

## Journey or destination? Framing change in Swedish sustainable tourism initiatives

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### Abstract

Addressing sustainability challenges requires profound changes and transformations across all sectors, including tourism. Bound up in the operationalisation of transformation is the discursive aspects of change: the claims around how change can and should happen. This is a hitherto under-researched area, especially in sustainable tourism governance. This paper responds to this gap by investigating how two Swedish tourism organisations and their sustainability initiatives navigate and conceptualise change. Viewed as norm entrepreneurs, these organisations construct and disseminate narratives that shape sector-wide understandings of how sustainability should, and can, be achieved. The analysis explores their diagnostic and prescriptive framing strategies for addressing challenges in change (towards sustainability), focusing on the rationale, progress, and structure of change. Using a qualitative case study approach, the paper draws on semi-structured interviews (n=13) and document analysis to reveal contrasting change orientations: one initiative frames change as a journey, emphasising flexibility and incremental progress, while the other views it as a destination, focusing on well-defined targets and standardisation as shaping change. These orientations reflect underlying trade-offs between accessibility and rigour in achieving sustainability goals. The findings provide insights into how framing processes influence the communication and implementation of change, offering valuable lessons for sustainable tourism practitioners and researchers in Sweden and beyond.

**Keywords:** Transformation, sustainability initiative, sustainable tourism, framing, norm entrepreneurs, Sweden

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## 1. Introduction

The tourism sector accounts for 8.7% of total GDP and provides employment to approximately 22 million people across the European Union (WTTC, 2023). Yet this economic weight brings considerable environmental and social costs. Tourism contributes around 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Lenzen *et al.*, 2018), and also places pressure on local water resources, waste systems, and land use, contributing to habitat destruction, displacement, overcrowding, and economic dependency (Gössling & Peeters, 2015; Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2022; Thapa *et al.*, 2022). These overlapping pressures have made sustainability a central concern in tourism governance and planning, and the need for long-term, coordinated, and meaningful change has become critical (López-Sánchez & Pulido-Fernández, 2014). Since the 1970s, a range of organisations and initiatives have emerged to promote more responsible tourism (Lane, 2017), including global efforts such as the Global Sustainable Tourism Council and Green Key (Bohdanowicz-Godfrey & Zientara, 2015). In Sweden, efforts range from community-based tourism organisations to national versions of global accreditation schemes to pledge-based campaigns. Though diverse in form, many share core aims: reducing environmental harm, mitigating local impacts, and supporting fair and resilient businesses (Klintman, 2017). However, their understandings of the pathway to these goals often diverge, raising critical questions about what guides the operationalisation of change.

A further commonality across these efforts is their capacity for norm entrepreneurship in defining sustainable tourism and progress towards it. Norm entrepreneurs are actors, e.g. organisations, initiatives, movements, or individuals, who – by virtue of resources and credibility – influence norms, shape discourse and collective understanding, and disseminate narratives within specific issue fields (Sunstein, 1996; Payne, 2001; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Ayling & Gunningham, 2017). By crafting frames and narratives, for example, organisations operating sustainable tourism initiatives may help normalise specific understandings of change towards sustainability (Spinelli, 2021; Feindt & Oels, 2006). Yet, how these organisations do so remains insufficiently examined in the current literature. This gap appears particularly problematic in the tourism sector's increasingly polycentric and non-state governance landscape (Derckx & Glasbergen, 2014; Lesar *et al.*, 2020). The norm entrepreneurship perspective is utilised as a starting point in this paper: it is not an analytical tool, but argues for the importance of focusing on specific actors in an issue field. Thus, examining how sustainable tourism norm entrepreneurs understand and promote change is vital for a broader understanding of their discursive influence on change efforts and governance within the tourism sector.

Change is a permeating concern in sustainability research, policy, and practice. Several bodies of literature have developed knowledge on how change occurs or should be supported, including research on sustainability transformations and transitions (e.g. Patterson *et al.*, 2016; O'Brien, 2012; Feola, 2015; Scoones *et al.*, 2020; Chaffin *et al.*, 2016), organisational change (e.g. Van de Ven & Poole, 1995; Higgs & Rowland, 2005), and the design and implementation of sustainable tourism initiatives such as eco-labelling and voluntary programmes (e.g. Lesar *et al.*, 2020; Beames *et al.*, 2022). However, while each field provides valuable insights, they focus on particular dimensions of change – such as structural and systemic shifts, managerial processes, or programme efficacy – rather than on how change is conceptualised by actors seeking to promote it. Furthermore, Eising-Mertsch *et al.* (2024) and Hagbert *et al.* (2021) have identified a need for knowledge on discursive aspects of transformation. This paper draws on, and contributes to, these fields of research by advancing a frame-analytical approach focused on how change towards sustainable tourism is constructed and promoted.

Taking a frame-analytical approach, the aim of this paper is to explore how norm entrepreneurs in sustainable tourism conceptualise change towards sustainability through diagnostic and prescriptive framing (Schön & Rein, 1994), with the objective of producing knowledge on transformation narratives and frames, which may support and inform sustainable tourism governance. We treat frames as

productive elements that influence how problems are defined and which solutions are legitimised (Schön & Rein, 1994; Entman, 1993), positioning framing as a precursor to operationalising change policies, initiatives, and actions within the tourism sector (Feindt & Oels, 2006). We abductively develop an analytical device – change orientations – tailored to our cases, designed to examine how sustainable tourism norm entrepreneurs construct change through framing, addressing the questions:

1. *How do norm entrepreneurs in sustainable tourism frame change towards sustainability through diagnostic and prescriptive framing?*
2. *What orientations to change emerge from these framings, and how may they shape understandings of change towards sustainability in the tourism sector?*

Drawing on two Swedish tourism organisations and their sustainability initiatives – the West Sweden Tourism Board’s *Stepping up Sustainability*, and The Swedish Nature and Ecotourism Association’s *Nature’s Best* and *The Step Counter* – we suggest new ways of analysing the forms and implications of change framings in tourism governance. Therefore, the contributions of this study will be threefold: 1) empirical: we produce new case-based knowledge on sustainable tourism initiatives as norm entrepreneurs; 2) theoretical: we create a new approach to studying the framing of change towards sustainability in the tourism sector; and 3) practical: we generate insights that can inform sustainable tourism governance to improve efficacy and manage trade-offs.

This paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 provides a literature review, discussing previous work on sustainability initiatives, framing theory, and approaches to change before assembling the analytical framework utilised in this paper. Section 3 outlines the study’s methodology. Section 4 presents the results, organised by the diagnostic and prescriptive framing (Schön & Rein, 1994) of the two cases, and highlights their respective journey- and destination-oriented approaches to change. Section 5 discusses the implications of these findings for sustainable tourism and change work more broadly.

## **2. Literature review and theoretical foundations**

### *2.1 Sustainability initiatives and norm entrepreneurship*

This paper focuses on tourism promotion and interest organisations and what we refer to as *sustainability initiatives* run by or within these organisations. The term draws on a broad literature, where initiatives may be seen as experiments, innovations, programmes, projects, or otherwise organised efforts to address sustainability challenges. In transitions and grassroots innovation research, initiatives are framed as attempts to challenge incumbent practices or explore more sustainable ones (e.g. Markard *et al.*, 2012; Seyfang & Smith, 2007). In tourism, initiatives such as certifications, pledges, and sustainability guidelines are sometimes grouped under the term sustainable tourism quality control tools (ST-QTCs) or sustainability guidance (Lesar *et al.*, 2020; Lesar & Weaver, 2022; Beames *et al.*, 2022). These literatures together allow us to define sustainability initiatives as bounded efforts to promote, enable, or shape change towards sustainability, often involving guidance, rules, coordination, and/or soft regulation. These may operate on different societal levels and can emerge from various actors.

While sustainability initiatives may have varied impacts, our interest lies in their normative and discursive influence – how they allow their parent organisations to shape sectoral understandings and approaches to change. To emphasise this dimension, we draw on the concept of norm entrepreneurship (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Payne, 2001), which refers to value-based influence exerted by actors committed to particular causes, such as sustainable tourism. Certain actors may have norm entrepreneurship capabilities due to their visibility, size, expertise, axiological position, or other forms of attention and/or power resources (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Norm entrepreneurs can operate on all societal levels (international governance, national government, civil society and social movements,

business and industry etc.), in different directions (top-down, bottom-up, or sideways), and through varied means (Lawless *et al.*, 2020; Morales, 2024; Skarp, 2022). Although norm entrepreneurship is not the analytical focus of this paper, it provides an important starting point for understanding the potential reach and influence of organisations that operate sustainable tourism initiatives.

