

Integrated Regional Tourism Development Planning in Saudi Arabia: A Framework for Sustainable Infrastructure and Destination Growth under Vision 2030

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Abstract- Saudi Arabia is moving away from having tourism based on a number of individual flagship destinations towards establishing a development system that is linked across territories, in which issues relating to mobility, utilities, heritage, ecosystems, communities and investment have to be coordinated on a regional basis. This study presents an integrated framework for regional tourism development planning aimed at achieving sustainable infrastructure and destination growth in line with Vision 2030. In order to do this, a structured integrative review was carried out using peer-reviewed literature published between 2020 and 2025, with recent research conducted in Saudi Arabia serving as a foundation and the review being extended via citation chaining in the areas of sustainable tourism, regional planning, destination governance, infrastructure, conservation and resilience. The synthesis highlights five recurring planning tensions: the balance between concentrating benefits and spreading them territorially; the conflict between rapidly expanding capacity and ecological constraints; the tension between delivering iconic projects and ensuring network connectivity; the dilemma between destination competitiveness and the legitimacy of the residents; and the issue between setting growth targets and maintaining adaptive performance control. It is shown that infrastructure is most effective when planned as part of a regional portfolio rather than as separate assets for individual destinations, with transport, water, energy, digital systems and the public realm being arranged in accordance with carrying capacity and local economic connections. The paper puts forward a framework that combines a regional spatial diagnosis, destination archotyping, infrastructure readiness, ecological and social thresholds, investment phasing, governance coordination and indicator-based adaptation. It maintains that Saudi tourism planning should move from a focus on individual projects to connected destination systems which distribute demand, protect environmental and cultural assets, enhance the local capture of value and allow the level of development to be adjusted as new evidence becomes available. The framework thus provides a practical basis for regional authorities, destination managers and infrastructure

agencies who wish to turn the ambitions set out in Vision 2030 into sustainable and locally appropriate tourism growth.

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become one of the main tools that Saudi Arabia is using to achieve economic diversification, to transform its areas, and to introduce new kinds of domestic and international mobility. Since the launch of the broader reform programme, tourism policy has shifted from focusing on pilgrimage and business travel to include heritage, nature, leisure, events, coastal tourism and large-scale destination developments. Research carried out between 2020 and 2025 indicates that this expansion is not merely about raising the number of visitors; it is at the same time an infrastructure challenge, a regional development issue, a conservation concern and a test of governance. Studies on Saudi tourism highlight the sector's potential to contribute to non-oil growth, employment and investment, but they also point out pressures arising from environmental capacity, institutional coordination, the readiness of the workforce, and unequal levels of community involvement (Ali and Salameh, 2021; Waheed et al., 2020; Iqbal and Aftab, 2025).

The fact that the scale of change means that regional planning is especially important is clear. AIUla, The Red Sea, Diriyah, Riyadh, Makkah, Madinah and the newly developing nature-based destinations are part of very different ecological, cultural and settlement systems and their effectiveness relies on links that go beyond the individual projects: such links include airports and intercity transport routes, water and energy networks, waste management systems, digital connectivity, housing for the workforce, supply chains, heritage landscapes and protected areas.

Studies comparing AIUla and The Red Sea show how destination design can combine objectives relating to protected land, lower-carbon mobility and biodiversity, while research into recreation cities highlights the importance of coordinating tourism, the environment, urban planning and transportation rather than treating entertainment development as a separate type of land use (Filippi and Mazzetto, 2024; Alyousef et al., 2022). The result is that part of a destination's success is generated outside the destination itself.

The review therefore regards tourism development as a regional system; rather than looking at individual hotels, attractions or giant projects, it focuses on the network via which destinations share visitors, labour, capital, services and environmental pressures. This approach is necessary since optimising one project at a time can lead to regional inefficiency. A destination might be commercially successful yet still end up with congested gateways, excessive infrastructure duplication, pressure on ecosystems or poor local value capture. On the other hand, a smaller destination can become viable if it is included in a regional itinerary, makes use of a shared utility platform or benefits from coordinated marketing and transport arrangements. The main issue then is how Saudi Arabia can plan its tourism infrastructure and destination development so as to enhance regional connectivity without damaging the ecological and cultural resources upon which the tourism offer relies.

