Article

Comparing AlUla and The Red Sea Saudi Arabia's Giga Projects on Tourism towards a Sustainable Change in Destination Development

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Abstract: This paper examines architecture for tourism, focusing on destination design. In the past forty years, tourism destinations and their impact have been affected and transformed by emerging topics such as the impact of social media and the necessity of sustainable indicators in the tourism industry. In the global panorama of ongoing tourism transformations, Saudi Arabia has recently established new governmental opening regulations that started in 2019 for visitors and tourist visa entry. The country is facing a rapidly transforming economy, and new destinations for tourism will impact the country's growth in the coming years as part of the Sustainable Destination Program in alignment with the ambitious targets of the Saudi National Vision 2030. The adopted methodology of the study compares selected parameters of two significant Saudi Arabian case studies, AlUla and The Red Sea Project (TRSP), for the ongoing sustainable tourism destination development of planned tourist giga projects. According to the findings, AlUla and TRSP demonstrated an intense commitment to sustainable tourism through their efforts concerning protected areas, environmentally friendly transport, and significant rewilding and reforestation. The research's conclusion emphasizes Saudi Arabia's commitment to innovative thinking, long-term growth, and sustainable tourism. The study's implication is primarily suited for destination design; it suggests potential applicability even in smaller-scale tourism development projects or additional comparisons in sustainability design approaches in diverse contexts, particularly in the MENA region.

Keywords: destination design; sustainable destination development; tourism impact; GCC sustainability; tourism economies; tourism sustainability; environmental impacts

1. Introduction

Research is part of the emerging field of architecture for tourism, also referred to as destination design [1]. Although designing for leisure and vacations has been practiced since the times of the earliest thermal destinations (around the 16th century), its study within architecture academies is beginning to establish itself in recent times. Today, the steady growth of tourism continues to have undeniably significant effects in various sectors, including the design of the natural and built environment. As observed in Savelli's work [2], the design of vacation places has special characteristics, such as the tendency to recreate an "elsewhere", an "other" place where a sense of "dépaysement" can be enjoyed. Destination design, therefore, appeals to elements that can facilitate the process of alienation and repositioning in the holiday dimension, making this field distinct from that of "ordinary" contemporary architecture.

This research aims to clearly articulate the research objectives related to the research questions, highlighting the need for the study given the existing research gap on the development of tourist destinations in Saudi Arabia. This gap is especially significant

since Saudi Arabia only recently welcomed international tourists and foreigners. Tourism is currently one of the pivotal sectors growing according to the Saudi National Vision 2030. Analyses were conducted by selecting and comparing two Saudi Arabian giga projects as case studies to investigate the implications of fast tourism sector growth toward a sustainable shift within the Saudi National Vision 2030, which strongly emphasizes designing tourist attractions in alignment with the nation's sustainable growth.

The case studies of AlUla and The Red Sea Project (TRSP) were chosen from the literature reviews as the best-known examples of tourism development through adopting sustainable strategies. The research methodology compares some selected parameters to understand how new tourism destinations adopt sustainable architectural design techniques to increase the overall tourism development in the nation. It provides an interesting overview of the differences between AlUla and TRSP. The results show that comparing the two projects reveals a common approach to design that has been strongly focused on environmental sustainability issues, adhering to the expected sustainable strategies promoted by the Saudi National Vision 2030. With Saudi Arabia recently opening its doors to tourists, this study's main contribution is to fill the gap in the nation's tourism destination development sector since tourism is now the nation's largest industry. The paper is structured in the following sections: Sections 1–7 and References.

2. Literature Review

Analyses of the literature explore the subject of tourism extensively, examining various aspects over the past forty years. Recently, ongoing debate has suggested an international shift of social variables that will affect the tourism industry worldwide [3–5], targeting sustainable approaches and limitations [6] in different tourism sectors [7–17]. The significant influence of social media and digital platforms plays a major role in shaping the researched destination's impacts. These are expected to reshape the approach to tourism in the short term. Special focuses are placed on the lived experience of tourism as associated with impacts on people, places, and economies [18], especially in the relationship between tourism and capital investments and recent tourism needs [19]. Planning and managing the tourist industry must include sustainable tourism indicators, i.e., STIs, although the literature reveals a gap between their application to SDGs [20,21] and the ongoing debate about sustainable tourism and the developed tourism based on principles of sustainable development [22] and the evolving approached applied worldwide [23]. A complex combination of parameters includes diverse factors influencing destination competitiveness. For comparing a sustainable tourism destination, Ritchie and Crouch investigated the complexity of multifaceted factors including parameters that enhance tourism destination, such as "infrastructure", "accessibility", "facilitating resources", "hospitality", "enterprise", and "political will". The authors also provided a model of fundamental importance for international tourism destination management and the core resources and attractors [24]. There is a need for a shift in perspective to seek criticism on the sustainable tourist development approaches that promote economic prosperity while neglecting the environment. The concept of sustainable tourism has grown very quickly in the past decades, as defined by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) [18,25] in compliance with the United Nations (U.N.) Sustainable Development Goals [20]. Currently, there are numerous set indicators for evaluating tourism and tourist destinations, including analyzing their level of sustainability:

