

Article

Sport Tourism as Driving Force for Destinations' Sustainability

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Abstract: Sport tourism is a fast-growing segment of tourism offering new perspectives and supporting travelers' behavior shift towards active living that is a boost for sustainable destinations. These interrelations between active living, active travelling, and sport tourism have a powerful environmental, economic, and social impact. Based on the recognized contribution of sport tourism in sustaining destinations, the current paper aims to (a) explore the state of sport tourism in the Adriatic–Ionian Region by identifying existing sport tourism initiatives, (b) analyze the current and future potentials of sport tourism in the area's sustainable growth, and (c) draw policy recommendations for sport tourism development in the region with a view to support the wider vision of sustainability. The review of existing sport tourism cases, revealing an existing investment towards this tourism form, was followed by a qualitative survey of the area's tourism stakeholders (Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Albania, Montenegro, Serbia). Results reveal that sport tourism is estimated to help in building a unique identity closely linked to sustainability goals—the area represents a great natural and cultural beauty that can be emphasized by sport initiatives, while, once such efforts are incorporated in wider sustainability plans, the destinations' profiles can be significantly upgraded.

Keywords: sport tourism; sustainable destinations; active living; tourism; sustainability



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1. Introduction

1.1. Sport Tourism's Main Characteristics

Sport tourism (ST) is one of the fastest-growing segments in the tourism industry. Millions of tourists are interested in sport and leisure activities during their travel regardless of whether sports are the main objective of the trip or not [1]. Sport tourism, a two-dimensional economic and social activity, is at the crossroads of tourism and sport sectors [2], both of which face the challenge of sustainable development [3,4]. Today, the interrelationships between active living and active travelling have a powerful economic and social impact on societies globally, playing simultaneously a pivotal role in areas' sustainability [5]. As supported by [6,7], a triple bottom line framework of economic, social/cultural, and environmental impacts of sport tourism is linked to sustaining destinations, following the sustainability benchmarking and assessment frameworks that have been proposed for understanding the impact of tourism and special events [8–12]. There are also interesting proposals adding more dimensions to the wider impact of tourism sustainability assessment which also apply to sport tourism; incorporating technology and governance/participatory planning features while assessing the contribution of sport tourism in resource efficiency, the transition to the low-carbon era, and the shift to sustainable behaviors is highly relevant for understanding the sport tourism dynamic [13–16].

As [17,18] argue, sport tourism, being a cultural experience of physical activity and of its place, is linked to a two-dimensional concept. Physical activity is dependent on content planning and provision, while place experience is associated with a destination's and event location's access, accommodation, and venue quality [19]—all above referenced subdimensions are highly interrelated to a wide pool of involved actors, issues that make sustainable

sport tourism planning even more challenging. Given this complex and multidimensional character of sport tourism [20,21] as well as its estimated high contribution to sustainable destination development (linked to revenue creation opportunities and to environmental conservation and preservation), sport tourism has been recognized as a field of interest by both academic [22] and commerce sectors (i.e., event organizers and sport tourism service providers), while it has triggered the wide interest of competent authorities and destination planners [23].

Various interlinked elements form sport tourism. In [24], the authors set four criteria to describe sport tourism, all elements being directly linked with sustainable development goals:

- (a) Travel: refers to a trip, beyond the hometown, to a tourist destination, being (travel) the part of the tourism experience that can be influenced by the shift to more sustainable transport modes (i.e., taking the long leg of the trip by rail has considerably lower fuel emissions than other modes, and intra-area trips by walking and cycling are similarly more sustainable).
- (b) Accommodation: includes accommodation, at least one day, at the host destination. The benefits of adopting sustainable management practices in accommodation appear promising in the hotel sector; however, there is a strong need for investing in time and resources and a two-dimensional push (from customer to the entrepreneurs and vice versa) [25].
- (c) Motivation factors: includes internal and/or external motivations (drivers) to actively engage individuals within a sport product, motivation and awareness for green and sustainable tourism being highly interconnected aspects.
- (d) Nature of sport product: describes the formation of sport products with which a consumer may be involved. In reaching sustainability goals, the provided sport products should be linked to, among other things, active living benefits at the personal level and, from an environmental point of view, messages [26].

The sport tourism context consists of human experiences which are focused on a set of services during a trip to specific destinations for participation in a sport product. The trip holds a professional (business related to sports, e.g., professional teams and players) or recreational (e.g., trail runners in outdoor small-scale sport events) purpose. Reference [18] defined the sport tourism sector as ‘all forms of active and passive involvement in sporting activity, participated in casually or in an organized way for non-commercial or business/commercial reasons that necessitate travel away from home and work locality’. Reference [27] made a distinction between sport tourists who are involved in competitive sport either actively or passively, calling them ‘hard’ sport tourists, and those who are involved with the main scope of the recreation, calling them ‘soft’ sport tourists. Therefore, the engagement in participation in sport events is formed by active or passive behaviors, and it is driven by several motives [28]. Sport tourism literature highlights the important role of segmentation of the sport tourism market to improve promotional actions, create clear patterns of group behavior, and personalize their communication strategies according to consumers’ behavior [29–32].

Passive sport tourism is related to spectatorship, i.e., traveling to watch sports. Several spectators decide whether to travel to watch sports or not before even considering the event’s hosting destination. Their major drivers deal with socializing and hedonic outcomes. Passive sport participants include those who follow mega events (e.g., Olympic Games), major events (e.g., World Athletics Championship), or local events (e.g., a football match of their favorite team or city marathons). On the other hand, active sport tourism participants are defined as those who actively engaged in professional sports or recreational activities. Active participants might be professional athletes (e.g., basketball players), elite/serious leisure participants (e.g., trail runners in small-scale ITRA series mountain events), or recreational individuals (e.g., hikers and mountaineers). For the latter category, their primary motivation is the sense of belonging to a niche sport subculture [33].

1.2. Impact of Sport Tourism Development in Sustainable Growth of an Area

Tourism is an essential pillar of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially goals 8, 12, and 14. As a segment of tourism, sport tourism can also help achieve sustainable development.

According to [34], at an economic level, sport tourism contributes to SDG 8 (promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all) by creating many opportunities for new business activities that will create the need for many new jobs.

Furthermore, sport tourism contributes to SDG 3 (ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages). Besides providing the tourists with sporting opportunities and an outlet for physical exercise, investment in sport tourism can also promote the participation of local populations in sporting activities. As suggested by [35], to achieve future sustainable sporting events, residents should be deeply involved in the event's planning and implementation, an issue that can trigger further interest in bottom-up investment in the sustainability of events (permanent jobs as a motivation or supporting stable and sustainable planning).

Finally, given coordinated efforts in reducing CO₂-related emissions and therefore responding urgently to the climate crisis [36], sport tourism can also contribute to SDG 15 (protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of the terrestrial ecosystem) as well as SDG 16 (promote peaceful and inclusive societies, provide access to justice for all, and build inclusive institutions).