The paper makes three contributions. It begins by combining new evidence from Saudi Arabia with the broader body of research on sustainable destination indicators, regenerative tourism and regional mobility. Secondly, it reinterprets infrastructure as a staged enabling system and states that its capacity, timing and location should be determined by the level of maturity of the destination and by the carrying conditions. Thirdly, it suggests a planning framework which connects spatial strategy, infrastructure investment, community benefit, environmental thresholds and adaptive governance; in this way it provides a link between the high-level ambitions for development and the practical decisions needed to establish coherent regional tourism systems.

II. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS AND RESEARCH GAP

The current body of literature offers solid yet scattered grounds for integrated planning. Saudi research tends to look at each aspect separately—such as economic diversification, resident attitudes, protected areas, heritage conservation, service quality, geospatial monitoring or organisational resilience. While each of these areas is useful, none by itself can show how a region should coordinate a number of destinations that have different growth rates and infrastructure requirements. For instance, people in Riyadh assess tourism in terms of the benefits and costs they perceive, which shows that the legitimacy of development relies more on local experiences than just on figures derived from visitor data (Alsaloum et al., 2024). Heritage studies indicate that conservation and tourism should be managed as closely interdependent processes, especially in cases where local identity and the character of a place are important for competitiveness (Mazzetto, 2022; Bay et al., 2022). Studies of the Red Sea area prove that conservation planning can have a tangible effect on the development envelope before the level of construction is determined (Chalastani et al., 2020; Alatawi, 2022).

Another area of research focuses on the measurement of sustainability. Reviews of indicators cautions that monitoring of destinations tends to place too much emphasis on environmental and economic outputs while paying insufficient attention to governance and the processes involving stakeholders (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023; Marinello et al., 2023). Further research aimed at policy development demonstrates that indicators have an effect on decisions only when they are incorporated into institutions that are able to act on the information they generate (Gasparini and Mariotti, 2023). This point is important for the Saudi regions since dashboards alone are not adequate unless the thresholds lead to changes in phasing, operating rules, transport provision or land allocation.

The problem here is the lack of an integrated approach. Although there are existing studies dealing with destination design, sustainability, infrastructure and social acceptance, an overall regional mechanism which links these elements is still poorly developed. The missing planning approach is one that establishes

where growth should take place, what infrastructure should come before it, what limits should be imposed on it, how the benefits should be distributed and when the level of development should be adjusted. In order to fill this gap it is necessary to have a framework that is spatial, step-by-step and adaptable rather than one that is simply aspirational.

III. AIM, OBJECTIVES AND REVIEW QUESTIONS

The goal is to create an evidence-based framework for integrated regional tourism development planning in Saudi Arabia, a framework that links infrastructure investment with sustainable growth of tourist destinations in accordance with Vision 2030. The review has four objectives: to identify the regional planning factors that are most closely associated with tourism growth and with both infrastructure and the quality of the destination; to look at the way in which ecological, cultural and social constraints can be included in the phasing of development; to establish the governance and monitoring needs for multi-destination regions; and to turn the evidence into a practical planning structure. Three questions direct the synthesis: How should tourism destinations be linked at the regional level? Which infrastructure and capacity decisions should be made before, during and after demand growth? And what indicators and governance mechanisms are capable of ensuring that regional development remains within acceptable environmental, social and economic limits?

IV. REVIEW METHODOLOGY

A structured integrative review was chosen since the subject area involves planning, tourism management, infrastructure, conservation, economics and governance, which means that a review focused on just one discipline would be unsuitable. The evidence considered consisted only of material published between 2020 and 2025. The Saudi studies that had been uploaded were used as anchor papers since they directly cover destination development, recreation planning, Vision 2030, sustainability and tourism-led growth. References within these anchor papers were then used to find more recent peer-reviewed research that could clarify the mechanisms not adequately addressed in the Saudi literature, especially those

relating to sustainable destination indicators, regenerative planning, mobility, resilience and the use of evidence in policy.

The search concepts were divided into five categories: Saudi Arabia and Vision 2030; regional tourism and destination development; transport, utilities and quality infrastructure; heritage, biodiversity and carrying capacity; and governance, indicators and resilience. The search strategy followed the structure of the queries used in Scopus, Web of Science and ScienceDirect; the evidence was obtained from the provided papers, through citation chaining, from publisher websites and from bibliographic records. In order to be eligible, a source had to be published in English between 2020 and 2025, have relevance to tourism and development or be based on an enabling regional mechanism, and must have a traceable scholarly record. Sources were excluded if they were purely promotional, if they lacked methodological transparency, or if they dealt with tourism without having any transferable planning implications. Before being included in the final reference list, the DOI metadata was verified against the publisher's records or the bibliographic records.

