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EUROPEAN LAKE DESTINATIONS AND SUSTAINABILITY: THE CASE OF THE NEULAKES NETWORK

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Introduction

Lakes have long been recognized as valuable natural resources, playing a key role in the environment and the socio-economic development of local communities. Beyond their ecological significance, lakes offer numerous opportunities for tourism, providing local communities with economic benefits while also contributing to the preservation of cultural heritage and landscapes. The increasing interest in sustainable tourism has drawn attention to how lakes can be leveraged as strategic destinations while ensuring environmental protection. This thesis explores the multiple benefits lakes offer to local communities, with a particular focus on their potential for tourism and the role of networks such as nEULakes in fostering sustainable tourism development in European lake regions.

Sustainable tourism has become increasingly important as it seeks to balance environmental conservation with socio-economic benefits for local communities. Lakes, often located in fragile ecosystems vulnerable to pollution, overuse, and climate change, are popular tourist destinations. Sustainable tourism practices are crucial for preserving their natural beauty and ensuring long-term viability. Networks like nEULakes promote collaboration among minor centers on European lakes to share best practices, address challenges like environmental degradation and fluctuating tourist demand, and enhance tourism management strategies.

The first chapter provides an overview of the environmental and socio-economic significance of lakes, emphasizing their vital role as freshwater resources that support biodiversity, ecosystems, and human activities. Lakes offer essential services such as drinking water, irrigation, and recreation while also sustaining agriculture, fishing, and water supply needs. The chapter highlights the connection between lakes and their surrounding environments, showing how these natural bodies contribute to ecological balance and environmental health. It also explores the origins of lakes, offering insights into their diverse formation processes. Through limnology, i.e. the scientific study of inland waters, the section underscores the ecological significance of lakes, particularly their role in sustaining biodiversity. Additionally, it delves into the economic, cultural, and recreational benefits lakes provide to local communities while addressing the

pressing challenges posed by climate change, emphasizing the need for sustainable management strategies to ensure the long-term viability of these vital resources.

Chapter 2 focuses on lakes as tourist attractions, highlighting their recreational opportunities and cultural significance. It defines lake tourism and explores the various activities that draw visitors to lake destinations, such as swimming, boating, hiking, and cultural events. Additionally, the chapter evaluates the economic benefits of lake tourism, such as job creation, revenue generation, and the development of local businesses. It also considers the environmental and social impacts of this practice, both positive and negative, addressing challenges like seasonal demand and environmental pressures. It concludes with a discussion on sustainable tourism management, outlining strategies to ensure the responsible development and preservation of lake destinations.

Chapter 3 focuses on the case study of nEULakes, a network of minor centers surrounding European lakes that collaborates to promote sustainable tourism. The section outlines the network's goals and its significance in supporting sustainable tourism initiatives across various lake regions. It details the programs and initiatives launched by nEULakes, including cultural exchanges and educational programs that emphasize environmental protection. A key aspect of this chapter is its exploration of the European Commission's funding opportunities, which facilitate collaboration among stakeholders to advance sustainability and tourism in lake areas. A specific case study of successful collaboration within the network, the *ENSEMBLE* project, is also included, which aims to enhance sustainable tourism across nEULakes member lakes.

The last chapter reports on interviews with stakeholders from various nEULakes destinations. The talks centered on three themes: lakes and sustainability management, the balance between sustainability and tourism, and the nEULakes network's role. Key topics such as the challenges faced by lake regions, the effectiveness of nEULakes' initiatives, and the importance of networks in promoting sustainable tourism are identified. Additionally, this part offers examples of best practices and policy recommendations based on stakeholder feedback and suggests future research areas, emphasizing the nEULakes network's role in facilitating collaboration and innovation for sustainable European lake tourism management.

In conclusion, this thesis aims to achieve two main objectives: first, to demonstrate the essential role that lakes play as natural and touristic resources for local communities, and second, to evaluate the impact of collaborative networks like nEULakes in enhancing the sustainability of lake tourism. By exploring the balance between tourism development and environmental conservation, this research contributes to highlighting the importance of cooperation at both the local and international levels in ensuring that tourism development supports the ecological, cultural, and economic well-being of lake regions.

1. The value of lakes as natural resources

1.1 Introduction

Lakes are among the most vital and dynamic freshwater resources on our planet, playing an indispensable role in the lives of local communities. These natural reservoirs of water serve as crucial sources of drinking water, irrigation, and recreation, while also supporting diverse ecosystems that contribute to the overall health of the environment.