U.N. World Tourism Organization (UNWTO): 41 Statistical Frameworks for Sustainable Tourism (UNWTO2016);
United Nations (U.N.): 17 Sustainable Development Goals (UN2015);
World Economic Forum (WEF): 14 Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (WEF2019);
European Commission (E.C.): 67 European Tourism Indicators for Sustainable Destination Management (EC2017);
Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC): 105 GSTC Criteria for Destinations (GSTC2019);

Global Destination Sustainability Index (GDS-Index): 70 Global Destination Sustainability Index (GDSI2019).

Analyzing and evaluating the sustainability of tourism has been an important field of scientific research, with a significant, rapidly growing body of literature supporting this argument. The number of research papers that investigate and provide indicators that evaluate the sustainability of tourist destinations and earlier reviews that have discussed this topic from different perspectives serve as the informational basis for the research. Globally, there has been an increase towards sustainable tourism as a holistic strategy for enhancing the economic, social, and environmental aspects of tourism. Many authors in the literature have adopted indicator systems to create and execute sustainable tourism models as a standard procedure [26] to enhance the tourists' needs and reach the global trends of sustainable tourism. The range of examples in sustainable tourism indicators shows an ongoing process where the proposed alternatives still need to satisfy the growing needs of users and policies in planning. However, several solutions are underway to bridge the gap between supply and demand indicators in tourism development [27]. Contextualizing current work on environmental indicators is one aspect of modern international research that refers to case studies in Europe [28–37], with particular attention to tourist countries like Italy [35] and Spain [36,38,39], and considering local tourism and residents [34] or tourists perspectives [40] and investigating diverse locations for economic evaluations [33,41], including regenerative intervention for tourist development by contributing to future paradigmatic transformative potential [28]. The literature review analyses reference many countries that have linked tourism values into a regenerative paradigm and aim to guide governmental regulation in Australia [42], New Zealand [43], and worldwide. The use of sustainable indicators for tourism destinations has drawn more attention in recent years, but determining indicators for the implementation of sustainability has never been straightforward [31,33,38–41,44]. In addition, referring to the literature review, further studies and data on the nation's urban planning and systems are needed. They typically need guidance for interpretation and integration into governmental urban planning decision making. With rising urbanization, emerging nations—especially in the Gulf countries—strongly pursue techniques to promote sustainable tourism [45]. A comprehensive investigation is needed in this setting, particularly regarding Saudi Arabia, which has recently embraced tourism, intending to promote religious, cultural, and heritage tourism [46–49] and long-term development and sustainable tourism [50–59].

Saudi Arabia Context

Saudi Arabia has recently established itself as a leader in adopting innovative strategies for a sustainable post-oil era. The nation has experienced considerable economic expansion and expanded its goals to include establishing new sectors, foreign investments in tourism, and cultural businesses and preserving national heritage. In alignment with the Saudi National Vision [60] and the Kingdom's 2030 goals, the research aim is to compare two case studies as part of the current growth of sustainable tourist attractions within planned tourism giga projects: AlUla and The Red Sea Project (TRSP). There is a current research gap in the development of Saudi Arabia's tourism toward a shift in destination development after recent openings to foreign visitors and tourists, with tourism growing as the primary sector in the country.

The recent search for national identity and local values has drawn businesses and tourist investments from local and international sources.