As such, we approach our case organisations as actors with norm entrepreneurship potential to acknowledge their structural position and communicative power, which they utilise in their sustainable tourism initiatives, in shaping how change towards sustainability is understood and operationalised in tourism governance. Having established this, the following section introduces our frame-analytical approach, which forms the basis for examining how change is framed through these initiatives.

## 2.2. Framing theory

Framing theory has emerged as a critical theoretical framework for understanding how social, political, and environmental issues are constructed, interpreted, and acted upon. Framing is “the automatic or strategic process of selecting, shaping, interpreting, and organising a part of our complex reality into a bounded construction that may affect both our own and others’ understanding and actions” (Klintman, 2025, p. 9). This is achieved by selecting and presenting information, stories, and arguments in distinct ways (Entman, 1993). Framing research distinguishes between a cognitive approach focused on individual sense-making and an interactional approach emphasising strategic meaning-making (Dewulf *et al.*, 2009). This paper adopts the interactional approach, focusing on how sustainable tourism norm entrepreneurs intentionally and unintentionally frame change, influencing the tourism sector’s discourse and norms.

The usefulness of framing theory is its ability to reveal how selective inclusion and exclusion may shape perceptions within an issue field, here sustainable tourism, where norm entrepreneurs foreground particular aspects and types of change while potentially sidelining others (Entman, 1993; Schön & Rein, 1994). As an interpretive device, we use Schön and Rein’s (1994) diagnostic-prescriptive divide. This holds that policy framing often operates as diagnostic (defining problems) and prescriptive tools (suggesting solutions) (Schön & Rein, 1994). Applied here, diagnostic and prescriptive frames enable the norm entrepreneurs to identify challenges to change work and propose corresponding strategies, thus guiding sectoral discourse and action by constructing the pathway to a potentially sustainable tourism sector.

Although the norm entrepreneurs in this paper do not operate formal policies, they align with policy discourse by setting normative expectations and similarly influencing tourism practice. While framing theory provides a framework for analysing how change is framed and understood, it is also necessary to consider the specific orientations and views of change these frames reflect. Below, we begin approaching change from the point of view of three bodies of literature – sustainability transformations, organisational change, and quality control tools in tourism – before we develop an analytical framework for change frames, allowing us to examine how different approaches to change are framed within the tourism sector.

## 2.3. Approaching change towards sustainability

Central to this paper’s inquiry is the concept of change. Change has been explored across multiple fields, with attention to how it happens, how it could or should happen, how it is governed, and what kinds of change are desirable. This paper does not aim to explain or prescribe change per se, but to examine how norm entrepreneurs frame it in efforts to inspire or guide others. To approach this, we draw on sustainability transformations, organisational change, and sustainable tourism quality control tools literature – however, our aim is to develop a vocabulary for understanding how change is constructed and communicated, rather than propose a change model. Furthermore, specifically in the former two,

a need has been identified to understand the political, discursive, and narrative aspects of change and transformation (e.g. Eising-Mertsch *et al.*, 2024; Hagbert *et al.*, 2021; Patterson *et al.*, 2016; Vaara *et al.*, 2016), to which this paper responds. In the literature on sustainable tourism quality control tools, there is a dearth of studies examining these aspects.

Sustainability transformations literature provides conceptual tools for thinking about change as structural, systemic, and often urgent. While much of it focuses on large-scale shifts in socio-ecological or socio-technical systems (Feola, 2015; O'Brien, 2012; Chaffin *et al.*, 2016), we draw on how it distinguishes between incremental improvements – adjustments within existing systems – and transformative shifts towards states that can be considered sustainable (Kates *et al.*, 2012; Geels *et al.*, 2015; Patterson *et al.*, 2017). These distinctions help clarify how norm entrepreneurs frame the progress of change: as relative to current conditions, or as unfinished until an absolute state of sustainability has been reached.

Organisational change literature focuses on how actors initiate and manage change processes, typically within firms, NGOs, or institutions, often emphasising strategic, structural, or behavioural shifts (Da Ros *et al.*, 2023; Higgs & Rowland, 2005; By, 2005). It offers a range of models that describe change as planned or emergent (Lewin, 1947; Maimone & Sinclair, 2013), incremental or strategic, anticipatory or reactive (Nadler & Tushman, 1989), standardised or context-specific (Higgs & Rowland, 2005), and as teleological, evolutionary, dialectical, or cyclical (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). From this literature, we draw vocabulary relating to the rationale for change, meaning whether goals drive it (e.g. planning, teleology) or the process (e.g. evolution, reaction). This also supports our conceptualisation of change structure frames: through uniformity (e.g. standardisation) or differentiation (e.g. context-specificity, flexibility).

A third relevant body of literature concerns sustainable tourism quality control tools (QCTs) – voluntary mechanisms such as certification schemes, codes of conduct, and monitoring frameworks that aim to operationalise sustainability ideals (Lesar *et al.*, 2020; 2022). These tools typically structure change through standardised procedures that enable assessment, comparison, and continuous improvement (Weaver, 2006). Recent research expands the understanding of QCTs from a linear spectrum to a multiverse of diverse tools and implementation modes, including more flexible, post-Fordist approaches (Lesar *et al.*, 2022). This literature helps us conceptualise structure in norm entrepreneurs' change frames in terms of whether change is expected to follow a shared script to enable comparability or be adapted to specific contexts and needs.

#### *2.4. An analytical framework for understanding norm entrepreneurs' change frames*

Change frames reflect deeper conceptual, theoretical, and even mythical constructions of how change does and should come about (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Majone, 1989; Schön & Rein, 1994) and thus shape how initiatives define change, legitimise specific pathways, and operationalise change towards sustainability. To explore these framings, we draw on the relevant vocabularies and dimensions of the bodies of literature presented above and assemble a conceptual framework based on three ideal-typical dualisms (see Table 1). These dualisms serve as analytical devices, and while such ideal types rarely exist in pure form in practice (Weber, 2011), they offer a valuable heuristic for examining the dominant tendencies in how norm entrepreneurs in sustainable tourism frame change. While framing and norm entrepreneurship guided early analysis and foci, the change frames framework was assembled abductively, through an iterative process between data and theory (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

**Table I.** *Change dimensions and ideal types.*

<b>Dimension of change</b>	<b>Dualism</b>	<b>Left side of dualism</b>	<b>Right side of dualism</b>
Rationale – what drives and shapes change	Goal vs. Process	Goal (Change is directed and aligned towards predefined goals.)	Process (Change is a process with no goal; change is a response to internal or external forces.)
Progress – against what progress is defined	Absolute vs. Relative	Absolute (Sustainability is an absolute state or a space above or below a threshold.)	Relative (Improvements are incremental and relative to current conditions.)
Structure – fixedness or flexibility of changes	Standardisation vs. Customisation	Standardisation (Change and sustainability are fixed and standardised; the same for all.)	Customisation (Change and sustainability are flexible and customisable for each actor.)
Orientation – integrating the dimensions above into orientations	Destination vs. Journey	Destination (Change is directed towards a specific goal, reflecting an absolute, standardised notion of sustainability, which is the same for all.)	Journey (Change is focused on continuous, incremental and relative improvements, which must be adaptable to individual entities.)

### 2.5. Rationale: Goal vs. Process

Borrowing mainly from organisational change literature, the goal-process dualism addresses the foundational logic of change: whether it is understood as oriented towards a fixed, deliberate endpoint or shaped by emergent dynamics and external forces (Lewin, 1947; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995; Maimone & Sinclair, 2013; O'Brien, 2012). In goal-oriented change, action is guided by predefined outcomes – targets, visions, or objectives – and legitimised by the pursuit of these ends (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995; Nadler & Tushman, 1989). This logic underpins many international agreements and national sustainability plans (e.g. reaching Net Zero through the Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism (UNWTO, 2021)). In contrast, process-oriented change emphasises ‘ongoingness’ and change as a never-ending progression. Drawing on dialectical, evolutionary, and emergent perspectives (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995; Maimone & Sinclair, 2013; By, 2005), this perspective places process as the locus of value, emphasising responsiveness and adaptation to internal and external forces and contexts.

