

The Current Point of View: Sustainable Sports Tourism in Vojvodina

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Received: 19. November 2025 | Accepted: 08. December 2025 | Published: 17. December 2025

Abstract

The expectations of modern sports tourists, athletes, and recreationists are increasingly focused on integrated contents and perspectives that are related to the concept of sustainability. Such a development trend requires that research directions be directed towards the contexts of this interdisciplinary approach. This study focuses on the development of sustainable sports tourism, aiming to assess the current state of sports tourism in Vojvodina through a SWOT analysis and to examine stakeholder perspectives via interviews. This is a cross-sectional study, which comprises SWOT analysis, and semi-structured interviews (N = 30). Results discovered that the region of Vojvodina has potential for tourism development. However, due to poor implementation of strategies, disorganization, and limited resources, it has not yet reached its potential. These obstacles could be overcome through stronger brand differentiation and strategic management, while emphasizing the advantages of this region, such as the preserved nature, multiculturalism, authentic food, and sustainable principles.

Keywords: sustainable tourism · sports tourism · sports event · sustainable development · DEPART · competitiveness

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Introduction

Tourism, in general, is a fast-growing industry and a significant factor in economic growth and development in any country (Mirović et al., 2022; Pavković et al., 2021). It also brings many benefits to the local population. Destinations in order to improve competitiveness, need to promote their specific characteristics to distinguish themselves from other locations (Mulec & Wise, 2013).

Vojvodina is an autonomous province (AP) in the north of Serbia with around 1.7 million people (Republički zavod za statistiku, 2024a). It comprises three sub-regions: Backa, Banat and Srem (Kalenjuk Pivarski et al., 2023). Several rivers (e.g., Danube, Tisa, Sava), mountains (e.g., Fruška Gora, Vršacke mountains), lakes (e.g., Palić, Ludaš) and nature reserves (e.g., Fruška Gora) enhance the region's natural appeal. This provides opportunities for hosting cultural and sporting events. In addition, numerous border crossings improve regional and international travel. The region is also known for its multiethnicity and cultural heritage, which is important as multiculturalism and experiencing different cultures has become one of the interests of

travelers in recent years (Štetić & Trišić, 2024). An increasing number of organization of sports events of all formats from different sports is taking place in Vojvodina. To the greatest extent, the venue is Novi Sad, as the main administrative center in Vojvodina, which indicates that the tourist potential clearly exists. This potential has long been internationally recognized (Milovanović et al., 2019). Overall, Vojvodina has great potential for tourism development (Grubor et al., 2022; Stankovic & Cirkovic, 2003).

A tourist is any person who spends at least one night in the place of visit, outside of his residence, in a tourist accommodation facility for rest, recreation, or other reasons such as health, sports, education, religion, business, etc. (Republički zavod za statistiku, 2024b). The key indicator of tourism is the number of tourists and recorded overnight stays (Stankovic & Cirkovic, 2003). In the period from 2015 with 994314 overnight stays to 2024 with 1993267 overnight stays (except for 2020 and 2021 due to the restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic), there has been an increasing trend in Vojvodina. As a result, tourist arrivals increased annually over the last decade, as shown in Figure 1.