The nation's architectural and financial growth in the last decades can be classified into multiple stages by analyzing the transformation from traditional vernacular communities to modern planned cities, which mirror the historical shift beyond oil-centric growth to post-oil prosperity. Over the past few decades, government programs have significantly encouraged urbanization by stressing the shift away from traditional paradigms in favor of contemporary design and environmental responsibility. The Saudi advocation for sustainable tourism refers to experiences conducted in the Gulf regions [61–63] to enhance

sustainable tourism of al Maha resorts in Dubai, United Arab Emirates [61]. The project is located in a preservation zone that combines luxury with insights into the history, culture, fauna, and flora of the Arabian Desert to enhance local environmental values [41–44]. With similar intent in the literature, some researchers have highlighted the optimized approaches adopted by TRSP for preserving the coastal values and, in the meantime, targeting the enhancement of business investments in marine spatial planning. In the analyzed case study, the authors stressed the intent of TRSP for a 28,000 km^2 development along the Red Sea to create a sustainable luxury tourism destination in Saudi Arabia, focusing on the Al Wajh lagoon's biodiversity.

The Red Sea Development Company is committed to achieving a net-positive impact on biodiversity, surpassing conservation outcomes of an undeveloped scenario. Through optimized development plans and marine spatial planning, their study debates the three-layer conservation zoning to demonstrate conservation success amidst development. The meticulous design and planning can potentially lead to coastal development enhancing rather than threatening conservation efforts, according to the results in recently published information about the project, which is still under construction. Only a little is available online due to the project's confidentiality during work completion [64,65]. The literature presents recent strategies adopted to promote tourism impacts on sustainable destinations for the AlUla area. Particular attention is placed on the adopted landscape design program, which offers an important guide about the sustainable strategies projects adopted in AlUla to preserve and promote autochthone landscaping and wild preservation. The authors [66] presented the plants selected to fulfill landscape design to reach 20% of the AlUla area's potential biodiversity, which aims to be a national tourist landmark for discovering Saudi origins and culture [66,67] in compliance with the Saudi National Vision [60] and the kingdom's 2030 sustainable goals. In Saudi Arabia, the recent opening to tourism, the country's growth, and the ambitious challenge of being a leader in sustainable tourism development in the post-oil era of Gulf countries have led to many national investments in giga projects to promote new tourism destinations. Saudi Arabia is among the most active countries that promote sustainable tourism growth in alignment with the National Vision for developing sustainable growth in the post-oil era. However, from the literature analysis, in Saudi Arabia, a gap emerges regarding the current research for under-construction mega tourism projects, especially regarding their massive impact on the national sustainable tourism destinations program. More research must be conducted on the topic, as it will greatly impact future national strategies and sustainable growth.

Additionally, there are many access limitations and restrictions to resources due to the confidentiality of ongoing interventions, which constitute among the largest investments financed by the country's government. Referring to the parameters and factors influencing destination competitiveness to enhance tourism destinations as studied by Ritchie and Crouch [24], the research adopted sustainable parameters for comparing two giga projects and their adopted sustainable shift for tourist destinations in Saudi Arabia [68] by utilizing sustainable parameters. The study aims to fill the research gap in comparing case studies and analyses parameters for the implementation of sustainability in tourism destinations in Saudi Arabia in alignment with the Saudi National Vision 2030 to raise the impact of sustainable tourist design destination development. Practical application methods and the creation of regional general action plans are recommended to promote future country development in alignment with the sustainable goals of the Saudi National Vision 2030.

3. Methodology

The research adopted archives from public or private organizations available online or in public institutions. The materials were classified into primary and secondary sources, including papers, maps, articles, photos, instructional materials, and ads. This research used a hybrid technique including site visits, reviews of pertinent literature, and analysis of surveys, documents, maps, photos, and pictures.

The research method employed compared cases to understand and interpret a complex phenomenon, namely the design approach and its attention to sustainability, through similarities, differences, and common trends. It is one of the most widely used methods in architectural research and can be both qualitative and quantitative in its application. In this case, a mixed method was chosen to collect the quantitative data useful for subsequent comparative studies or data reanalysis. To select the case studies, we set the following parameters to investigate the adopted sustainable national strategies in developing tourism destinations to highlight fundamental similitudes.

- Location: Saudi Arabia;
- The tourism project was completed or under construction and partially or entirely supervised by Saudi governmental institutions;
- Major tourism destination in Saudi Arabia;
- Category of intervention: "Giga projects";
- Target: The sustainable development of the country;
- Must adopt a sustainable design approach (preservation of the natural environment, enhancement of local values, promotion of economic growth in the post-oil era) to benefit the impact of tourism destinations.

