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The Impact of Eco-Degradation on Residential Tourism: The Case of the Mar Menor, Spain

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Abstract: The relationship between tourism and the environment is often studied through tourism's impact on destinations, with limited focus on how eco-degradation affects tourism, including residential tourism, which remains the most loyal to specific destinations. This study examines whether a destination's eco-degradation impacts the residential tourists' satisfaction and their intention to revisit. Two studies were conducted on the Mar Menor destination (Spain) using two online questionnaires administered through social media. Study 1 (from October 2020 to December 2021, n = 822) explored tourists' perceptions of the destination's ecological situation. Study 2 (November 2022 and March 2023, n = 453) examined how the destination's eco-degradation influences residential tourists' intention to revisit, considering the mediating role of destination attachment and perceived value. We found that residential tourists' perceptions and revisit intentions vary with accommodation type. Eco-degradation impacts holiday satisfaction but not revisit intentions. Second-home ownership compels visits despite dissatisfaction or a preference for alternative destinations. This research contributes to the scarce literature on residential tourism by showing that place attachment and the perceived value, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions can explain revisit intention even in contexts of eco-degradation of the destination.

Keywords: residential tourism; eco-degradation; Mar Menor; intention to revisit; destination

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1. Introduction

The relationship between tourism and the environment is complex (Ștefănică et al., 2021) and is based on a paradox: tourism activity tends to degrade the environment necessary to sustain tourism (Williams & Ponsford, 2008). This problem is heightened when other factors, including industrial waste, agriculture, and overpopulation, contribute to the eco-degradation of destinations. The tourism–environment interplay has been addressed through two approaches. The first focuses on tourism's impacts on the environment, with the literature indicating that tourism is one of the most environmentally damaging industries (Cevik, 2023; World Tourism Organization & International Transport Forum, 2019). The second approach focuses on the impact of eco-degradation on tourism (Scott et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2019), which is highly vulnerable to eco-degraded environments.

Like other types of tourism, residential tourism (RT) is often blamed for contributing to the eco-degradation of destinations. Because RT enhances tourists' attachment to destinations (Aronsson, 2004; Hall, 2014), it is possible to perceive those who participate

in RT as a potential group of interest to slow down the eco-degradation of destinations and the departure of tourists without such attachments. Such tourism is characterised by a high intention to revisit (ItR), which is crucial for destinations (Seetanah et al., 2020) as it is an outcome of tourist satisfaction and attachment. Since perceived destination value influences ItR (Silva & Correia, 2017; Stylos & Bellou, 2019), it is reasonable to expect that the eco-degradation of destinations may harm ItR. However, in the case of RT, it is plausible that attachment to the destination can make residential tourists resilient to decreased ItR. Thus, this research investigates whether a destination's eco-degradation influences residential tourists' ItR. In this regard, Hjalager et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of designing studies that directly capture the perceptions and intentions of second homeowners and users to understand whether they perceive environmental degradation and how it influences their behavioural intentions. Specifically, this study examines whether the eco-degradation of a place affects residential tourists' intention to revisit. Understanding how eco-degradation shapes tourists' perceptions of destination quality, satisfaction, and willingness to return is crucial, especially when attachment to the destination may serve as a mitigating factor.

This article is structured in sections. Section 2 offers the theoretical foundations of the analysed topic: eco-degradation, residential tourism, and the intention to revisit. As the literature on environmental issues points out, it is important to contextualise studies because of the deep nexus between the local environment and tourism (Gordon & Goodall, 2000; Higgins-Desbiolles & Bigby, 2022; Shahgerdi et al., 2016). Section 3 offers a description of the tourist destination of the Mar Menor (Spain) from both a geographical and an environmental perspective. Our topic has hardly been analysed in the literature and there is no previous information about residential tourists' thoughts about the eco-degradation of the Mar Menor area. Therefore, Section 4 presents an exploratory study of tourists' perception of the environmental situation of the destination, the possible loss of quality of their stay due to eco-degradation, and their intention to return to the destination for their next vacation. After this exploratory analysis, we conducted a confirmatory study with a different sample size two years later. This confirmatory analysis (Section 5) investigates whether the perceived value of the destination, perceived changes in the tourist experience, and satisfaction with the destination act as antecedents of ItR when the destination is perceived as eco-degraded. We present each study's results, conclusions, and discussion, as the findings from the exploratory study serve as the basis for the confirmatory study. Finally, Section 6 offers a general discussion of the findings.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Eco-Degradation and Its Influence on Destinations

Eco-degradation refers to a deterioration of the environment resulting from the depletion of its resources and the disruption of its natural state due to human intervention (de Silva et al., 2021). This degradation implies a persistent reduction or deterioration of the environmental structure or capacity to sustain its ecosystems and to benefit human beings (Delgado & Marín, 2020). Moreover, eco-degradation is a transformative process that disrupts environmental equilibrium, potentially resulting in extreme events with impacts on ecosystems and human populations (Morganstein & Ursano, 2020). While some such events are accidental (e.g., oil spills, the Fukushima nuclear event), they often result from human-caused environmental aggressions.

Many tourist destinations are in areas with fragile ecosystems that suffer from the aggressions of tourism and economic activities. Land and resource overuse, waste generation, increased pollution, soil erosion, natural habitat loss, and infrastructural development are several factors that have significant adverse impacts on ecosystems (Kocabulut et al., 2019).

When destinations degrade, their quality decreases for tourists, leading to dissatisfaction and a negative impact on the local economy and society. Alongside its direct effects on the landscape and the tourist stay, environmental degradation can affect the infrastructure and resources that support tourism. For example, water pollution can hinder access to swimming and other recreational activities. Similarly, air pollution has adverse effects on health, and soil degradation can lead to erosion, causing damage to roads and homes.