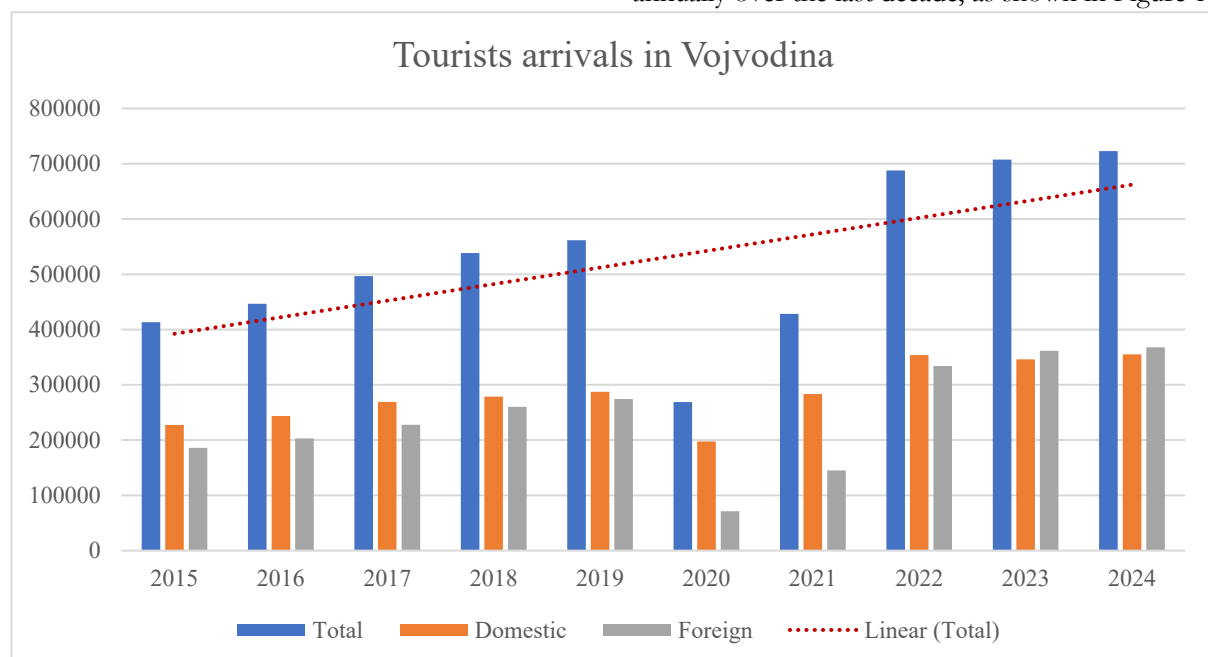


Figure 1. Total Number of arrivals and separated on domestic and international tourists in the region Vojvodina from 2015-2024 year. Source: Institute for Statistics of Republic of Serbia

These numbers represent tourists who checked in and stayed overnight in facilities offering accommodation services (Republički zavod za statistiku, 2025). Tourism is one of the key components of the strategic development plan of AP Vojvodina for the period 2023-2030. The formulated measures include: 1. Development of accessible and green tourist infrastructure in

Vojvodina, 2. Support for the creation and promotion of a sustainable tourist offer (product), and 3. Establishing the concept of smart tourism – improving human resources, management and digitization in tourism (Development Plan of AP Vojvodina from 2023-2030., Provincial Secretariat for Regional Development, Interregional Cooperation and Local Self-Government, 2023).

One segment of tourism is sports tourism, which could include active holidays focused on sports (e.g., skiing), travel to resorts offering sports facilities or equipment, sports activities available for tourists, and taking part in sporting events (e.g., cycling).

The sports tourism sector in Vojvodina includes the following stakeholders: the Provincial Secretariat for Economy and Tourism; the Provincial Secretariat for Sport and Youth; the Tourism Organization of Vojvodina and local tourism offices; sports organizations; educational and research institutions (such as the Faculty of Sport and Physical Education, the Department of Tourism at the Faculty of Natural and Mathematical Sciences); the tourism and hospitality industry; cultural institutions, heritage and tourism; and the sport event organizers in Vojvodina. Although there are not many examples of sustainable sports events in the Vojvodina region, interest in sustainable sports tourism is growing. However, due to its favorable geographical position, the region is known for some sports events such as the Novi Sad Marathon, the Night Marathon, and the Fruška Gora Trail. We would like to highlight two events that can serve as good examples for others in organizing sustainable sports tourism projects: the Tour de Fruška, and Camp Vidre (Kamp Vidre, n.d.; Tour De Fruška, n.d.). These manifestations effectively integrate the region's natural environment and rich cultural heritage, offering engaging experiences for both children and adults. Sustainable sport tourism illustrates the transformation of leisure into a more active, meaningful, and environmentally responsible experience. Furthermore, from the perspective of the sociology of sport, it highlights the potential of sport manifestations to promote sustainability, contribute to the well-being of local communities, and foster intercultural integration.

This study focuses on the development of sustainable sports tourism, aiming to assess the current state of sports tourism in Vojvodina.

Method

This research follows a cross-sectional study design. Two types of data collection were used: SWOT analysis based on a literature review and semi-structured interviews.

The literature review resulted in SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis to

examine the inner strengths and weaknesses of Vojvodina's sport tourism, while considering external opportunities and obstacles from the environment. This method is often used in the tourism industry to evaluate internal (strengths, weaknesses) and external (opportunities, threats) factors. These factors are crucial for evaluating the market position of destinations and represents the first step in strategic planning (G. Popović et al., 2021).

A total of $N = 30$ stakeholders in sports tourism from Serbia participated in the interviews on a voluntary basis. The selection criteria for interviewees to have experience in organizing a sports event in Vojvodina. All interviews were conducted in compliance with ethical standards ensuring the anonymity of participants. The qualitative research focused on the attitudes and opinions of stakeholders regarding sustainable sports tourism in the Autonomous Province (AP) of Vojvodina. To conduct the thematic analysis and interpret common patterns, ideas, problems and difficulties, the interview questions were formulated around the following topics: (1) Sustainability (Impact), (2) Policy and Funding, (3) Event Management and Promotion, and (4) Market Trends and Customer Expectations in sports tourism. Data collection took place in August and September 2024 within the territory of AP Vojvodina in the Republic of Serbia. A team of researchers conducted the interviews and analyzed the data.