The review did not make up the number of database hits or the totals obtained during the screening process. Rather, reproducibility was achieved by means of clearly stated eligibility criteria, a defined publication time frame, verification of DOIs, and traceability thematically from the evidence to the various components of the framework. This approach is in keeping with that of an integrative review whose aim is conceptual synthesis rather than the estimation of effect sizes. The evidence was first coded deductively according to the categories of infrastructure, environment, society, economy and governance and was then refined inductively into recurrent planning mechanisms. Contradictions were kept rather than being averaged out. For instance, studies focused on growth recommend greater investment in tourism, while those concerned with conservation and regeneration stress the need for limits, restoration and distributional outcomes. The synthesis therefore regards development intensity as a variable that can be controlled rather than as an assumed objective.

The evaluation stressed contextual relevance, the transparency of the methods, the clarity of the concepts, and the value of the findings for regional decision-making. When dealing with local institutions, residents' attitudes, environmental conditions or specific projects in Saudi Arabia, empirical studies based on the local situation were given more interpretative importance; international conceptual studies were employed to reinforce the general planning rationale. The final synthesis was structured around five interdependent propositions: connectivity, infrastructure readiness, ecological and cultural thresholds, local value capture, and adaptive governance. These propositions constitute the analytical foundation of the proposed regional framework.

V. EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS

5.1 Regional connectivity and selective accessibility

Regional connectivity must come first since tourism demand operates through networks rather than across administrative borders. A destination is accessed via gateways, corridors and interchange systems and also relies on labour catchment areas, logistics, utilities and digital services which can be of a regional nature. Evidence from Saudi Arabia indicates that tourism growth and wider infrastructure modernisation are closely linked, and that good infrastructure has an impact on the reliability of the standards, services and systems which support national diversification (Kumar and Albashrawi, 2022; Ali and Salameh, 2021). Regional planning should therefore make a distinction between assets that are specific to a destination and those that are shared and provide enabling functions. Airports, rail connections, important roads, transmission networks, water systems and regional waste facilities should be evaluated in terms of their capacity to serve groups of destinations, not just a single project; this helps to avoid duplication and enables investment to be made in sequence according to the combined demand.

Yet connectivity should not be taken to mean maximum accessibility. Fusté-Forné and Michael (2023) indicate that regional mobility planning can lead to more sustainable travel patterns when traffic flows are intentionally organised. In areas where the

environment is particularly sensitive, uncontrolled access may damage the resource which draws in visitors. The example of the Red Sea illustrates how an ecological assessment can influence the development footprint, navigation rules and conservation areas even before tourism becomes intense (Chalastani et al., 2020). The aim of such planning is therefore selective connectivity—providing high-capacity access in places where the settlements and infrastructure can handle the demand, granting controlled access in areas where ecosystems or heritage are fragile, and offering networked itineraries that spread visitors across a range of complementary locations rather than placing pressure on a small number of famous sites.

5.2 Infrastructure readiness and resilience

The second point is about infrastructure readiness. It is common for tourism plans to assume that accommodation and attractions will generate demand while the infrastructure develops afterwards. However, the Saudi situation indicates that the reverse approach is usually more reliable: utilities, mobility, the public realm, emergency services and digital systems must achieve certain readiness levels before visitor numbers are allowed to increase. Alyousef et al. (2022) consider planning standards, road networks, safety, environmental regulation and cross-sector coordination to be the necessary conditions for the successful development of large-scale recreational facilities. Mazzetto (2022) does the same, linking tourism expansion to airports, public transport, walkability and urban improvement. It follows that a regional framework should include phase gates; for example, the unlocking of new hotel keys, the increase in event capacity or the opening of new attractions should be tied to evidence that water, energy, wastewater, mobility and public services are able to handle the extra load without causing a deterioration in the level of services available to residents.