### 2.6. Progress: Absolute vs. Relative

The absolute-relative dualism concerns how progress towards sustainability is defined: as achieving an absolute, ideal state, or as relative improvements (Faber *et al.*, 2005). An absolute view conceptualises sustainability as the property of an entity, practice or system, where there are fixed and possibly definable thresholds or limits to what is considered sustainable (Fischer *et al.*, 2007; Chaffin *et al.*, 2016), such as those articulated in the planetary boundaries framework (Rockström *et al.*, 2009). An absolute view constitutes a binary perspective on whether something is sustainable. In contrast, a relative view of change defines success in terms of incremental progress (Kates *et al.*, 2012; Feola, 2015), prioritising improvements within a given context and focusing on reducing negative impacts over time rather than achieving a predefined absolute state (Faber *et al.*, 2005; Bjørn & Hauschild, 2013). Progress is any change relative to an organisation’s starting point or sectoral peers.

### 2.7. Structure: Standardisation vs. Customisation

This dualism mainly draws on sustainable tourism quality control tools literature (e.g. Lesar *et al.*, 2020). However, certain organisational change models provide an additional vocabulary for approaching this dimension. This dualism addresses change structure and implementation, whether pursued through fixed, uniform frameworks or flexible, context-specific adaptations. A standardised approach to change,

which we conceptualise as Fordist following Lesar *et al.* (2020), relies on fixed criteria and processes to ensure comparability and compliance (Hudson, 2009). Higgs and Rowland (2005) characterise a similar view of change as sophisticated, with high complexity and standardisation. Conversely, a customised approach emphasises responsiveness to local conditions and organisational capacities, and emergence and unpredictability (e.g., Maimone & Sinclair, 2013; Higgs & Rowland, 2005). Drawing on post-Fordist governance models, this perspective privileges adaptability and flexibility, constructing change efforts as tailorable to specific contexts and needs (Lesar *et al.*, 2020; Lovering, 2020).

### 2.8. Orientations to change: Journey vs. Destination

The dualisms outlined above come together to form the overarching conceptualisation of destination-oriented vs. journey-oriented change, representing two ideal-typical approaches to change, which we have abductively constructed for this study (see Table 1). A destination orientation constructs change as predefined goals, absolute states, and standardised pathways. A journey orientation, by contrast, casts change as an ongoing process, valuing relative improvements through customisation. The analysis of two real-world sustainable tourism norm entrepreneurs and their sustainability initiatives in Section 4 explores how these orientations manifest in practice, offering insights into their implications for sustainable tourism governance and discourse.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Design, analysis and ethics

This study adopts a qualitative, abductive case study approach, examining how norm entrepreneurs in sustainable tourism frame the concept of change. The case study approach was deemed the most appropriate, being suitable when research questions are formulated as “how” questions, when the researcher(s) have little control over the conditions of the study, and when the time frame is contemporary (Yin, 2018). Using a case study design also allows for in-depth exploration of certain aspects of specific organisations, programs, institutions, events and so on (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2018), enabling a nuanced and deep understanding of these. For this study, the aspects in focus are tourism organisations’ frames around change towards sustainability. The study also followed an abductive approach (see Figure 1) (Tavory & Timmermans, 2012), understood as a logic of inquiry that moves iteratively between empirical material and theoretical concepts.

The primary data collection method consisted of semi-structured interviews (n=13) with representatives from two organisations operating sustainable tourism initiatives in Sweden, with complementary document analysis to contextualise and triangulate. Although the number of interviews is limited, our primary goal is an in-depth frame analysis (Lindekilde, 2014) rather than broad representativeness. The interviews were conducted both online and in person during 2023, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Participants were selected based on their direct involvement in, or detailed knowledge of, the initiatives run by each organisation. In consultation with a contact person from each organisation, we identified and interviewed all key informants directly engaged in the initiatives (see Table 2 for participant profiles). Following a semi-structured interview design, interview guides were developed to organise, but not fully steer, the interviews, and were based on surface knowledge of each organisation and initiative, and with the research project’s general focus in mind: to investigate framing in the operationalisation of sustainable tourism (see Figure 1). The interview guides captured various aspects of each organisation and their initiatives, including rationales, trade-offs, challenges, and experiences around each initiative (see interview guide in Appendix). This approach allowed for flexibility in exploring participants’ perspectives and experiences of developing, implementing, and communicating each initiative without inserting frame theory at this stage. Because interviewees are organisational representatives, we recognise the possibility of social desirability bias. This study focuses on how these actors frame change, not on verifying sustainability outcomes. Future studies might combine a frame perspective with participant observation or outcome evaluation to investigate implications directly. The

interviews were complemented with document materials, such as published materials and the organisations' respective websites (see Table 3), in order to contextualise each case study further, and to triangulate (Bowen, 2009). The included documents were selected as they are the key public-facing materials for each organisation and their initiatives.

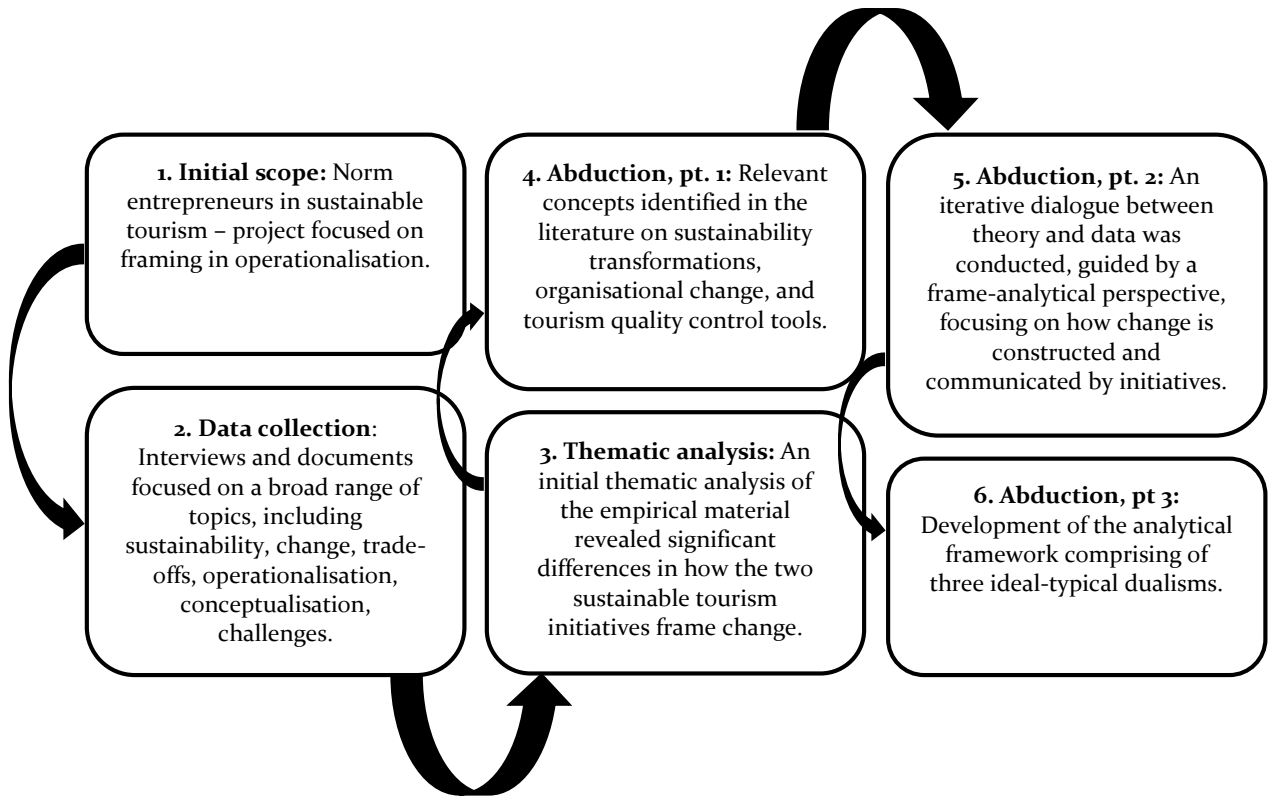
**Table 2.** *Participant profiles. Kept intentionally broad to protect anonymity.*

Organisation and pseudonym	Roles
West Sweden Tourism Board (WSTB) <i>Maya</i> <i>Helen</i> <i>John</i> <i>Magnus</i> <i>Rita</i> <i>Naomi</i>	The interviewees consisted of directors and planners, involved in conceptualisation of Stepping up Sustainability, planning, management, marketing, and distinct types of tourism. All interviewees had close connection to, and insight into, Stepping up Sustainability and its implementation.
The Swedish Nature and Ecotourism Association (SNEA) <i>Mira</i> <i>Kai</i> <i>Alex</i> <i>Elias</i> <i>Sofia</i> <i>Lina</i> <i>Bianca</i>	The interviewees consisted of directors, elected representatives, project managers, and communicators, covering all aspects of SNEA's operation. All interviewees had complementary insights on Nature's Best and The Step Counter.