Based on the dynamic character of sport tourism and the potential positive impact of it in improving areas' attractiveness while supporting sustainable growth, the purpose of this study is to dive into a specific study area (the Adriatic–Ionian case) with high existing flows of tourists that has invested little in sport tourism so far, so as to understand the maturity level and the potential impact on the sustainable growth of the areas (mainly as regards economy and society) and conclude with policy implications for opening the path towards sport tourism development. As such, the aim of the study is to answer the following issues: (a) understand the state of development of sport tourism in the Adriatic–Ionian Region by identifying good practices for sport tourism development that show windows of opportunity for sector growth; (b) analyze the current and future potentials of sport tourism in the sustainable growth of each area; and (c) draw policy recommendations for sport tourism development in the region based on the area's tourism stakeholder survey. Specifically, the study starts from existing sport tourism initiative review in the study area in order to build the area's current profile and continues with a theme analysis of input (concerns and thoughts on sport tourism investment) collected via questionnaires answered by the area's policy makers and stakeholders.

The remainder of the paper is divided into seven sections. Section 2 presents the study area and sport tourism initiatives that have been implemented in the area in an attempt to extract the area's interest and dynamic on further investing in this market. Section 3 presents the methods used in this study, a qualitative survey to real actors involved in tourism planning of the area. Section 4 presents the main outcomes of the survey as regards specific themes and sub-themes. Section 5 analyzes the potential of using sport tourism for boosting sustainable development in the study areas. Section 6 discusses key policy implications for sustainable destination support via sport tourism and active living promotion. Section 7 puts the main findings of the paper in context, and Section 8 presents concluding remarks and future steps.

2. Study Area

2.1. The Case Study Area: Adriatic–Ionian Region

The study area from which sport tourism case studies were identified and the stakeholder survey on the sport tourism dynamic applied is the Adriatic–Ionian Region (ADRION) (Figure 1), the functional area primarily defined by the Adriatic and Ionian Sea basins that is home to more than 70 million people. The tourism sector of the area, although attracting

a large number of tourists every year (seven out of the thirty top EU destinations are located in ADRIAN Region), is not optimally managed and exploited, and coordinated actions to support sustainable tourism growth are needed [37,38].



Figure 1. The study area [39].

More precisely, 10 destinations of the region (Thessaloniki, Preveza, and Igoumenitsa in Greece, Ravenna and Grado-Aquileia in Italy, Ljubljana in Slovenia, Zadar in Croatia, Tivat in Montenegro, Berat in Albania, and Belgrade in Serbia, hereinafter referred also as SUSTOURISMO cases) took part in a wide discussion on sustainable tourism promotion through sustainable mobility and active modes of transport and living, part of which is sport tourism promotion, as revealed by extended rounds of consultation with local and regional authorities and also with private sector actors (in the framework of SUSTOURISMO Interreg ADRIAN 2014–2020 project) [40].

2.2. Sport Tourism Events and Initiatives in the Study Area

According to the local stakeholders, sport tourism presents a dynamic in the Adriatic–Ionian area; however, efforts should be intensified to reach a desired, competitive level of the market and open windows of further supporting wider sustainability initiatives. In this part, cases of sport tourism events and initiatives from the area are presented with a view to map the current situation in the area.

2.2.1. Athens Marathon: The Authentic, Athens, Greece

Today, Athens Marathon: the Authentic—named as such since it starts from the Village of Marathon and ends at the Panathinaikon Stadium where the first modern Olympic Games were held in 1896 [41]—is considered the largest running event in Greece and one of the most popular events internationally. It is established by the Greek Athletics Association (SEGAS). The 42,195 m route starts at the town of Marathonas. Runners follow the route that was mapped for the 1896 Olympic Games, and it is supposed to be close to the route that Pheidippides ran to convey the news of victory in Ancient Greece. His accomplishment inspired the modern sport event of marathon races. The event has shown rapid growth in the last decade.

The number of runners increased from 5250 in 2016 to 50,000 (850% increase) in 2019, which was the year just before the COVID-19 lockdown. It is worth noting that this growth happened during the years of economic crisis in Greece. The socio-demographic profile of runners shows their dynamic nature and perspective. Runners are almost balanced in

terms of gender in the 5 km distance (51.4% males and 48.6% females), while males are the vast majority in the 10 km and 42 km races (67.1% and 81.5%, respectively)—motivations for participating differ per gender and extend from self-esteem and psychological coping to achievement of personal goals [42]. In terms of the age profile, the average age in all the races is just above 40 years (41.2 in the 5 km, 41.6 in the 10 km, and 43.4 in the 42 km). Finally, most runners in all the races are highly educated. University graduates are the majority (76% in the 5 km, 81% in the 10 km, and 78% in the 42 km) [43].

The growth of the marathon can also be seen based on other figures. The sponsors' investments (fees, supporting teams/runners, communication actions, activation, etc.) were more than EUR 2 million. Furthermore, it is estimated that the direct economic impact on the city of Athens was more than EUR 15 million. This economic development comes from international and domestic runners. The event has a strong focus on fundraising for several social responsibility actions. More than EUR 800,000 is collected and used for social purposes. Furthermore, the event has an environmental program, such as collecting and recycling plastic bottles, garbage, clothes, etc., promoting eco-friendliness and environmental values [1]. Additionally, the Athens Marathon event attracts more than 26,000 volunteers who participate in a structured volunteering training program before the event. Taking all these into account, the event has a strong social, economic, and tourism impact on the city and its residents. The Greek Athletics Association has been following a strong promotional strategy to develop running culture in Greece. Back in 2006, there were 60 running events with 15,000 participants. Today, there are more than 936 races and close to 250,000 registrations. SEGAS's strategy can be summarized as an attempt to take advantage of the international reputation of Greece because of the 2004 Athens Olympic Games and at the same time use the legacy of the games while applying the principles of sport marketing and sport management in all the stages of event management. These are the top points of SEGAS's strategy. Furthermore, cooperating with public bodies, private organizations, and non-profit associations in order to maximize the impact of the event and involving local associations and communities within the event organization to build positive attitudes towards the event are considered essential elements. Moreover, promoting the history of the event builds a nostalgic environment that may increase participation. Similarly, giving an international image to the event with the establishment of the International Symposium of Marathon can achieve the same effect. On the other hand, changing the name of the event to "Athens Marathon: The Authentic" was an important rebranding and positioning strategy. Lastly, investing in the upgraded services and changing it from a one-day event to a four-day festival with the inclusion of associated shorter running events for leisure runners and promoting the values of social solidarity by cooperating with 16 non-governmental organizations in order to promote social and environmental values, volunteerism, charity, and fundraising are estimated to be among the best promotional actions.