This method alters the way in which infrastructure is evaluated. While traditional appraisal tends to focus on usage and financial return, tourism areas need to have resilience buffers since demand is seasonal, driven by events, and vulnerable to shocks. As Wided (2022) points out, organisational resilience and dynamic capabilities are important for maintaining

tourism following a disruption. Infrastructure portfolios should therefore be examined in relation to peak demand, climate stress, emergency access, supply interruptions and recovery situations. Redundancy does not always mean inefficiency when failure could leave visitors stranded, cause damage to ecosystems or disrupt local communities. The right question to ask is whether the spare capacity protects the regional tourism system at a justifiable lifecycle cost.

5.3 Ecological and cultural thresholds

The third proposition involves ecological and cultural thresholds. The growth of Saudi destinations is heavily based on assets that are both rare and specific to a given location—such as desert landscapes, coral systems, oasis environments, archaeological resources, the historic urban structure and religious heritage. It follows that conservation cannot simply be treated as a mitigation measure introduced after a decision on growth has been made. As Filippi and Mazzetto (2024) point out, both AIUla and The Red Sea have incorporated the establishment of protected areas, lower-impact mobility, and restoration goals into their destination planning. Alatawi (2022) points to conservation challenges that continue to exist beyond the boundaries of protected areas, and Chalastani et al. (2020) show the benefits of using spatially explicit conservation planning for a major coastal project. Taken together, these studies back up a threshold-first approach in which no-build zones, restoration aims, water budgets, limits on habitat disturbance and rules regarding visitor management are set in place before any capacity is assigned.

The same argument can be applied to cultural carrying conditions. Although heritage has the power to create distinction, over-commercialisation, overcrowding or unsensitive redevelopment may undermine authenticity and residents' attachment. Bay et al. (2022) show the need to manage heritage development in terms of its physical, social and economic aspects, and Mazzetto (2022) connects preservation directly to the quality of tourism. Regional plans should therefore include not only heritage sites but also cultural landscapes, the traditional relationships between people and their settlements, visual corridors, craft economies and community uses. For these elements

buffer zones, design regulations, interpretation standards or restrictions on incompatible commercial formats may be necessary. Sustainable growth is attained when tourism provides the funds needed for stewardship without displacing the cultural practices which give the place its meaning.

5.4 Local value capture and territorial linkages

The fourth proposition is that of local value capture and it decides whether or not tourism results in genuine regional development. Although economic studies link tourism, renewable energy and non-oil activities to diversification, it is the overall growth figures that do not show who ends up capturing the value thus produced (Waheed et al., 2020; Faisal et al., 2024). Research carried out among residents in Riyadh indicates that when people feel the benefits of tourism their support for it increases, but when they perceive costs they are less in favour of it (Alsaloum et al., 2024). Likewise, research into women's participation shows that inclusion has an impact on the social foundations of sustainable tourism (Elshaer et al., 2021). Regional tourism policy should therefore take into account not only visitor spending and the volume of investment but also the amount spent by residents on local firms, the quality of resident employment, skills development, small-business involvement, housing pressure and access to public facilities.

There are spatial consequences involved. When tourism employment is established a long way from existing settlements, regional plans will have to choose between offering workforce mobility, building new housing or setting up service centres. If spending by visitors stays within the enclosed compound of the destination, then connections with the neighbouring towns are likely to remain weak. A regional development approach should intentionally establish various kinds of interfaces—such as local food and craft supply chains, excursion routes, transport stops, training centres, public waterfronts, event partnerships and enterprise zones. The aim is not to make every destination follow the same socioeconomic model, but rather to make sure that each one has a reasonable way of distributing its benefits beyond just the increase in land value and the direct project wages.

5.5 Adaptive governance and regenerative value

The fifth proposition concerns governance and adaptive control; in the case of tourism areas, various bodies are involved, including ministries, regional authorities, municipalities, destination companies, transport agencies, conservation organisations, utility providers, investors and local communities. Fragmentation may result in misaligned timelines—such as accommodation opening before the roads, the roads before habitat assessments, or major events taking place before public transport capacity has been developed. According to Iqbal and Aftab (2025), strategic leadership, stakeholder integration and technology are important for achieving sustainable tourism within the Vision 2030 framework. Furthermore, geospatial monitoring provides a foundation for monitoring progress in terms of development and spatial indicators throughout Saudi Arabia (Qwaider et al., 2023). The institutional issue is therefore not merely the absence of data, but rather how decision-making rights should be arranged concerning that data.

