Viability of Urban-Tourism Development in Coastal Cities as Leverage for the Development of a Regenerative Local Economy: The Case of the Resort City Eilat, Israel

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As Eilat’s tourism industry stagnates, the potential of urban tourism (UT) to overhaul the city’s tourism industry and promote a sustainable local economy is examined. The research questions concern UT viability in Eilat and main local stakeholders’ perspectives about it. This mixed-method study twines quantitative data from residents’ surveys with qualitative insights from in-depth interviews with local government and business-tourism personalities. Qualitative research yields four main themes: the essential role of cooperation among stakeholders, the need for community involvement in decision-making and assurance of just apportionment of utility, the need to develop and upgrade municipal infrastructures, and the paramount importance of preserving the local tapestry of life. In quantitative research, it is found that local residents clearly favor UT development. Importantly, offering urban-tourism activities may prolong tourists’ sojourn in Eilat. Local inhabitants also foresee solid potential for UT although they stress the importance of responsible management to curb possible adverse effects. The findings sketch a roadmap for UT development in Eilat, emphasize possible foci of action, report sizable support for such development, and indicate potential avenues of growth.

Keywords: urban tourism; regenerative local economy; sustainable tourism; all-inclusive model; stakeholders

# Introduction

Tourism is the main industry in Eilat, Israel’s southernmost city. The town’s marine- and desert-tourism attractions lure domestic and inbound tourists alike. Hotel-room occupancy exceeds the Israeli norm, at 73.4% in some fifty establishments with 11,000 rooms in 2019 (State Comptroller, 2021), and is second only to Tel Aviv. Some 90% of jobs in Eilat are directly or indirectly related to tourism (Stylidis et al., 2015). Municipal tourism revenue in 2018 is estimated at NIS 3.7 billion (NIS 4.5 billion if one adds non-hotel overnight stays). Between 2010 and 2019, domestic tourists outnumbered inbound tourists to Eilat who stayed in Eilat hotels, the latter accounting for 7.8% of the total in 2017 and 8.5% in 2018 (CBS, 2019) in an inverse trend to that in other important Israeli cities. Although tourist arrivals in Eilat have largely stagnated in the past decade, the downward trend in inbound tourism halted in 2017–2018 and turned around somewhat but still falls far short of its level at the beginning of the decade.

Inbound tourism to Eilat (even excluding 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic began) has plateaued if not slumped somewhat in the past decade, as has domestic tourism. A mild upturn in domestic tourism at beginning of the decade has levelled off since 2013 at around 6.2 million overnight stays per year (CBS, 2021) (Table 1).

Table 1. Overnight stays in Eilat, 2010–2021

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Year | Domestic tourists (,000) | Inbound tourists (,000) |
| 2010 | 5,829.3 | 273.5 |
| 2011 | 5,670.5 | 269.8 |
| 2012 | 5,861.2 | 239.8 |
| 2013 | 6,098.1 | 223.0 |
| 2014 | 6,157.5 | 186.8 |
| 2015 | 6,310.9 | 143.6 |
| 2016 | 6,206.8 | 153.3 |
| 2017 | 6,181.4 | 192.1 |
| 2018 | 6,202.9 | 213.0 |
| 2019 | 6,202.8 | 211.8 |
| 2020 | 3,349.2 | 53.5 |

Source: CBS, 2021

This article investigates tourism development in Eilat and the viability of urban tourism (UT) development in a resort city based foremost on coastal and water attractions. For this purpose, the outlooks and positions of four key tourism industry players are tested: the tourism-business sector, municipal decision-makers, local residents, and tourists. The focus on main stakeholders’ outlooks and stances may reveal a unique and interesting perspective on where Eilat’s development should head; this explains the importance of the study. In the existing situation, tourism stagnating due *inter alia* to the all-inclusive model common at the town’s hotels and vacation sites, in-depth research that takes account of the needs of the town, its inhabitants, and tourists is needed. This necessity yields two main research questions:

1. Might UT development in Eilat promote a regenerative local economy?
2. What position do main tourism-industry stakeholders (business sector, municipal authority, tourists, local inhabitants) take on UT development in Eilat?

To answer, these main stakeholders, their expectations, and their influence are identified and their positions are analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively below. Stakeholders in tourism and its development are, for example, residents, tourists, the tourism-business sector, and municipal officials (Freeman, 1984; Shani & Pizam, 2012). A mixed-methods (quantitative/qualitative) design is used to yield a rich picture of the phenomenon in question along with quantitative data from a sample large enough to permit external validation. This mixed-methods approach is well suited to stakeholder analysis and elicits a picture of tourism in Eilat, thus attaining the goal of the study broadly and exhaustively.

**Literature review**

***Urban tourism***

In urban tourism (UT), a widespread global and local phenomenon, a city becomes a salient cultural center of leisure activities: vacationing, sports, culture, and time with friends and family (Howie, 2003). UT is based on tourism-related visits to and outings in urban areas outside familiar tourism hubs in cities worldwide. Various definitions of UT have evolved, reflecting the growth of the field and changes in perspectives on it. The World Tourism Organization sees UT as tourism activity in an urban space that has certain characteristics and a non-agrarian economy (United Nations Environment Programme and World Tourism Organization, 2005).

In further conceptualizations, it is emphasized that UT is only one economic activity that takes place in the city; therefore, it competes with other industries for resources. This adds complexity to tourism planning, policymaking, and operational management because these mandate the formation of a connection between tourism and public and commercial organizations that operate in these areas. Urban development has many constraints and environmental aspects, in particular, draw less attention than do matters such as cultural heritage or residential necessities, as is not the case in other tourism models (Edwards et al., 2008; Novy & Colomb, 2019). Summing up, Gârbea (2013) finds that UT “represents all attractive tourist resources of a city aimed for attracting visitors and residents, in which various types of tourism are interfering and contributes to the development and regeneration of urban areas” (p. 196).

One characteristic of UT is diversity, manifested in experiences as different as visits and outings to industrial areas, migrant neighborhoods, graffiti walls, collective/alternative culture and consumption venues, leisure sites such as cafés, pubs, clubs, and restaurants in ancient buildings, relics, and unique shops (Mura & Slak Valek, 2023). What, however, transforms tourism in a city into UT? For example, does standard mass tourism in centers of megacities qualify as UT? Some answer in the negative, contending that UT entails specific integration of tourism and the city (Ashworth & Page, 2011).

In the early 1980s, as the harmful effects of mass tourism began to appear, the concept of sustainable tourism and various types of alternative tourism started to emerge (Jovicic, 2016), challenging the essence of tourism and redrawing the boundaries between a tourism destination and one not so (Uriely, 2005) to the point of reversing the two. The phenomenon is attested in many tourists’ wish to abandon intentional tourist attractions in favor of “ordinary” urban areas such as side streets and residential neighborhoods in order to experience local authenticity (Novovic & Gligorijević, 2018). In this postmodern trend, many urban destinations worldwide have been developing unique products and experiences grounded in alternative forms of tourism (Hershko, 2019).

***The allure of UT***

Urban culture creates a hybrid encounter of wealth and identities and reaches out to many areas of research—from urban architecture, geography, sociology, urban psychology, and cultural design to urban semantics and its political, gender, and class representations (Jameson, 1998). Unlike traditional coastal tourism, typified by bathing, urban seashore environments may pique tourists’ cultural and historical interest by offering leisure facilities and unique and authentic products that tell local cultural lore (Sednak & Mihalic, 2008). The broad diversity of UT products makes UT attractive to many kinds of visitors, possibly enhancing the tourism destination’s competitiveness and improving tourists’ visiting experience and local inhabitants’ quality of life. This potential connects with the principles of sustainable development, in which residents and tourists share an interest in developing the tourism destination in a responsible and balanced way (Novy & Colomb, 2019). Accordingly, new approaches toward tourism development seek to understand how tourists integrate into a town’s tapestry of life by building links between townspeople and visitors (Nilsson, 2020).