This chapter aims to explore the multifaceted value of lakes, emphasizing their significance for local communities and the ecosystems they support. Furthermore, it addresses the pressing challenges posed by climate change and the strategies required for effective management.

The first section provides a brief introduction to freshwater, outlining its fundamental importance to human life and ecological balance. Understanding the various origins of lakes, as explored in the second section, offers insight into the diverse nature of these bodies of water and their formation processes. The third section delves into limnology – the scientific study of inland waters – highlighting the ecological value of lakes and their role in sustaining biodiversity.

The fourth section focuses on the direct and indirect benefits lakes offer to local communities, from economic opportunities to cultural and recreational activities. Lastly, the chapter discusses the numerous challenges that climate change poses to lake ecosystems and the livelihoods of those who depend on them. It underlines the need for management strategies to ensure the sustainability of these natural resources in the face of a rapidly changing climate.

By examining the natural values of lakes, this chapter seeks to highlight the critical relationship between lakes, local communities, and the environment, cultivating a deeper awareness and understanding of these essential freshwater resources.

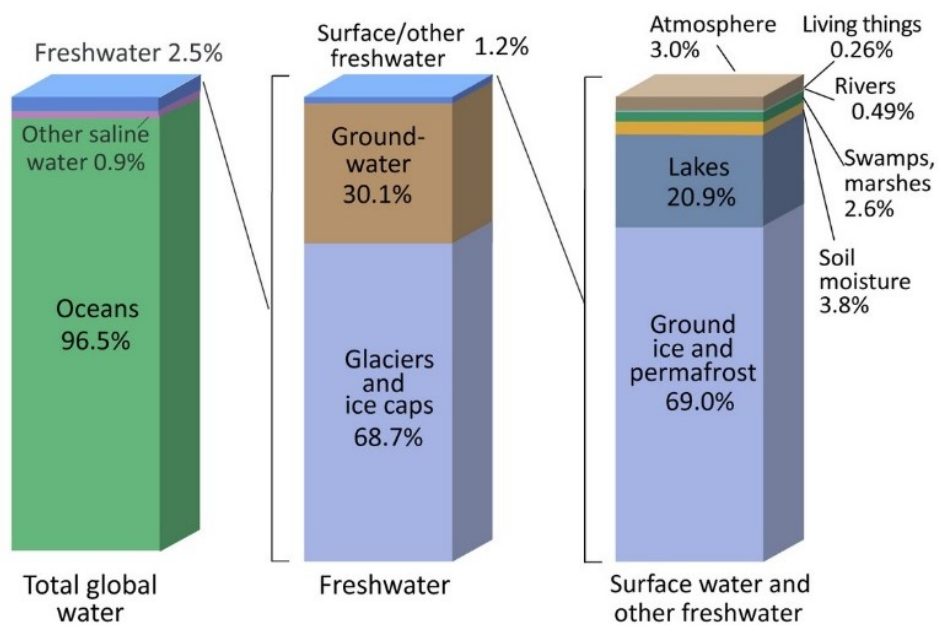
The central emphasis on lakes is due to the primary subject of this thesis, which delves into the importance of an interconnected network of lakes in contributing towards more sustainability.

1.2 Water resources on Earth

The Earth is characterized by a significant abundance of water, with approximately 71% of its surface covered. The oceans alone hold an astounding 96.5% of all the water on Earth (USGS Water Science School, 2019). In addition to the vast oceans, water exists in various forms across the planet: It can be found as water vapor in the air, in the flowing currents of rivers and lakes, trapped in ice caps and glaciers, and within the Earth as soil moisture and in aquifers. Furthermore, water is an essential component of living organisms, existing within both humans and animals, and contributing to the formation and maintenance of ecosystems. While it's easy to envision the water on the Earth's surface, it's important to recognize that there is a significance of unseen water beneath our feet in supporting life.

Image 1

Where is Earth's Water?



Credit: U.S. Geological Survey, Water Science School. <https://www.usgs.gov/special-topic/water-science-school>
 Data source: Igor Shiklomanov's chapter "World fresh water resources" in Peter H. Gleick (editor), 1993, *Water in Crisis: A Guide to the World's Fresh Water Resources*. (Numbers are rounded).

Image 1 shows the bar chart created by the U.S. Geological Survey that illustrates the distribution of Earth's water, highlighting that almost all of it is in the form of saline water in the oceans. Only a tiny proportion of the total water on Earth is freshwater, and out of that, only a relatively small amount is accessible and capable of sustaining human, plant, and animal life.