**Table 3.** *Documents used for triangulation and contextualisation.*

Document and source	Document type
Stepping up Sustainability website, 12 individual pages	Website
Stepping up Sustainability newsletter, 15 letters	Newsletter
The Swedish Nature and Ecotourism Association website, 11 individual pages	Website
Nature's Best website, 3 individual pages	Website
The Swedish Nature and Ecotourism Association report on Swedish nature tourism entrepreneurs	Report

A thematic frame analysis was employed to explore the data (e.g. Lindekilde, 2014). Taking an abductive approach, this focused on the iterative refinement of the theoretical framework on change (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This approach allowed insights from the data to inform and adapt the theoretical framing of change while remaining grounded in Schön and Rein's (1994) diagnostic-prescriptive divide. This process culminated in the analytical framework outlined in Section 2 and explicated further in Section 4. Documents were used for contextualisation and triangulation (Given, 2008), but also to iteratively inform and refine the theoretical framework on change. The triangulation did not reveal any significant discrepancies between how interviewees framed their initiative and its approach to change, and how it was conceptualised and conveyed in newsletters, reports, and websites. Following an abductive process, a carefully selected analytical comparison was conducted, focusing on specific aspects of the two initiatives. A comprehensive comparison was beyond the scope of this paper, not only due to the numerous dissimilarities between the initiatives but, more importantly, because of the paper's specific aim to focus on norm entrepreneurs' change frames through sustainable tourism initiatives.



**Figure 1.** *Process for abductive, thematic frame analysis.*

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. Interview participants were informed of the study's aims and their rights. Anonymisation measures were employed to protect interviewees' identities, and no sensitive information was collected. All data were handled and stored following standard research ethics guidelines to ensure confidentiality and respect for participant privacy. As both frame analysis and abduction invite choices on behalf of the researchers, we have attempted to remain reflexive and close to interviewees' accounts and perspectives, which we further exemplify with interview quotes throughout Section 4.

### 3.2. *Cases and case selection*

We selected two organisations as they can be considered the most prominent organisational norm entrepreneurs for sustainable tourism in the Swedish tourism sector, both operating specific sustainable tourism initiatives (Lesar *et al.*, 2020; Beames *et al.*, 2022) in partially overlapping sub-sectors with partially overlapping reach of influence. The first organisation is the *West Sweden Tourism Board* (WSTB). This is operated and funded by the regional authority Västtra Götaland. Since 2020, WSTB has run *Stepping up Sustainability* (SuS), which serves a dual purpose: as the internal sustainability strategy for WSTB, and simultaneously a pledge initiative encouraging sustainable practices in businesses and municipalities working with tourism throughout Western Sweden. This paper's focus is mainly on the outward-facing part of the initiative. SuS now has over 650 members, from municipalities to hotels, restaurants, cycle and kayak guides, voluntary associations, and more. To join SuS, an aspiring member must 1) promise to take the SuS principles into account in future developments (see Table 4); 2) write a text for the SuS website describing their sustainability efforts; and 3) communicate about the same on their own website or channels. There are no costs for membership.

**Table 4.** *Stepping up Sustainability's principles.*

<b>Stepping up Sustainability's principles</b>	<b>This principle can* mean...</b>
<b>Principle 1:</b> As little unnecessary environmental impact as possible	...marketing to nearby markets; encouraging longer stays; improving businesses' sustainability performance etc.
<b>Principle 2:</b> Good for both residents and visitors	...efforts leading to money staying locally; target groups that spend more money locally etc.
<b>Principle 3:</b> More visitors when and where places are not full	...destination development and marketing projects aimed at evening out occupancy rates; planning to avoid overtourism etc.
<b>Principle 4:</b> More full-time jobs and more resilient businesses	... strengthening profitability; testing cooperative models for creating more full-time positions etc.

\* = As we show in Section 4, these principles are flexible rather than prescriptive.

The second case is an industry organisation for nature tourism in Sweden, called *The Swedish Nature and Ecotourism Association* (SNEA). This organisation and its sustainable nature tourism certification scheme, *Nature's Best* (NB), were founded in 2002. Currently, SNEA has around 250 members, of which 37 are Nature's Best-certified. To become certified, a company must go through an extensive process, pay a certification fee, and measure its performance annually (for Nature's Best's principles, see Table 5). Because of their recent recognition by the meta-certification organisation Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), SNEA has recently implemented a sustainability management system called *The Step Counter*, meant to educate and usher companies towards a Nature's Best certification. Membership costs approximately €200-500 per year, depending on company size. Nature's Best certification is an additional ongoing cost.

**Table 5.** *Nature's Best principles.*

<b>Nature's Best's principles</b>	<b>This principle means...</b>
<b>Principle 1:</b> Respect the limitations of the destination	...protecting the destination; respecting environmental and cultural limits; local cooperation etc.
<b>Principle 2:</b> Benefit the local economy	...anchoring tourism locally; using local services and resources etc.
<b>Principle 3:</b> Green the entire business	...actively minimising environmental impact; greening all aspects of the business; encouraging sustainable guest practices etc.
<b>Principle 4:</b> Contribute actively to nature and culture protection	...taking responsibility for environmental and cultural values; actively participating in or supporting protection efforts etc.
<b>Principle 5:</b> Invest in joy of discovery, knowledge and respect	...encouraging curiosity and respect; having knowledgeable guides and hosts etc.
<b>Principle 6:</b> Quality and security on the trip	...that companies should realise and exceed expectations; that an NB business is a trustworthy partner etc.

These two organisations both overlap and diverge in important ways. They were selected because each operates a named, branded sustainability initiative, providing bounded and formal entities for analysis, and because both act as norm entrepreneurs within Swedish tourism. The West Sweden Tourism Board (WSTB), through Stepping up Sustainability, is considered a sustainable tourism frontrunner among governmental tourism promotion bodies, reaching a broad set of actors, including municipalities, companies, NGOs, travel agents, journalists, and tourists. The Swedish Nature and Ecotourism Association (SNEA), meanwhile, has long been a leader in sustainable nature tourism and now also represents the sector in advocacy and lobbying aimed at public authorities, promotion bodies, and other stakeholders. While their members constitute a modest share of the broader tourism sector, SNEA has

positioned itself as a leading voice in a segment central to Sweden's tourism appeal – nature remains one of the country's key attractions for international visitors (Visit Sweden/YouGov, 2024). Neither organisation follows a predefined model or theory of change; both have developed their initiatives internally. As Tables 4 and 5 show, their sustainability principles are broadly aligned, but their framings of change diverge.

Though contextual, organisational, and structural factors likely influence the types of frames employed to a certain extent, the focus of this paper is not to explain genesis, but to examine current framing strategies. Viewing these organisations as norm entrepreneurs, we choose to place our lens on the frames, ideas, and narratives they create and use around change in their respective initiative. Furthermore, the orientations and change dimensions identified here are not axiomatically tied to the 'form' of the initiative that each organisation operates. There are process-oriented and flexible forms of labelling, and more fixed and teleological forms of pledge initiatives (e.g. Lesar *et al.*, 2020; Graci & Dodds, 2015). Sweden also provides a useful context for exploring how change towards sustainability is framed, given its frequent positioning as a country with high sustainability ambitions (Anselmi *et al.*, 2023). As such, through their positions, sustainability initiatives, and the Swedish context, WSTB and SNEA serve as paradigmatic cases, while also providing valuable variation in relation to each other (Flyvbjerg, 2006), thus providing overlapping and complementary insights and perspectives, enabling a multifaceted exploration of how change (towards sustainability) may be framed within the sector.