A tourism destination is considered attractive if it has components that may attract tourists (Timur & Getz, 2009). In UT, attractiveness rests on primary and secondary components. Primary components are the city’s main visiting destinations such as historical buildings or neighborhoods and special events. Secondary components—shops, conference and events venues, overnight accommodations, means of transport, etc.—support the attractions and abet the city’s tourism development by amplifying tourism offerings (Hershko, 2019). A tourism city also offers day activities, information centers, and guides. Most of what happens there occurs in public spaces such as the city center, markets, and parks (Ashworth & Page, 2011).

Tours and attractions may also exist outside the center, possibly motivating townspeople and visitors to share the city’s resources, services, and facilities (Hallmann et al., 2015). To remain attractive as a tourism destination, a city cannot rest on the laurels of its epitomic tourism attractions; instead, it must also consider using municipal assets in the long term by, for instance, upgrading infrastructures such as streets and sidewalks as they develop UT (Nilsson, 2020). Furthermore, certain urban characteristics may affect a city’s image: access to tourism information, signing, and maintaining green or public spaces for the better (Boivin & Tanguay, 2019), and noise, urban waste, and inefficient transport for the worse (Provenzano, 2015). As a rule, the environmental quality and accessibility of an urban space count the most in attracting visitors (Boivin & Tanguay, 2019).

***Stakeholders in urban development and management***

Stakeholders play a dispositive role in developing and managing UT. Given that their outlooks, positions, and behaviors meaningfully influence UT success and sustainability (Timur & Getz, 2008), their expectations, concerns, and interests should be understood and integrated into UT planning and decision-making. Recognizing the structure of stakeholders in a given area and understanding how they influence or are influenced by policymakers may be helpful to those who formulate strategies and may lead to intelligent medium- to long-term decisions (Freeman, 1984). In UT, a broad range of stakeholders—residents, local businesses, representatives of the tourism industry, government authorities, community groups, environmental organizations, and cultural-heritage watchdogs—are involved (Timur & Getz, 2009). It is helpful to classify them on the basis of areas of interest, influence, and level of involvement for an understanding of their specific perspectives on the tourism destination (Boom et al., 2021).

In respect of sustainable tourism, the main stakeholders in UT are residents due to their proximity to the tourism activity and, in turn, their primacy in bearing the burden of UT impacts (traffic congestion, overcrowding, crime, inflation, gentrification, etc.) (Phuc & Nguyen, 2023). Residents’ outlooks are shaped by their daily experiences, including direct encounters with tourists and the effects of tourism on their neighborhoods. Residents may smile on tourism due to its economic advantages and its potential for enriching leisure life; they may also frown on it on account of overcrowding and fear of loss of local identity (Biagi et al., 2020). Given the critical importance of co-opting stakeholders into decision-making when sustainable-development models at mass-tourism destinations are applied, residents’ outlooks must be understood when the social impacts of UT are managed and positive community involvement is created (Shani & Pizam, 2012).

A city’s business community, including hotels, restaurants, tourism operators, and retail establishments, also plays a crucial role in UT (Haro Aragú et al., 2021). Its outlooks are often influenced by economic considerations such as attracting more customer demand and generating more revenues. While favoring tourism and acknowledging its potential for growth and employment opportunities, businesses may have concerns about seasonality, competition, and the necessity of sustainable practices. Government authorities—municipal, regional, and national—are also important stakeholders due to their role in planning and regulating UT in the context of economic development, urban infrastructure, environmental sustainability, and social welfare. They may view tourism as a way to promote economic growth, improve the town’s brand, and attract investments, but they must respond to fears associated with infrastructure development, environmental impacts, and policy implementation (Petrova & Hristov, 2016).

UT stakeholders’ divergent interests often trigger conflicts and challenges in decision-making (Li et al., 2020), making effective collaboration and mediation crucial. Participatory approaches to stakeholder involvement in dedicated forums, workshops, and public consultations, *inter alia,* promote understanding of different points of view and, perhaps, assumption of joint responsibility for sustainable UT development (Lalicic & Önder, 2018). To understand stakeholders’ outlooks, one may use various tools such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, workshops, and social-media analysis (Dimotrovski et al., 2021) to gain important insights on their attitudes, expectations, and concerns, possibly guiding tourism policymakers and planners in developing strategies tailored to stakeholders’ interests and promotive of sustainable UT.

***The “all-inclusive” model in tourism***

This study examines the viability of UT in responding, *inter alia*, to the implications of the “all-inclusive” model that is common in resort cities such as Eilat—a business model that hosts all products and services in a tourism venue in return for payment upfront (Zopiatis et al., 2020). The model revolutionized hospitality services in tourism-based economies including “sun, sea, and sand” destinations (Ozturk et al., 2019), stirred keen interest among tourism stakeholders, and has been adopted with growing celerity and optimism in the past twenty years (Wall-Reinius et al., 2019). Britain’s largest travel association, for example, considers all-inclusive packages ideal for attracting budget-constrained sightseers at times of economic instability (Zopiatis et al., 2020). Studies emphasize the potential advantages of such tourism for travelers and consumers (Alegre & Sard, 2015) but the experiential dimensions of such vacations have eluded the research attention they deserve. Few studies look into the economic impact of the all-inclusive paradigm on hospitality operators and the local community alike (Arbelo-Pérez et al., 2019) and concern is growing in recent years about the dire impacts of all-inclusive packages for the sustainability of the tourism destination (Oviedo-García et al., 2019).

In Israel, all-inclusive hospitality was found preferred above all by young people, the traditional/religious, those with high-school education, and persons of relatively low income. Tourists who use this model tended not to venture out of their hotels and are less exposed to the city’s leisure and amusement offerings (Degani & Degani, 2012, quoted in Fattal, 2015). By inference, the commonality of the all-inclusive model in Eilat’s hotels is thwarting the town’s tourism development and confining many tourists to the main hotel district. This substantiates the need to rethink the development of tourism in Eilat and to lure additional market segments by diversifying the tourism product.

**The research venue—Eilat**

Eilat is Israel’s southernmost city. Situated on the western shore of the Gulf of Eilat, it is around 350 km from the center of the country and is the state’s most peripheral municipal authority. It is bordered triangularly by its own lines; Taba, Egypt; and Aqaba, Jordan. The first step toward making Eilat an international tourism city was taken in June 1975, when the initial charter flight delivered the first of 250,000 tourists, most from Europe, to the town that year. In the 1980s and 1990s, Eilat enjoyed rapid tourism development with government encouragement; today, its economy is based chiefly on tourism and most employment emanates directly or indirectly from it (Kaveh-Zweik, 2005). [לא נמצא ברשימת המקורות]

The advent of strong inbound tourism in the last decades of the twentieth century gave Eilat an international patina, generating much foreign-currency revenue and smoothing hotel occupancy across the year (ibid.). In the past decade, however, its share has tumbled and the town’s tourism development has halted, manifesting in no addition of hotel rooms and slowing of tourism-infrastructure development and creation of new attractions. The net tally of active hotels in Eilat has been constant since 2002 and the number of hospitality rooms has fallen slightly (Fattal, 2015; Stylidis et al., 2015). Eilat’s neighbors to the south and east, Sinai and Aqaba, in contrast, have seen rapid tourism development after billions of dollars were invested in tourism infrastructure and international chains built hotels and resort villages (State Comptroller, 2021).