2.2.2. Windsurf Club Vassiliki, Lefkada, Greece

Windsurf Club Vassiliki is considered an international sport brand which is on the island of Lefkada, Greece. The company has become a point of reference for the windsurf market internationally. The Windsurf Club Vassiliki is placed in the forefront of the coastal area, combining ideal conditions for water sporting activities (e.g., kitesurfing and windsurfing) with the unique experience of staying in a sport hotel, called Grand Nefeli, and enjoying local culinary tastes. The operation of the company is divided into two sectors: (a) accommodation and culinary and (b) water-based leisure activities [44].

Tourists are accommodated in a four-star sport hotel which is situated within a specially designed tree-planted area in front of the windsurfing spot. All rooms are equipped with eco-friendly materials, such as queen-size beds, sofas, a balcony with a sea view, hammocks, and poufs for the personal relaxation of the guests. The recreational activities are mostly water-based. Sport activities include windsurfing, kitesurfing and surfing courses, and SUP. There are courses for beginners and advanced or independent participants who aim to learn or improve their techniques. All courses are held individually or in group

form with the support of international instructors. Another area on which the company focuses is family holidays. There are kids' camps for children from 8 to 16 years old which provide all the necessary facilities to develop motor and psychological needs. There is a structured program for each day, and their purposes are enhancing knowledge, developing cognitive skills, learning water safety, and having fun with a variety of activities on land or sea. Overall, Windsurf Club Vassiliki is considered an innovative sport tourism company which attracts tourists mainly from the Balkan region and internationally.

2.2.3. 'Alexander the Great' City Marathon Event, Thessaloniki, Greece

The 'Alexander the Great' marathon is an international venue which attracts people from all over the world. Its history goes back to 2006, and it holds a symbolic meaning for Greece. The brand "Alexander the Great" refers to the Great Commander of Ancient Greece who was born in the Pella region, which is the starting point of the marathon event. Hence, the vision of the organizing committee is to promote Greek culture and a healthier lifestyle which positively impacts participants' wellbeing. The organizer is the 'Triton' track and field sport club of Thessaloniki. Several government bodies and local authorities support the facilitation of such events. The Track & Field Greek Federation is the main supporter of the sport marathon. The 'Alexander the Great' international marathon is considered a major sport event with mass participation and remains the second biggest marathon in Greece according to registrations. It takes place on the second weekend of April in order to extend the tourism season. The recent venue of 2022 had more than 20,000 runners in three categories, including (a) marathon, (b) 10 km, and (c) 5 km. In addition, it offers a fun race for kids (1000 m). The marathon itinerary starts from the Pella region and finishes in downtown Thessaloniki. Moreover, both races (10 km and 5 km) are offered in the Thessaloniki city center. To further extend its services, 'Alexander the Great' includes a sport fair, a marathon flame ceremony, and several cultural amenities over the two days of the marathon's weekend. The venue is considered an international major sport event, and thus it receives national and international media coverage. Specifically, the national television broadcast covers the race live, and many international articles from sports media have been written in the news. In terms of sport sponsorships, several national and worldwide companies such as banks, sport goods, sport nutrition, and others sponsor the event. Overall, this event remains at the front line of sport products in the Balkan region [45].

2.2.4. Albania Water Sports, Albania

'Albania water sport' is a sport professional hub for active tourists and professionals who want to involve and promote water-based outdoor activities across the coastline of Albania. They provide free membership access to all training sessions, events, and activities throughout the year. Furthermore, they offer equipment rentals. Additional benefits of membership include long-term equipment rental packages, discounts for purchasing equipment, special prices for club activities, equipment exchange and storage, etc. These amenities are offered to individuals, families and groups, or corporate users to join their regular activities. Along the coastline of Albania, an individual can experience windsurfing, kitesurfing, sailing, stand-up paddle, SUP yoga, water-based tours, and inclusive sport holidays. A few of the water sport bays are Sektori Rinia, Agip, Porto Romano, and Saranda. The spots have been assessed for their wind direction, wind speed, seashore conditions, accessibility, and potential risks and hazards, and they were selected as appropriate areas for sport tourism. An additional product in their portfolio is the SUP Ride sport event at Tirana Lake. This event is conducted in the capital of Albania and is considered a regional sport event which attracts domestic and international participants. To improve the registration process, organizers provide free registration to experienced SUPers. This policy is in line with the major goal of local authorities to make Albania a water-based sport tourism destination. Finally, the event is organized under the Tirana European Youth Capital 2022 program with the support of the National Youth Congress in cooperation with

the Municipality of Tirana and the Agency for Parks and Recreation. This is the first sport event under the framework of Tirana: European City of Sports 2023. More sport events will follow for 2023 [46].

2.2.5. Adriatrek, Petrovac, Montenegro

Adriatrek is an outdoor activities company specializing in canyoning and outdoor activities in Montenegro. Since 2015, the company has been an affiliated member of the International Canyoning Organization for professionals. Canyoning in Petrovac is one of the most amazing parts that a tourist might experience. The aim of the excursion is to cross a natural geomorphological canyon from the highest access point to the lowest possible. The techniques that are used in a canyon are walking, scrambling between rocks, trees, and bushes, swimming, jumping from low or high rocks, and abseiling with rope. The company's services are divided into two sections: (i) daily trips for canyoning and (ii) training and certification of autonomous canyioners or canyoning instructors through the international canyoning organization for professionals. For the day trips for canyoning, Adriatrek has equipped three canyons in the surrounding area with permanent belays on the rocks. These gorges consist of (a) Rikavac gorge, (b) Medjurecki gorge, and (c) Skurda canyon. Each canyon has a different degree of difficulty depending on the season, the amount of water, the place and height where the abseiling process takes place (inside or outside the waterfall), and the distance of the canyon. Regarding the training of autonomous canyioners or instructors, the company posts on its website scheduled schools every year. These schools run for several days and hold a high level of physical and psychological demand. Regarding the field of education, they are divided into schools of (a) autonomous canyioners, (b) assistant instructors, and (c) instructors. The first school lasts 8 days and aims to train and enhance the mixing of those involved to the level of making an autonomous descent with a group of a similar level in a canyon of moderate difficulty. The individual receives all the necessary technical and theoretical knowledge to operate autonomously during the expedition. The remaining two schools last 10 days, as the training becomes more demanding on rope techniques, rescue, pedagogical training, psychology, and team management so that each instructor can in his/her turn teach/train new canyioners for the first time according to the standards [47].

2.2.6. The Adventure Tourism Capital of Slovenia: Bovec Destination, Bovec, Slovenia

Bovec is considered the Mecca of adventure tourism in Slovenia. For any tourist who wants to get involved in outdoor activities, Bovec is the place. Bovec is situated in the River Soca Valley. There are numerous travel agents, adventure operators, and entrepreneurs who provide land- and water-based activities. Bovec attracts nature enthusiasts and those who seek adventure and relaxation at the same time. The destination is in the heart of Slovenian Alps, and it is surrounded by high mountains, rivers and gorges. During the summer season, an individual can experience rafting, kayaking, hiking, mountaineering, mountain biking, canyoning, and caving. On the other hand, in winter he/she might do some skiing on Kanin Mountain. One of the highlights of the destination remains the Soca River in western Slovenia. There are several rafting, hydro-speed, and river kayaking sessions. Nowadays, Bovec has been structured and promoted as a sport tourism destination globally. There are many places to stay, from luxury hotels and cozy guesthouses to scenic camping sites. Local authorities and the tourism sector have cooperated with the sub-sectors of central government to build a sport image worldwide [48].