#### 4. Results and analysis

The thematic frame analysis revealed that the two norm entrepreneurs frames change in relatively distinct ways through their respective sustainable tourism initiatives (see Table 6). West Sweden Tourism Board and its pledge-based initiative, Stepping up Sustainability, construct a journey orientation to change. In contrast, Sweden's Nature and Ecotourism Association reflects a destination-oriented approach through its initiatives Nature's Best and The Step Counter, however with increasing journey tinges colouring their frames. How these orientations are constructed, legitimised, and framed is presented below, following Schön and Rein's (1994) diagnostic-prescriptive frame division.

**Table 6.** *Overview of diagnosis and prescription; the latter divided into dimensions of change.*

	<b>WSTB: Stepping up Sustainability</b>	<b>SNEA: Nature's Best and The Step Counter</b>
<b>Diagnosis</b>	Sustainability is complex, bureaucratic, and burdensome.	Sustainability is complex and difficult.
<b>Prescription</b>	Change needs to appear simple and positive to broaden participation.	Change towards sustainability is inevitably complex; businesses thus require support and education.
- <b>Rationale for change</b>	<b>Process.</b> Goal-avoidant, process-focused.	<b>Goal.</b> Goal-focused.
- <b>Progress</b>	<b>Relative.</b> Progress is defined as relative to current conditions.	<b>Hybrid relative-absolute.</b> Progress is defined both as relative and as towards absolute state.
- <b>Structure</b>	<b>Customisation.</b> Change can be customised by each organisation; actions can be chosen.	<b>Standardisation.</b> Change is standardised and needs to follow a protocol; support and education is provided.
<b>Overall orientation</b>	<b>Journey.</b> Change is a continuous journey without a destination. Addresses the diagnosis by omitting targets, casting relative change as sufficient, and emphasising flexibility.	<b>Destination.</b> Change is a guided journey towards a destination. Addresses the diagnosis by combining incremental changes steered towards Natures' Best, and offering support and education along the way.

#### 4.1. The West Sweden Tourism Board's initiative: Stepping up Sustainability

##### 4.1.1 **Diagnosis: Sustainability as too complex**

Stepping up Sustainability emerged in response to an internally 'felt' critique of the WSTB's earlier focus on maximisation, which prioritised high visitor numbers without sufficient regard for social or environmental impacts. Those involved in tourism promotion began to sense that this approach "didn't feel good" (Helen, WSTB). However, the 'how' of creating change is framed as the central challenge Stepping up Sustainability addresses. Specifically, the difficulty of creating change is attributed to sustainability being too complex, burdensome, and bureaucratic for tourism businesses to implement, when it does not need to be. This complexity is said to inhibit action and, by extension, exclude less value-led actors and smaller companies. In response, WSTB claims that the region's tourism sector must shift away from maximisation, a change they see as achievable through goal omission and direction-setting principles (rationale of change), incrementality and relativity (defining progress), and adaptability and broadened participation (structure), aligning the initiative with what we term a journey orientation. These aspects are framed as key to enabling sector-wide action and participation. The following section focuses on how WSTB constructs and legitimises this change orientation through SuS (see Table 7), through the three change dimensions outlined in Section 2.

##### 4.1.2 **Prescription: Change as a continuous journey**

The first dimension in the analytical framework emphasises the differences in what is allowed to drive and shape change – an end or the process of change itself. Emerging from both interviews and documents, one of Stepping up Sustainability's core framings of change is a journey with a general direction, without a destination. The journey frame makes prominent features of continuous movement, development, and process and is further reinforced by clear and explicit goal avoidance. Interviewee John explains:

*"We didn't try to define sustainability, because then you end up in the ditch all the time, and you don't get started. It was supposed to be the start of a movement in the right direction. Small and big steps are welcome."* (John, WSTB)

**Table 7.** *WSTB's change frames explained.*

<b>Dimension of change</b>	<b>West Sweden Tourism Board</b>	<b>Exemplified by</b>
<b>Rationale</b>	Process – no goals for change, sustainability is never-ending	WSTB's goal-less, but direction-setting principles
<b>Progress</b>	Relative – incremental progress, changes are meaningful as relative to current conditions.	<i>"We reach success through continuous improvements with a focus on concrete initiatives."</i> (SuS website)
<b>Structure</b>	Customisation – change is flexible and adaptable.	Lists of possible, but not mandatory, actions on SuS website

Here, John captures three aspects of what is imagined to drive and shape change: goal avoidance (not wanting to define what is sustainable tourism), that SuS is about process (the start of a movement), and 'the right direction'. 'The right direction', also occurring in other interviews, refers to the four principles on which SuS is based (see Table 4). While directional, these principles avoid setting articulated targets – principles 1 and 2 do not include definitions or thresholds of what is considered, for example, 'unnecessary impacts' or 'good for residents'; principles 3 and 4, anchored by 'more', are at their core relative and goal avoidant. However, though absent from interviews, the SuS website includes two goal-oriented suggestions which businesses can adopt should they choose: to become eco-certified, and to set up environmental goals for one's own business. These could be interpreted as introducing a

teleological tinge; however, they are only two of a long list of optional actions; SuS's goal avoidance is a more prominent frame. As a rationale of change, removing clearly defined targets and instead focusing on general direction and movement still indicates a process-based approach (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995), where the focus is on each step taken. Addressing WSTB's diagnosis, avoiding targets is thought to simplify change work and promote participation by removing the pressure of conformity, thus encouraging more businesses and organisations to engage in change work. To date, Stepping up Sustainability has over 650 members – although this may be because of various reasons, interviewees indicate that this is partly due to the initiative's simplicity and low threshold.

At the root of the goal avoidance observable in WSTB's frames lies what can be interpreted as a process approach to sustainability itself: the idea that sustainability is not a state, but a never-ending movement (Faber *et al.*, 2005). Interviewee Helen captures this succinctly when she says: *"There is no goal, because everything can always become more sustainable."* Other interviewees echo this understanding – sustainability is never finished, and sustainability is an ongoing form of work; change and sustainability are synonymous.

This highlights the intertwining of the first and second dimensions of change in our theoretical framework. The second dimension captures how progress is defined; that is, against what change is assessed, signifying what 'counts' as (meaningful) change. In Stepping up Sustainability, WSTB defines progress and changes through a relative lens, focusing on incremental improvements from current conditions rather than adherence to absolute thresholds. This approach, they claim, enables organisations to begin where they are, regardless of their current level of sustainability engagement. The following quotes from the SuS website, as well as interviewee Naomi, reflect these change frames:

*"We reach success through continuous improvements with a focus on concrete initiatives."* (SuS website)

*"I think we must constantly and slowly step up to be better or smarter. I think we must continue to stride."* (Naomi, WSTB)

This frame positions incremental improvements as valuable and as 'leading to success' (SuS website), reflecting a more relative idea of what counts as meaningful and worthwhile changes. Change work is here assessed and valued not by its distance reduction to an absolute state (where a tourism sector could be considered 'sustainable'), but rather by that it is a change from current conditions, regardless of distance 'moved'. According to this logic, the magnitude of change and whether a practice, an organisation or the sector itself is sustainable are less important than the fact that a change has been made. Melding insights from this and the previous change dimension, incremental changes are meaningful and valuable, as sustainability is positioned as a never-ending and ongoing effort. This incremental and relative framing of change addresses the diagnosis that sustainability and change work are too burdensome, by defining meaningful change as incremental steps, rather than assessing the value of implemented changes according to an ideal end-state.