In 2020, Eilat had a population of some 52,000 and a relatively large share of people aged 20–29. Most inhabitants are wage-earners whose average wage is 13% lower than in the rest of the country (State Comptroller, 2021). Eilat’s physical size, location, and economy challenge development in several ways. Its distance from central Israel raises its cost of living and business operating expenses considerably. Its geographical isolation keeps residents from working out of town and precludes hiring from other urban centers (Fattal, 2015). Consequently, the local economy rests on only a few industries and about one-third of the population works in tourism (CBS, 2015). Employment diversity shortfall is a major barrier to the intake of new population (Fattal, 2015). The large proportion of nonresidents / infiltrators / labor migrants in Eilat—about 3,000 in number—poses social, political, and economic challenges. Most work in hotels and a cutback in their numbers in recent years has created a labor shortage in that industry (ibid.), possibly toppling some hotels into functional failure or even closure (Association of Hotels). [אין הפנייה]

The city’s population size and unusual climatic conditions challenge economic health by repressing competition and requiring high expenditure to hire education personnel, high electricity expenditure due the need for air-conditioning most of the year, sizable municipal participation in firefighting expenditure due to extreme weather, bloated water consumption for landscaping, extra roadbuilding expenses due to severe wear and tear, and rapid population turnover (Agmon, 2010). Acute labor shortages exist in many crucial occupations including the civil service, teaching, and healthcare (Stylidis et al., 2015). Competition with Aqaba presents yet another to Eilat because it sits at a strategic intersection that offers extensive access to world markets due to its location, diverse transport infrastructure, and international trade accords to which Israel is signed with the United States, the European Union, and the Arab League countries (Fattal, 2015).

**Qualitative research: representatives of the business-tourism sector and the Municipality**

The qualitative part of the study comprises semi-structured in-depth interviews with two main stakeholder groups in Eilat’s tourism industry: business tourism (tourism operators, restaurateurs, hoteliers) and the Municipality—makers and shapers of Eilat tourism policy. They were chosen because they are closely familiar with the town’s tapestry and have acted within it for years. Overall, sixteen interviews took place (see list in Table 2), in which the stakeholders were asked to express their opinions on the possibility of developing UT and establishing a regenerative local economy in Eilat. They were also asked about the state of local tourism, integrating residents into tourism development, the city’s branding, local lore, and state of public transport—a highly meaningful variable in the context of UT development due to its ability to let tourists access remote parts of the city and enable the many tourists who reach Eilat by air to move about town during their stay.

Table 2. Municipal and business interviewees

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Name**  | **Position**  |
|  | **Municipal authority** |
| **Yossi Chen** | CEO, Tourism Corporation |
| **Meir Yitzhak Halevi** | Former Mayor of Eilat and Deputy Minister of Education |
| **Merlyn Rosenfeld** | Manager of Economic and Business Entrepreneurship Development Division, Municipality of Eilat |
| **Eli Lankry** | Mayor of Eilat |
|  | **Transportation** |
| **Koby Nahmani** | Manager of Egged bus company, Eilat branch |
|  | Restaurants |
| **Adi Carmel** | Proprietor—Fortuna Restaurant |
| **Yuval Ziv** | Proprietor—Broytman Restaurant |
| **Dror Haroush** | Proprietor—Pedro Restaurant |
|  | **Attractions** |
| **Amir Elkayam** | Local artist and museum owner |
| **Eran Lass** | Local entrepreneur, proprietor of wine establishment and first wine hotel, under construction in industrial area |
| **Yael Lerner** | Municipal tour and sightseeing guide |
|  | Hospitality |
| **Guy Meller** | Leading CPA in Eilat, partner in BDO and local Airbnb entrepreneur |
| **Shani Rosenwasser** | Vacation apartment entrepreneur, Ye’elim Quarter |
| **Avi Karel** | Restaurateur and Bar-On hotel developer |
|  | **Tourist district** |
| **Dr. Ronen Shai** | Former hotelier, CEO of Voice of Red Sea Radio and advisor to companies |
| **Lior Paikin** | Proprietor—Barbis Restaurant |

The data gathered in the qualitative research were aggregated into four main themes (categories) that were deemed of critical importance for UT development in Eilat: (1) cooperation among local tourism stakeholders; (2) community participation in local UT development; (3) development of suitable infrastructure for consolidation of UT in Eilat; and (4) protecting the townspeople’s fabric of life.

***Cooperation among stakeholders***

Those interviewed expressed support of developing UT in Eilat but explained that it would entail cooperation among stakeholders in the local tourism and leisure industries via dialogue and understanding of the city’s singular needs and the resources necessary for flourishing UT. In this context, the tour guide Yael Lerner remarked: “I’d set up an orderly entity that would ordain cooperation among everyone in town: restaurants, diving clubs, and so on…. I’m a strong believer in connections.” The restaurateur Avi Karel elaborated, explaining that developing UT should be part of a demarche “based on the magic triumvirate of the Municipality, which defines planning and invests in development; entrepreneurs—not only local—who should be encouraged to invest in the town, and funders: banks and other institutions that believe in local entrepreneurship.” This illustrates the importance of combining governmental authorities with private elements. Similarly, the former mayor, Meir Yitzhak Halevi, believes there should be “a commingling of uses…. Residents, businesses, and tourists should dwell together and everything to facilitate and promote the process should be done.”

The interviewees also expressed concern about the current lack of cooperation. Paikin noted, “There’s no matrix that works together; everyone looks out for themselves and their interests.” The owner of the Museum of Art, Amir Elkayam, agreed, claiming that those in charge of music were not acting to facilitate cooperation: “The Municipality isn’t cooperating today…. The culinary scene in this neighborhood has to be integrated and a continuum of all stakeholders can be created here; you should have small cafés and street restaurants where artists can present their works. The whole thing would be integrated.” Elkayam alluded to the importance of creating a shared space for diverse purviews that would reflect the town’s living, pulsing tapestry.

Interestingly, the interviewees believe that UT, once developed, would not impair traditional tourism in the main tourist district but would fructify and enrich it. In this context, the entrepreneur Guy Meller noted: “Different segments of tourism complement each other and here you’d have cross-fertilization. It’s not a threat and it shouldn’t be a consideration at all.” Paikin also believes the two types of tourism can coexist: “If Eilat becomes like Barcelona—a city with internal content—and market segments that aren’t here come, I’m sure we’ll all gain from it. They’ll nourish each other….” He reflects the view of UT as a potential engine of growth for Eilat and its inhabitants, in contrast to the existing tourism industry.

***Community participation in developing UT***

The qualitative findings show how important it is to co-opt residents into UT development in Eilat in utilitarian terms, by mobilizing residents for the success of UT projects, and ethically, by improving the state of the local population and involving residents in making decisions about where they live—critical principles for sustainable tourism. Merlyn Rosenfeld, director of the Municipal Economic Division, explained: “Even today, when we travel around the world we look for the local, the authentic, for contact with the local population. That’s where we should go and we’ve already begun.” Meller agreed: “[The need] definitely exists; people want to rub shoulders with the locals and find authenticity.…” The incumbent Mayor, Eli Lancry, said: “It also makes an important sociological statement. I would plug the resident into tourism in our city…. In the cultural revolution that I am spearheading, we are leading people into the city and I believe in it with all my heart.”