The two selected case studies are the only ones capable of satisfying the requirements. For comparing the sustainable tourism destinations given in the two selected case studies, we adopted the parameters of Ritchie and Crouch [24] for enhancing tourism destination, namely "infrastructure", "accessibility", "resource", "hospitality keys", "enterprise", and "political/governmental institutions will". We also included the timeframe and location, objectives, and the expected GPD contribution per year as well as the expected new direct jobs opportunities. Regarding the following list, the comparisons between case studies were based on the given parameters:

1. Timeframe and location;
2. Infrastructures: Master plan dimensions and preliminary studies;
3. Protected areas;
4. Accessibility: Mobility projects;
5. Resources: Reforestation;
6. Objectives: Wilding objectives;
7. Hospitality keys;
8. Enterprise: Expected visitors per year;
9. Expected GDP contribution;
10. Expected new direct jobs;
11. Governmental institutions' supervision.

These parameters were chosen to elucidate how the design approach follows a careful orientation toward the impacts of the tourist destination's development on the environment. Some parameters, such as design choices related to sustainable mobility or rewilding objectives, are qualitative. In contrast, others are purely quantitative, such as the percentages of protected territory and the number of ongoing reforestation objectives. In conclusion, the adopted research methodology employed diverse approaches, utilizing archives from various sources and employing a hybrid approach involving site visits, literature reviews, and analysis and comparisons. The case studies' selection focused on investigating the adoption of sustainable national strategies in developing tourism destinations, with stringent criteria applied to ensure relevance and uniqueness. The two selected case studies from Saudi Arabia emerged as the exclusive instances meeting these criteria.

4. Materials

Academic debate on architecture for vacations has traditionally been absent or lacking, and this sector has typically been relegated to the almost exclusive influence of professional practice for several reasons. Vacations have never been associated with committed architecture but are more focused on themes such as social housing, as vacations pertain to a

condition of well-being historically belonging to a narrow niche [2]. Over time, this niche has significantly expanded, and the consequences of tourism now produce effects on all scales. The architecture for tourism does not only concern its direct users, as its impacts affect vast territories and segments of the population that may not actively participate in the phenomenon but suffer its direct and indirect effects; see, for example, the Italian destination design of the 1960s, a missed opportunity for academia [2], which discusses the case of Italian seaside architecture and points to the need for more in-depth study and governance. Today, sector-specific literature is finally beginning to emerge, albeit with a historical approach focused on the past rather than actively engaging in contemporary debate.

The Gulf countries' region, within which the case study of Saudi Arabia is situated, is an international catalyst for exercising the architectural profession. The international architectural debate usually refers to these countries questioning the effects of globalization and capitalism on cities and territories [6]. Due to their scale and attention to contemporary issues, the cases of tourism projects in Saudi Arabia could introduce innovative models of international interest. The objective of this research is to investigate their relevance.

From the case studies, a paradigm shift emerges driven by the imperative of sustainability, which was previously absent in large-scale tourism projects in the Gulf. Dubai, as an example, witnessed the construction of artificial islands that were highly impactful on ecosystems. It set a model for all surrounding countries, normalizing massive land reclamations, the dredging of sea beds, and the continuous disruption of ecosystems to the point of becoming a replicated model, for example, The Pearl Island in Qatar, Bahrain Bay and Two Seas Islands in Bahrain, The Wave in Oman, Palms Islands, The World Waterfront in Dubai, and Saadiyat Island in the UAE. The projects under examination operate under a different cultural framework, following the sustainability goals of Vision 2030. Considering various environmental impact scenarios, preliminary studies and calculations have been central to the development projects. They appear to reflect a different culture that is attentive to environmental issues, which are typically distant from the lifestyle of Gulf countries due to a socio-economic and environmental context that is significantly different from the Western one. Also, the relationship with nature is relevant to those touristic projects. Suppose a tourist destination is meant to represent an ideal elsewhere that legitimizes the work and progress of society. In that case, nature plays a fundamental role here as an element of alienation and in the cultural identification of places. Destination design has often codified and reinvented the landscape in the locations where it intervenes [1,2,69]. Landscape preservation and enhancement interventions are expected to apply a similar process here through reconfiguring the natural environment similar to those cases mentioned above, although implemented within a much shorter timeframe.