2.2. RT as Tourism for Long Vacation Stays

RT has stirred controversy because of its multifaceted nature and different definitions (Mantecón, 2017). It has been said to encompass various forms of tourism, including second-home tourism (Adamiak et al., 2015), retirement or migration tourism, summer migration, or seasonal suburbanisation (Hall & Müller, 2004). RT has also been interpreted as an economic activity focused on real estate (Mantecón & Huete, 2008) or as the outcome of migration related to the purchase of property in a tourist destination, lending it a real estate rather than a tourist motivation (Perez-Aranda et al., 2017). These perspectives distinguish temporary visitors (those staying in destinations during certain seasons) from residential tourists (those staying in destinations for a long time, staying primarily at the destination while periodically returning to their home country or region), with a focus on the geography of tourism. However, from a tourism perspective, other authors have argued that RT can align with the UN World Tourism Organization's (2008) definition of tourism. For example, Alarcón et al. (2011) considered residential tourists as those who stay in second homes or rent or use free housing accommodations while maintaining a seasonal or extended vacation stay. Similarly, RT can encompass activities related to the recreational use of second homes (González et al., 2019; Perles-Ribes et al., 2018). In contrast, Müller et al. (2004) affirmed that second-home tourism also includes weekend vacations. Alarcón et al.'s (2011) approach did not exclude visitors based on legal ownership status (as in the case of second-home tourism) and established a long-term but limited-stay requirement. Therefore, legal ownership of a home in a tourist destination, whether the home is fully owned or shared, does not affect the nature and objectives of the stay, nor does it limit the activities of visitors as tourists (Volo, 2015). Thus, nothing in the established definitions of tourists (UN World Tourism Organization, 2008; Yu et al., 2012) disqualifies visitors as tourists based on property ownership in a given destination. In the current study, we understand RT as tourism practised by individuals in private dwellings (either fixed or mobile) who stay at a destination for an extended but limited time and engage in typical tourist activities, such as leisure, rest, and sport, and who do not visit for work purposes or change their legal residence.

2.3. RT and Local Environment

Non-permanent residents in touristic residential areas give rise to unbalanced territorial development (Soto & Clavé, 2017), which changes local natural habitats. These changes are driven by two main factors: first, there is a marked increase in real estate development, as residential tourism often combines leisure and investment objectives (Hjalager et al., 2022). Secondly, this real estate development leads to the creation of housing estates that end up being annexed to the initial population centre, demanding more public services and more public and commercial infrastructures and increasing waste and pollution. In many cases, these effects cannot be adequately managed, and add to the effects of climate change, further aggravating the degradation of the local environment (Næss et al., 2019; Peters & Meybeck, 2000). However, RT can also play a significant role in improving destinations' conservation and environmental recovery. In many cases, residential tourists may act as a barrier to curbing eco-degradation for several

reasons. First, residential tourists can develop an awareness of their importance to destinations and actively promote environmental preservation (Robinson et al., 2019). These tourists tend to have longer stays compared to conventional tourists and may exhibit greater concern for the destination's environment (Ericsson et al., 2022; Hao & Xiao, 2021; Mazón & Aledo, 2004). Second, RT can help reduce mass tourism's negative impact on the local environment. In areas where RT is predominant, destinations lack infrastructure for mass tourism (Karayiannis et al., 2016).

2.4. Environment and Intention to Revisit (ItR)

ItR, defined as the willingness to return to a destination (Luo & Hsieh, 2013), reflects a tourist's likelihood of revisiting a location. ItR serves as the best proxy for crucial tourism indicators, including tourist satisfaction (Correia et al., 2017) and destination attractiveness (Seetanah et al., 2020), given that tourists with higher ItR are likelier to recommend the destination and develop greater loyalty toward it.

Destinations with a healthy environment have a greater capacity to attract tourists and meet their demands (Suharyono & Digdowiseiso, 2021). Conversely, environmental issues negatively impact ItR (Singh et al., 2020). Sadat and Chang (2016) indicated that any improvement in environmental quality leads to an increase in ItR, while Bauer and Chan (2001) found that the perception of environmental problems at the destination negatively impacts ItR. These findings can also be extended to residential tourists, even though they have a strong connection to their destination. These tourists can revisit the same destination while utilising different housing options, such as second homes, rentals, or free options (e.g., staying with family or friends), which further anchors their commitment. Second-home tourists often return to destinations where they have invested in real estate and extend their stay to make the most of their investment (Romita, 2013). However, tourists who have not made such an investment (non-second-home tourists) may have greater flexibility to change their vacation destination without suffering financial losses. Consequently, their ItR could be more readily influenced by a decline in the quality of their stay or the destination's environment.

3. The Mar Menor as a Destination

The Mar Menor, located in southeastern Spain, is the largest saltwater lagoon in Europe and borders the Mediterranean Sea. A 24 km long narrow strip called La Manga separates both seas, with second-home tourist resorts occupying half of this strip. In 1999, the United Nations declared Mar Menor a specially protected area due to its endangered species. This destination encompasses all the coastal areas surrounding the Mar Menor.

The environment of the Mar Menor is typical of coastal lagoons, with unique habitats and species, and typical of the Mediterranean area. Its sea has a high salinity, which has formed salt marshes that have imposed very specific and unique adaptations on the fauna and flora. It is also an area of sea salt production, which has allowed the creation of suitable environments for bird migration.

The Mar Menor emerged as a summer tourist destination in the 1960s, although urbanisation intensified in the 1980s and 1990s. Tourists in this destination primarily consist of Spanish families who stay in private homes, accounting for 81.0% of the total visitors, with stays ranging from 15 to 30 nights (Arroyo Mompeán & Vegas Juez, 2019). A substantial proportion of tourists spend the entire summer season at the destination, usually from mid-June to early September. Regarding housing preferences, the most recent governmental study on residential tourism showed that 43.5% stayed in their owned second homes, 30.2% stayed in rented homes, and 26.3% were hosted free of charge (Instituto de Turismo, 2014). In addition to residential tourism, the Mar Menor area is also a destination

for minority tourism, such as golf, health, and cultural tourism (concentrated in a few days in August and September).