Linked to what is considered valuable change is the prescribed structure of change. This third dimension captures the type or form of change that is encouraged – whether change is expected to be standardised, fixed, and 'Fordist,' or whether it is presented as customisable and adaptable, aligning with more 'post-Fordist' concepts of production (Lesar *et al.*, 2020). Customisation is central to how change is framed by WSTB in SuS. Prescriptive criteria and fixed standards are avoided ('We didn't try to define sustainability', as interviewee John said), framing change as flexible and adaptable to each participating organisation's contexts and capacities. The guiding principles in Table 4 further support SuS's customisation approach, as they provide a framework, but without criteria. Each principle

contains suggestions for implementing it, for example, using smaller plates to avoid food waste for principle 1, or organising activities around darkness for principle 3; however, how participating organisations interpret the principles is customisable. The customisability is further exemplified by interviewee Magnus' statement:

*"It's different for each organisation. When a company joins Stepping up Sustainability, they do that according to their ability and their preconditions."* (Magnus, WSTB)

The framing of change as customisable directly responds to WSTB's emphasis on broadening participation and inclusivity in change work. By promoting a change model that emphasises voluntary action, where each participating organisation may choose what is possible for them to change, WSTB attempts to build a sense of joint action within the sector. Interviewee Helen emphasises:

*"It's much easier to get others to join. It's of course somewhat easier; the threshold is lower, but I believe that you get more members who are positive about this, because there aren't so many demands. It doesn't require that much time, but it also feels positive, and a bit more modern maybe, like 'now we do this together' and 'I contribute what I can.'" (Helen, WSTB)*

The norm entrepreneur's post-Fordist approach (Lovering, 2020) thus frames change as adaptable, malleable, and a 'buffet' of actions (Lesar *et al.*, 2020), which are available to different participants under the broad guise of sustainability work. This connects to the first and second dimensions of change, as change in SuS is not about specific actions to reach a sustainable state, but rather about any action to create change in 'the right direction'. Together, these framings construct a change orientation as a shared journey – never-ending, open, adaptable, and accessible – where each actor contributes what it can. This responds to the diagnosis proposed by WSTB, where change towards sustainability in the tourism sector is viewed as too complex and burdensome.

#### *4.2. The Swedish Nature and Ecotourism Association's initiatives: Nature's Best and The Step Counter*

##### **4.2.1 Diagnosis: The inevitable complexity of change work**

The Swedish Nature and Ecotourism Association and their certification, Nature's Best, emerged from a belief in ecotourism as an alternative to unsustainable mass tourism. SNEA highlights the particular sensitivity of nature tourism to the impacts of tourism activities:

*"To not saw off the branch that nature tourism is sitting on is one of the sector's greatest challenges."* (SNEA website)

Following this, SNEA's problem diagnosis (Schön & Rein, 1994) emphasises the critical need for controlled, measurable, and systematic change work. Like WSTB, they frame sustainability as difficult and complex to implement, particularly for the small businesses that make up most of their membership base. However, where WSTB claims that change work does not need to be complex, SNEA positions this complexity as inevitable. Thus, SNEA constructs a different set of change frames compared to WSTB. Rather than removing complexity, SNEA supports a structured journey towards a defined destination. In response to their diagnosis, they frame sustainable (nature) tourism as a destination to reach, viewed as attainable through three interlinked framings: Nature's Best as defining sustainable tourism and as a fixed end-point (rationale of change), a hybrid absolute-relative understanding of progress through the recently introduced Step Counter (defining progress), and a standardised but supported pathway (structure of change). Together, Nature's Best and The Step Counter form SNEA's response to the perceived complexity of change towards sustainability in tourism businesses.

We want to note that change is framed slightly differently for Nature’s Best and its ‘sibling’ The Step Counter – more as a destination for the former and slightly more as a journey for the latter. However, as they are run by the same organisation and are closely connected, we interpret them as working in tandem and therefore symbolise a hybrid view of change promoted by a single norm entrepreneur. The following section thus focuses on how SNEA’s understanding of change, including its hybridity, is constructed and legitimised through attention to the three change dimensions (see Table 8).

#### 4.2.2 Prescription: Change as a guided journey to the destination

As their rationale, SNEA takes on a goal-focused, or teleological, approach (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). The Nature’s Best certification represents the endpoint, defined by strict criteria that signal when a business has achieved this standard (see Table 5). SNEA’s new Step Counter, while seemingly process-focused through its metaphorical name, further reinforces this teleological framing, as it frames Nature’s Best as the ‘final step’. Interviewee Kai describes Nature’s Best as a ‘crowning achievement,’ while interviewee Alex likens it to ‘a final exam’. These characterisations highlight the challenge of practicing sustainable nature tourism under Nature’s Best. However, rather than removing strict targets, SNEA emphasises the importance of support, capacity building, and education, provided through The Step Counter, in making changes towards that goal. Though these may emphasise process, the organisation’s approach to change is shaped, directed, and driven by a goal: Nature’s Best. This addresses the diagnosis outlined above – that change work is challenging and complex – through maintaining a view of change as needing to be steered towards a goal, but emphasising support in reaching that goal.

**Table 8.** SNEA’s change frames explained.

Dimension of change	Swedish Nature and Ecotourism Association	Exemplified by
<b>Rationale</b>	Goal – Nature’s Best certification is the goal; changes should align towards NB.	Framing Nature’s Best as the “ <i>crowning achievement.</i> ” (Kai, SNEA)
<b>Progress</b>	Hybrid relative-absolute – Nature’s Best equals sustainable tourism; The Step Counter introduces supported steps towards an absolute state.	The coexistence of a process-oriented tool (The Step Counter) and an absolute threshold (Nature’s Best).
<b>Structure</b>	Standardisation – change towards sustainability is a series of universal steps.	“ <i>We don’t make exceptions in our criteria.</i> ” (Elias, SNEA)

Though SNEA and their two initiatives are strictly goal-focused, their approach to change in the second dimension – how change is defined and valued – is more nuanced. Nature’s Best defines what counts as sustainable nature tourism, and thus represents a view of sustainability as an absolute state (Faber *et al.*, 2005): conditions can be judged as either sustainable or unsustainable, as exemplified by the following quote from interviewee Mira:

“*Those saying that tensions between [economic, environmental and social] sustainability is an issue, I don’t understand that. If you work truly sustainably, you have no conflicts. If you have these tensions, you are not sustainable.*” (Mira, SNEA)

This binary – whether something is sustainable or not – forms the foundation of an absolute understanding of change towards sustainability (Faber *et al.*, 2005). For SNEA, tourism organisations are deemed sustainable only when they ‘have reached a certain level’ (Mira, SNEA); that is, when they achieve what is stipulated as sustainable through Nature’s Best and receive the certification. Simultaneous to this absolute view, a more relative view is seemingly taking root, following the

reorganisation of the Nature's Best certification according to GSTC standards and through the creation of The Step Counter, which allows tourism organisations to monitor their changes, progress, and improvements continuously. Interviewee Mira again explains:

*"The approach we now have is that you get bumpers or a handrail to hold onto. 'I was here, and now I'm here. The next step is this, right.' [...] And then you do your little measurement with The Step Counter – 'Look, I've progressed two steps'. We think it can really boost companies' development journey."* (Mira, SNEA)

The set-up of The Step Counter – 'I was here and now I am here' (Mira, SNEA) – signals a more relative, incremental framing of change, where change is defined and valued according not only to the distance reduction to an absolute state (Nature's Best), but also by the shift from a current condition to a new condition. Interviewee Sofia gives voice to a more relative view, echoing Helen and the West Sweden Tourism Board:

*"...sustainability work is not just something you finish, but it's a process and a happening over time and it's really only over time that you can see if you're improving or worsening, and to then think 'what more can I do?'"* (Sofia, SNEA)

Similar to how change is framed in SuS, this signals a view of sustainability itself as ongoing – 'a happening over time', as Sofia says. As such, an absolute view, represented by Nature's Best, and a relative view, represented by The Step Counter, here combine to form a hybridised approach to how change is defined and valued for SNEA: changes are meaningful relative to current conditions, as well as on the road to what is considered sustainable.

Lastly, both Nature's Best and The Step Counter prescribe a standardised approach to change (Lesar *et al.*, 2020), where change is understood as a series of universal steps that need to be taken to become sustainable. In addition to implementing changes according to the principles in Table 5, Nature's Best requires that certified companies create a destination analysis, an environmental plan, and an ecotourism or sustainability policy. The Step Counter contains a series of workshops and educational interventions, which companies must go through to progress and ultimately take the final step to become certified. Interviewee Elias gives expression for this framing when he says:

*"We don't make exceptions in our criteria, or what we demand from companies, which also makes us – it's not for everyone, most companies in Sweden don't have this level of maturity, this ability, the possibility to become Nature's Best-certified."* (Elias, SNEA)

The organisation thus frames change towards sustainable nature tourism as defined by specific, standardised, and universal actions and steps, reflecting a standardised approach to change (Lesar *et al.*, 2020). In response to the diagnosis, The Step Counter provides 'handrails' along the way, in Mira's words, as well as a clear overview of which changes companies are expected to make. Though we do not interpret this as enough to indicate a hybrid approach in this dimension, it nuances the structure of change promoted: changes are expected to follow a standardised protocol, yet they are accompanied by structured guidance designed to facilitate implementation.