Results

Sports tourism in Serbia and Vojvodina, as its autonomous province, remains underdeveloped. However, despite all the weaknesses, there is a plan to improve and adopt more sustainable tourism practices. The strategy for developing sports tourism in AP Vojvodina is based on three priority measures: enhancing environmentally friendly tourism infrastructure, development of sustainable tourism offers, and implementation of the concept smart tourism through better management and digitalization in tourism (Development Plan of AP Vojvodina from 2023-2030., Provincial Secretariat for Regional Development, Interregional Cooperation and Local Self-Government, 2023). A comprehensive analysis of the literature review led to the following SWOT analysis (Table 1):

Table 1. SWOT analysis for Sustainable Sports Tourism in Vojvodina

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethnically diverse region • Multicultural environment (over thirty ethnic group) • Rich natural resources (rivers, lakes, national park) • Culture for traditional festivals, wine, and agro-tourism • Strong academic support from higher-education institutions • Continuous improvement of sports tourism infrastructure and offers • Established network of volunteers • Increasing integration of tourism, ecology, and sports programs • Diverse sports related activities for active vacation and ecotourism • Inclusion on the Danube River cycling route • Traditional Balkan hospitality • Good strategy of promotion for Novi Sad by tourist organizations • Recognition of Novi Sad: European capital of youth and of culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of management depth • Lack of research for sustainable sports tourism • Narrow scope of tourist services and products • Lack visibility of international promotion • Lack of knowledge and digital competencies in this topic • Underutilization and overloading in tourism in specific seasonal periods • Insufficiently using existing potential and resources • Inconsistent and/or outdated sport tourism infrastructure in different areas (urban or rural) • Inaccessibility of sport infrastructures for people with disabilities • Inconsistent traffic infrastructure for supporting tourism activities and • Insufficient control over sports tourism developmental strategies and plans • Weak knowledge about environmental conservation practices among inhabitants • Region image as agricultural region • Many properties in undefined ownership
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tourism as an important part of the Vojvodina's strategic plan from 2023-2030 • Rapid growth of sports and recreational events in the last years • Initiatives for cross-border cooperation • Government encouragement for domestic tourism • Digitization • Integration of multiculturalism into tourism offerings • Development of products and services to be more accessible • Smart technology usage • Opportunity for services such as health and wellness tourism • Promotional strategies in offering winter sports tourism • Increased adoption of DMOs • Advancing tourism with digitization • Support for sustainable tourist offer development • Tourism as an opportunity for younger generation to stay • Great network of trails and canals for active tourism • Growing local interest in the development of sustainable tourism options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global political and economic instability • Serbian economic challenges of instability • Strong competitive sport tourism offers in nearby EU countries • Poor implementation of strategies for sustainable sport tourism • Environmental degradation during the sports tourism programs • Climate changes • Weakly market ties and problematic consistent supply chains • Overall and rural depopulation • Low birth rates in this region • Declining agricultural sector • Low forest coverage in Vojvodina • For meeting international standards requires investment and development • Low level of protective measures and controls • Political and administrative problems to attract foreign investments • Balkan political tensions • Uneven distribution of services for repair and purchase sport equipment

Sustainability (Impact)

The interest in sustainable sports tourism in Vojvodina has a growing tendency. Although stakeholders recognize the importance and necessity of sustainability and reducing negative impacts for long-term viability, there is a lack of reliable and effective strategies. For example, current decisions are made on an ad hoc basis, waste

management and renewable resources are inadequate. Another factor that was mentioned is the lack of infrastructure and low financial support. Sustainable tourism practices are not prioritized as they are mostly seen as an additional cost. This lack of strategies, clear guidelines and environmentally responsible measures leads to difficulties in implementing sustainable measures in sport events.

We try to be sustainable, but without proper infrastructure, it is difficult to achieve long-term success. (In. 1)

Our events depend heavily on volunteers and donations, which makes it hard to integrate sustainability measures. (In. 12)

On the other hand, opportunities to reduce the environmental impact of sport events lie in collaborations between local governments, private organizations, and sports federations. They can promote sustainable and environmentally friendly practices, such as promoting local food. The eco-friendly strategies can attract more tourists and contribute to the long-term success of the events.