Research Questions

The research questions regarding the new tourism projects in KSA focus on the apparent introduction of a new design approach that would constitute a break with the past. They were substantiated to understand whether the design approach implemented is genuinely mindful of its impact and oriented towards environmental sustainability. The two identified giga projects for tourism were compared to address and contemplate the following questions:

1.　Do the master plans demonstrate a comprehensive commitment to sustainable design? Does the emphasis on sustainability, culturally closer to European and international policies, finally represent a genuine design direction? Is sustainability discussed merely in terms of appearance, i.e., greenwashing, or does it signify a genuine design breakthrough?
2.　What is the relationship with the natural environment, and how is nature used to establish tourist destinations?
3.　After comparing the data, do the two cases show a common, comparable, and replicable approach? Can one identify a recognizable approach as a Saudi model for destination design projects?

4. Can we speak of a turning point and break with the Dubai model, where awe for purely quantitative dimensions is at the core of architectural and territorial transformations? Is the model of record-breaking projects still valid, or is its application changing?
5. Does a genuinely innovative and positive model emerge that could serve as a reference for the Gulf region, the MENA area, or even internationally?

These questions aim to critically and comparatively evaluate the approach and impact of the new tourism projects in Saudi Arabia, focusing on themes such as sustainability, the relationship with the natural environment, and the potential to establish a distinctive model in the regional and international context.

The selected cases, AlUla and The Red Sea Project (TRSP), are two new tourism destinations in the final stage of their development and are establishing themselves internationally. They were selected from a wider range of tourism giga projects, including Diriyah, Quiddiya, the Assir region, and Trojena, which are also currently under development but excluded from this analysis for various reasons. Diriyah is a district of Riyadh, which, after the development of the UNESCO site of At-Turaif [70], is developing a new quadrant of the capital in which immense residential development converges [71]. Diriyah was excluded from the study due to the mixed nature of the project program, which would have made it too difficult to distinguish and analyze the tourism components of the project from the city's housing or consumption needs. The choice was made to take into consideration for the study the tourism projects that therefore pertain to the holiday dimension and not to an "ordinary" living dimension that is part of the metropolis' residential expansion projects, however mixed in nature.

Quiddiya is another satellite project related to the kingdom's capital city. It will host the largest theme park in the Middle East, serving not just as a tourist destination but as a concentration of sports facilities of metropolitan interest for events and competitions. Due to the same mixed nature that characterizes Diriyah, Quiddiya was not included in the comparison. In this case, the designation as a sports hub, which is more functional for metropolitan hobbies and activities, makes its analysis as a purely touristic destination difficult. Trojena and Abha constitute two interesting case studies for future research; they cannot be included as "giga" projects for ongoing research. However, their development still needs to be revised for careful analysis in the future.

The AlUla case study is a tourist destination (Figure 1) designed near a pre-existing city and centered around an exceptional historical and archaeological heritage, where the first UNESCO site in Saudi Arabia was identified [70]. On the other hand, the case of TRSP is not only a new tourist destination but also a new foundation project situated in an environmentally privileged context for observing its characteristic ecosystems, such as the presence of corals, mangroves, turtles, and rare birds. Both destinations are nearing completion but are already active and open to tourism: AlUla has been active since 2019 and TRSP since 2023.

Figure 1. Hegra, Saudi Arabia's first UNESCO World Heritage site, AlUla, 21 October 2023 (Source: Authors).

5. Results

Both locations required infrastructure implementation to accommodate tourism and related mobility, with projects like the TRSP airport or the AlUla tramway. In both cases, preliminary studies on ecosystems were conducted, perimeters were drawn to safeguard the landscape, and environmental and development goals were set in stages. In both cases, there was an intention not only to preserve the landscape and ecosystems but also to actively work towards their improvement by establishing large nurseries that actively contributed to reforestation goals per the Saudi Green Initiative [72–74].

AlUla is located northwest of the kingdom, along the ancient incense trade route in the Medina province. The landscape is characterized by desert and the presence of sandstone mountains, which stretch along an oasis corresponding to the path of the ancient trade routes. Some mountains were carved and used as tombs by the ancient Nabataean

civilization, constituting the site of Hegra, recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The tourism project was announced in 2017, with its completion scheduled for 2035, but the destination began welcoming visitors as early as 2019.

For the destination development strategies, the Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU) and the French agency for AlUla (Afalula) [75] were established. In addition to the necessary archaeological interventions for restoration and enhancement, Afalula also conducted a study on ecosystems, particularly existing plant species, identifying approximately 60 [66,76]. This study has been vital in laying the foundations for the ecological restoration of the landscape (Figure 2).

Figure 2. AlUla Master Plan: "Journey Through Time" (Source: AFALULA, https://www.afalula.com/en/journey-through-time-masterplan/ accessed on 25 January 2024).

