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Join the Med: Creating a multipurpose platform for enhancing sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean

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Abstract

The Mediterranean region offers significant opportunities for tourism development within a complex and diverse environment, but these opportunities come with challenges that threaten the sector's sustainability. Pressures on the natural and built environment, uneven distribution of benefits, declining quality of life, loss of authenticity, alteration of local customs, exploitation of traditions for profit, and cultural homogenization all pose serious risks. Ensuring a sustainable path for tourism requires the mobilization of both private and public actors, along with improvements in policy frameworks at both strategic and operational levels (Niavis et al. 2022).

In this context, the Interreg initiative provides fertile ground for fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders and driving significant progress toward sustainable tourism development (Knippschild and Vock, 2017). Nevertheless, the ability of Interreg projects to record significant achievements in promoting change in the areas of its implementation is conditioned by many socioeconomic, institutional, and geographical factors (Reitel et al. 2018; Niavis et al. 2022). One of the key factors in securing long-lasting impact is the viability of projects funded by Interreg through the passage of time and the continuous capitalization on previous knowledge and practice gains from newly funded ones (Petrakos et al. 2022).

This calls for the active participation of stakeholders and project partners after the project's lifetime and the continuous monitoring of similar projects in order to build on available knowledge, bring added value, and avoid replication. Keeping partners involved after the end of their project is not always feasible, as many projects do not incorporate long-term objectives (Shepherd and Ioannides, 2020).

To deal with these challenges, the capitalization of past knowledge and the viability of project results after their implementation are now essential criteria used by Managing Authorities to evaluate project applications (Petrakos et al. 2022). Moreover, programmes set new mechanisms such as governance and community projects, targeted capitalization calls, formal partner agreements after the implementation of projects, and digital platforms to maintain results (Interact, 2024; 2025). By doing so, programmes ensure that project outputs will not be lost in a programme's library or repository but rather will be kept alive for any future project to replicate, transfer, or improve them. Moreover, the key messages and recommendations of each project continue to feed policy dialogues and exchanges, securing in this way that Interreg programmes enter various policy dialogues with collective inputs that better reflect the needs and challenges of the population residing in their intervention areas.

To this end, this paper seeks to highlight the importance of a knowledge hub collecting data and information related to such a diverse topic, such as sustainable tourism. In order to do so, the paper showcases the experience gained through the creation of Join the Med platform, a knowledge hub developed by Community4Tourism (C4T), the Thematic Community project of the Interreg Euro-MED Programme for Enhancing Sustainable Tourism under the Sustainable Tourism Mission of Interreg Euro-MED Programme. The Mission has been collecting the results of 30 projects so far (building upon the legacy of the Sustainable Tourism Community of Interreg MED 14/20 programme) and will continue to integrate the results of the current and future projects of the Mission.

Join the Med platform answers to the need for effectively and efficiently collecting and presenting the results of projects, which are considered relevant to sustainable tourism issues as well as valuable assets for practitioners, policy makers, academics and other stakeholders' groups, in an integrated and dynamic way in order to reach the end-users and ensure the viability and replicability of the results. Join the Med aims to highlight sustainable tourism practices in the Mediterranean and provide policy extensions of tourism-related activities.

The platform functions as a knowledge hub for sustainable tourism issues by drawing information from the actions and results of the Sustainable Tourism Mission and as a

mechanism for visual presentation of the synthesis of the Community's results. The aim is to establish a non-static, dynamic tool with interactive visualizations of the projects' results which can also act as a database and monitoring mechanism collecting projects' results and incorporating visual features by mapping pilot areas, actors, activities, synergies and links with other projects and activities. The spatial reference of Join the Med is the Mediterranean region, however, the platform includes thematic and spatial extensions beyond the Mediterranean territories.

Join the Med architecture includes five basic features:

1. Tools: Tangible and easily replicable tools that reflect different types of approaches, address a variety of policy targets, incorporate replicability conditions and have been implemented in various destinations in the Mediterranean.
2. Knowledge: A fully customizable search engine providing access to a wide range of documents related to tourism sustainability issues with a particular focus on the Mediterranean.
3. Best practices: Concrete examples and best practices for sustainable tourism which include a summary of key elements for success and the lessons learnt from Mediterranean destinations with the aim to support decision-makers and local communities to foster their adoption.
4. Stakeholders: Sustainable tourism is an issue addressed by different types of stakeholders. Academic entities, tourism-related businesses, local, regional and national authorities, institutions and international organisations have been dealing with sustainable tourism issues in the Mediterranean and are available on the platform.
5. Policy hubs: The identification of specific policy targets to address tourism challenges is the first and most important step towards ensuring a sustainable future for the region. Join the Med platform has created 12 policy hubs to address these challenges. Each one of them includes extensions to policies and initiatives. These are: Reducing seasonality, Addressing carrying capacity, Integrating ICZM/MSP principles, Addressing climate change/risk assessment, Promoting clustering and innovation, Improving social well-being, Improving capacity building/stakeholder engagement, Improving accessibility, Generating employment, Diversifying and differentiating the tourism product, Monitoring tourism sustainability, Increasing gross value added.

The platform's added value is related to:

- The use of interactive maps or concept maps in order to provide synthetic information, supported by search filters
- Addressing practitioners, policy makers, academics and stakeholders related to tourism issues and being open to the public
- The use of attributes for providing integrated knowledge based on spatial (country, region, destination), thematic criteria (keyword,/policy target, policy, indicator, objective) and criteria related to typologies (stakeholders, tools, joint actions/synergies)
- Incorporating the existing scientific knowledge on the topic of sustainable tourism
- Integrating policy extensions to the topic of sustainable tourism

Keywords: sustainable tourism, Mediterranean region, project sustainability, Join the Med platform, Interreg Euro MED

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