Policy and Funding

The existing policy framework and funding practices in sports tourism are not sufficiently developed and clear. Due to inconsistent and not consistently transparent funding mechanisms, there is a great deal of uncertainty among sports event organizers. One of the most reliable contributions are personal relationships and private sponsors. While there is an example of events that are funded by public and private sources, the criteria for allocation are not known.

Funding exists, but it is often sporadic and unpredictable, leaving us to rely on personal connections and goodwill rather than a structured system. (In. 8)

A centralized funding platform for sustainable sports events would make the process more transparent and ensure fair distribution of resources. (In. 19)

Therefore, it is not surprising that smaller events struggle to find adequate and stable funding to succeed, and furthermore, to adopt more sustainable practices. Sports event organizers emphasized that the difficulty of finding sponsors for smaller events could be avoided if local authorities played a more active role in promoting and seeking funding.

Event Management and Promotion

Any event requires collaboration and effective coordination between the organizers, local authorities, and sponsors to ensure proper management and promotion. From the interviews, it appears that in practice, institutional support is often limited to the organizers of sports events. Therefore, promotion becomes a greater challenge. In addition, advertising in traditional media, such as television and the press, is often not possible due to budget constraints. Therefore, private contacts and social media platforms play a significant role in promotion and attracting participants. However,

this does not contribute to the growth of the sports event.

We have to manage everything ourselves, from organizing the event to contacting local services, and this leaves little room for professional promotion (In.12)

On the other hand, stronger cooperation with government agencies could create more opportunities for organizing events. For example, promotions on city websites or joint promotional activities involving different events, as noted by the interviewees:

I think working closely with local authorities and other event organizers could boost our visibility and participation. (In. 21)

Market Trends and Customer Expectations

As sports tourism is becoming increasingly popular in this region, customer expectations are also rising. There is a growing demand for active travel, outdoor activities, and their connection to nature, such as cycling, hiking, or running. Participants are often looking for experiences that focus on both their physical performance and their leisure time. They are also looking for unique experiences and sustainable practices.

People expect more than just a race; they want an event that offers a full experience- good facilities, eco-friendly practices, and something memorable. (In. 1)

Meeting their expectations requires better infrastructure and event planning, which are difficult to achieve without proper funding and support. In addition, the lack of amenities such as eco-friendly accommodation makes it difficult to attract a wider audience, as the following response vividly illustrates:

While there is growing interest in sustainable tourism, we still lack the infrastructure to fully meet those expectations. (In. 8)

Discussion

This study focuses on the development of sustainable sports tourism, aiming to assess the current state of sports tourism in Vojvodina through a SWOT analysis based on the available literature, and to examine stakeholders' perspectives from good practices in sport tourism via interviews. Thematic analysis of the data yielded four key themes, which are summarized below.

The last few years have brought many limitations due to politics, the economy, and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, according to the development plan for Vojvodina, this region has a solid legal basis for tourism growth and it is oriented towards the

principles of sustainable tourism (Development Plan of AP Vojvodina from 2023-2030., Provincial Secretariat for Regional Development, Interregional Cooperation and Local Self-Government, 2023). The region's numerous natural features (rivers, lakes, and mountains) provide strong potential for the development of sustainable sports tourism. Furthermore, there are 502 sports facilities, 63 provincial branch associations and more than 1300 sports clubs available in the Vojvodina region (Sportski Objekti u Vojvodini, n.d.). Some successful examples of sports practices are the Recycling Marathon, the Night Marathon, the Fruška Gora Trail, the Tour de Fruška, and the Camp Vidre for Children.

To uncover common patterns, ideas, problems and difficulties, the interviews covered themes as sustainability, policy and funding, event management and promotion, and market trends and customer expectations in sports tourism.

Sustainability results: In summary, the main challenges to improving sustainability in sports tourism are the lack of strategies, financial constraints, and understanding of how to introduce sustainable measures without increasing costs. These can be applied at both local and national levels. With formalized plans and greater support from local governments, sustainability in sports tourism could be improved. However, besides all the barriers in its implementation, there are sustainable good practices in sport tourism offered in Serbia, which are highlighted by Matić (2025) in a comparison of two good practices of sustainable sports tourism in Serbia (Tour de Fruška and EuroVelo 6, the Danube bicycle route in Serbia). The author emphasizes the importance of bicycle infrastructure both in encouraging active mobility and measurable health practices and year-round promotion through different kind of marketing strategies. Thus, the development of the concept of sustainability contributed to the realization of combining active mobility, environmental conservation, rural development, cultural promotion, cross-border cooperation, and revitalizing rural and underdeveloped river regions. This approach promotes low-impact travel, revitalizes underdeveloped areas, and contributes to Serbia's alignment with EU green transition goals.