The Mar Menor's ecosystem has worsened over the past two decades, primarily due to two factors: agricultural-sector waste and hyper-urbanisation for tourist purposes (Caballero et al., 2022). The agricultural sector has been a significant contributor to untreated waste, with excessive use of fertilisers and pesticides in farmlands surrounding the Mar Menor. This overuse has resulted in high levels of certain nutrients and pollutants in seawater, leading to a decline in water quality, eutrophication processes, and marine mortality (MITECO, 2019; Rodríguez-Calles, 2022). Regarding hyper-urbanisation, real estate development has led to extensive urban sprawl, mainly aimed at constructing second homes (Arroyo Mompeán & Vegas Juez, 2019), that has urbanised almost the entire coastline, especially in the La Manga area. This intense urbanisation has reduced the sea's surface and depth, altering its natural flows. Moreover, tourism, especially during the summer, has also added to the lagoon's degradation, placing additional stress on its fragile ecosystem.

The European Parliament (2022) expressed concerns about the lack of decisive, comprehensive, and not cosmetic actions to protect the Mar Menor and the degrading evolution of the natural environment in which the tourist destination is located. This eco-degradation has resulted in substantial losses in tourism and the economy. Over the six years from 2015 to 2021, there has been a decrease in real estate value amounting to EUR 4.15 billion, and the return on investment in housing has decreased by 43%, resulting in a substantial financial loss for those who bought properties along the Mar Menor coastal line. Consequently, many property owners have sought to sell, and the buyers are primarily foreign buyers (a minority) acquiring summer homes in the Mar Menor area. From a statistical perspective, RT remains nearly invisible. The Spanish census no longer relies on surveys but instead combines numerous administrative registers that fail to capture tourist movements. The resident tourism survey, which includes a section on RT, interviews 550 individuals in the vicinity of the destination, covering all types of tourism. This limited coverage leads to a substantial underestimation of the reality of RT and, as a result, its statistical invisibility.

Given the serious environmental issues of the Mar Menor (e.g., severe marine eutrophication that led to two episodes of mass mortality of marine fauna, biodiversity loss, and high urban pressure on the ecosystem) and the weak governance of the regional government (responsible for monitoring and improving the Mar Menor's environment), a national law was enacted in 2022 (Law 19/2022), upheld by the Spanish Constitutional Court, granting the Mar Menor legal personality. This means that any individual (e.g., a resident tourist) or legal entity (e.g., environmental groups) has the standing to defend this ecosystem in court.

4. Study 1

4.1. Objectives

The eco-degradation of the Mar Menor, which has been described as the saddest example of environmental vandalism (Trelinski, 2021), garnered significant condemnation from both the Spanish and international media in 2019 and 2021, leading to extensive citizen protests. In 2019, this eco-degradation led to a mass mortality event among wildlife. It is in this context that the current exploratory study was conducted in December 2020 (with timing deliberately distant from the summer season). This study had two objectives: first, to explore tourists' perceptions of the destination situation, potential loss of quality of their stay, and ItR; and second, to identify differences in perceptions among tourists using different types of residential housing (second home vs. non-second home).

4.2. Material and Methods

4.2.1. Sampling and Participants

The authors adopted a non-random sampling approach to mitigate the respondents' self-selection bias and because random sampling is impractical due to the absence of a comprehensive tourist list ensuring equal selection probability. Furthermore, we align with Zhao (2021), who argues that in social sciences, representativeness is achieved through balanced composition (see Table 1). Since there are no statistical criteria to guide the calculation of non-random sample sizes, we followed Vehovar et al.'s (2016) recommendation, which suggests that the minimum sample size should at least match the sample size calculated based on the random-extraction assumption (n = 384, $p = q$ = 50, N > 20,000, e = 5%, z = 1.96). The sample size used in the current study (n = 822) satisfied this requirement. Participant demographics, as presented in Table 1, indicate that the respondents were mainly men (55.8%), were aged between 36 and 59 years (61.1%), and owned a second home (50.1%).

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample for Study 1 (n = 822).

Variables		***n* (%)**
Sex	Male	459 (55.8)
	Female	363 (44.2)
Age	18–35 years old	194 (23.6)
	36–59 years old	502 (61.1)
	Over 59 years old	126 (15.3)
Origin	Murcia	688 (83.7)
	Another Spanish region	120 (14.6)
	Foreign	14 (1.7)
Type of housing	Owned	412 (50.1)
	For free	233 (28.3)
	Rented	177 (21.5)

4.2.2. Procedure

We used a web-based survey to collect data because this approach does not require spatial or temporal synchronicity, and it eliminates the need for direct interviewer–interviewee interaction, which was a concern due to the ongoing fear of social interaction arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were contacted through social networks, specifically Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and WhatsApp. Thirty recruiters disseminated the request for participation by applying a snowball sampling approach. They posted in open groups on Facebook and encouraged all their contacts to respond and further disseminate the request. The same request was posted on X. Additionally, participants reached out to their WhatsApp contacts, urging them to complete the questionnaire and to share it. Neighbourhood associations and three interest groups in the Mar Menor were also contacted. The requests for participation posted on social networks included information about this study's goals, participation requirements, and a link to the online questionnaire. Only one request was posted on each of the three social media networks in addition to a single reminder for participation. The data collected were processed and analysed with SPSS version 22.

4.2.3. Instruments

To measure the variables of interest, single items were used to shorten the questionnaire and avoid rejections (Diamantopoulos et al., 2012) and monotony when answering similar items (Hoeppner et al., 2011).

The variables, items, measures used, and their sources are listed in Table 2. For the variable related to the loss of quality of the vacation, the item emphasises the state of the environment as a fundamental factor in the tourist experience (Ștefănică et al., 2021). Lastly, to categorise the type of housing, a distinction was made between tourists who stayed in second homes and those who rented or stayed for free (non-second-home residential tourists).

Table 2. Variables, items, measurements, and their sources for Study 1.

Variables and Items	
Variable: The tourists' perceptions of the Mar Menor destination. Item: How would you rate the Mar Menor as a tourist destination? Measure: 5-point scale (1 = very bad; 5 = very good).	Beerli and Martin (2004). Yoon and Uysal (2005).
Variable: Perceptions of loss of quality of the vacation. Item: The current state of the Mar Menor has reduced the quality of my vacation. Measure: 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).	Neal et al. (2007).
Variable: Intention to revisit (ItR). Item: I will return to the Mar Menor for future vacations. Measure: 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).	Adapted from Mechinda et al. (2009).

