainability." (Participant 10)

In conclusion, participants are optimistic that by overcoming barriers through partnerships, training and policy reform, Dakhla's brand could become a vehicle for attracting investment into the region, which would then lead to the development of sustainable tourism initiatives that create a better and more sustainable economy through the enhancement of the attractiveness and resilience of Dakhla.

The study highlights the importance of territorial branding in contributing to the sustainability of Dakhla-Oued Eddahab's tourism product. At present, Dakhla is unsuccessful in using a single approach to market, advertise and promote the benefits of all of Dakhla's tourism offerings due to the disjointed nature of Dakhla's tourism marketing activities. By creating a unified territorial branding strategy that integrates circular and regenerative approaches to branding, Dakhla will be better positioned to develop Dakhla's identity as an eco-resilient tourism destination. In addition, this collaborative approach will also assist Dakhla in developing innovative solutions to the many challenges associated with climate change, the limited resources available for climate change adaptation, as well as the potential consequences resulting from climate change. These findings are consistent with the body of work related to sustainability branding, and therefore suggest that Dakhla has the potential to serve as an

example of how peripheral regions can move towards resilient tourism models. This study demonstrates the role of territorial branding as a mechanism for facilitating the development of sustainable, circular, and regenerative tourism within Dakhla-Oued Eddahab. Addressing the identified opportunities and constraints, stakeholders in Dakhla can increase their tourism attractiveness while bolstering their resilience to climate change and other global trends.

Future research could include identifying how to implement the strategies identified within the current research findings, and policymakers could support coordinated efforts in which they invest in developing a strong territorial brand to ensure the long-term viability of tourism in Dakhla.

4.5 POTENTIAL OF CIRCULAR TOURISM IN THE BRANDING STRATEGY

Participants in conversations indicated that the idea of Circular Tourism is becoming more commonly understood and recognized as a strategic tool to increase Dakhla-Oued Eddahab's sustainability and tourist appeal. While there may not be any projects currently implemented, there are a number of priority themes identified by stakeholders with respects to creating a Circular economy - such as efficient use of resources, minimizing waste, and promoting the local economy. These stakeholders consider these activities not only as an ecological necessity but also as a way to promote their brand by providing a unique tourist experience at Dakhla-Oued Eddahab, thus providing another area on which to build a regional identity.

"... Circular Tourism has yet to become a standard, but those businesses engaged in recycling, reducing, and reusing are benefiting in terms of their image and client base." (Participant 5)

Responsible resource management is needed in tourism infrastructure and nautical activities, as the use of water, energy and materials need to be managed appropriately. Many local businesses are trying out new ideas such as the use of solar panels, recycling materials for utilities and accommodations, and recovering water.

"... As a company, we installed solar panels and had systems to recover water for our bungalows.... Not only does it help the planet, but it makes us look good." (Participant 1)

Waste reduction is a major factor regarding resource management; all participants stated that sorting, reducing plastic waste, and raising awareness of waste to tourists are areas of improvement occurring primarily because of association initiatives and some of the newly developed businesses.

"... As a provider of services, am much more aware of waste from our water-related activities and am trying to make visitors aware of the amount we produce. The environmentally conscious tourist is becoming a non-traditional tourist who I am trying to attract." (Participant 8)

Participants view supporting the local economy as a foundation of circular tourism; for example, if tourists buy or promote locally made craft products, locally grown food products, or locally produced cultural products, the result will be a stronger relationship between tourists and the local area and create sustainable tourism revenue to support the community. The participants also feel that this support for a territory brand will help develop Dakhla's image as a destination rooted in resource use, identity, and sustainability.

"... By using local cooperatives and providing their products to tourists, we are creating a local economy and creating international recognition of Dakhla as a responsible tourism destination." (Participant 12)

Overall, circular tourism is recognized as a strategic lever for territorial branding, in that it has the potential to integrate sustainability, tourist attractiveness and local economic development; however, for circular tourism to be fully implemented it needs to have adequate institutional support, have local competencies developed and have greater structured coordination between various parties.