The restaurateur Yuval Ziv considered it important to involve residents in decision-making on UT development because “If [residents] aren’t involved, they won’t be satisfied and it’ll be hard to penetrate the neighborhoods and flood them with tourists.” The entrepreneur Eran Lass agreed: “A local economy has to be based on the townspeople in some way…. It can be leverage tourism.” For Paikin, tourism pertains to all the townspeople and not only to tourism operators and businesspeople: “Did you call me a tourism operator? I think we’re all tourism operators. Our very living in this tourism city makes us all tourism operators and not just businesspeople. Tourism is everyone’s business!” Similarly, the restaurateur Dror Haroush believes in associating tourism with the neighborhoods: “For example, I’d remove the Second International Jazz Festival … from the tourist district and scatter it around the neighborhoods—at restaurants, pubs, and cafés. It’s big money; instead of putting it in one place, it should be distributed to lots of small places around town. It’s the only way to connect tourists with the neighborhoods. A hundred small performances are better for a city like ours than one large one.” His remarks attest to the preference of “little and local” over mass productions in central locations.

Co-opting residents into UT development is described as essential for the creation of a local tourism experience. The CEO of the municipal tourism company, Yossi Chen, explained: “Residents are the best marketers of the city; they can tell its story best. Therefore, it’s important to involve them in developing UT.” Lerner concurred: “The Eilatis are a story unto themselves and not just service providers for the hotels. Tourists come away from local outings in Eilat amazed. They hadn’t expected to see these things…. I tell them the story and then they hear it from the residents, too. They feel the people who are behind the place.” Elkayam agrees: “The story of the population is here in the neighborhood: sixty artists who want to tell their stories.” Namely, the lore of Eilat should be told by the residents themselves.

Some interviewees noted the importance of integrating tourism and leisure contents within the neighborhoods. Rosenfeld commented: “[I’m] focusing on a target that heads exactly toward economic development in conjunction with residents and bringing contents into the neighborhoods.” Lerner, like Rosenfeld, considers co-opting residents very important as an act of empowerment: “The whole thing in UT is about involving the local population and, in turn, developing the local economy. I want to empower people.” Rosenfeld’s and Lerner’s remarks demonstrate the importance of co-optation not only for tourism growth but also as a step toward resident empowerment.

Although aware of the need to involve residents in developing and managing UT, some interviewees viewed residents with disapproval if not condescension. Paikin claimed: “There are no professionals here who’ll teach the city and the residents what a tourist is and what tourism is. It begins at a very early stage: education from an early age.” Halevi expressed a similar view: “When you live in a host city, you also need the ability to accept tools and learn how to host. One of my main roles as mayor and as holder of the education portfolio was to make it a policy from preschool on to educate in being hospitable and pleasant, patient, tolerant, and understanding toward the tourist.” Chen complained about the foregoing attitude toward residents: “There are municipal officials who think residents exist to serve tourism, to the point that some tell hotel employees not to drive to work so as not to take up guests’ parking spaces.” The entrepreneur Shani Rosenwasser concurred: “Today there’s a sense of estrangement: yes, tourists make us a living but they take over our natural resources, parking places, infrastructures, and so on.” If so, residents depend on tourism but tourism impairs the texture of their daily lives.

***Development of UT Infrastructure***

The interviewees sketched a tableau of deficient and faulty infrastructure that ill befits an important tourism city and precludes adequate development of UT. Karel described it: “No hotel has been built in Eilat in years. If we understand why this is happening, we may understand why UT is an excellent way of solving it.” Elkayam added: “Everything’s sleepy, as though we’re stuck fifty years back.” The interviewees stressed the importance of developing attractions in the city, as Meller explained: “We’re really at a stage that requires development of new additional attractions, such as a waterpark … and neighborhood development.” Their remarks, however, do not yield a focused definition of neighborhood development and its importance for tourism development.

In several interviewees’ eyes, the Municipality has not been effective enough in laying down a municipal tourism-development policy. Ziv elaborated: “The Municipality has to dictate policy and sad to say it isn’t doing so. I have no doubt that if the municipal authorities would lay down a policy in favor of developing UT, then the matter would wake up and fly ahead…. It’s got tremendous potential.” Others, contrarily, mentioned important measures that had been taken to enhance local infrastructures. Chen noted: “Today we’re working on amending the town building plan to rezone the old industrial area for industrial-residential-culinary.” Rosenfeld also projected optimism: “The town building plan for the industrial area was amended to allow mixed uses. Housing, commercial and entertainment spaces, and attractions are being developed, along with a trend toward urban renewal as part of a comprehensive urban outlook that’s in favor of placing strategic tourism venues within the city.”

Rosenfeld touched upon a cardinal issue in the context of UT: mixed-use development. This concept treats the city as a single space, alive and throbbing, in which tourism and leisure activities are twined in all areas of life. Elkayam also believes that the development of tourism-supportive infrastructures would give the neighborhoods a jolt of momentum: “They’d have to invest in development here, of course. You can let residents use their yards to make a living, for example. If they bring in an architect and make a minimum investment, you can let them open a little café, serve local street food, and earn some money.” These and other remarks are indicative of the importance the interviewees attributed to linking all sections of town into a territorial continuum in which tourism is part of the fabric of municipal life.

As for developing appropriate infrastructures, the need to create possibilities of low-cost overnight accommodations and amusements was expressed. “People have had enough of size and prestige,” Haroush alleged. “The tourism product we’re talking about is cheaper and that’s what is needed today.” Lerner said: “Good tourism is ‘soul tourism.’ What we need now are inexpensive places for domestic and inbound tourists to spend the night.” These descriptions give evidence of a perception that regards UT as an interconnected—inexpensive, intimate, and accessible—product, the opposite of conventional tourism in Eilat, which is based on massive, expensive, and impersonal hotels.

***Protecting residents’ quality of life***

The interviewees plainly support UT development but also worry that it will harm the delicate fabric of life of the city and its inhabitants. Meller explained: “They have to regulate municipal overnight accommodations so it doesn’t become a nuisance. It’s not enough to make the neighborhoods and the residents accessible to tourists. They have to bring in content and apply regulation so that tourists will get what they want without hurting the local residents’ quality of life…. I would not want a touristy scene of alcohol and everything that comes with it in the residential neighborhoods.” Thus Meller expressed concern about safeguarding the sound fabric of neighborhood life and protecting the local population from an inappropriate tourism scene. Halevi also considered it important to maintain proportionality and strike the right balances: “It’s critical to protect the intimate space of residents who suddenly lose their privacy, so we have to find the right balance and dosages.” The residents’ privacy and the intimacy of the town’s neighborhoods are at stake.

Several interviewees favored stricter regulation of commercial accommodations such as Airbnb. The hotelier Ronen Shai was one of them : “I don’t believe in Airbnb as it operates in Eilat today. It’s not organized and orderly but rather scattered around the neighborhoods unsupervised and managed like a partisan operation.” Halevi agreed: “We also need meaningful regulation where Airbnb is concerned.” These remarks point to the need to impose regulation mechanisms on tourist accommodations in residential areas that are offered on sharing platforms. The question is how such regulation would be implemented and whether the motives for implementing it are tainted by stakeholders’ other interests.

Rosenwasser also emphasized the need to protect residents’ quality of life with appropriate balances: “Tourism shouldn’t be allowed in all the neighborhoods. There are probably quieter neighborhoods where residents want less noise, less bustle, and a more placid quality of life, even though there, too, you can hold temporary pop-up events without creating a permanent tourist scene.” Rosenwasser counselled a flexible policy that would take account of the neighborhoods’ character and texture of life and tailor activities accordingly.