In a more detailed analysis of the data, the initial bar in the graph underlines the fact that only 2.5% of the Earth's total water is freshwater, which is essential for sustaining all forms of life.

The middle bar shows the distribution and percentage breakdown of freshwater. The majority of the world's freshwater is located in ice caps and glaciers, as well as underground. However, a small fraction, slightly over 1.2%, exists as surface water, such as rivers and lakes. Despite its relatively small percentage, this surface water plays a critical role in meeting the needs of various life forms on our planet (Wetzel, 2001).

Finally, the distribution of surface freshwater is illustrated in the right bar. Most of this water is stored in ice, while around 20.9% is contained in lakes. Rivers represent a mere 0.49% of surface freshwater. Despite their minimal contribution to the overall freshwater volume, rivers are a crucial water source for human consumption.

Surface water is predominantly utilized for the supply of drinking water and for irrigation purposes. However, groundwater is of utmost importance as it not only contributes to the maintenance of adequate water levels in rivers and lakes but also serves as a vital water source for communities located in regions where visible water sources are scarce (USGS Water Science School, 2019).

As mentioned, the Earth's hydrosphere covers over two-thirds of the planet's surface and comprises about 97% marine waters, with the remaining percentage comprising continental waters. However, only a tiny portion of this water is readily available for human use. Water resources are not distributed evenly across the planet, with some regions having abundant water while others face scarcity (Federparchi, n.d.).

Today, the rapid growth of the global population, increasing consumer demand for products, the effects of climate change, and the significant impact of pollution are posing serious threats to water management.

This water crisis is generated by a multitude of factors, including the rapid growth of the global population, increasing consumer demand for products, the effects of climate change, and the significant impact of pollution. A staggering 70% of the world's water is utilized for agricultural purposes (Federparchi, n.d.), therefore, in light of the severity of the water crisis, it becomes imperative to thoroughly reassess and innovate agrarian techniques to ensure that they are not only more resource-efficient but also significantly minimize wastage.

In industrialized nations, water pollution is primarily caused by agricultural and industrial activities introducing chemical contaminants into water sources. On the other hand, in developing countries, water pollution is largely attributed to mining operations and unregulated domestic activities, which lack proper sewage systems, leading to contamination. Additionally, air pollution significantly contributes to water pollution, and the impact of climate change further worsens the challenges faced by ecosystems and water supplies.

Another cause of the water crisis is the disruption of its cycle. In fact, water is a vital and dynamic resource constantly in motion. This process ensures the continuous movement of water from one location to another and from one state to another. However, water can become a finite resource if this cycle is disrupted.

Throughout the last century, the demand for water on a global scale has risen significantly, contributing to a widespread water crisis, particularly in regions with limited access to water. A staggering 11% of the world's population currently lacks access to safe drinking water, posing a severe threat to the well-being of millions of individuals.

Numerous scientific studies have demonstrated that the minimum biological water requirement per capita for human survival is 5 liters of water within 24 hours. It is essential to emphasize that while the human body can sustain itself without food for a

month, the absence of water renders survival impossible beyond a mere week. This underscores the crucial significance of water as a fundamental necessity for the preservation of human life.

In discussions about adequate living standards, it's important to note that each human requires a minimum of 50 liters of water per day. However, the harsh reality is that billions of people lack access to this amount of water on a daily basis, making it an unattainable goal.

Recognizing the critical issue of water scarcity, the United Nations has set the minimum water right at 40 liters per day in an effort to gain widespread support for World Water Day, which is observed globally on March 22nd. This significant day serves as a platform to celebrate the importance of water in our lives and aims to raise awareness of the 2.2 billion people worldwide who lack access to clean and safe water (UN-Water, n.d.).

As the United Nations, various organizations, such as the World Bank and the World Health Organization (WHO), are actively pursuing ambitious goals and projects aimed at addressing the pressing challenges associated with climate change and water scarcity. Their collective efforts are focused on finding sustainable solutions to these critical global issues.

In the upcoming sections, the research will delve into a detailed exploration of freshwater environments with a specific emphasis on lakes, the main object of research of this thesis.

1.3 Origin of lakes

Lakes are vital components of the Earth's ecosystem and have significant impacts on surrounding environments and human communities. They offer a diverse range of advantages, underscoring their significance in various aspects of life. The creation of lakes is evidence of the Earth's constantly evolving and dynamic surface, influenced by factors such as tectonic movements and shifts in climate patterns.