4.3. Results

Figure 1 shows the box plots for the variables analysed. From this figure, it is evident that the Mar Menor destination was rated as poor (median [Me] = 2, interquartile range [IQR] = 2). There was a very high loss of quality in their vacation (Me = 5, IQR = 1), and the ItR was in the middle of the range of responses but with a high IQR (Me = 3, IQR = 3), meaning that the data were spread over a wide range of values, indicating high response variability. Regarding IQR, only 39.2% of participants indicated that they would return to the Mar Menor on their next vacation. Furthermore, the findings indicated that 61.5% of second-home tourists intended to return to the destination, while only 15.9% of the non-second-home residential tourists shared the same intention.

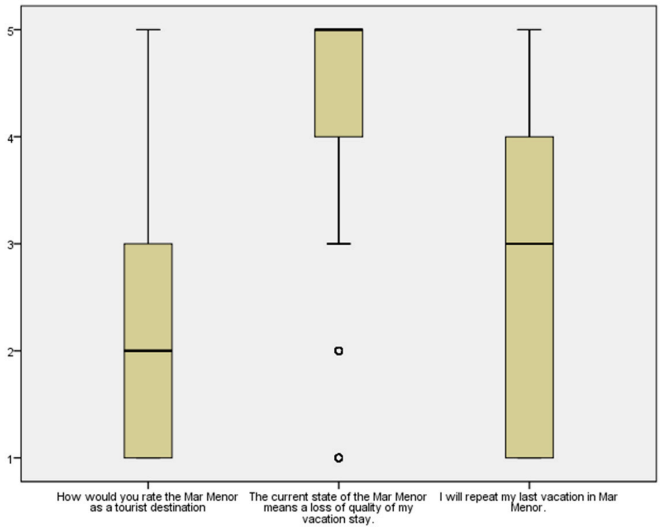

Figure 1. Box plots for variables of Study 1.

To test whether tourists who opt for different types of stay (second home vs. non-second home) exhibit contrasting perceptions of the destination, perceived loss in quality of stay, and ItR, the Mann–Whitney *U*-test was used. This test was selected because the original measures were ordinal, and the Mann–Whitney U-test serves as the non-parametric version of the t-test. Table 3 shows that the two groups had different medians concerning their perception of the destination and ItR. In both cases, second-home tourists showed significantly higher medians, which implies a comparatively better perception of the destination and a greater willingness to return to the destination on their next vacation. However, both groups had similar perceptions regarding the loss of quality in their vacation.

Table 3. Exploratory results. Mann–Whitney test.

Variables	Groups	*n*	U (*z*)	*p*
PER	Non-second-home residential tourists Second-home tourists	410 412	75,946.00 (−2.63)	.009
LOSS	Non-second-home residential tourists Second-home tourists	410 412	79,979.00 (−1.65)	.100
ItR	Non-second-home residential tourists Second-home tourists	410 412	45,890.50 (−11.60)	<.001

PER = perception of the destination's quality, LOSS = loss of quality of the vacation stay, ItR = intention to revisit; U = Mann–Whitney test, *p* = asymptotic significance (2-tailed).

4.4. Findings

Residential tourists reported a significant loss of quality during their vacation, giving the Mar Menor destination a poor score and indicating a desire to avoid revisiting the destination for their next vacation. The non-second-home residential tourists showed reluctance to revisit the Mar Menor, while the second-home residential tourists showed inertia, a concept defined by Polites and Karahanna (2012). This finding suggests that tourists who do not look for diverse destinations tend to choose the same destination due to their attachment to it and the real estate investments they have made.

5. Study 2

5.1. Conditions

To study the perceptions of eco-degradation among those who experience it, it is necessary to consider whether there is significant eco-activism in the region and whether eco-degradation is due to human or natural factors. The presence of eco-activism implies a high risk of extremism-biased responses (Monterrubio, 2017). Furthermore, research has indicated that reactions to eco-degradation caused by human activities tend to be more virulent than those attributed to natural causes (Lindholm et al., 2015). Hence, we conducted Study 2 considering these issues following a period of one year characterised by minimal social eco-activism or environmental disaster arising from the main problems in the Mar Menor, namely, agricultural runoff.

5.2. Objectives and Hypotheses

Study 2 had two primary objectives. First, it aimed to determine whether the perceived value tourists place on the destination and the perceived loss of vacation quality influence ItR. Second, this study investigated whether the perceived change due to eco-degradation

affects the perceived destination value, vacation satisfaction, and, ultimately, ItR in the vacation experience.

The perceived value of a destination can be defined from various perspectives. The predominant viewpoint is the economic perspective, which sees the perceived value of a destination as a trade-off between benefits and costs (Gallarza & Gil, 2008). However, this perceived value should go beyond the economic perspective and be understood as an assessment of the destination's attractiveness (Cracolici & Nijkamp, 2009). Thus, the destination's value represents a complex evaluation of attributes, such as infrastructure, culture, social value, quality of services, emotional experience, reputation, and monetary and non-monetary costs (Pandža Bajs, 2015; Zhang et al., 2022).

We grounded the present research in two models. The first is the place attachment model, which originates from environmental psychology and describes a positive connection or bond between an individual and a specific location (Morgan, 2010; Giuliani, 2003; Giuliani & Feldman, 1993). This model provides a framework for understanding tourists' emotional and functional connections to destinations, particularly for long or repeat visits (Kim et al., 2022; Silva & Correia, 2017). The second is the perceived value, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions model (Zeithaml, 1988). Applied to tourism, this model can explain that destination quality directly affects satisfaction and, therefore, loyalty or behavioural intentions (Pandža Bajs, 2015). In our study, we tested whether revisit intentions (which should be very high in residential or second-home tourists) may be conditioned by the evolution of the relationship with the place, which could modify tourist experiences. Thus, three intertwined aspects were considered: environment, emotional attachment value, and reputation. Environments characterised by natural and well-preserved landscapes and the absence of pollution are perceived as unique and provide a sense of place (Campelo et al., 2014). Conversely, excessive real estate development or aggressive economic sectors can degrade the environment, negatively affecting visitors' health and well-being (Reitsamer & Brunner-Sperdin, 2017). Second, tourists can develop emotional attachments to their destination (Hall, 2014), fostering positive emotions and lasting memories that create a sense of connection with it. Moreover, many residential tourists select their destination based on family ties. Lastly, destination reputation is essential to second-home tourists because it affects the value of their real estate investment and the overall quality of their vacation (Oliveira et al., 2018). A positive reputation enhances the social image associated with choosing that destination, while a poor reputation plays a negative role.