Indicator research offers a valuable warning: although sustainable tourism indicators are widely available, governance factors and stakeholder participation are often inadequately addressed, and the act of measuring usually has only a limited direct effect on policy (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023; Gasparini and Mariotti, 2023). Marinello et al. (2023) make a similar point, namely that indicator systems are most effective when they are tailored to the specific context of a destination rather than being simply adopted as generic checklists. Saudi regional planning should therefore make use of a concise control set linked to specific actions. For instance, if habitat conditions deteriorate the capacity for tourism could be suspended; if resident satisfaction falls then measures such as changes to mobility, noise levels or use of public spaces could be introduced; if water intensity exceeds a certain threshold then retrofits would have to be carried out before any expansion; and if peak periods become excessively

congested then marketing and event scheduling should be shifted towards the shoulder periods.

The idea behind regenerative tourism goes even further than simply reducing damage. Bellato and others (2023) advocate for a kind of development which enhances a place's ability to flourish, and Becken and Kaur (2022) link tourism value to various kinds of well-being and to outcomes for future generations. When this concept is applied to regions in Saudi Arabia, regeneration means that tourism should gradually improve the ecological situation, the care of heritage, the public areas, local skills, and the capacity of local enterprises. This is a greater demand than mere compliance since the standard to be met is net positive contribution rather than just causing no minimum harm. It also promotes long-term competitiveness, since destinations that restore their landscapes, strengthen their identity and improve the amenities for residents create kinds of value that cannot easily be achieved by construction alone.

5.6 Demand quality and destination differentiation

The growth strategy should finally take into consideration demand quality, the service experience and destination differentiation. Research based on events in Saudi Arabia has shown a link between service quality, visitor satisfaction and sustainable results (Alsiehemy, 2023), and studies on rural tourism in Al-Ahsa have found a connection between pro-environmental values and visitor well-being (AlAli et al., 2024). These findings indicate that capacity expansion should not be seen as the only way of achieving economic value. By encouraging longer stays, greater spending by locals, repeated visits, dispersal to other locations and lower-impact mobility it is possible to boost regional returns without having proportionate increases in peak volumes. A fully developed regional strategy should therefore actively manage the composition, timing and movement of demand just as it manages the supply of rooms and attractions.

Table 1. Evidence domains and regional planning implications

Evidence domain	Recurring signal in the literature	Regional planning response	Illustrative control metric
Connectivity	Visitor flows depend on gateways, corridors and shared systems.	Cluster complementary destinations; combine high-capacity gateways with selective access in sensitive areas.	Inter-destination travel time; public/low-carbon access share
Infrastructure readiness	Tourism capacity can outpace utilities, mobility and public services.	Use phase gates tied to water, energy, wastewater, emergency and digital readiness.	Peak-load headroom; service reliability; recovery time
Ecological & cultural thresholds	Natural and heritage assets can be degraded by unmanaged intensity.	Define no-build zones, water budgets, conservation objectives, buffers and visitor controls before capacity allocation.	Habitat/heritage condition; water per visitor-night
Local value capture	Resident support depends on perceived benefits and manageable costs.	Link destinations to local procurement, skills, SMEs, public amenities and workforce mobility.	Local procurement; skilled local employment; resident sentiment
Adaptive governance	Indicators influence outcomes only when tied to decisions.	Assign owners, thresholds, review cycles and pre-agreed responses across agencies.	Threshold breaches resolved per cycle; decision lead time
Resilience	Seasonality and shocks create uneven and uncertain loads.	Design redundancy, emergency routing and modular capacity into regional systems.	Spare capacity; recovery time; peak-to-average load ratio

VI. INTEGRATED REGIONAL PLANNING FRAMEWORK

The framework suggested treats regional tourism planning as a seven-stage cycle instead of adopting a single master plan. In the first stage, the regional evidence base is set up, this involving information on ecosystems, heritage, settlements, gateways, utilities, mobility, hazard exposure, land ownership and socioeconomic conditions. In the second stage, the

destinations are classified according to their archetype and level of maturity, taking into account the fact that a coastal conservation destination needs different infrastructure and control rules from a metropolitan events hub or a pilgrimage gateway. In the third stage, non-negotiable thresholds are defined, such as those relating to protected areas, water budgets, heritage constraints, minimum service levels and acceptable levels of impact on residents. It is these thresholds that define the safe planning envelope.