Among the world's freshwater bodies, there are many artificial features such as fish ponds, drinking water reservoirs, hydroelectric and irrigation dams, and rice fields. Despite the prevalence of these man-made structures, a substantial number of naturally formed basins also exist (Moss, 2010).

Many of these natural lakes have been shaped by dramatic and often catastrophic events, such as glacial, volcanic, and tectonic activities, which have also clustered many of these lakes into distinct lake districts (Wetzel, 2001). These lakes are typically shallow and have a transient geological existence.

1.3.1 Glacial lakes

The most important agent of lake formation is glacier erosion and deposition processes (Wetzel, 2001).

A glacial lake is a fascinating natural phenomenon formed by the erosive power of glaciers over thousands of years. As glaciers carve their way through the land, they create deep depressions that eventually fill with water, generating these bodies of water. Glacial lakes serve as a powerful testament to the ever-changing climate, as they are directly tied to historical and ongoing fluctuations in the Earth's climate that have shaped the planet's landscape over time.

They are crucial for studying climate change due to their volume changes and ecological data. Additionally, their beauty and uniqueness attract tourists from around the world, highlighting the need for conservation for future generations. They symbolize our planet's natural dynamics and are valuable for understanding environmental changes.

These lakes are present in different regions of the world, ranging from remarkable ones like the Great Lakes of North America, which were formed during the last ice age, to alpine lakes such as Lake Geneva and Lake Como. The lakes found in the Pyrenees and those in Iceland, like the Jökulsárlón, are also perfect examples of this type of lake.

1.3.2 Tectonic lakes

The formation of lakes can also be significantly influenced by the movement of tectonic plates, which create the Earth's crust. These lakes typically originate at fault lines where these plates meet and where earthquakes are more likely to occur. Over time, they can grow extensive and deep and often take on an elongated shape.

Examples of tectonic lakes include the colossal Lake Baikal in Siberia (the world's deepest lake), as well as Lake Malawi and Lake Tanganyika in Africa.

1.3.3 Volcanic lakes

Indirectly controlled by tectonic activity, volcanic movements can also create lakes. Volcanic lakes are formed within volcanic craters or calderas by the accumulation of water. This water can come from precipitation, groundwater discharge, river outflows, or a combination of these factors.

Crater lakes are commonly found in tropical regions where the rainfall is abundant enough to fill the basins of active volcanoes.

Some notable examples include Kawah Ijen in Indonesia, the largest acidic lake on an active volcano worldwide. In New Zealand, Ruapehu and White Island both experienced eruptions in 2019. Central and South America are home to volcanoes with crater lakes, such as Santa Ana in El Salvador, Copahue, and Peteroa.

Japan is also noteworthy for crater lakes, with examples such as Yugama Lake on the Kusatsu-Shirane volcano and Yudamari Lake on the Aso volcano. Despite not being located in the tropics, Japan's snow serves as an essential meteoric recharge for the formation of crater lakes.

1.3.4 River lakes

Many lakes result from the movement of sediments in the rivers. Over the course of time, the immense force of water flowing through river paths can cause significant erosion, eventually forming lake basins in the eroded areas.

Furthermore, when a waterfall creates a lake at its base, erosion by the force of falling water creates a type of lake known as a plunge-pool lake. Additionally, lakes can also form at river mouths and on deltas, providing unique habitats for diverse ecosystems.

1.3.5 Man-made lakes

Lakes can be formed not only by natural catastrophic events but also by human activities. Man-made lakes, such as reservoirs and impoundments, are created through deliberate or unintentional processes involving damming or other actions leading to water accumulation in a specific area.

Examples of artificial lakes include reservoirs constructed for the purpose of supplying drinking water, generating power, supporting fisheries, and providing recreational activities. Additionally, there are other types of man-made lakes, such as farm ponds, constructed on agricultural land and primarily used for irrigation and livestock watering; ornamental lakes, designed for aesthetic purposes and can often be found in gardens or public parks; and quarry lakes, originally created for mineral extraction and other industrial activities.

1.3.6 Further origins

People, ice, and earth movements play all a role in the formation of lakes, but these are not the only factors (Moss, 2010).

Natural lakes can also be created through a variety of gradual processes. For example, lakes can form from the erosion of chalk or limestone by rainwater, which dissolves the

rock as it flows underground. Additionally, they can be generated by the ocean when longshore bars of shingle and sand block river mouths, causing freshwater to pool behind them.

Moreover, wind erosion has the ability to create shallow depressions that may hold water temporarily or seasonally. For example, sandy areas can feature dune lakes, while flat, arid, or semiarid regions may include playa lakes.