The extensive literature has shown that the perceived value of the destination significantly predicts tourist satisfaction and ItR (Chen & Chen, 2010; He & Luo, 2020; Pandža Bajs, 2015). The value proposition of an RT destination shapes tourists' response to it. When a destination provides a high-quality stay and convenient services, tourists are more likely to experience positivity and satisfaction. Conversely, if a destination's value is substandard, tourists are more likely to experience dissatisfaction. Consequently, destinations need to invest in providing a high-quality stay that aligns with tourists' expectations. This investment not only ensures a positive experience that leads to satisfaction but also encourages repeat visits. Satisfaction is recognised as a significant factor in behavioural intentions (Tian-Cole et al., 2002). Based on these arguments, we proposed two hypotheses:

H1. *The perceived value of a destination influences residential tourist satisfaction.*

H2. *Residential tourist satisfaction influences ItR.*

Environmental degradation exerts significant impacts on human well-being, including physical health and lifestyle, as well as on social and economic activities. While it is true that tourism degrades the environment (Shahbaz et al., 2021), it is important to note

that eco-degradation also affects tourism. Tourism depends on various factors, and the attractiveness of the environment and its deterioration have both short- and long-term effects not only on destinations' resources but also upon communities and the tourism sector (Amelung et al., 2007; Saint Akadiri et al., 2019). Despite this interplay between tourism and the environment, there is a dearth of literature on the direct impact of eco-degradation on tourist behaviour. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H3. *Eco-degradation leads to a reduction in the perceived value of the destination (H3a), resulting in lower satisfaction with the vacation (H3b) and ultimately leading to a lower ItR (H3c).*

Furthermore, given the lack of research on the impact of housing type on ItR, Study 1 identified differences in ItR depending on the kind of housing utilised for vacationing in the destination. Based on the results of Study 1, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H4. *Second-home tourists show higher ItR compared to non-second-home residential tourists.*

Figure 2 shows the conceptual and structural model to be tested.

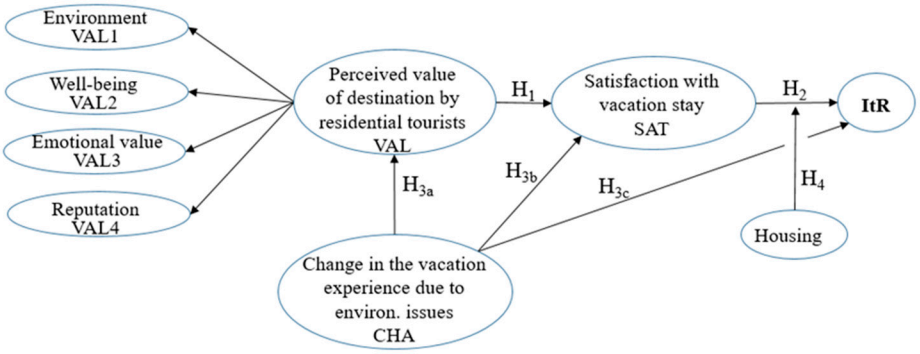

Figure 2. Conceptual model to be tested.

5.3. Material and Methods

5.3.1. Sampling and Participants

As in Study 1, we adopted a non-random sampling method resulting in a final sample of n = 453 individuals, which aligns with Vehovar et al.'s (2016) recommendation. As shown in Table 4, most participants were female (53.2%), aged between 36 and 59 years (58.1%), residing in the Region of Murcia (73.5%), and with a second home in the Mar Menor area (54.7%). This sampling structure is in line with Zhao's (2021) recommendation.

Table 4. Characteristics of the sample for Study 2 (n = 453).

Variables		***n* (%)**
Sex	Male	459 (55.8)
	Female	363 (44.2)
Age	18–35 years old	194 (23.6)
	36–59 years old	502 (61.1)
	Over 59 years old	126 (15.3)
Origin	Region of Murcia	688 (83.7)
	Another Spanish region	120 (14.6)
	Foreign	14 (1.7)
Type of housing	Owned	412 (50.1)
	For free	233 (28.3)
	Rented	177 (21.5)

5.3.2. Procedure

Like Study 1, Study 2 utilised a web-based survey to collect data. The same social networks, including Facebook, X, and WhatsApp, were employed to contact participants, announce this study, present its objectives and disseminate the questionnaire. The participants in Study 1 and Study 2 were different as the recruiters for both studies were unrelated (independent samples). Data were collected in November 2022 and February–March 2023, which deliberately avoided the Spanish Christmas and Easter holidays to mitigate potential seasonal biases. The analyses in this study were conducted using the Lavaan package (R software version 4.3.1) to perform confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), measurement invariance testing, and structural model estimation.

5.3.3. Instruments

The perceived value of the Mar Menor as a destination was measured as a second-factor instrument comprising four factors, each of which consisted of three items. All items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

As no preexisting instrument was found to measure the perceived change in the vacation experience due to a modification in the physical environment, adapted items were used. Initially, a list of 10 possible changes in the environment was developed, and this was subsequently refined to 7 items following a review by two experts. These items were rated on a seven-point scale (1 = "has gotten considerably worse", 7 = "has gotten markedly better", 4 = "nothing has changed"). Table 5 lists the items used and their sources.

Table 5. Variables, items, and their sources for Study 2.