2.2.7. Croatia as a Heritage and Hiking Destination, Croatia

Croatia holds a long history and culture in the Balkan region. It includes quaint villages, walled towns and castles, national parks, clear rivers, and beautiful beaches. It is also famous as the land of "1000 islands" with the longest coastline in Europe. One of the most famous sport products of Croatia is the hiking trails in the Dinaric Alps. Thousands of

thru-hikers, trekkers, and daily hikers experience unique trails which bridge the mountains with the sea.

Several companies offer heritage and sightseeing with hiking route services across the Croatian mainland. Istria and Zadar are two famous destinations for heritage visits and hikes around the city in a rural area. Croatia has eight national parks which provide various hiking routes with different difficulties. The national parks are named Plitvicka jezera, Paklenica, Risnjak, Mljet, Kornati, Brijuni, Krka, and Sjeverni Velebit. In those areas, one can experience several outdoor activities, like hiking, horse riding, rock climbing, cycling, caving, canyoning, boat trips, birdwatching, and kayaking. However, the most challenging activity is the thru-hike passage. This activity allows a hiker to cross the Dinaric Alps from inside the mountain, with high passages, scenic routes, and uphill approaches. Overall, Croatia is considered a classic sport and adventure destination in the Balkan region [49].

2.2.8. A.NI.M.US—Adriatic–Ionian Games for Social Inclusion, Ancona, Italy

The main objective of the A.NI.M.US event was to strengthen the role of sports in social inclusion and cohesion within the Adriatic–Ionian Region. The games took place in 2019 and had a great success story for the Ionian region. The event was structured on two main pillars. First, the Adriatic–Ionian Youth Games in Ancona (Italy) and socio-cultural collateral activities aimed to encourage participation in sport for the intrinsic benefits of socialization, for the promotion of voluntary activities, for the sharing of equal opportunity values, and for the improvement of health conditions. Participants were teens, coaches, voluntary associations, local authorities, journalists, school personnel, and students. Different sport disciplines from cities and organizations of twelve EU countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovenia) plus four EU candidate/potential candidate countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia) took place over four days. Second, the Info-Edu activities from May to October 2019 aimed to improve skills and knowledge of target groups, including seminars on equality between women and men, on social inclusion of persons with disabilities, and on health-enhancing sport activities and eating behaviors, the Cities for Sport and Inclusion Conference, a seminar on inclusive sport in the AI Region and beyond and volunteering opportunities, and local ANIMUS events throughout all the involved area. The participants of this event included more than 500 hundred people. At the venue there were sport activities and several side activities. The post-event assessment showed that the event had a large impact on the media, reaching more than 300,000 people [50].

2.2.9. Beogradski Marathon, Belgrade, Serbia

The Belgrade Marathon (Beogradski Maraton) is one of the biggest sporting events in Serbia. This event has a long history, as it was bid on for the first time back in 1910. However, the first modern marathon in Belgrade took place on 8 May 1988. Initially, the route's length of the 1989 marathon was 46.7 km, with the start and finish being in front of the Federal Parliament Building. Since 1990, the Belgrade Marathon has a standard length of 42.195 km. The City of Belgrade and its departments supported the event. Several other bodies of authorities are also involved, such as the government, the army, the police, volunteers, and several sponsors. Today, the Beogradski Marathon series is an annual sport event which is hosted in the capital of Serbia. The Beogradski event bids on six amateur running races. It is a prestigious and popular city event for the Balkan region which attracts more than 6000 participants each year. The routes of each marathon cross heritage areas, the old town, rivers, and Belgrade's main square. The event offers 5 km, 10 km, 21 km, 42 km, and themed races. It is sponsored by large international companies and is supported by local authorities and central government [51,52].

2.2.10. Cyclotourism Boost after COVID-19 in ADRION Region

Cycling for covering daily mobility needs and cycling tourism in ADRION have risen during the strong COVID-19 lockdowns and also seem to be a trend after this shocking situation. After lockdowns, and in order to keep people's interest in cycling at a high level, cycling policies and spatial planning processes have been enhanced—greener spaces with priority to bicycles, dedicated cycling routes and safe infrastructure, and integrated approaches that support the use of bicycles are some examples [53].

At the transnational level, seven out of the nineteen routes in the EuroVelo network (the European cycle route network trying to offer a sustainable trans-European network which was developed with the support of a wide pool of local stakeholders [54]) cross parts of the ADRION Region (Mediterranean Route, East Europe Route, Baltic–Adriatic Route, Via Romea, Sun Route, Atlantic–Black Sea Route, Iron Curtain Trail [55]), offering a unique experience of history, culture, sunlight, mountains, valleys, and places of great natural interest while showcasing that cycling tourism is a form of sport tourism with much to add to areas' sustainability and resilience.

2.3. Area's Dynamic for Sustainable Tourism Development through Sport Events and Initiatives

Many of the existing sport events are linked with areas' history (Authentic Marathon, 'Alexander the Great' marathon, Belgrade marathon), which supports in parallel active living, tourism, and sport tourism. Very interesting is the fact that volunteers are utilized on many occasions (Authentic Marathon, A.N.I.M.U.S), showing that there is a stable ground for further building on such initiatives. Youth involvement and interest in similar events add value to efforts towards sport tourism development, while youth, empowered and trained ambassadors of sustainability, can contribute to the shift towards sustainable behaviors covering all aspects of life, from daily living to tourism-related decisions.

Looking at the existing initiatives in sport tourism in the area while taking into account the richness of the history and the natural and cultural provisions of ADRION countries, sport tourism seems to be a good opportunity for supporting the area's branding while simultaneously investing in sustainable growth. The interest of the policy part of the area in developing sustainable and responsible tourism potential, through innovative and quality tourism products and services as clearly stated in [56], is in line with sport tourism goals towards sustaining destinations. For this reason, and in order to better define opportunities and extract recommendations, a survey of real actors of tourism from the ADRION area was conducted.

3. Methods

In the current paper, an explanatory case study methodology was applied, which is considered appropriate for dealing with complex issues like sustainable planning [57,58]. Starting from understanding the current situation in the ADRION Region sport tourism initiatives as presented in the previous session, authors are concluding on generalized recommendations. Proposing a set of realistic actions for sustainable sport tourism planning for an area with low capacity and experience but high interest in the field (as revealed from stakeholders' statements in the SUSTOURISMO project framework) was achieved using a targeted questionnaire as the main information-gathering instrument. The information collected was the input for the theme analysis employed in the paper.