Integrated regional planning cycle

Growth is released only when spatial, infrastructure and threshold conditions remain acceptable.

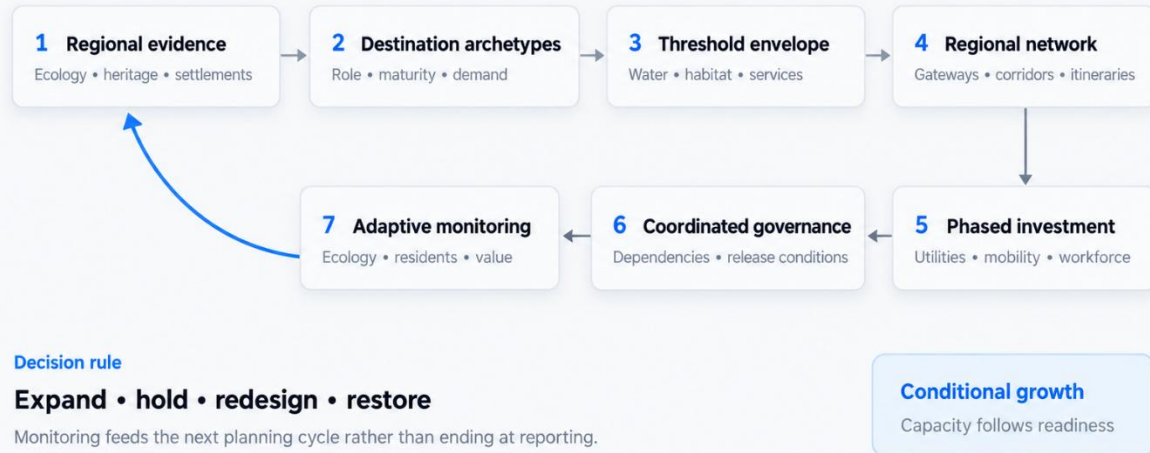


Figure 1. Integrated regional tourism development planning cycle.

In stage four the regional network is designed by grouping destinations into functional clusters which are linked together through strategic gateways, public transport, road corridors, digital systems and visitor itineraries. Where scale economies are viable, shared infrastructure is identified, but where environmental sensitivity demands it, access restrictions are kept in place. In stage five a phased investment portfolio is prepared, each phase connecting tourism capacity with

the readiness of the enabling infrastructure, the workforce and public services. When assessing capital decisions they are considered not just on the basis of the return on each project but also with regard to regional connectivity, resilience, local procurement and the environmental performance over the product's lifecycle.

Table 2. Destination archetypes and differentiated regional planning priorities

Destination archetype	Primary resource/value	Infrastructure priority	Growth-control emphasis	Priority monitoring
Heritage archaeological	Cultural assets, historic landscapes and identity	Walkability, interpretation, public realm, gateway management	Protect authenticity, visual integrity and resident uses	Heritage condition; crowd density; local enterprise spend
Coastal ecological	Marine and terrestrial biodiversity	Low-impact access, water-energy systems, waste and habitat restoration	Ecological envelopes, controlled mobility and visitor intensity	Habitat condition; water intensity; protected-area pressure

Destination archetype	Primary resource/value	Infrastructure priority	Growth-control emphasis	Priority monitoring
Religious gateway	Pilgrimage flows, sacred places and service experience	Mass transit, crowd management, health, accommodation and digital guidance	Peak-demand management, service reliability and dispersal	Throughput; travel time; safety; visitor service satisfaction
Metropolitan events / entertainment	Events, recreation and urban experience	Public transport, roads, public realm, emergency services	Congestion, noise, seasonality and resident impacts	Transit share; peak congestion; resident sentiment
Rural / oasis / nature	Landscape, agriculture, biodiversity and local culture	Last-mile access, SME interfaces, digital services and small-scale utilities	Dispersed capacity, conservation and local value capture	Local spend; ecological footprint; length of stay

In stage six, the destination system is managed through coordinated governance. A regional tourism infrastructure board or a similar interagency arrangement would be responsible for maintaining a single phasing plan and for resolving the dependencies that exist between tourism, transport, utilities, conservation and municipal services. This organisation would not take the place of the sector regulators; instead it would make the sequencing across sectors visible and ensure that the agreed release conditions are enforced. In stage seven the loop is closed by means of adaptive monitoring. A limited dashboard would monitor ecological condition, utility intensity, mobility performance, resident sentiment, local value capture, visitor experience and financial performance. If any thresholds are breached, predetermined responses would be triggered rather than discretionary reporting.