Variables and Items	Sources
Intention to revisit (ItR). Itr1. The Mar Menor will be my preferred destination for my next vacation. Itr2. I would repeat my past vacations in the Mar Menor. Itr3. I would want to return to the Mar Menor on vacation.	Mechinda et al. (2009). Horng et al. (2012).
The perceived value of the destination Factor 1: Natural environment (Val1) Val11. It has a good image of the natural environment. Val12. It is an area with reduced pollution. Val13. Its environment (sea and coast) is well preserved.	Cheng and Lu (2013). Pandža Bajs (2015). Zhang et al. (2022).
Factor 2: Well-being (Val2) Val21. The Mar Menor is a quality area to rest. Val22. It is an area with good and attractive services. Val23. It is a destination that produces well-being.	Cheng and Lu (2013). Pandža Bajs (2015). Suhartanto et al. (2020).
Factor 3: Emotional value (Val3) Val31. Going to the Mar Menor has emotional value for me. Val32. I identify with the Mar Menor area. Val33. Being in the area generates satisfaction for me.	Kim et al. (2013). Pandža Bajs (2015). Ashton et al. (2020). Suhartanto et al. (2020).
Factor 4: Reputation (Val4) Val41. It is a good area compared to others. Val42. It is a destination with a good reputation. Val43. It is an area that I recommend visiting.	Pandža Bajs (2015). Moon and Han (2019).
Change in the environment (Cha) Cha1. Its image of a natural area. Cha2. The level of pollution. Cha3. Its physical environment (sea and coast).	Beerli and Martin (2004). Assaker (2014).
Satisfaction with the destination (Sat) Sat1. This place is what I needed for my vacation. Sat2. This place is what I imagined. Sat3. This place is always a good choice. Sat4. Going to the Mar Menor was satisfying.	Lee (2009). Marinao-Artigas (2018).

5.4. Results

5.4.1. Measurement Model

We analysed the data using the two-step causal method. The first step involved a confirmatory factor analysis to validate the measurement model (reliability and validity). Subsequently, a structural equation analysis was performed to test the hypotheses. Given that Mardia's M coefficient of multivariate normality was found to be 17.56, robust estimators were used to ensure the accuracy of the analysis.

In the first step of the analysis, items with a factorial load smaller than .70 (Val22 and Val31) were eliminated to ensure convergent validity. No issues of reliability were identified because all Cronbach's alphas and composite reliability indices of the factors were higher than .7. All extracted variances were greater than .50, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Psychometric properties of the measurement model.

Construct	Item	λ (*t*-Value)	α	Reliability CR	AVE
Intention to revisit (ItR)	Itr1	.90 (38.15) ***	.91	.92	.79
	Itr2	.94 (42.17) ***			
	Itr3	.81 (22.52) ***			
Natural environment (Val1)	Val11	.79 (22.44) ***	.86	.86	.68
	Val12	.81 (21.70) ***			
	Val13	.88 (23.80) ***			
Well-being (Val2)	Val21	.77 (22.42) ***	.83	.84	.73
	Val23	.93 (33.35) ***			
Emotional value (Val3)	Val32	.63 (12.24) ***	.75	.81	.69
	Val33	.96 (31.72) ***			
Reputation (Val4)	Val41	.85 (29.49) ***	.86	.86	.68
	Val42	.75 (21.90) ***			
	Val43	.86 (30.330) ***			
Change in the environment (Cha)	Cha1	.90 (26.23) ***	.92	.92	.80
	Cha2	.88 (24.47) ***			
	Cha3	.90 (26.50) ***			
Satisfaction with the destination (Sat)	Sat1	.88 (32.68) ***	.94	.94	.79
	Sat2	.82 (23.49) ***			
	Sat3	.93 (41.05) ***			
	Sat4	.92 (36.28) ***			

Notes: λ = standardised factor loading, α = Cronbach's α, CR = composite reliability, AVE = average variance extracted, *** $p \leq .001$.

We confirmed discriminant validity because the interval for the correlation estimate for each pair of factors did not contain the value of 1. For the second-order factor, the average variance extracted (AVE) assumed a value of .51, and the omega hierarchical was .88. Therefore, the goodness of fit of the measurement model was good. Furthermore, we confirmed configural and metric invariances because the imposition of restrictions on the factor loadings did not worsen the model's goodness of fit. This was reflected in the Satorra–Bentler scaled chi-square (S-Bχ^2) value of 464.03 (with 298 degrees of freedom [*df*] = 298, $p < .001$), a normed chi-squared (NCS) value of 1.56, a robust comparative fit index (CFI) of .98, a robust root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) of .06, and a 90% confidence interval (CI) for an RMSEA of [.05, .07].

5.4.2. Hypotheses Testing

We used a covariance-based structural model to test the hypotheses, whose resulting fit was good (see Table 7). The robust adjustment goodness measure yielded a value of S-B χ^2 = 515.45 (*df* = 161, $p < .001$), NCS = 3.20, CFI = .95, RMSEA = .08, 90% CI of RMSEA was [.07, .09].

Table 7. Structural equation model results.

Hypotheses	β	*t*-Value	r-SE	*d*	R^2	Contrast
H_1 (Val → Sat)	0.94	14.20 ***	0.11	0.30	.90	Accepted
H_2 (Sat → ItR)	0.83	17.50 ***	0.05	0.63	.71	Accepted
H_{3a} (Cha → Val)	0.66	11.52 ***	0.04	0.58	.43	Accepted
H_{3b} (Cha → Sat)	0.02	0.45 ^{NS}	0.06	0.01		Rejected
H_{3c} (Cha → ItR)	0.01	0.20 ^{NS}	0.07	0.01		Rejected

Notes. *** = $p < .01$, β = standard coefficient, r-SE = robust standard error, *d* = Cohen's d, R^2 = coefficient of determination, ^{NS} = not significant. Val: perceived value of destination by residential tourists. Cha: change in the vacation experience due to environmental issues. Sat: satisfaction with vacation stay. ItR: intention to revisit.

To test hypothesis 4, it was necessary to conduct an intercept invariance analysis (Ceylan et al., 2020; Van De Schoot et al., 2015). The analysis yielded a robust S-Bχ^2 = 515.25 (df = 328, $p < .001$), with NCS = 1.57, r-CFI = .972, robust RMSEA (r-RMSEA) = .06, and a 90% confidence interval for RMSEA [.05, .07]. These results revealed a difference of −.49, indicating that the mean for tourists with a non-second home is estimated relative to those with a second home, whose intercept was fixed at zero for reference. This finding supports H4, revealing that second-home tourists display a stronger intention to return than non-second-home residential tourists.