3.1. Survey's Scope

As mentioned in the introductory part, based on the dynamic character of sport tourism and the potential positive impact of it in improving an area's attractiveness while supporting sustainable growth, the purpose of this study was to dive into the Adriatic–Ionian case, an area with high existing touristic flows that has, however, invested little in sport tourism so far, so as to:

- (a) understand the state of development of sport tourism in the Adriatic–Ionian Region by identifying good practices for sport tourism development that show windows of opportunity for sector growth;
- (b) highlight the potentials that sport tourism brings to the sustainable growth of the areas;
- (c) draw policy recommendations for sustainable sport tourism development in the region.

In this research, we started from the bottom line that there is an existing initial interest on sport tourism development, with a view to support the wider vision of ADRION destinations towards a sustainable tourism future (as derived from the cases presented in the previous section and the initial considerations of tourism stakeholders as reached in the SUSTOURISMO project); therefore, specific interest and targeted plans are to be extracted through the questionnaires.

3.2. Data Collection

The data were collected through structured interviews with representatives of tourism authorities in the partners' countries and the completion of a questionnaire. The qualitative method aims to provide an in-depth overview of the collected data and detailed clarification of the research topic. The present report used the theme analysis approach as an appropriate tool for qualitative data in the sport field [59–61]. Theme analysis is an easy method for analyzing qualitative data [62–64]. In the current study, we followed the six-step approach (Table 1), as described in [62,64].

Table 1. Six-step approach in theme analysis.

Steps	Content
Familiarize yourself with the dataset	Transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data, taking initial notes, highlighting the main idea (if possible)
Generate initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic way across the entire dataset, highlighting words/phrases/sentences which are relevant to each code
Search for themes	Writing down the codes into potential themes
Review themes	Checking if the themes are relevant to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire dataset (Level 2)
Define and name themes	Analyzing each theme with their codes, generating clear definitions/names/sub-themes to describe your data
Write the report	Producing all the results in a systematic and clear way (table, text, etc.)

In the framework of SUSTOURISMO project activities, a questionnaire aiming to extract insights into the sport tourism dynamic in the ADRION area was developed, and SUSTOURISMO partners, with the support of their stakeholders, gave valuable input on it [65]. The open text questions posed are:

- Whether sport tourism can help economic development in their area and how;
- On top of economic development, how other aspects of sport tourism development can benefit their area;
- Whether their area has specific characteristics (environmental, structural, facilities, services, etc.) which fit with sport tourism promotion and in what way;
- Which are the best examples of sport tourism services (i.e., programs/activities) promoted in their area and why they are considered successful;
- Whether sport tourism in their area can be seen as an autonomous form of tourism to be developed and/or a form supporting of mainstream tourism;
- What is the profile of sport tourists in their region (e.g., age, country, family, socio-economic status);
- Whether their country/area is investing in sport tourism and how;
- Which stakeholders are involved in their area in relation to sport tourism promotion and development;

- Whether there is strong support from the (a) local or (b) central government or (c) both on promoting sport tourism and how;
- Which are the main challenges/difficulties in sport tourism promotion in their area;
- How is sport tourism promoted (e.g., media, social media, and the internet) in their area;
- Comparing mass tourism vs. alternative tourism (sport tourism included), which is the best tourism model for their area and why;
- Whether COVID-19 has influenced (a) tourism and/or (b) sport tourism in their area and how and what were the measures to get back to normality;
- Whether there is the skilled human capital to support sport tourism development;
- What is their future strategy for the development of sport tourism.

In total, 8 questionnaires were collected giving insights for Greece (GR) (2 questionnaires answered from Regions of Central Macedonia and Epirus stakeholders), Italy (IT), Slovenia (SL), Croatia (HR), Albania (AL), Montenegro (ME), and Serbia (RS).

4. Results

The main themes of sport tourism according to qualitative results are presented in the following table. Regarding this table (Table 2), the first column refers to the theme (main umbrella), the second column describes the sub-themes, which refer to the main idea, and the last column addresses the phrases or sentences or summary of paragraphs (from the collected questionnaires) which are relevant to each theme.

Table 2. Results of theme analysis.

Theme	Sub-Theme	Content (Interviewees' Words)
Economic development	Economic sustainability of the country	Jobs are created and tax revenue is earned (AL)
	Revenues	Through ST, the economic capital could increase in the future, but there are concerns about sustainability, an aspect to be taken into account (GR, SL, IT, HR)
	Direct economic impact in the area	Sports contribute significantly to regional economic development by generating employment and securing inflow of both domestic and foreign capital (SL)
Social Impact	Tax revenues	There are several sources of direct revenue in the area (AL, HR, IT, ME)
	Healthy lifestyle	ST impacts social cohesion by encouraging innovation, fostering sustainable development and urban regeneration (SL)
	Social cohesion	Sport tourism also empowers local businesses by creating demand in areas and extending the seasonality phase of tourism, an issue supporting area's resilience and sustainability (GR)
	Social welfare	ST boosts the adoption of a healthier lifestyle (GR, SL, IT)
	Community pride and Destination image development	ST products develop the destination identity as sport tourism destination and enhance its image internationally (RS)
Sport tourism products	Employment sustainability	Building ST services in a remote area could empower social cohesion, community pride, and public wellbeing (GR, SL)
		ST generates employee positions and supports their sustainability (GR, ME, SL, HR, IT, AL)
		We are organizing sport tourism packages for runners to stay in the city (RS)
	National parks	Our mainland is covered by mountains. Thus, several outdoor activities are offered (SL, AL, GR)
	Outdoor activities	There are trail running paths, hiking trails, cycling itineraries to offer (GR, AL, SL)
	Sport festivals	At Lake Pamvotida of Ioannina, panhellenic and international water skiing and rowing competitions take place, while, at the same time, the lake is a destination for the preparation of sport teams (GR)
	Professional and amateur tournaments	
	Running events	The sport festival was held for two days. We also link it to cultural and educational events (GR)

Table 2. Cont.