The framework views growth as being conditional. Growth rights, the amount of building space, the number of events and the capacity to attract visitors can increase where the system shows it is ready and can be halted if there are signs of unacceptable stress. This method is in line with the indicator literature's focus on context and governance, since it also takes into account the Saudi experience of large destinations that are developing rapidly. At the same time, it establishes a practical link between strategic aims and operational control in that Vision 2030 provides the direction, regional plans convert that direction into spatial priorities, infrastructure programmes build up

the necessary capacity, and monitoring decides whether the next stage of growth should go ahead.

VII. DISCUSSION

The report indicates that the challenge facing Saudi Arabia in the field of tourism is now moving from creating destinations to integrating various elements of the system. When undergoing early-stage changes, it is advantageous to have highly visible projects since they attract capital, build up market awareness and speed up institutional learning. Yet, as the range of destinations grows, the main issue becomes coordination. For instance, several successful destinations may all compete for the same amount of gateway capacity, water supplies, skilled labour, or peak-season demand. Hidden costs can arise because of the speed of development if there is no regional integration—costs resulting from duplicated infrastructure, fragmented ecosystems, and uneven benefits at the local level.

In order to deal with this, the proposed framework separates ambition from the conditions for release. It does not oppose growth; instead, it ties growth to evidence. This distinction brings together two lines of research which are usually shown as being in conflict. On the one hand, the economic and Vision 2030 studies stress diversification, employment and investment, while on the other hand the regenerative and conservation studies focus on ecological limits, stewardship and community well-being (Iqbal and

Aftab, 2025; Bellato et al., 2023). The regional phase-gate model enables both objectives to coexist since infrastructure and visitor numbers can be increased in areas where the thresholds are respected and can be redesigned where they are not.

Regional differences are just as significant. A one-size-fits-all national sustainability model would fail to take into account the differences between coral coastlines, oasis landscapes, heritage cities, religious destinations and metropolitan entertainment areas. The framework therefore focuses on standardising the planning process not the end result. Each region must examine carrying conditions, infrastructure readiness, local value capture and adaptive indicators, but the specific thresholds and the sequence of investments should be determined on a local basis. This is in line with the evidence that the effectiveness of indicators depends on the governance context and the characteristics of the destination (Marinello et al., 2023; Gasparini and Mariotti, 2023).

Another consequence relates to time. Although tourism master plans tend to show what the final situation will look like, it is actually during the transitional period that the most important decisions are made. Problems such as temporary congestion, the need to accommodate labour, construction logistics, incomplete public transport systems and disturbance to the ecosystem can harm the destination's reputation before the ultimate plan has been realised. Phasing must therefore be regarded as a design discipline and each intermediate stage should function as a viable destination and a place that is pleasant to live in, with the infrastructure, the public spaces and the environmental management being appropriate to the capacity that is already in operation.

VIII. PLANNING AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

What this means for regional authorities is that they should develop portfolios of tourism infrastructure on a cluster basis. The various aspects of transport, utilities, digital systems, emergency services and the public realm should be matched up with a number of different destination plans in order to identify any common bottlenecks and opportunities for shared capacity. When carrying out investment assessments, regional spillover effects, resilience and ecosystem

costs should be taken into account rather than considering only the demand at the project level.

Destination developers should have their approvals tied to specific readiness conditions which can be measured. Capacity increases should be carried out in relation to water efficiency, mobility performance, habitat condition, workforce services and resident impact. This enhances predictability since the expectations are set in advance and it also provides incentives for developers who are able to reduce infrastructure intensity by means of design, demand management and circular resource systems.

When it comes to national policy, it would be possible to achieve comparability by means of a small number of common regional indicators, without the need to impose identical destination models. The key measures should be visitor nights per unit of water, the share of low-carbon access, the condition of protected or restored habitats, resident satisfaction, local procurement, skilled Saudi employment, peak congestion, and visitor dispersal. The focus must continue to be on decision-making: each indicator should have a responsible party, a threshold, a review period, and a defined management response.