5 DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that territorial branding is a strategic lever for enhancing tourism development and promoting local resources in the Dakhla-Oued Eddahab region. Although the region benefits from strong natural and cultural assets, its territorial image remains fragmented and requires better coordination among stakeholders. Local entrepreneurs and associations play a central role in destination promotion, while institutional support remains limited.

The study shows that territorial branding contributes to sustainable tourism by encouraging environmental protection, community participation, ecotourism development, and the promotion of local products and services. It also supports climate resilience through initiatives such as dune protection, infrastructure adaptation, and awareness-raising, although these actions remain fragmented.

Furthermore, circular tourism emerged as an important opportunity for sustainable destination management through renewable energy use, water reuse, waste reduction, and the valorization

of local products. Integrating these practices into the territorial brand could strengthen the destination's competitiveness and attractiveness.

Consistent with previous studies, the results confirm that territorial branding enhances destination competitiveness, sustainability, and resilience. However, the small sample size (N = 15) limits the generalization of the findings. Despite this limitation, the study highlights the potential of territorial branding as a key tool for fostering a sustainable, resilient, and competitive tourism sector in Dakhla-Oued Eddahab.

6 CONCLUSION

The findings from this research project support earlier assertions that territorial branding can be a strategic tool for transforming a tourist destination. In the case of Dakhla-Oued Eddahab, the advantage of territorial branding is that it supports the enhancement of natural and cultural features as well as building partnerships with local stakeholders and encouraging sustainable and circular development.

The study also suggested that the image of a destination must incorporate climate-related issues and resilience to improve attractiveness and the long-term sustainability of tourism. From a scholarly perspective, the data suggests that there is a relationship between territorial branding, sustainability, and resilience, providing a stronger rationale for the creation of an identity for a tourist destination as part of a strategy to coordinate and implement changes in the way people behave or interact with a destination. For practitioners and decision-makers, the data is intended to provide recommendations that support the organization of local initiatives to achieve coherence in actions and enhance the influence of tourism policies on sustainable development. Finally, the study has established a number of opportunities for future research: additional research could be conducted in other types of coastal and desert areas to examine and compare sustainable territorial branding strategies; or, conduct deeper investigations into the economic effects of circular and ecological approaches on the attractiveness and resilience of tourist destinations. Exploring these options will help to better understand how territorial branding can become a global driver for the transformation of tourist destinations as a result of the environmental and climatic transitions.

7 Perspectives and Recommendations

The research suggested that Dakhla-Oued Eddahab has potential for a sustainable brand but that this potential is only partially realized. There is a need to formalize a branding strategy within an overall plan to coordinate the actions of diverse public, private, and associative actors. The strategy may include guidelines for promoting tourism, improving natural and cultural resources, and engaging local communities in order to enhance destination coherence and visibility. It is also important that climate-related and circular economy practices are included in the brand's identity.

Tourists and local stakeholders should understand that Dakhla-Oued Eddahab is not only a desirable tourism destination but also a responsible and resilient place in terms of environmental

challenges. By communicating infrastructure modifications, promoting the ecotourism and minimization of waste, and promoting the use of local products, the Dakhla-Oued Eddahab destination will differentiate itself from its competitors at a national and global level and will foster investment in sustainable businesses. The operational recommendations presented for tourism stakeholders and public policy makers include:

- Formulate an institutional, financial, and operational model that will encourage long-term support for sustainable place branding programs.
- Provide training and awareness-raising activities for entrepreneurs, associations and community groups to help enhance their capacity to make sustainable and circular economic decisions.
- Facilitate collaboration between public and private sector stakeholders on promotion efforts and coordinate on the development of ecological and regenerative initiatives.
- Use communication and marketing tools to emphasize sustainability and resilience as well as showcase the unique identity of Dakhla-Oued Eddahab.

The following set of recommendations are intended to establish territorial branding as a strategic lever to promote responsible and sustainable tourism by reconciling economic development with the sustainability of ecosystems.

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