Theme	Sub-Theme	Content (Interviewees' Words)
Stakeholders	National Tourism Organizations	The government's support is a fundamental aspect of our actions (SL, GR, HR)
	Sport Tourism Associations	Several local municipalities are involved with sport events (SL, GR, AL, ME, IT, RS, HR)
	Regional/Local Municipalities	Local volunteers are our major pillar to bid the marathon (GR)
	Private clubs	The local authorities (police, first aid responders, local entrepreneurs, etc.) are a necessary part of our event (RS, GR, SL)
	Tour operators	The main distributor of our sport products is an international tour operator (AL)
	Travel agents	Hoteliers (GR)
	Hotels	Sport clubs and associations (AL, ME)
Strengths	Restaurants	There are some people with high expertise in ST management (GR)
	Human resources expertise	For 2022 and 2023, the Slovenian Tourist Board has defined sport tourism as the main communication theme (SL)
	Strategic marketing actions	ST products are offered mainly in natural environment; thus, we need to take careful action to protect nature (GR, ME)
	Promotional actions	Our area is full of natural resources and exciting local areas (AL, GR, HR, SL)
	Natural environment	Digital marketing is the main communication channel of the ST products (GR, HR, IT, SL)
		We seek funds to support our event (HR, ME)
		Climate change requires new strategies for the sustainable management of tourism destinations (GR)
Challenges	Funds (public and private)	In the period of the peak of pandemic and global COVID crisis, there were less arrivals, and hotels and restaurants were closed for some time. Sport events faced similar challenges (HR)
	Low government investments	There are few individuals with expertise in outdoor activities (AL, SL, GR)
	Outdated infrastructures	The main reason lies in the outdated infrastructure (SL)
	COVID-19 pandemic impact	The COVID-19 pandemic was the worst thing for our field (GR, SL, IT, HR, ME, AL)
	Training human resources	Our brand name gives us a strong advantage through athletes' brand (SL)
	Development of stakeholders' collaboration	The ST branding strengthens the visibility and reputation of Slovenia through intensive communication and promotional activities and cooperation with Slovenian athletes (SL)
	Technology	Local authorities also participate in theme trades related to sport tourism sector in order to develop sport image and tourism awareness for the destination (GR)
Good practices	Climate change	The promotional plan includes the promotion of sport tourism either as an autonomous form or as a secondary/complementary activity that visitors can do in Epirus (GR)
	Branding destination	The area has a long history on hiking trails (SL, GR)
	Development of destination identity	We focus on sustainability of our jobs, employers, and destination (AL, IT, ME, SL)
	International marketing strategies	
	Theme Trades	
	International tour operator cooperations	
	Using social media channels	
	Sustainability goals	

5. Potentials for Boosting Sustainable Growth in the Adrion Areas through Sport Tourism

As mentioned in the introduction, sport tourism can contribute to the sustainable growth of an area and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Analyzing the results of the survey, this statement can be easily made for the specific Adrion Areas. More specifically, sport tourism seems to contribute to the following specific SDGs:

- Promotion of sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth;
- Ensuring healthy lives and promotion of wellbeing for all ages;

- Protection, restoration, and promotion of sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystem;
- Promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies.

The sport tourism sector has a great economic impact in ADRION societies. It increases the employment rate, the tax revenues, and the economic capital, while it contributes significantly to regional economic development by generating employment and securing the inflow of both domestic and foreign capital.

Sport tourism, like other segments of tourism, provides jobs and income opportunities, including for less favored groups in Albania. Depending on the nature of sport tourism products and experiences developed, local people work for the different services that are provided to the visitors, and new businesses catering to sport tourists are developed. Another characteristic related to the economic impact of sport tourism in all the Adrion Areas is the fact that sport tourists tend to spend more than average tourists (for renting equipment, hiring instructors, participation fees, etc.).

Sport tourism in all the ADRION areas seems to boost the active living of residents and increases the percentage of people who will be actively involved in sports. Participants in sport tourism have positive emotions associated with their experience which can make them change their lifestyle towards more healthy and active daily activities and behavior.

In almost all the study Adrion areas, sport tourism is related to nature, and as a result, it plays an important role in enhancing awareness of nature's value and the importance of its protection, as well as encouraging measures for environmental preservation among travelers, the locals, and the tourism industry. The Pamvotida lake in Ionanina, the canyons in Adriatrek, Petrovac, and Montenegro, and the mountains of the Slovenian Alps are some of the natural attractions that are used for sport tourism purposes.

Building sustainable tourism services, especially in the remote areas of the Adrion countries, seems to empower social cohesion, community pride, and public wellbeing. Additionally, as regards the visitors of the areas, sport tourism provides encounters between people of diverse cultural backgrounds and lets them interact with each other. It fosters friendship and mutual understanding, laying the foundation for more peaceful societies. It also helps the locals and visitors to have a friendly relationship through sport and other activities.

The main conclusion of the previous analysis is that all the Adrion areas of the current study seem to have strong potential to boost sustainable development through sport tourism, taking into account the policy recommendations that are presented in the following section.

6. Policy Recommendations

The policy recommendations for boosting sport tourism in ADRION destinations, presented in this section, are based on the above qualitative analysis and are linked with the understanding of the sport tourism dynamic as presented in the introductory part.

6.1. Sport Tourism Products

The study has indicated further evidence that the sport tourism sector holds a strong popularity in the ADRION region, with mutual services such as outdoor activities and sport events. This result leads to the question, "which is the sport tourism product for the ADRION region to further develop a recognized and sustained sport environment which, in its turn, supports future destinations and their society?". Developing a unique sport identity of sport tourism takes time and is shaped by several external (i.e., social, political, and economic) factors. The most critical factor is considered the geographical location where the sport tourism services take place and the existent sport facilities in the host destination. Most sport tourism services in ADRION are associated with the natural environment and cities' facilities. Today, the countries which are investigated in this report bid on a broad range of small-scale city and outdoor sport events, adventure tours, and daily outdoor activities and host senior or amateur tournaments. Despite most organizers' well-defined recreational focus, they also seek broader audiences and diverse

groups of people including families, competitive/elite runners, and people with disabilities (segmentation and needs coverage based on different profiles). Thus, well-clarified sport tourism objectives are critical for their identity, communications, and sustainability in order to generate a unique sport product.

Further building on survey's answers, it is recommended that sport tourism organizers should clearly determine their sport products and provide further details for the geographic location to highlight their geographical advantage compared to their competitors, as well as explain their facilities and services; linking them to sustainability goals is needed and can be done by mobilizing sustainability ambassadors, such as young people. On the other hand, sport tourism owners and policy makers might establish cooperations with local authorities and stakeholders of the area—cooperation is mentioned in all surveys as a prerequisite both for sport tourism and also for an integrated approach towards the areas' sustainable development. The latter can enhance the identity of the product and the greater mobilization of resources to support each service at the time. Furthermore, sport tourism policy makers and promoters need to identify suitable elements of their services and their destination. This leads to new opportunities for destination marketing. What is also needed is that the sport tourism services have tangible objectives which can be measured and assessed. All stakeholders and participants should be involved in the monitoring and assessment of sport tourism provisions. It is also supported that sport tourism promoters (i.e., partners, sponsors, media) ought to work around a main objective of the product. For example, they could develop an adventure image perception for a specific area in their country that supports sustainable destination branding. Another strategy might be the development of commercial associations for a sport event in the same area. Both tactics lead to one objective which is the development of a sport identity with clear sport products.