Six nature reserves with a total area of about 13,000 km^2 have been created in AlUla [75] to conserve the biodiversity and natural heritage of the place. Currently, more than 50% of the territory of AlUla is a protected area, and the authorities aim to increase this percentage to 80%. The development masterplan for AlUla, titled "Journey Through Time", has designated five districts that succeed one another through the AlUla oasis, leading on a journey through time by progressively approaching the Hegra site. In addition to delineating archaeological sites requiring protection and districts characterized by new study centers, significant importance has been given to the "rejuvenated oasis".

The oasis constitutes the focal point of the destination development plan, connecting the five districts to characterize the destination as a single cultural oasis. This natural axis serves as a green corridor for sustainable mobility. The masterplan has located pedestrian, equestrian, and cycling paths here, along with a tramway that is currently under construction, which will facilitate sustainable mobility for tourists and residents to the airport.

The preliminary study on pre-existing plants has laid the foundation for landscape development. The recognized and selected species have become the reference vegetation imposed on urban planners and landscapers for the territory's development and have been incorporated into guidelines for approving new projects. Elisabeth Dodinet, an expert in archeo-ethno-botany, extols the decision to use only native species not so much to reinforce a romantic and nostalgic idea of the territory but rather to enable the flourishing of a vibrant ecosystem resilient to the desert climate. These 60 species are cultivated in the AlUla plant nursery, established at the end of 2021 and designed to produce around 600,000 seedlings yearly.

The ongoing renaturalization process aims to restore the existing and damaged oasis and ecosystems. The goals include planting 10 million plants by 2035 and recreating the natural habitat for various animal species, such as Arabian oryx, gazelles, and Arabian leop-

ards [77]. By 2035, RCU plans to deliver the ecological restoration of at least 65,000 hectares of degraded land and preserve 80% of the land [77].

The Red Sea Project is located approximately four and a half hours by car from AlUla in the Tabuk province, on the kingdom's west coast. It is an archipelago of 92 uninhabited islands, and to facilitate access to this new destination, a new international airport called "The Red Sea International" was inaugurated. Crystal-clear waters and ecosystems of particular interest, including mangroves, turtles, and coral reefs, characterize the area. Unlike AlUla, no pre-existing built heritage exists here; it is a new foundation. The project was announced in 2017, with the completion of the first phase expected in 2024 and overall completion by 2030. In the meantime, it started welcoming its first visitors in 2023.

After establishing numbers for the economic development of tourism in the region, several scenarios were considered to measure the impact on ecosystems. The King Abdullah University for Science and Technology (KAUST) was consulted, and the results of its research were disseminated in scientific articles [65]. After identifying the species and ecosystems in the area, the possible project impacts on ecosystems were measured through computer simulations. Following the studies, Red Sea Global, which is responsible for project development, decided to heed the recommendations from KAUST's studies and reduce the number of rooms initially planned for the project, thereby modifying the initial project and its impact.

The project has been reduced by 40%, decreasing from 20,000 rooms to 12,000 [65]. In this regard, Red Sea Global's stated goal was to minimize the environmental impact and achieve a 30% improvement in biodiversity. The master plan initially outlined the area's perimeter of interest to establish functional rules for developing the TRSP (Figure 3) and imposing regulations to protect ecosystems, such as fishing bans, maximum navigation speed, anchoring prohibitions, and restrictions on plastic use. Development limits were then established; in Figure 2, the areas designated for development are shown in red. To protect and enhance the destination's pristine natural environment, 75 percent of the destination's islands will be undeveloped, and nine sites of significant ecological value will be designated [78] and therefore untouchable by the project.
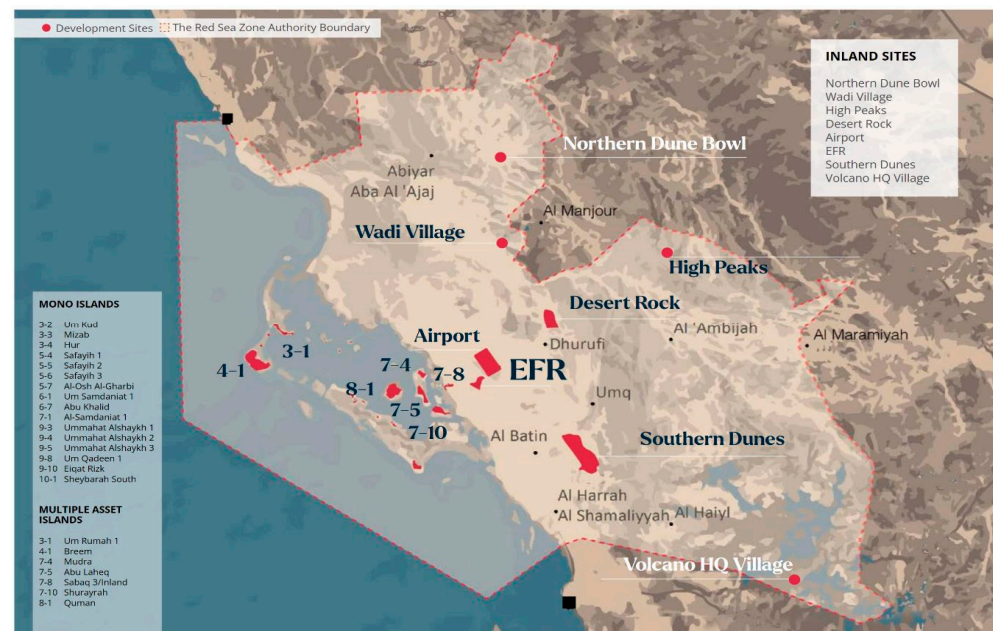