5.5. Findings

The value residential tourists place on the Mar Menor tourist destination strongly and positively influences their satisfaction with the vacation stay. This relationship indicates that as perceived value increases, almost 94% of this change leads to greater satisfaction, reflecting a highly robust result due to the significance of the t-value. Moreover, the coefficient of determination suggests that perceived value explains 90% of the variability in satisfaction, indicating an almost linear relationship. This makes perceived value the most influential predictor of satisfaction, highlighting the importance of maintaining or enhancing the perceived quality of the tourism destination. Similarly, the relationship between satisfaction with the stay and the intention to revisit remains strong. The tested model showed that satisfaction with the vacation stay explains 71% of the variance of revisit intention, with a strong predictive power. Indeed, greater satisfaction correlated with a higher likelihood of returning to the destination. As a result, satisfaction with the stay plays a key role, reinforcing the notion that enhancing the tourist experience can significantly boost the intention to return. Conversely, a poorer tourist experience is likely to reduce the intention to revisit.

The analyses showed that the change in vacation experience due to eco-degradation influences the perceived value of the destination by residential tourists, thus supporting the influence of a change in the vacation experience due to environmental issues on the perceived value of the destination. This finding shows how eco-degradation reduces a destination's attraction. Furthermore, we observed that perceived value is a complete mediator, as the model did not fit adequately due to the lack of a direct relationship between satisfaction (rejecting H3b) with and ItR of the destination (rejection H3c). Consistent with the previous literature, the perceived value of the destination significantly predicts tourist satisfaction and ItR (Chen & Chen, 2010; He & Luo, 2020; Pandža Bajs, 2015). The rejection of these two hypotheses (H3b and H3c) highlights the importance of the bonds and feelings (attachment) that connect residential tourists to the place where they have made a vacational real estate investment. This attachment appears to be an essential factor for RT and, in alignment with Hosany et al. (2017), it is worth noting that the emotional aspects associated with ownership can act as psychological buffers against the perception of eco-degradation.

The results showed that tourists who did not enjoy a second residence had a lower ItR compared to those who owned a second home in the Mar Menor. This finding, which

has not been previously reported in the literature, suggests that despite the destination's eco-degradation, residential tourists with second homes maintain a stronger attachment to the destination than those without second homes. It should be noted that the decision to purchase a second residence is made when individuals develop a motivation (emotional or functional) that drives such a purchase. In this case, the motivation is their attachment to the location (Hall, 2014).

6. General Conclusions and Implications

6.1. General Conclusions

RT encompasses various modalities, all characterised by a prolonged stay at the destination in private dwellings, regardless of whether these dwellings are owned (in whole or shared), rented, or free. In contrast to short-stay tourists who prefer to change their destination on successive trips or vacations, residential tourists tend to generate greater attachment to the destination. For second-home tourists, their attachment is not solely a result of their financial investment but also their motive to make the destination a place for second-home tourism. Although there is little literature on RT compared to other types of tourism, it holds significant importance at both national and international levels, as it generates emotional attachment, sparks interest in the quality of the destination, and results in profound attachment.

Eco-degradation negatively influences a destination's natural value and attractiveness. It can be perceived as a vector for destroying natural resources, negatively impacting tourism experience and demand. Various types of tourism heavily rely on the environmental quality of the destination, including ecotourism, adventure tourism, cruises, and sun-and-beach tourism. However, in the case of the Mar Menor, it was found that residential tourists tend to be the most reluctant to abandon their destination. Specifically, residential tourists with second homes displayed particularly resilient attachment, and this resilience disappeared when they used non-second-home housing. Consequently, attention should be paid to the fact that eco-degradation leads to a loss in the perceived quality of the vacation. In our view, there are two possible explanations for this resilience. The first suggests that residential tourists may separate the environmental issues of the destination from other factors that contribute to their satisfaction and intention to revisit. Thus, in line with Baloch et al. (2023), the perceived degradation may be acknowledged as problematic but not significant enough to directly influence their future behaviour. The second explanation refers to the possibility that (residential) tourists perceive the eco-degradation of the destination as a structural and inevitable issue that affects them, just as it may affect many other destinations (Touloun & Eddali, 2023). This would reduce its relative impact on their satisfaction assessments and intention to return. However, residential tourists who chose the destination for its attractiveness or emotional attachment may feel a strong intention to change their destination, which they may convert into behaviour if their attachment to the destination were to disappear (due to a change in real estate investment or loss of the emotional attachment).

Our study establishes that the perceived value of the destination is a full mediating variable that explains and predicts residential tourists' satisfaction and ItR. In addition, changes in the vacation experience directly influence perceived value, making eco-degradation a direct contributor to value and one that indirectly influences tourist satisfaction with the vacation stay. However, residential tourists who own a second home in the destination exhibit higher ItR, likely due to their investment, rendering them resistant to changes due to eco-degradation. This full mediation implies that the perceived change due to eco-degradation alone is insufficient to explain its effect on satisfaction with the stay and ItR. Instead, tourists are more affected by the consequences of eco-degradation on

their well-being, the destination's reputation, or its emotional value than by changes in the vacation experience due to eco-degradation.

6.2. Theoretical Implications

Firstly, our findings support the perceived value, satisfaction, and behavioural intention model outlined by Zeithaml (1988) but suggest that the analysis is enriched by considering the place attachment model. This model has been proven to be a solid foundation for explaining residents' attitudes towards tourism (Stylidis, 2017), and we understand that it also can explain the emotional bonds that connect long-stay (residential) tourists with their vacation destinations (Kim et al., 2022). While it may seem that tourism property investment is the primary driver of attachment, such investment is often made in vacation destinations where some form of emotional bond already exists. Moreover, this place attachment tends to remain resilient even when the vacation experience is affected by a decline in the destination's ecological value. Despite its significance, it is striking that many recent studies overlook this emotional attachment as a factor in decision-making, and we suggest its inclusion to improve insights from tourist research.