6.2. Target Groups and Service Tender

The sport service demand is specified by the participants' willingness and behavioral intentions to engage with a sport tourism product. This engagement has a twofold goal for both destination and participants: tangible benefits for the hosting destination (e.g., paying a fee at a Dinarik national park in Croatia—direct economic impact) and intangible benefits for the participants (e.g., gaining self-confidence through adventure activities) and the area (e.g., sport tourists, familiar with walking and cycling, are probably more keen to also adopt sustainable travel patterns for their non-event-linked travels on their trip, i.e., for sightseeing). It is also very important to classify customers in smaller niche markets to provide personalization and customized services—this tailored-to-needs approach can also serve the transmission of sustainability messages. The attitude 'we target all kinds of tourists' is not working anymore, since sport tourism participants have their own unique needs and motivations.

The authors propose that sport tourism entrepreneurs might offer well-specified information, support, and unique services which fit the cultural assets of the area and give the sense of an authentic experience, linked also with the area's history (as in the marathons presented above). Sport tourism organizers should offer clear incentives for different types of participants (i.e., physically disabled individuals) [66] and trigger sustainable behaviors. Furthermore, policy makers might state the benefits and the expected outcomes from participation in their activities. This strategy will empower positive attitudes toward sport products and motivate individuals for future participation. Moreover, sport tourism promoters should outline the main product, the side activities, and the amenities which are offered in the area. This tactic will reveal the core and the peripheral sport product and, simultaneously, the different opportunists for sport participation and active holidays, while in parallel they should highlight the role of this active type of tourism in reaching areas' sustainability.

6.3. Sport Tourism Management

Sport tourism management is the key element to further develop a destination to a sport, active, and sustainable tourism brand. Thus, local and/or regional stakeholders should generate a small sport tourism hub which in turn will act as a communication channel for future participants. The management of a sport tourism product contains several actors, such as government, local authorities, non-profit organizations, freelancers, and entrepreneurs. It is of the utmost importance to create strong collaborations for planning, implementation, and evaluation of such services. Thus, sport tourism product management could be considered as a permanent activity. A common concern which was noted across the sample was the lack of human expertise in the field. This outcome means that skillful human resources are needed.

Answering the considerations of the stakeholders answering the survey, it is recommended that owners and organizers find and/or train human resources according to the market needs, including skills such as planning, communications, hard/technical skills, and service offerings. Sport management teams should create appropriate technical manuals, operation reports, and guides to ensure the smooth transfer of knowledge in their human resources department. This will ensure the success story of sport tourism services in the area. Sport management teams ought to focus on delivering the product as promised to different groups—inclusiveness as part of destinations' wider vision. This will lead to brand trust, which is needed to create positive word of mouth and loyal customers. It goes hand in hand with trust in the sport tourism product and should be built with trust in environmental goals.

As for sport tourism product management, it is also suggested that sport tourism organizers should develop a 'participant's journey' map to manage service quality at each stage. This practical implication will help operation managers to evaluate and improve their services. Sustainability assessment of sport tourism initiatives should also be taken into account once reaching the target groups and asking them to evaluate the product. Notifications and tips for their contribution in the sustainability goals can accompany any type of after-visit assessment, also increasing, in this way, awareness for future trips. It is also vital from a management perspective to evoke positive experiences of sport tourism participants and build satisfaction in a sport event in order to contribute to positive and responsible behaviors that are vital to sport organizations [67] and to the areas.

Lastly, synergies and collaborations within the sport tourism sector to develop aligned environmental strategies and sport initiatives seem to be on the right path towards optimal sport tourism management [68].

6.4. Sport Tourism Impact

The sport tourism sector has a great economic and social impact in ADRION societies. Therefore, sport managers of adventure sports in Bovec or sport events and festivals in Thessaloniki might include tangible and intangible impacts in their promotional activities for both consumers and local stakeholders (i.e., tour operators, local authorities, local communities). Tangible impact characteristics might be new infrastructures for tournaments, reconstruction of outdated facilities, hiking trail improvements, direct revenues in remote areas of the country, and job creation. On the other hand, intangible characteristics of impact refer to social cohesion, community pride, development of sport identity, enhanced destination sport image, and social wellbeing. Sport policy makers usually focus on the tangible characteristics to promote their services. However, a good practice might be the promotion of intangible benefits in the domestic market and for stakeholders to make society aware of and create a positive attitude toward the sport tourism products. Without any doubt, all sport tourism activities have much greater intangible impacts such as healthy lifestyle benefits, which are directly associated with broader wellbeing objectives.

It is recommended that sport tourism promoters communicate the intangible benefits to future participants and local stakeholders, among which is the contribution to sustainability. Tangible benefits and rewards could be exploited to further trigger interest. On the side

of policy makers, they are responsible for ensuring that the estimated impacts are closely aligned with sustainable destinations' identity and sport products. Sport organizations and policy makers should be in close cooperation for undertaking environmental impact assessments and bringing robust environmental policy development one step closer to integrated sustainability policies [69]. Input should be given by the sport managers, and they should report their direct economic impact to leverage authorities for further support. In parallel, sport marketers should communicate social impacts in their communities in order to create a favorable attitude toward their brand as a sustainable destination for sport tourism. This will lead to positive attitudes for sport tourism products and for sustainable and responsible behaviors.

6.5. Sport Tourism Marketing

Sport tourism marketing is a challenging process to grow a destination's reputation as a sport brand—creating synergies in sport management is one of the most important dimensions [31]. Marketing refers to sport products, including but not limited to creating opportunities for revenue, exploration of distribution channels, and promotional actions. The marketing mix should contain communication messages, detailed information, and usage benefits of sport services. However, these actions must be in line with all stakeholders. Therefore, meetings should be held in order for all stakeholders to follow the recommendations. A striking finding of the present study is the various marketing approaches which stakeholders may apply in each country in a separate way. This finding leads to tension among them and does not follow the marketing standards within a collaboration between public and private sectors. The main character of sport tourism products, based on the sample, is the recreational form of activities. Hence, all stakeholders should understand the nature of sport tourism to provide services which fit the participants' needs. A last note should be made regarding marketing strategies. Most of the organizations and companies use local, regional, or national promotion services. With the usage of social media platforms, policy makers should adopt international marketing approaches to attract international tourists.

Sport tourism promoters should adopt international marketing strategies to attract inbound tourists and should cooperate with sustainability ambassadors for mutually supporting the twofold goal of active living and sustainable behaviors. Today, DMO should contain human resources who are experts in applicability and operate all kind of social media channels, including search engine optimization practices. In addition to the above, a real active competent authority should invest in sport tourism; policy makers should identify participants' needs, perceptions, and experiences of sport tourism and share this information with stakeholders. This will lead to better custom fitting services and to the effort of raising awareness for fitting tourists actual needs.

Participatory planning for sport tourism should be a cornerstone. For example, sport events could profile their participants and spread the word to affiliated sport events to develop unique services which do not overlap with one another and which operate respecting and even enhancing sustainable destinations' profiles.

On the promoters' side, they might apply an integrated marketing communication strategy which is in line with the local authorities' or government's national strategy for tourism development and for sustainable growth.