Overall, the interview findings reflect the vast importance of developing UT in the realization that Eilat is stagnating if not declining. The interviewees acknowledged the critical need to involve residents in this enterprise, even though some still saw residents as people who should “serve” tourists, an attitude that may cloud the development of sustainable UT. Also expressed was the importance of cooperation in creating a physical and conceptual continuum of all sections of town and among all stakeholders from the Municipality to businesses and culminating with the residents themselves. Furthermore, a balance needs to be struck between developing tourism and sustaining residents’ quality of life. The qualitative findings also point to the critical need to develop appropriate infrastructure in transport, overnight accommodations, and other matters.

**Quantitative research: tourists and local residents**

Examined in the quantitative part of the study were the attitudes of two additional groups of stakeholders: Israeli tourists who visit Eilat and local residents. Overall, 309 participants—147 local residents and 162 domestic tourists—took separate digital questionnaires. The residents’ questionnaire was distributed by means of a link to their cellular devices and on social networks; the tourists’ questionnaire was distributed in places of accommodation and/or tourist attractions.

***Tourists’ survey***

The tourists’ survey was conducted by means of a dedicated judgment sample composed of 162 domestic tourists over age eighteen who were vacationing in Eilat. (Their profile appears in Table 2.) The goal was to attain a maximally heterogeneous sample of tourists without using a probabilistic sampling strategy. The questions were distributed by means of an intercept survey among respondents in Eilat hotels and at tourism sites. Their attitudes and preferences were tested by means of a structured closed-item (Likert-scale or multiple-choice) questionnaire that elucidated the perceived attractiveness of developing UT in Eilat in tourists’ eyes and asked to what extent tourists would wish to stay longer in Eilat if the town had UT-based attractions. The questionnaire had four parts: (1) socio-demographic background questions, (2) the extent of preference of types of UT in accordance with different types of attractions such as local culture, culinary scene, art, guided sightseeing in neighborhoods and the community, and local historical heritage lore; (3) perceptions of possible harm to existing vacation tourism in Eilat; and (4) the current extent of tourists’ exposure to the city’s UT offerings .

Table 3. Profile of research participants—tourists

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Indicator | Respondents (N) | Respondents (pct.) |
| Sex |  |  |
| Male | 62 | 42.47 |
| Female | 83 | 56.85 |
| Other | 1 | 0.68 |
| Age group |  |  |
| 18–22 | 9 | 6.16 |
| 23–26 | 47 | 32.19 |
| 27–39 | 22 | 15.06 |
| 40–45 | 28 | 19.17 |
| 46–51 | 19 | 13.01 |
| 51–73 | 21 | 14.38 |
| +75 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Family status |  |  |
| Couplehood | 104 | 71.23 |
| Other | 42 | 28.77 |
| No. of children |  |  |
| 0 | 80 | 54.79 |
| 1 | 12 | 8.57 |
| 2 | 19 | 13.01 |
| 3 | 19 | 13.01 |
| +4 | 16 | 10.95 |
| Area of residence in Israel |  |  |
| North | 13 | 8.9 |
| Sharon | 24 | 16.44 |
| Center | 43 | 29.45 |
| Coastal plain | 7 | 4.79 |
| Jerusalem and vicinity | 36 | 24.66 |
| South | 23 | 15.75 |
| Type of residential locality |  |  |
| Large urban (>200,000) | 80 | 55.17 |
| Small/medium urban (<200,000) | 28 | 19.31 |
| Rural (kibbutz, moshav, community settlement) | 37 | 25.52 |
| Employment |  |  |
| Wage-earner | 60 | 41.1 |
| Self-employed | 23 | 15.75 |
| Student | 55 | 37.67 |
| Soldier | 2 | 1.37 |
| Unemployed | 1 | 2.05 |
| Retired | 3 | 0.68 |
| Other | 2 | 1.37 |
| Education |  |  |
| Up to 12Y  | 51 | 34.93 |
| Up to 15Y | 52 | 35.62 |
| Up to 18Y  | 38 | 26.03 |
| >18Y  | 5 | 3.42 |
| Monthly income |  |  |
| Far above average | 27 | 19.57 |
| Slightly above average | 40 | 28.99 |
| Around average | 27 | 19.57 |
| Slightly below average | 21 | 15.22 |
| Far below average | 23 | 16.67 |

Relating to habits in visiting Eilat, fifty-seven respondents (35%) reported that they customarily visit the town at least once a year and 106 (65%) do so mainly for rest and recreation. Most respondents (126, 78%) customarily spend up to three nights of their vacation in Eilat. Many (115, 70%) prefer to stay in the seaside central tourist district and 60% prefer to vacation in large hotels. As for perceptions of Eilat as a tourism destination, most survey participants are dissatisfied with the state of Eilat’s tourism industry (Table 4). Statements that describe Eilat as a boring city that offers nothing to do outside the central tourism district averaged rather high (3.60 and 3.48, respectively) whereas responses reflecting satisfaction with the current state of UT there received relatively low mean scores. In addition, the participants expressed rather strong satisfaction with the indicators of personal security and shopping during their most recent vacation in Eilat but were less pleased with the culinary scene, activities and attractions, and nightlife (Table 5). The indicators of authentic tourism environment and events and culture received the lowest average satisfaction scores.

Table 4. Perceptions of Eilat as a tourism city—tourists’ survey

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Avg. | S.D. |
| Except for the familiar seaside tourist district and the hotels, there is nothing to do in Eilat. | 3.60 | 1.14 |
| Eilat is boring; its tourism has not developed in years. | 3.48 | 1.14 |
| It is the existing separation of the tourist district from the residential area that makes Eilat attractive from a tourism perspective. | 3.04 | 1.157 |
| It is important to connect the tourist district with the residential area and encourage tourists to circulate all over town. | 3.02 | 1.20 |
| There has been some UT development in Eilat recently, including the local culinary scene, urban sightseeing, wine culture, performances, museums, galleries, and so on. | 2.83 | 1.05 |
| Eilat is amazing just as it is; I wouldn’t change a thing. | 2.23 | 0.88 |

\* Participants were asked to rate their agreement / disagreement with each statement from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree).

Table 5. Satisfaction with surroundings of accommodations during most recent vacation in Eilat

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Indicator | Avg. | S.D. |
| Personal security | 4.13 | 0.84 |
| Shopping | 4.01 | 0.96 |
| Culinary scene  | 3.55 | 1.10 |
| Activities and attractions | 3.51 | 1.03 |
| Nightlife | 3.48 | 1.05 |
| Events and culture | 3.24 | 1.06 |
| Authentic tourism environment | 3.22 | 1.11 |

\* Participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with various indicators in their accommodation environment during their most recent vacation in Eilat from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied).

In the main part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked if they might change their tourism-consumption habits if UT were to be developed in Eilat. In such a situation, the most sought-after activity would be trying out the local culinary scene followed by attending cultural events, shopping at street venues, and visiting galleries and museums (Table 6). Although urban sightseeing and accommodations received relatively low averages, about one-third of the sample expressed strong interest in them.

Table 6. UT preferences in Eilat

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **UT activities** | **Avg.\*** | **Respondents expressing strong interest in activity \*\*** |
| **Culinary scene** | 3.97 | 111 (74%) |
| **Attending cultural events** | 3.45 | 85 (57%) |
| **Shopping at street venues** | 3.36 | 75 (50%) |
| **Visiting galleries and museums** | 3.15 | 68 (45%) |
| **Urban sightseeing** | 2.89 | 49 (33%) |
| **Urban accommodations in residential neighborhoods** | 2.83 | 49 (33%) |

\* Participants were asked to rank the extent of their interest in urban-tourism activities in Eilat from 1 (very highly disinterested) to 5 (very highly interested).