Figure 3. The Red Sea Project Development Sites (Source: The Red Sea Global, https://issuu.com/theredsea/docs/, accessed on 25 January 2024).

The development limits also stand out among the goals; the one million visitors targeted by 2030 is also its upper limit. In terms of energy, the destination claims an off-grid

setup, aiming to power its luxurious consumption entirely through renewable sources only. Vehicles are all-electric, including boats with a 12–15 knot speed limit. An exception is made for planes and hang gliders powered by sustainable aviation fuels (SAF), i.e., renewable or waste-derived fuels that meet sustainability criteria. An airline, Fly Red Sea, has been established for this purpose, and it is also exploring the possibility of fully electric seaplanes; it continues to work closely with ZeroAvia to trial retrofitting Cessna caravan seaplanes with hydrogen-electric propulsion technology [65].

The development has set as its goal a net-positive impact on biodiversity and an increase in the conservation value of the site by 30%. As in the case of AlUla, a nursery has been built here as well; it is the largest in the MENA region [65], covering an area of 1 km^2 to meet ambitious reforestation goals. In this case, the aim is to reach 30 million new plants by 2030 and 50 million by 2040. Currently, 4 million plants are thriving, and these flourishing botanicals are already adorning first resorts. The dominant species chosen for reforestation are mangroves, which are also useful for nourishing marine ecosystems. Non-native but compatible species from Australia have also been selected among the permitted plants for greening to survive in and contribute to the ecosystem.

6. Discussion

The two projects compared show a common design approach deeply focused on sustainability issues, starting from the preliminary studies on ecosystems, which have been demonstrated to be significantly influential in the development of the destinations (Table 1). The sustainable development policies introduced by Vision 2030 find real implementation in these two cases. Preliminary studies, design, development, and new practices contribute to creating and spreading a new culture of sustainability in the Gulf region. Particularly significant in the case of The Red Sea Project is the limit of 1 million visitors per year, which also imposes a constraint on economic development.

Table 1. Data comparisons between case studies' master plans for sustainable destination development based on selected parameters for sustainable destination development (Sources https://redseaglobal.com, https://www.rcu.gov.sa/, accessed on 25 January 2024).

Title 1	Case Study 1	AlUla	Case Study 2	TRSP
1 Timeframe	2017–2035 Welcoming guests since 2019	2017–2030 Welcoming guests since 2023
2 Master plan dimensions	22,561 km^2	28,000 km^2 (land and water)
3 Protected areas	Today, more than 50% of preserved land and the intention to increase it to 80%	75% of the islands untouched and protected, with nine islands completely untouched
4 Mobility projects	46 km low-carbon tramway and a green pedestrian spine with trails for bicycles and horses	Electric vehicles, seaplanes SAF, and limitation on sea speed
5 Reforestation objectives	10 million plants	30 million plants
6 Rewilding objectives ecosystem	Reintroduction of ibex, oryx, gazelles, and Arabian leopards	30% net-positive conservation benefit increasing biodiversity
7 Hospitality keys	+9000 rooms	8000 rooms, 1000 properties
8 Expected visitors per year	1.98 million	1 million (also the limit)
9 Expected GDP contribution	±SR 120 billion (USD 32 billion) per year	±SR 22 billion (USD 5.86 billion) per year
10 Expected new direct jobs	38,000	35,000
11 Governmental institutions Supervision	Royal Commission for AlUla	Red Sea Global
Master plan source website	https://www.rcu.gov.sa/	https://www.redseaglobal.com