8.1 Implementation sequencing, financing and regional value

The implementation should also be carried out in an institutional sequence since regional integration relies just as much on governance capacity as it does on capital spending. As tourism policy in the Middle East shows, sustainable-development goals weaken when community involvement and institutional coordination are regarded as secondary issues (Anouti et al., 2023). In the case of Saudi regions, a practical approach would be to start with spatial data and infrastructure baselines, then move on to agreed thresholds, followed by multi-agency investment programming and end with the release of capacity on the basis of performance. With regard to religious gateways, a similar demand-oriented perspective is needed: visitor profiles, seasonality and service expectations should be used to inform planning for itineraries, mobility and accommodation rather than be treated as activities that come after the main processes (Kayal, 2023; Hassan et al., 2022).

Financing must also make a distinction between assets that allow access to different regions and those whose benefits are mainly enjoyed in a single destination. Since economic evidence shows that tourism growth has an interaction with energy consumption and environmental performance, project evaluation should take into account the use of resources and carbon emissions rather than treating them as external costs (Waheed, 2023). In the case of islands, coastal areas and other delicate environments, investment assessment should clearly include environmental value and take into account carrying capacities (Nesticò and Maselli, 2020).

In the end, regional policy ought to vary the types of value that it aims to achieve. As regenerative tourism research suggests, resilient destinations need diverse local economies rather than relying on a narrow visitor-spending approach (Cave and Dredge, 2020). Likewise, the evidence from Saudi Arabia indicates that the paths taken in tourism development are linked to environmental results, thus supporting the need for integrated economic and ecological planning (Iswan et al., 2021). Adopting these priorities would transform the framework from one that is merely a planning idea into a discipline capable of practical implementation.



Figure 2. Adaptive growth-control matrix linking infrastructure readiness to environmental and social pressure.

IX. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The review is based on existing published evidence and not on primary regional data. Since Saudi tourism initiatives are changing quickly, the capacities stated, the assumptions about the timing of developments and the governance structures might be subject to alteration. The framework must therefore be tested by applying it in a comparative regional context using up-to-date transport, utility, ecological and visitor-flow data. Future research should look into threshold calibration, the economics of shared infrastructure, regional visitor-routing models, the distributional

effects on residents, and the connection between tourism phasing and water-energy systems. Particularly important will be longitudinal studies in order to find out whether the environmental and community commitments made during the planning stage continue to be effective when mature operating demand is present.

X. CONCLUSION

At this stage, Saudi Arabia's shift towards tourism has made regional integration just as significant as the creation of new tourist destinations. The evidence

examined between 2020 and 2025 indicates that sustainable growth of a destination goes beyond the quality of the individual attractions; it also relies on the way in which transport and utilities are arranged, on the protection and restoration of its ecological and cultural assets, on the acceptance of development by the local residents, on the distribution of economic benefits, and on the capacity of institutions to alter their course when signs of stress appear.

The framework suggested converts those requirements into a planning process centred on spatial diagnosis, destination archotyping, threshold definition, network design, phased investment, coordinated governance and adaptive monitoring. Its main idea is conditional growth, which means that capacity should only be expanded when the supporting systems are in place and the environmental and social conditions are still acceptable. Thus, a disciplined link is established between the long-term Vision 2030 objectives and the short-term infrastructure decisions.

The framework also alters the meaning of tourism infrastructure since roads, airports, water supplies, energy systems and digital systems are not just supportive facilities; rather they determine where visitors go, how the benefits are distributed, the amount of environmental pressure they create and whether the destinations retain their resilience. Arranging their planning on a regional basis can cut down on duplication, increase the reliability of services and establish stronger connections between major projects and the surrounding communities.

Saudi Arabia therefore has the strategic opportunity of creating networks of distinct destinations rather than having a number of separate islands of excellence. A regionally integrated approach is able to maintain the differences between heritage, coastal, religious, rural and metropolitan destinations while linking them together through common standards, selective mobility, co-ordinated investment and evidence-based controls. When growth is managed as an adaptive regional system, tourism can make a contribution both to an increase in the number of visitors and to non-oil revenue, as well as to the restoration of ecosystems, the strengthening of local economies, improved public facilities and more lasting destination identities. This combination is what forms the basis for sustainable

infrastructure and for destination growth under Vision 2030.

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