\*\* Respondents who answered “highly” or “very highly.”

More generally, sixty-two respondents (41.3%) defined themselves as satisfied or very satisfied with tourism offerings in Eilat and sixty-one (40.6%) pronounced themselves dissatisfied. Twenty-seven (18.0%) said they do not leave the central tourist and hotel district at all when on vacation, making the question irrelevant to them. The participants were then asked to state the extent to which they would adjust the duration of their vacation and the frequency of their visits to Eilat if UT, including festivals, markets, theatre, art, and local culinary scene, were to be developed there. Most respondents (103, 69%) said they would prolong their vacation as the result of the development of UT and 76% (113) said they would change the frequency of their visits to Eilat pursuant to the development of UT.

***Residents’ survey***

The residents’ survey was conducted by means of heterogeneous purposive sampling of 147 people who represented the inhabitants of all main neighborhoods (northern, western, and southern) in Eilat. The participants were aged eighteen and over and had lived in Eilat for at least two years. The purpose was to attain the most heterogeneous sample of residents possible without using a probabilistic sampling strategy. Residents’ attitudes were examined by means of a structured closed-item (Likert-scale or multiple-choice) questionnaire. Items included local inhabitants’ conceptualization of the possible effects of developing UT in Eilat on their quality of life, with emphasis on three aspects: (1) economic effects: livelihood opportunities, changes in real-estate values, etc., (2) social effects: changes in community cohesion, preservation of social relations, etc., and (3) environmental effects: changes in the nature and appearance of the neighborhood and its surroundings.

Table 7 profiles the Eilat residents who participated in the study. Sixty-five respondents were male (45.14%) and seventy-eight female (54.17%). They ranged from eighteen to seventy-five years of age, with 84% in the 30–60 bracket. As in the tourists’ survey, no participants above age seventy-five were recorded, presumably because people in this cohort have limited access to the digital media that carried the link to the questionnaire. As for family status, 124 respondents had couplehood relations (86.11%) and twenty did not (13.89%). Most participants were couples with children and fifty-seven said they had no children (39.58%). Ninety participants (62.50%) said they were employed as wage-earners and 43 (30%) were self-employed. Most members of the sample, eighty-five in all (60%), have academic degrees whereas 60 (40%) have only secondary schooling. As for their (gross) monthly income relative to the national average, seventy-four (51.38%) said they surpassed the average, forty-three (29.86%) approximated the average, and the rest earned less. Accordingly, the research sample was composed mainly of a socio-demographic mix of middle-aged, well educated people who have above-average income.

Table 7. Participant’ profile—local residents

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Indicator | Respondents (N) | Respondents (pct.) |
| Sex |
| Male | 65 | 45.14 |
| Female | 78 | 54.17 |
| Other | 1 | 0.69 |
| Age group |
| 18–22 | 1 | 0.69 |
| 23–26 | 6 | 4.16 |
| 27–39 | 24 | 16.67 |
| 40–45 | 42 | 29.16 |
| 46–51 | 51 | 35.41 |
| 51–73 | 16 | 11.11 |
| +75 | 4 | 2.77 |
| Family status |
| Couplehood | 124 | 86.11 |
| Other | 20 | 13.89 |
| No. of children |
| 0 | 57 | 39.58 |
| 1 | 24 | 16.67 |
| 2 | 22 | 15.28 |
| 3 | 28 | 19.44 |
| +4 | 13 | 9.02 |
| Employment |
| Wage-earner | 90 | 62.5 |
| Self-employed | 43 | 29.86 |
| Other | 11 | 7.64 |
| Education |
| Up to 12Y  | 60 | 41.67 |
| Up to 15Y | 29 | 20.14 |
| Up to 18Y  | 43 | 29.86 |
| >18Y | 12 | 8.33 |
| Monthly income |
| Far above average | 17 | 11.81 |
| Slightly above average | 57 | 39.58 |
| Around average | 43 | 29.86 |
| Slightly below average | 18 | 12.50 |
| Far below average | 9 | 6.25 |
| Duration of residency in Eilat |
| Up to 5Y | 9 | 6.25 |
| Up to 10Y | 6 | 4.2 |
| Up to 20Y | 17 | 11.80 |
| >20Y  | 112 | 77.8 |
| Neighborhood of residence in Eilat |
| Longstanding neighborhoods (A–E) | 15 | 10.41 |
| In-between neighborhoods (West 6, 7, Ganim) | 46 | 31.94 |
| New neighborhoods (Simhon) | 65 | 45.14 |
| Other | 18 | 12.5 |
| Type of residency |
| Rented apartment | 32 | 22.22 |
| Owned apartment  | 40 | 27.78 |
| Rented private home | 7 | 4.86 |
| Owned private home | 60 | 41.67 |
| Other  | 5 | 3.47 |
| Industry of employment  |
| Business and trade | 31 | 21.52 |
| Hotels and tourism | 21 | 14.58 |
| Teaching | 15 | 10.41 |
| General government | 37 | 25.70 |
| Services | 11 | 7.64 |
| Student | 2 | 1.38 |
| Currently not working  | 5 | 3.47 |
| Other | 22 | 15.27 |

As Table 8 shows, the participants considered tourism very important for Eilat and believed that action to overhaul and diversify the tourism industry should be taken. Concurrently, they wished to see additional sources of livelihood develop in Eilat in order to alleviate the town’s acute dependency on tourism.

Table 8. Views on Eilat as a tourism city—residents’ survey

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Avg.\* | S.D. |
| Tourism in Eilat needs diversification | 4.52 | 0.74 |
| Without tourism, Eilat has no right to exist | 4.25 | 0.91 |
| Tourism in Eilat is slumping because it has been stagnating in recent years while its competitors have been developing | 3.99 | 1.169 |
| Eilat’s dependency on tourism should be alleviated right now | 3.73 | 1.09 |

\* Participants were asked to rate their agreement / disagreement with each statement from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The responses indicate agreement that UT development has much potential for Eilat. Initially, the respondents were asked to note whether they think the tourist district should be separated from the town’s residential areas. Only a small minority (twelve participants, 8.2%) advocated total separation whereas fifty-one (34.7%), while valuing separation, thought various interfaces could exist in the form of spot events. Conversely, most (84, 57%) expressed passionate support for the diffusion of tourism into residential neighborhoods; among them, thirty respondents (20.4%) supported holding multiple events that would attract tourists to the neighborhoods whereas fifty-four respondents (36.7%) went even farther, thinking it obligatory to mingle the areas and encourage tourist traffic in all parts of Eilat.

The townspeople who took part in the study agreed sweepingly about the favorable effect of UT on various aspects of life in Eilat, including local economic development, community involvement in tourism, neighborhood beautification, job creation, urban infrastructure, and the city’s image in tourists’ eyes (Table 9). They evinced a more balanced outlook on the effects of UT on crime and personal security and on the central tourist district, although here, too, a large majority foresaw no effect or even a positive one.