SNEA's frames construct a change orientation as a guided journey towards a fixed destination. Sustainability is positioned as a defined state, but meaningful change is also understood as incremental movement from current conditions. While the organisation emphasises that change needs to be informed by clear criteria and standards, it also highlights the need for support and staged progression.

This change orientation responds to the diagnosis that change towards sustainability is inevitably complex and challenging.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we set out to address the two research questions ‘*How do norm entrepreneurs in sustainable tourism frame change towards sustainability through diagnostic and prescriptive framing?*’ and ‘*What orientations to change emerge from these framings, and how may they shape understandings of change towards sustainability in the tourism sector?*’ To reiterate the study’s broader aim, these questions emerge from recognising that framing of change towards sustainability is bound up in its operationalisation. This means that the way change is imagined and claimed to unfold will impact its implementation. Furthermore, we suggest that the two tourism organisations and the respective sustainability initiatives this paper takes as cases are so-called norm entrepreneurs, who intentionally and unintentionally communicate and shape perceptions, understandings, and norms in the issue field sustainable tourism, by leveraging frames and narratives (Payne, 2001; Schön & Rein, 1994). In this sense, WSTB and SNEA also have influence and reach beyond their immediate organisations and the actors they work with; they may also shape perceptions around how change should be implemented in the sector more broadly through the frames they craft, utilise, and leverage. This further confirms the importance of examining how such entrepreneurs imagine and frame change.

### 5.1. Theoretical implications and empirical contributions

This study has theoretical and empirical contributions. Firstly, to the bodies of literature drawn on – sustainability transformations, organisational change, and sustainable tourism quality control tools – we contribute empirical, case-based knowledge on how efforts to inspire and guide change towards sustainability in the tourism sector are framed. This responds to the knowledge gaps identified by others (e.g. Eising-Mertsch *et al.*, 2024; Hagbert *et al.*, 2021; Vaara *et al.*, 2016) as well as us. Such case-based knowledge, especially when abductively produced, may also be used to suggest new lines of sight or inquiry into previously uncharted territory, as exemplified here by the development of the journey-destination framework as a tool for analysing change orientations.

Through the abductive analysis, the study also advances theorising of how sustainability initiatives in the tourism sector construct change by showing that a shared problem diagnosis (that achieving sustainability within tourism is complex and challenging) can give rise to divergent change orientations. WSTB and Stepping up Sustainability adopt a journey-oriented narrative that frames change as a process-oriented, incremental, and customisable path, in order to remove complexity in change and broaden participation. In contrast, SNEA’s initiatives pursue a more structured, destination-oriented model, setting explicit and absolute standards for sustainable tourism. This view, however, is increasingly hybridised through the newly implemented sustainability management system, The Step Counter, which aims to support tourism businesses in handling the complexity involved in transformations. These divergent paths – one flexible and goal-less, the other standardised and guided – show that the shared diagnosis of complexity can be translated into distinct understandings of how to drive change. The findings therefore demonstrate that complexity in sustainability transformations can be framed as a reason either for removing goals and thresholds or for enforcing them, thereby highlighting the generative role of framing in shaping how change itself is theorised and operationalised.

Building on the suggestion that these organisations have broader influence through norm entrepreneurship, the different framing orientations may impact how the sector understands and operationalises change towards sustainability more broadly. A narrative such as ‘*sustainability is complex, therefore goals and definitions should be removed*’ will have other implications than one claiming that ‘*sustainability is complex, therefore companies should be guided through it*’. The former

likely encourages wider participation in change work and generates broader acceptance in the sector. However, it simultaneously risks oversimplification. It is, for example, questionable whether the complexity of change is solved by removing rather than managing it. The latter, through the emphasis on handling complexity through targets and goals with education and support, may lead to more stringent actions, yet risks excluding smaller or less motivated actors in the sector. This demonstrates the theoretical importance of examining norm entrepreneurs' framings of change, since these do not remain internal choices, but circulate beyond to shape sectoral understandings about what sustainable tourism entails, and who can realistically participate in it.

Lastly, these insights are not confined to the tourism sector, but extend to norm entrepreneurs for sustainability, and even societal narratives and imaginaries around transformation, more broadly, where similar framings influence how participation in transformation is encouraged, progress away from and towards (un)desirable states is defined, and change is operationalised and implemented. Areas of research that focus on transformation and change, whether societal, sectoral, or organisational, may benefit from examining how change is discursively shaped, as this is bound up in how transformation is operationalised.

### 5.2. Managerial implications

This study has a set of managerial implications, relevant for norm entrepreneurs or other actors that attempt to inspire, guide, and drive transformation towards sustainability in the tourism sector, and beyond. Though this study is situated in Sweden, we argue that these implications are relevant beyond this national context, as they are largely focused on handling trade-offs arising through different change orientations. The risks and tensions in each are discussed below, with specific suggestions for how they may be handled.

For the journey orientation, these appear around relativity as a definition of progress and customisation as a form of structure. A relative approach to change towards sustainability, as utilised by both organisations to differing extents, raises significant concerns when small and incremental improvements are equated with sufficient sustainability or change work (e.g. de Freitas Netto *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, an adaptable approach may lead to what Lesar *et al.* (2020) term 'the buffet effect', where picking and choosing actions, regardless of substantiveness, is legitimised as change work. Both a relative approach and customisability may lead to more engaged and responsive adoption of changes in a sector, as it makes change towards sustainability seem simple and possible to a variety of actors. The risks with both of these are, however, that small, superficial, or inconsistent efforts may very well fall short of meaningful progress, and may create a façade of change efforts – an appearance of commitment – without addressing key underlying unsustainability and without demanding proof of change. This is also known as greenwashing (de Freitas Netto *et al.*, 2020), and while we have no reason to suggest intentionality on the part of either organisation in this study, such approaches invite critical questions about whether relative progress and customisability are sufficient in the face of accelerating sustainability crises.

For sustainable tourism norm entrepreneurs like WSTB and SNEA, the challenge lies in balancing relativity's inclusivity and openness with the need for more stringent accountability mechanisms that ensure all steps ultimately lead to substantive outcomes. Reflexive engagement with the relativity frame (i.e. that incremental progress is sufficient, or that sustainability is never-ending) could help mitigate these risks by cultivating a critical awareness of what counts as meaningful change and when relative approaches may fall short. Practically, such reflexive engagement could involve deliberating with employees, stakeholders, and residents around the meaning and objectives of sustainable tourism, for example, focused on its scope and impacts and how these may be conceptualised and measured in the sector.

For the destination orientation, the pitfalls are, diametrically to the journey orientation, found in the restrictions that come with ambitious and standardised forms of change. Framings of change holding that a tourism actor is not sustainable until it has reached a certain level or state may indeed result in more substantive outcomes, if and when such changes are adopted. However, this may simultaneously be excluding to smaller organisations, such as single-person companies, those with less economic capabilities, or actors, regardless of size, with weaker ideological commitment. Furthermore, a stricter and standardised understanding of change may discourage innovation and experimentation in change work. In the context of the tourism sector's polycentric governance landscape (Derx & Glasbergen, 2014), the destination orientation may thus, through a more stringent, goal-oriented, and absolute view of change towards sustainability, inadvertently frame this as impossible for parts of the sector.

The coexistence of these framings within the same sector highlights the potential for hybrid approaches that draw on the strengths, and address the weaknesses, of both. Journey-oriented framings, which emphasise incrementality and customisation, may promote inclusivity by encouraging diverse actors to engage in context-sensitive ways, but may create ambiguity concerning what constitutes meaningful and impactful changes. Conversely, destination-oriented framings foreground structure and clear goals, yet risks excluding smaller or less motivated actors. Sustainable tourism norm entrepreneurs may reconcile these tensions through combining incrementality with a goal focus as well as flexibility with accountability. In practice, such hybrid change orientations could afford and translate to, for example, establishing a set of specific, intermediary targets, for a company or a sector, to be reached by a certain year; creating tiered or 'lite' certifications that allow smaller or new actors to progress gradually towards a predefined level; promoting peer-based audits to lessen the risk of greenwashing etc. Ultimately, by reflecting on their framing strategies, norm entrepreneurs can navigate the complexity of supporting engagement while ensuring their efforts result in substantive and impactful change.