In both cases, massive reforestation and the establishment of large nurseries were carried out. The planting of millions of plants serves a dual purpose: on the one hand,

combating desertification and CO_2 and, on the other, strengthening the identity of the destinations through a recognizable landscape. Intervening on the landscape in these cases means reforesting the territories and reforesting the new destinations' cultural imagination. The palm trees of AlUla (Figures 4 and 5) as well as the Red Sea Project's (TRSP) (Figure 5) mangroves are identifying elements functional to the reinvention of places through the landscape. There is an active relationship with the environment, which is not limited to perimeter and preservation but also sets goals for species reintroduction and biodiversity improvement (as mentioned above in the table) even through the initiation of experiments on the health and development of marine vegetation [65]. Finally, the concept of regenerative tourism emerges. Although supervised by governmental institutions' operations, the two cases show a common design approach (the Royal Commission for AlUla (Figure 6) in one case and the Red Sea Global in the other) (Figure 3).

Figure 4. View of AlUla's oasis from Harrat's viewpoint, AlUla, 21 October 2023 (Source: authors).

Figure 5. Rendering of AlUla's oasis from Journey Through Time Master Plan (source: https://ucl.rcu.gov.sa/en, accessed on 25 January 2024).

Figure 6. AlUla Master Plan: Journey Through Time (source: https://ucl.rcu.gov.sa/, accessed on 25 January 2024).

7. Conclusions

Indeed, new standards for destination design have emerged, including net carbon neutrality on local emissions, wastewater reuse, sustainable mobility, and ecosystem improvement. One could speak of a Saudi model for destination design as innovative and sustainable; however, it IS necessary to await the completion of these projects and compare them with other ongoing projects. TRSP and AlUla are in an intermediate development phase, with completion scheduled for 2030 and 2035. The objectives seem close to their achievement; however, a sudden change undermining ambitious sustainability goals, such as the visitor limit at TRSP, would only be possible in economic tourism. Therefore, a re-assessment will be necessary in the coming years, coupled with studying new destinations like the Gulf of Aqaba, Sindalah, the Nassir region, and Trojena. The significance of these projects and the adopted design approach suggest a new focus on developing and designing tourist destinations. The Dubai model of artificial palm-shaped islands seems distant, but the world-record approach of pursuing numerical achievements remains, albeit shifted towards sustainable development goals. TRSP is currently the world's largest tourist destination under construction that will be fully powered by renewable energy and one of the world's most ambitious regenerative tourism destinations [65]. In contrast to Dubai's touristic projects of the 2000s, these two cases suggest that the ambition for acquiring symbolic capital finally aligns with the globally shared goals of progress and sustainable development in Saudi Arabia. The study's relevance in these cases extends beyond the GCC or MENA region, as it advances the development of the concept of regenerative tourism in applying it to the design of new, large destinations.

The research contributes to the design approach of new tourist destinations under construction in Saudi Arabia, an area that has been little explored but is a significant source of intervention in sustainable tourism design. The framing of new tourist destination projects certainly constitutes a niche on a global level, but regionally, it fits into a broad spectrum of new cases. According to UNWTO statistics, the Middle East is, in fact, the world region where tourism development has seen the largest expansion in 2023 [78]. As previously pointed out, the topic's novelty imposes temporal limits on the research. Destinations, although active, will see their total completion in 2030 and 2035. Therefore, it would be necessary to return to monitor the projects in the coming years to ensure that data

do not undergo sudden variations that could alter future quantitative comparisons. The temporal limits of the research also contribute to complicated analyses related to on-site visits because both AlUla and TRSP are formally operational. However, TRSP has yet to inaugurate its most significant structures.

The analysis can be compared and replicated, especially in the destination design context. The scale of the giga projects allows for an immediate quantitative comparison with future giga projects for tourism. However, the design approach allows for variations in scale application; the limit of applicability is deeper in the realm of destination design. Even on a smaller scale than giga projects, a tourism development project could use the same design approach even in smaller centers.

Future research could involve comparing the sustainability design approach of these projects with those in a context more distant from the MENA region. Another interesting research avenue would be monitoring the performance of these projects during their operational phase to understand if there are deficiencies integrated into the design approach identified following the operation of destinations under tourist pressures.

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