Table 9. [תיקנתי את המיספור] General effects of UT

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Highly negative effect | Negative effect | No effect | Positive effect | Highly positive effect |
| Development of local economy | 10.7% | 10.7% | 32.0% | 7249.0% | 6946.9% |
| Community involvement in tourism | 10.7% | 21.4% | 128.2% | 8457.1% | 4732.0% |
| Neighborhood beautification | 32.0% | 42.7% | 2416.4% | 5839.7% | 5739.0% |
| Job creation | 00.0% | 21.4% | 106.8% | 6544.5% | 6947.3% |
| Urban infrastructures | 21.4% | 2013.7% | 1913.0% | 4832.9% | 5739.0% |
| Crime and personal security | 74.8% | 3826.0% | 3221.9% | 3020.5% | 3926.7% |
| Central tourist district | 32.1% | 138.9% | 2819.2% | 6846.6% | 3423.3% |
| Image of town in tourists’ eyes | 00.0% | 74.8% | 128.2% | 5940.4% | 6846.6% |

Furthermore, 85% of respondents believed that management and enforcement may impose reasonable or strong control on the possible adverse effects of UT development. Some 61% thought UT should be developed citywide commensurate with supply and demand, as against 30% who advocated its development only in designated neighborhoods such as longstanding ones and/or the industrial zone. Only 4% thought UT in Eilat should not be developed at all and that tourism should remain in the tourist district as it is defined today.

Table 10 presents residents’ outlooks on the political, economic, social, and image contributions of UT. The most conspicuous contribution, they believed, is in improving the economic situation of the city and its inhabitants, improving its image, and rebranding Eilat as a tourism city. In other respects, too, such as improving residents’ quality of life and strengthening the city’s social structure, the participants expected UT to have a salutary effect although less so in these contexts than in those previously mentioned. In addition to the overall positive contribution that the residents found in UT, a large share expressed the wish to take part in it actively if it were to develop. Most (76.7%) expressed the wish to be part of UT in employment, participating in planning and development, or other ways.

Table 10. Contribution of UT development to Eilat

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Avg.\* | S.D. |
| Political contribution |  |  |
| Rapid development of UT is the outcome of decision-makers’ care for townspeople | 3.81 | 1.03 |
| Urban tourism has an immediate effect on municipal politics because it directly affects residents’ quality of life | 3.79 | 0.94 |
| Integrating UT into Eilat will help to empower residents | 3.48 | 1.03 |
| Economic contribution |  |  |
| Increasing tourism supply in Eilat, in the form of UT, will make an economic contribution to the city and its inhabitants | 4.39 | 0.60 |
| Income originating in UT “stays in town” and does not spill out as occurs in non-UT | 3.99 | 0.85 |
| The townspeople need not make a living from tourism to profit from it | 3.69 | 1.02 |
| Social contribution |  |  |
| Development of UT in disadvantaged neighborhoods will change the composition of their population and strengthen their social structure | 3.73 | 0.99 |
| Urban tourism will mitigate estrangement between townspeople and tourists  | 3.60 | 1.02 |
| Introducing UT in Eilat will help narrow social disparities among resident groups | 3.50 | 0.998 |
| Image contribution |  |  |
| Developing UT will considerably improve Eilat’s image in tourists’ eyes | 4.14 | 0.77 |
| Developing UT will help to rebrand the city. | 4.12 | 0.76 |
| Generally speaking, tourism helps to enhance residents’ satisfaction with the city itself | 3.73 | 0.91 |

\* Participants were asked to rate their agreement / disagreement with each statement from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

**Discussion and conclusions**

This study investigated the possibility of developing UT in Eilat and found promising potential for the advancement of a sustainable local economy there (Research Question 1). Four crucial conditions for successful UT development and management were identified: (1) active cooperation among multiple stakeholders; (2) active local-community participation in UT decision-making and utilities; (3) requisite upgrading of infrastructure, such as developing low-cost accommodations and affordable attractions in a way that would support UT; (4) maintaining local residents’ texture of life with minimum disruption of sound management of the lifestyle of Eilat.

In regard to Research Question 2, four key players (business sector, municipal authority, tourists, residents) expressed broad support for UT development in Eilat. They agreed that such development might make Eilat more attractive as a tourism city and might even extend visitors’ stay there. Tourists showed special interest in the kind of UT that would emphasize the local culinary scene, cultural events, sidewalk shopping, galleries, and museums. Residents viewed developing such tourism favorably but emphasized the importance of measured and judicious planning and management in order to keep the impacts of UT under control.

***Theoretical implications***

The study revealed strong demand for UT in a typical coastal-tourism city, meaning that UT is not limited to large metropolitan areas and may be offered in smaller cities or traditional coastal “sea, sand, and sun” tourist towns. This finding challenges the conventional wisdom about UT as suited mainly to globally important cities (Hallmann et al., 2015). The findings square with those of past studies that report tourists seeking diverse urban experiences and not iconic attractions (Sedmak & Mihalic, 2008). Respondents’ expression of willingness to prolong their stay suggests demand for diverse urban aspects from cultural events up to effervescent nightlife. Given that UT is typified by embedding attractions, facilities, and activities in the fabric of city life (Ashworth & Page, 2011), the finding that UT development would prompt visitors to extend their stay in Eilat indicates that UT may make life in Eilat more attractive, induce urban renewal, and help improve residents’ quality of life all in one.

The findings accord with current approaches to tourism development that strongly valorize the tourist’s (temporary) assimilation into the local community and creation of meaningful relations with residents (Pappalepore et al., 2010). When tourists blend into a city’s fabric of life, as the study proposes, they cease to be mere passive observers and become active participants in local life, culture, and events. This interaction may augment their understanding and appreciation of Eilat and its inhabitants and give both sides opportunities to learn from and share experiences with each other. By emphasizing connection, community involvement, and development of sustainable tourism, the study reflects an advanced approach toward UT development and management, the kind in which both the city and its visitors enjoy deeper and more meaningful experiences (Nilsson, 2020). In such tourism, for example, visitors would rather learn to cook at the hands of local chefs than simply eat in the town’s restaurants.

The preferences expressed by potential tourists to Eilat revealed a deeper and broader range of tourism motives than the conventional wisdom, which has it that visitors to this city come mainly to vacation in the sea and on the beach. Israelis’ tourism motives in regard to Eilat appear to have evolved and branched over the years, comporting with the classic “travel career ladder” theory (Pearce, 2013). Tourists who express an interest in local foods, cultural events, and unique shopping experiences in Eilat reflect their wish to enjoy experiences more authentic and enriching than simple hedonism. This trend, anchored in local and not in external initiatives that are uncoupled from the community’s interests, has real potential of abetting the formation of a regenerative local economy and sustainable tourism (Hall, 2019) in a way that would benefit the local population. Indeed, the residents’ survey showed that community support of UT and willingness to partake of it depend strongly on the ability to develop UT in the spirit of sustainability. Co-opting the Eilat community into UT planning, developing, and management appears to be critical for successful UT, as the sustainable-tourism approach indicates (McKercher, 2003).

The study demonstrates the importance of diverse stakeholders’ active participation in a way that corroborates the stakeholder theory, which holds that tourism development should take account of the interests of all relevant groups (Freeman, 1984). Furthermore, the findings emphasize the importance of cooperation among different stakeholders in UT despite rivalries and conflicts of interest that they may have Urban tourism is multi-faceted and multi-sectorial, ranging from bus services to food to accommodations. A fragmented approach that fails to take account of all stakeholders’ interests and ignores the importance of synchronizing all activities may impair the visitors’ experience in the town (Lalicic & Önder, 2018). When stakeholders collaborate for a common goal, they can ensure that all aspects of UT will merge to provide a holistic and attractive tourism experience. Cooperation among stakeholders also helps to optimize severely resource limitations that restrain tourism development. By collaborating, stakeholders can share resources and maximize the effectiveness of their investments (Li et al., 2020). Participation of all stakeholders in decision-making on UT development and management, especially of the local community (Shani & Pizam, 2012), ensures that the decisions made will bear everyone’s interests in mind, maintain the local community’s quality of life, and amplify local support of neighbourhood-based tourism projects.