### 5.3. *Limitations of the study*

This paper abductively developed the analytical journey-destination framework, which allowed us to examine and understand the diagnostic and prescriptive change frames utilised by two sustainable tourism initiatives in Sweden. As such, we have been able to analyse and draw conclusions about the specific cases in question, and make suggestions for how change could be approached in research and practice more broadly, without claiming generalisability or universality. Furthermore, the framework developed here captures only certain orientations of change. While it proved analytically fruitful in our cases, additional orientations may exist and could become visible in other empirical settings or sectors.

Further limitations in our study include the relatively narrow empirical scope, arising from the case study design, both in terms of data sources, as well as geographical context. To pre-empt impact of the former, we drew on both interviews and documents to provide sufficient depth. For the latter, we have argued that Swedish sustainable tourism organisations may serve as paradigmatic cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006), as the Swedish context may offer a more benign environment for ambitious sustainability initiatives.

Finally, as with all interpretive analyses, our reading of the material is shaped by our positionality and the analytical choices we made in the abductive process. This does not undermine the value of the findings, but it does mean that the framework should be understood as one possible lens among others, rather than as a definitive or exhaustive account of change orientations.

### 5.4. *Future research*

Building on the change orientations we have utilised as analytical devices in this paper, we call for future research to critically and systematically interrogate conceptualisations of change and transformation towards sustainable tourism systems and practices, as well as sustainability more broadly, in policy,

practice, as well as within research itself. Furthermore, going forward, researchers could combine frame analysis with outcome-based evaluations (e.g., carbon footprint measures, in situ observations) to investigate whether journey or destination orientations generate more tangible transformation, and under what conditions. Ultimately, further cross-sector research could illuminate how these orientations unfold in other contexts, for example food systems, consumer goods, and urban planning, thereby deepening our understanding of the paths available to create sustainable societies.

**Disclosure statement:**

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

**Ethical approval:**

No ethical approval was needed, in accordance with Lund University ethical guidelines and the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

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**Appendix. Interview guides**

There are two separate guides for each organisation, as they have different purposes and structure. The guide for SNEA is longer than for WSTB as this one contains questions for nature tourism entrepreneurs, GSTC certification, and more specific questions about certification according to Nature's Best.

**1. Interview guide - SNEA**

*(Note: Some SNEA employees also run their own nature tourism business – there is a section of questions that's only for them)*

**Questions about the interviewee**

- Can you describe your role?
  - What are your main tasks?
  - Who do you work with, and on what?
  - How long have you worked with SNEA / Nature's Best?

**SNEA / Nature's Best – basic questions**

- What is the purpose and aim of the Swedish Nature and Ecotourism Association?
- What is the purpose and aim of Nature's Best?
- How is SNEA governed, and does this have any impact on Nature's Best?

**SNEA / Nature's Best – in-depth questions**

- Has the role of Nature's Best within the organisation changed over time? Why?
- What is Nature's Best's role in practice?
- What challenges has Nature's Best faced in the past, and how were they addressed?
- What challenges does it face now and in the future? How do you think these will be handled?
- Are there different interests within nature tourism?
  - *Are they represented within SNEA?*
  - *Are there conflicts/tensions between these interests? How are they resolved?*
  - *Are there synergies between different interests? How / which ones?*

- How does SNEA work externally?
  - How do you work with promotion, influence, inspiration, etc.?
  - What is the purpose of this external work?

### **Nature's Best – in-depth questions**

- Can you describe the certification process for a company, from start to certification, and what happens afterwards?
- The basic principles on which the certification rests:
  - Where do they come from? / How were they developed?
  - Are they ever revised?
  - Where does the knowledge about what is or isn't sustainable come from?
    - Are there uncertainties about what counts as sustainable? How are these handled?
  - Are there synergies between the principles – in theory and in practice?
  - Are there conflicts between the principles – in theory and in practice? What is your experience?
    - *Conflicts between economic interests and environmental/nature considerations, between local interests and economic interests, between local interests and environmental/nature considerations?*
  - If there are conflicts, can they be resolved?
- What is it like to certify a company? *Easy, difficult, challenging? Why?*
  - How is it to apply the criteria in practice?
- When does a company get rejected for certification? Does that happen?
- Are there certain types of companies that will never be Nature's Best-certified? Why?
- What is Nature's Best's role in a broader perspective?
- What challenges has Nature's Best faced and is currently facing? How are these handled?
  - *Regarding certification according to GSTC: do you see this as a positive (or negative, necessary, 'neutral') development?*
    - *What will improve?*
    - *Will anything worsen? If so, what?*
  - *Do you think more or fewer companies will be able to get certified? Why? Is that good or bad?*

### **Nature tourism entrepreneurs**

- Are you / your company certified under Nature's Best?
- **If not:** Has your company considered becoming certified? Why / why not?
  - *What would be required for you to apply?*
  - *What do you think certification would bring to your company?*
  - *What would be the challenges?*
  - *Would there be any dilemmas or conflicts between different interests or values that you would need to handle?*
  - *Does Nature's Best's view of sustainability align with your own / your company's? Why / why not?*
- **If certified:** What were your reasons for applying?
  - *What has the certification contributed to your company?*
  - *Are you satisfied with the certification? Why / why not?*
  - *What have the challenges been?*
  - *Have there been any dilemmas or conflicts you have had to navigate? How did you do this?*

- *Does Nature's Best's view of sustainability align with your own / your company's? Why / why not?*

### **Questions about nature tourism, ecotourism, sustainability, and future**

- According to SNEA and Nature's Best, what is ecotourism?
  - Is more ecotourism always better? *Why / why not? When?*
  - Within SNEA, is there a perceived limit to how much nature and ecotourism Sweden's nature can handle? Is this discussed?
- Considering nature tourism and sustainability more broadly:
  - Are there problems, challenges, or conflicts between different interests, goals, or uses?
    - *Other economic uses (e.g., agriculture, forestry, mining)*
    - *Exercise and outdoor recreation*
    - *Non-organised / individual nature tourism*
    - *Hunting and foraging*
  - Are such potential conflicts or tensions discussed or considered within SNEA or Nature's Best, or in external collaborations?
    - *What, if anything, takes precedence?*
- Are there any synergies between different interests or different uses?
- What role do SNEA and Nature's Best play in Sweden's (and possibly the Nordic) tourism sector?
- What would you like the tourism sector to learn from SNEA and Nature's Best?
- How does the organisation wish to develop in the future?

### **Closing**

- Is there anything you would like to add?
- Do you have any questions for me?

## **2. Interview guide - WSTB**

### **Questions about the interviewee**

- Can you tell me about your role?
- How long have you been working with this?
- If not already mentioned: how involved are you in *Stepping up Sustainability*?
  - What do you do in relation to *Stepping up Sustainability*?

### **Basic questions about Stepping up Sustainability**

- What is the purpose of *Stepping up Sustainability*?
  - Are there any specific goals?
- Has anything changed since the start?
- What does the future look like for *Stepping up Sustainability*?
- I understand that SuS is not a label or a certification – why was this distinction/choice made?
- What are the benefits of SuS not being a label? Do you lose out on anything?
- [Do you keep SuS in mind when communicating with [stakeholders]? How?]

### **In-depth questions about Stepping up Sustainability**

- Where do these principles come from? Where does the inspiration come from? Who decided that these specific four should be the principles?

- Can anyone influence these now or in the future?
- The first principle is "as little unnecessary environmental impact as possible" – why not "no environmental impact"?
  - What is the advantage of phrasing it that way? Any disadvantage?
  - Who decides what constitutes unnecessary versus necessary environmental impact?
- The second principle is "good for both residents and visitors" – what is considered good and what is not good for both groups?
- Can you tell me a bit more about the third and fourth principles?
- Do these principles always go hand in hand, or are there sometimes conflicts between them?
  - From a broader perspective, how do you handle potential conflicts between different interests, such as economy vs. environment, or residents vs. visitors, etc.?
  - [In addition to them complementing each other], are there any synergies between them?
- Are there any other challenges specifically linked to the principles?

### Questions about tourism, sustainability and future

- What are some of the challenges when it comes to sustainability and tourism?
- Are there any issues or dimensions within sustainability and tourism that are particularly difficult or challenging to manage?
- How do you think *Stepping up Sustainability* will contribute to the work towards sustainable tourism?
- What do you see in the future for tourism in Västra Götaland?

### Closing

- Is there anything you would like to add?
- Do you have any questions for me?

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