Finally, sport managers should develop organizational culture and suitable marketing plans to ensure synergies among interested parties. For example, adventure companies could cooperate with each other in order to provide more services (e.g., rafting companies with hiking companies) and with experts and stakeholders in the field of sustainability. Sport promoters need to pay attention to the use of social media and create suitable messages in their overall sustainable marketing strategy. They could create content according to the advantages of the area of the sport products in the host destination. Any type of available digital tool for promoting the strategies should be exploited, taking into account sport

tourists' segments; digital sport tourism marketing can play a pivotal role in the promotion of events and initiatives, and according to [70], it can raise even greater brand awareness.

6.6. Sport Tourism Sustainability and Support

A common concern among the study's participants was the sustainability of sport tourism in their region. Sport tourism sustainability depends on several factors. Some of the sample reported funding constraints, while others reported difficulties due to high competition, nationally and from the nearby countries. Furthermore, a range of other important aspects could negatively impact the sustainability of the sector. These issues refer to overcrowded national parks, environmental management, waste management, industry standards, poorly shaped sport facilities, and small green areas in cities. Another mutual constraint, as indicated in the results, is the lack of government and public support for the sector. Several stakeholders reported the necessity of government support to further develop their product. Government and local authorities often hold a logistic role in sport tourism services. These actions could be identified in making the route traffic-free for a running event, providing fences and police control in a tournament, or controlling the fee for a national park. Only a few of them provide a small amount of financial support. Moreover, they are responsible for the natural environment which sport tourism services offer. The stakeholders noted the lack of taking care of actions to create an appropriate environment for their services. Based on the above lines, governments and local authorities could categorize their sport tourism products by quantitative (e.g., based on the number of companies) and qualitative (e.g., by geographical location and needs) aspects. This segmentation might help owners and entrepreneurs to improve their infrastructure and develop clear strategies. The support could be an improvement of roads for approaching a national park, reconstruction of an outdated stadium, human resources support, funding opportunities, etc.

As needed, local governments should develop a targeted policy for different types of companies (i.e., profit and non-profit) and areas (i.e., city and outdoors) in line with national tourism authorities' marketing strategies and draw an action and support plan for them. This will help the national tourism sector to create a clear promotional strategy internationally. Furthermore, local authorities might develop and construct attractive and user-friendly urban or natural environments to further support sport tourism companies. Environmental responsibility attitudes to promote destinations as eco-friendly sport tourism destinations can also play a significant role. There is also another aspect linked to sustainability: innovation can lead radical changes. For example, digital interactive copies of sport events can reduce the need for physical presence linked with transport emission reduction [71] while still bringing economic benefits to the areas. On the other hand, virtual sport events kept the interest of the audience alive even in the era of COVID-19 [72]—eSports, as mentioned by [36], have brought a new era to travelling, tourism, and sport event participation, while integration with traditional sport management approaches [73] should be guaranteed in order for local benefits to exist. Digitalization can also help improve event experience as well as the area's sustainability—before the event (i.e., trip planners offering information for green mobility options [74], dynamic geofencing solutions to support increased resilience during major events [75]), during the event (i.e., gamification approaches for increasing interaction among participants, for building the necessary perceptual sense of belonging at events [76], and for raising environmental awareness [77]), and after the event (i.e., smart mobility management for optimally departing from the event, apps keeping alive the interaction among participants). Lastly, European sport standards as applied in other countries (e.g., adventure tourism in central Europe) and compliance with current tourism industry sustainability standards are necessary.

7. Discussion

Sport tourism and planning for sustainability are complex issues being affected by global trends and challenges, and this motivated the research of the current paper; recom-

mentations provided the aim to act as a guide for ADRION authorities and other interested parties to dive into the different aspects of sustainable event planning and implementation.

The cases studies of sport tourism events and initiatives in the study area showed that there is an initial interest for sport tourism investment in the ADRION Region, while the preliminary discussions with ADRION stakeholders (within the SUSTOURISMO project) supported the willingness to further build capacity on the topic.

It is recommended that sport tourism service providers should establish strategic cooperation with local authorities and stakeholders (public–private cooperation schemes) for enhancing the identity of the product and the greater mobilization of necessary resources. Co-planning is also necessary for inclusive sport tourism; sport tourists of all different ages and needs should get involved in decision making and product design, and targeted sustainability-related messages should accompany efforts in sport tourism promotion. Furthermore, identifying suitable elements of sport tourism services will generate new opportunities for destination marketing, a process that should take into account the destination and overall needs. Stakeholders should invest in developing environmental responsibility attitudes to promote destinations as eco-friendly areas that prioritize sustainability. It is also important that the sport tourism services have tangible objectives which can be measured and assessed at a time and that the estimated impacts are closely aligned with the destinations' identities and objectives. As regards promotion, sport promoters need to pay attention to the use of social media and create suitable messages in the overall marketing strategy and should adopt international marketing strategies to attract inbound tourists. Another crucial aspect is skills development and capacity building for involved actors, while finally, financial support and sponsorship opportunities for sport providers are necessary for the implementation of sport tourism initiatives. Under the above conditions, it is supported that sport tourism can act as real driver of change towards sustainability of destinations.

8. Conclusions

For the current study, authors were motivated by the existing gap of knowledge in sustainable sport tourism planning, as revealed through the discussions with ADRION stakeholders. The interest of ADRION stakeholders in the promotion of sport tourism as a key to unlock the sustainability of destinations, revealed through the existing sport tourism initiatives and supported by survey results, jointly considered with the global trend of shifting to active living and tourism, shows that sport tourism presents a great dynamic for the study area.

The economic and social impact of sport tourism development is estimated to be remarkable, giving a boost in further investing in this form of tourism. Sport tourism can be an answer to the seasonality problem of ADRION tourism destinations; organizing the suitable event per case and per season can provide an impetus to year-round tourism. Taking also into account the experience of the pandemic, sport tourism seems also to resist shocking situations, providing an alternative to travelers while supporting an active way of living and travelling. For example, cycling as a form of sport tourism and physical exercise which is relaxing and healthy and brings tourists close to the nature can be an opportunity for the sustainable development of the area. Considering shocking situations (like COVID-19), eSports can be a solution having as a long-term goal the transformation of engaged and sensibilized digital tourists into responsible future visitors.

Promotion actions and campaigns in sport tourism should be accompanied with sustainability messages as mutual promoters of economic and environmental status improvement—the already existing pool of volunteers and youth volunteers supporting the organization of sport events in the area is a very positive point, revealing that a change is possible once joint efforts are taken and once training and capacity building takes place.

As a next step of the current study and in order to develop a clearer view of the area's willingness and opportunities for investing in sport tourism as a driver of destinations' sustainability, the survey presented in this paper should be tailored for tourism-related

stakeholders (decision makers, services providers, tourists, and locals), and the survey should be repeated in order to collect the different groups' ideas, suggestions, and considerations. Comparing the results of the different categories of involved stakeholders will reveal further aspects and will add to improving the recommendations.

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