Secondly, distinguishing between conventional and residential tourism can enhance our understanding of their differing relationships with the environment in destinations. Conventional tourism, typically linked to short-term leisure and detachment from the destination, is often seen as a threat to ecosystem conservation (Drius et al., 2019; Morales Yago, 2013). Conversely, residential tourism, characterised by prolonged engagement with the destination, can foster deeper interactions with the local community and its environmental resources (Ericsson et al., 2022; Müller et al., 2004). By differentiating these two forms of tourism, theoretical models addressing the impact of tourism from a transient perspective can be improved, incorporating concepts such as seasonal mobility and long-term concerns for destination sustainability. Furthermore, this distinction helps blur the traditional dichotomy between "visitor" and "resident," positioning the residential tourist within an intermediary category. Recognising these differences opens the door to exploring tourism as a potential steward of the destination environment—one that demonstrates resilience to environmental challenges, distancing itself from the transient, leisure-based tourism that often contributes to environmental degradation.

Lastly, we have highlighted the limited academic interest in destinations experiencing eco-degradation, a phenomenon that underscores the need to rethink tourism in terms of regeneration. We believe it is essential to expand this thinking, as all destinations facing environmental deterioration are often driven by a tourism industry that, while a key economic force, must reconsider its footprint. Addressing this issue could provide valuable insights into the limits of tourism growth as well as the potential for recovery through responsible practices. Furthermore, examining the factors that contribute to eco-degradation may enable the anticipation of similar dynamics in emerging destinations, helping to prevent future environmental collapse in destinations. In this way, academia could develop new theoretical and practical tools that position tourism as an active agent in ecological regeneration, fostering a shift towards more harmonious and sustainable relationships between economic development and the natural environment.

6.3. Policy and Managerial Implications

RT is an almost invisible form of tourism to Spanish public and private decision-makers. This is because current statistics fail to account for the use of second homes, private rentals, home exchanges, and home sharing during holidays and, as a result, fail to capture RT's importance in specific destinations. This statistical gap hides the reality of different types of tourism, which hinders the understanding of tourism reality and prevents

capturing the perceptions, expectations, and demands of these tourists about destination conditions. Consequently, public authorities should incorporate a monitoring system of residential tourists into official statistics to know the current situation and the evolution of these perceptions and expectations.

This study shows that changes due to eco-degradation influence perceptions of the destination, which in turn leads to disloyalty and low ItR. This lack of revisit intentions implies a lower likelihood of recommending the destination, and tourists may generate negative word-of-mouth in their private conversations (Siang et al., 2020). Therefore, there is a need for stakeholders involved in advertising campaigns and tourism promotions to conduct these campaigns without ignoring existing environmental problems. Particularly important is the promotion of destinations by local or regional governments. In this case, it is essential not to convey incomplete information to the market. While it may promote favourable purchase intentions (Yüksel et al., 2014), individuals subsequently understand that withholding relevant information is like lying (Dynel, 2018). Instead, we propose the redefinition of destination advertising narratives by highlighting environmental efforts and tangible outcomes that appeal to tourists (residential, second home or otherwise).

Lastly, the media, both public and private, can play a decisive role in shaping public opinion and responding to the environmental situation of the Mar Menor. A truthful, balanced, and positively oriented approach can not only provide accurate information about the current situation but also inspire action and instil hope. It is therefore essential to avoid catastrophic alarmism and adopt a constructive narrative that highlights recovery efforts, conservation projects, and the area's regenerative potential. For instance, sharing success stories, testimonials from local communities involved in ecosystem restoration, and interviews with independent environmental experts can create a narrative that encourages tourists to become part of the solution, promoting responsible tourism. By focusing on the opportunities arising from the gradual recovery of the Mar Menor's biodiversity, the media can help foster conscious tourism, strengthen the loyalty of residential tourists, and attract visitors who value environmental preservation.

6.4. Limitations and Future Research

This study is subject to potential limitations. First, it focused on the self-reported nature of survey data (Kreitchmann et al., 2019; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Notably, this study was conducted in a social context of significant mass social protest driven by the lack of governmental response to a severe environmental issue affecting the Mar Menor destination. In this context, self-reported measures are prone to social desirability and mood biases. The social desirability bias implies that participants may respond in ways they believe reflect the feelings and reactions of other residential tourists. Mood bias, conversely, reflects the influence of the emotional state induced by the degradation situation, increasing the likelihood of more critical or pessimistic responses, as the phenomenon under investigation is inherently negative. To mitigate these biases, we employed anonymous data collection, standardised instruments with validated items, and conducted fieldwork away from the most severe events in the Mar Menor.

Second, the data-collection method utilised social networks to reach participants. Although the number of people using social networks has increased, older individuals have fewer opportunities to engage in online activities, which could have limited participation. Although data for Study 2 were collected a year after the last marine mortality event, there may have been a higher propensity to respond by those who felt directly affected by the Mar Menor's eco-degradation. The heightened sensitivity of society and residential tourists to the ecological problems of the Mar Menor may have driven self-selection in participation.

Furthermore, for many tourists, the time of the survey may have been too early for them to select the destination for their next vacation.

Although the media has portrayed Mar Menor's situation as unique, the reality is that environmental degradation is a global issue, and there are other places where ecological problems emerge as relevant inhibitors when choosing them as tourist destinations. Therefore, regarding RT, and tourism in general, it would be valuable to analyse other destinations facing incipient and severe eco-degradation to determine whether the findings presented in this study are specific or are generalisable to other areas.

Lastly, it is important to emphasise that eco-degradation affects all destinations globally. This degradation is not limited to the worsening of the landscape or a mere reduction in the quality of the environment and the stay, as this occurs in the early stages of degradation and presents just a fraction of the potential consequences. Scientific research has shown that without interventions, land, water, and air deterioration will only worsen. In line with the Glasgow Declaration (UN World Tourism Organization, 2021), it is imperative to make informed decisions, not just cosmetic ones, to coordinate efforts aimed at enhancing the sustainability of destinations and the tourism sector. Overcoming the resistance of agents whose behaviour damages tourist destinations is a crucial step in halting and reversing eco-degradation.

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