Policy and funding results: To summarize, the main concerns and obstacles are unpredictable and non-transparent financial models. This problem affects the possibility of sports events and the growth of sports tourism in the region. A more stable financing environment can be achieved through better collaborations between the public and private sectors. Better structured policies and clearer

guidelines would also improve the current situation. So, it is definite that Serbia and the capital, Belgrade, have the capacity and potential for eco-friendly events with minimal harmful impact on the environment (Morfoulaki et al., 2023). The main suggestions for policy improvement lie in policy synergy for sustainable infrastructure.

Event Managements and Policy results: In summary, the biggest issue is the lack of structured and systematic support from government agencies for the management and promotion of sports events, which is essential for long-term tourism in Vojvodina. Organizers often rely on social media to promote their sport events, which is a weak measure for gaining visibility outside the region. Stronger partnerships are needed between local authorities, private sponsors, and tourism associations. That kind of collaboration for the implementation of sustainable sports tourism events requires careful planning and implementation, which is suggested by Chersulich Tomino et al. (2020). Analyzing the relevant scientific papers in systematic review on the topic of the impact and legacy of sports events, the authors state that the author's focus on the economic, and only then on the social and ecological impacts. Also, these authors suggest a holistic approach for organizers to avoid mistakes and extract maximum effects from future sports events. Further, a good form of advertising could be sports branding. The trend of turning sports product into brand is developing rapidly (S. Popović, 2017).

Market Trends and Customer Expectations results: In summary, there is a positive trend for sustainable sports tourism in Vojvodina and its connection with the environment. Participants are often looking for experiences that are linked to physical activity, leisure, and enjoyment. Customers also expect environmental responsibility and sustainability. As a result of evidence of starting the serious implementation of the concept of sustainability, success can be found: the first verified good practice in sustainable sport tourism in Vojvodina—the Tour de Fruška, which is evaluated through the program Interreg Europe (2025). It is obvious that this event, which was awarded the prize of the best in Vojvodina, with over 10,000 visitors (in the previous four editions of the event), has an ecological character: a plogging race and well-connected sports, recreation, nature, and economy. As a result of its success, Tour de Fruška organized the prestigious international race Gran Fondo Road Race in 2024.

However, these demands require adequate funding and support for the organizers mentioned in the previous interview topics, as the local infrastructure

does not fully meet these customer expectations. In general, sports tourism in Vojvodina reflects the global trend towards sustainability, environmentally friendly and culturally engaging travel experiences. In the last decade, the eco-friendly tourism offers and better infrastructure for sports tourism have become available.

This study has few limitations. Firstly, SWOT analysis as an assessment tool has the effects of subjective assessment by the evaluator, so the obtained assessment results should be supported by additional measurable indicators. Secondly, the sample of respondents included stakeholders from different organizations and institutions. Accordingly, the perspectives of sustainable sports tourism for someone coming from a provincial secretariat for sports and youth, or an event organizer with a different tradition and size, and a position in the respective sports association can be projected differently. Lastly, using in-depth insights from qualitative analysis could provide more useful information.

Further studies should include more stakeholders from other sporting events and manifestations. Considering that the concept of sustainability is relatively new in the practice of sports tourism in Vojvodina, this research represents one of the pioneering attempts to cross-section the current situation. Therefore, future research should monitor longitudinal effects in the development of sustainable sports tourism. Likewise, it is necessary to take into account and parallelly monitor the implementation of 3 key measures from the Development Plan of AP Vojvodina 2023-2030, which refer to the development of accessible and green tourist infrastructure in Vojvodina, the creation and promotion of new sustainable sport tourism products, and the process of digitization in sport tourism.

Conclusion

The Vojvodina region has strong potential for tourism development, especially in the context of sustainable travel based on tourists' experiences. However, this research shows that inefficient implementation of development strategies, lack of coordination among stakeholders, and limited financial and human resources have slowed down progress. To unlock this potential, it is necessary to invest in strategic management, clearly differentiate the regional brand, and improve cooperation between the public and private sectors. Highlighting the region's core strengths, its natural assets, cultural diversity, authentic cuisine, and commitment to

sustainability can help position Vojvodina as a unique and competitive tourist destination.

Declaration of interests: The authors report no conflict of interests.

Acknowledgement: This research is part of the Interreg Europe Project DEPART – Support the Development of a Sustainable Sports Tourism in Europe with the registration number 02C0622, which focuses on the development of sustainable sports tourism and highlights the strengths of six participating regions: Finland, Romania, Belgium, Lithuania, Greece and Serbia.

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