The emphasis in this study on the importance of protecting residents’ quality of life is consistent with the notion that sustainable tourism should prioritize residents’ well-being (Tefler & Sharpley, 2015) and be planned and managed in consideration of their subjective concepts (Grilli et al., 2021). The assumption that residents’ quality of life is critical in developing UT also reflects the social-exchange theory, which sees residents’ support of tourism as contingent on their viewing the importance of tourism as greater than its drawbacks (Nunkoo, 2016). It also bears mentioning that uncontrolled UT development would expedite urban development and raise property values, possibly creating gentrification, displacing local residents and changing the city’s cultural fabric. The implications of this study touch upon the need to be wary of these undesirable repercussions (Um & Yoon, 2021). Accordingly, responsible UT development would preserve the city’s socio-cultural carrying capacity, which focuses on a level of tourism activity at which a place can cope without triggering over-tourism and subjecting townspeople to socio-cultural distress (Milano et al., 2019).

***Administrative implications***

The findings above suggest the existence of a set of practical and administrative implications concerning UT development in Eilat. The study stresses the importance of cooperation among stakeholders. To achieve it, a structured framework is needed where representatives of local authorities, businesses, hotels, restaurants, and the community can meet frequently and discuss and make consensual decisions. Similarly, active participation of the local community in decision-making deserves special emphasis. The municipal authority should consider applying community-participation techniques for decision-making on UT development and management, such as resident surveys and plebiscites, ensuring residents’ representation in relevant municipal bodies, holding joint planning encounters with representatives of the local community, and establishing advisory teams with residents’ participation. For specific tasks or projects, temporary task forces comprised of residents of different neighborhoods may be established. For example, a dedicated task force may focus on developing a new cultural festival in town without compromising various community interests. Given the stakeholders’ diverse interests, confrontations—including among the residents themselves—are inevitable. The establishment of an orderly mechanism of conflict resolution with aforethought may be helpful in making successful decisions and implementing them on the front lines.

To ensure the cooperation of the population of Eilat and its trust in UT, the Municipality should campaign to enhance awareness of the importance of this form of tourism for Eilat’s future as a tourism city. Educating the local community about the advantages and challenges of UT—by advertising in local media, offering lectures in community centers, and holding activities in schools—may generate community understanding and involvement. Once a strategic decision to develop sustainable UT is made, education and training of residents for tourism and hospitality work will be crucially needed. Courses for entrepreneurs and managers on topics such as urban-tourism management, resident-involvement techniques, and principles and implementation of sustainable tourism may be helpful in raising the standard of service and promoting a UT that is consistent with the principles of the regenerative tourism economy. In the same context, the municipal authority may promote a policy of sustainable development including management and mitigation of urban waste, environmentally friendly initiatives, and measures to preserve the local sociocultural fabric of life.

This study stresses the need to upgrade urban infrastructures in Eilat in support of UT. This practical insight may be translated into actions such as allocating budgets for urban-renewal projects, creating pedestrian-friendly districts (dedicated areas that ensure pedestrians’ safety and comfort instead of prioritizing motorized transport), developing and improving public transport, and encouraging the establishment of varied accommodation possibilities in Eilat, such as boutique hotels, bed-and-breakfasts, and hostels, for different tourism segments. Infrastructure development should be accompanied by municipal measures to minimize disruption to residents’ lives, possibly including strict enforcement of noise-control regulations and limiting visitation in peak season and at special events so as not to overwhelm the neighborhoods’ carrying capacity. To keep the effects of UT controllable, as the residents emphasized, a mechanism for continual monitoring of these effects should be established, including regular feedback encounters with residents, visitors’ satisfaction surveys in order to understand their evolving needs, and ecological assessments to monitor environmental quality in urban spaces.

The survey among potential tourists demonstrated the need to diversify Eilat’s tourism offerings. The interest expressed by respondents in augmenting the supply of attractions, such as local culinary opportunities, cultural events, sidewalk shopping, galleries, and museums, brings to mind a series of potential UT development measures such as organizing cultural and arts festivals, promoting local artisans and businesses, conducting guided tours of the city focusing on local history, architecture, and culture, and investing in urban renewal including opening museums and galleries. Special festivals and events may become a platform on which local artists, musicians, dancers, and others receiving an opportunity to demonstrate their talent and help to enhance the city’s cultural attractiveness. Special festivals and events may give local businesses opportunities from food stands up to bus services, creating additional income streams for the local community. If Eilat’s tourism product is diversified on the basis of the areas of interest exposed in the study, the town may evolve from a classical resort city into a multifaceted tourism destination that offers varied experiences that will appeal to a broad spectrum of tourists. This revolution in tourists’ perception of Eilat may also advance sustainable tourism by smoothing incoming tourism across the year and among different attractions and parts of town.

One of the main obstacles in developing UT in Eilat is the variously manifested all-inclusive model in the town’s hotels. Even though this model is attractive to tourists who seek comfort at an affordable price, it severely limits their exposure to the rest of the city and crimps their interaction with local businesses and people. If a destination such as Eilat aspires to expand the utilities of tourism beyond the central hotel district, it needs strategies that will lure tourists out of the all-inclusive bubble. One possibility is to create collaborations with all-inclusive hotels, such as working with them on integrated vacation packages that improve their offerings by including urban sightseeing and events or discounts on shopping at local businesses. Another possibility is to hold “local-culture soirees” at the hotels themselves, encouraging guests to get a taste of local cultural life on the hotel grounds. A third possibility is to launch a campaign to enhance tourists’ awareness of the importance of supporting the local economy and the way this practice contributes to the local community and to sustainable tourism. Such a campaign might include personal stories of local artists, chefs, and businesspeople, creating a personal connection and encouraging tourists to discover more on their own.

***Limitations of the study and proposals for further research***

This study tested the potential of UT development in Eilat by examining various stakeholders’ interests and points of view. As in any study, it has several limitations that should be borne in mind. First, it examines the outlooks of four key stakeholder groups: tourism-related businesses, municipal authority, tourists, and residents. Although these groups are very important, other groups that can also offer important insights, such as local businesses that are not touristic, representatives of environmental-quality NGOs, and residents of localities near Eilat may exist. Second, the outlooks that the study presents reflect a snapshot at a given time (before meaningful development of UT in Eilat). Attitudes and stances toward urban development may change over time, especially insofar as UT develops. Third, the residents who took part in the study emphasized the importance of controlled and measured management of the impacts of UT. What, however, does this mean in practice? The vagueness of the expression “controlled and measured management” leaves room for broad interpretation that may lead to potential future conflicts. Finally, even though the study identifies the need to improve and upgrade urban infrastructures, it overlooks the logistical, environmental, and economic implications of such upgrades. Understanding these elements is critical for the design of a detailed program of UT development in Eilat.

As for recommendations for continuing research, a comprehensive study that would quantify the potential economic impacts of UT development in Eilat—both auspicious (generating revenue, job creation) and adverse (potential inflation or increase in housing prices) is called for. Such a study should focus on aspects such as urban-waste management, energy consumption, and the ecological footprints of accommodation and leisure facilities that would be established as this tourism evolves. In addition, insofar as UT develops, longitudinal studies should be carried out to track changes over time, deliver important insights into the evolving dynamic, and propose measures to correct failures. Continuing studies may also deliver insights into different market segments’ points of view, expanding the scope of tourists’ feedback to diverse groups beyond potential domestic tourists, such as inbound tourists or those in specific areas of interest such as adventure tourism or ecotourism.

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