Finally, natural reservoirs can also be created from animal and plant activities. Beavers, for instance, construct dams in rivers, creating lakes behind the dams. Over time, sediments can accumulate against the dam, leading to the formation of natural basins.

1.4 The value of lakes for the ecosystem

Lakes are inland bodies of water that are surrounded by land. They vary in size and shape but are easy to monitor, thanks to their limits. Due to their unique ecological characteristics, lakes offer an intriguing opportunity for scientific study and in-depth analysis (Kalff, 2002; Schindler, 2009).

As a matter of fact, since ancient times, humans have held a deep fascination with these bodies of water.

Throughout history, early civilizations such as the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans were drawn to the beauty and functionality of lakes, leading them to carefully study and make observations about water bodies for essential needs such as irrigation and drinking water. The Renaissance period saw a revival of interest in the natural world, with figures like Leonardo da Vinci making detailed sketches and notes on water movement. However, da Vinci's work predominantly showcased a blend of artistry and engineering rather than a purely scientific focus.

The pioneering research on lakes and freshwaters began in 1892 with the work of Swiss scientist François-Alphonse Forel. His innovative studies laid the groundwork for a new discipline called “limnology”. Forel's influential publication "*Le Léman*" sparked a wave of subsequent research in this emerging area (International Society of Limnology, n.d.).

During the 18th and 19th centuries, numerous researchers influenced by Forel contributed to the advancement of this emerging field of study. The term "limnology" gained widespread recognition towards the end of the 19th century in both Europe and North America. Throughout the 20th century, the scope of limnology studies expanded, encompassing a wide range of ecosystems within the study of lakes.

In 1970, the biologist Hugh Bernard Noel Hynes conducted the first in-depth study of analyzing ecosystems and running waters. His book "*Ecology of Running Waters*" has been significant in advancing understanding and providing valuable insights into this field (Wetzel, 2001).

His research delved into the ecological dynamics of flowing water environments, examining factors such as water flow, temperature, light penetration, and chemical composition. It also outlined the interplay between various organisms in these ecosystems and investigated the impact of human activities such as pollution, dam construction, and water extraction.

The author also provided a comprehensive overview of the different approaches for studying running waters. These approaches encompassed a range of field and laboratory methods to assess physical, chemical, and biological aspects, which played a crucial role in establishing a basis for forthcoming modern research in the field of stream and river ecology.

To summarize, limnology has evolved from early observational studies to a sophisticated interdisciplinary science. It plays a critical role in understanding and managing freshwater ecosystems, which are essential for biodiversity, human health, and the environment.

But what is limnology? The word can be defined in several ways, but it is important to recognize that the discipline involves the study of both freshwater and saline inland waters (Wetzel, 2001). According to the scholar Jacob Kalff (2002), this study includes lakes, rivers, and wetlands¹ as systems, and it may be the most successful of the ecological sciences.

Limnology is a field of study that explores the complex connections between the living organisms in freshwater ecosystems, the flow of water within these ecosystems, and the biogeochemical interactions that take place along the way. It also examines how these processes are influenced by the constantly shifting physical, chemical, and biological factors in these environments (Wetzel, 2001).

In addition to exploring the origins and definition of limnology, it is crucial to delve into the reasons why this field of study is important.

First of all, exploring water ecosystems is crucial for gaining insight into their functioning and how they sustain a variety of life forms while interacting with their environment. Additionally, limnological research plays a vital role in safeguarding water quality, crucial for ensuring safe drinking water, supporting aquatic life, and maintaining the health of ecosystems.

Limnology also helps identify pollution sources, understand nutrient cycling, and develop strategies to mitigate contamination.

Inland waters are home to a diverse array of plants, animals, and microorganisms. Limnology helps protect and conserve this biodiversity by studying these organisms' habitats and life processes. Understanding the dynamics of these ecosystems is essential

¹ Wetlands: Transition zones between terrestrial and aquatic systems where the soils are waterlogged for at least part of the year or covered by shallow water, and which are typically occupied by rooted aquatic vegetation (macrophytes); not all wetlands are physically connected to lakes or lotic systems. The littoral zone of lakes and rivers forms a continuum with wetlands. Wetlands can have both lotic and lentic attributes and, at times, may lack standing water entirely. (Kalff, J. (2002). *In Limnology: Inland Water Ecosystems* (p. 12). Prentice Hall.)

in developing effective conservation strategies and ensuring the protection of endangered species.

Understanding the connections between lakes, their catchment areas, and the air they interact with is also crucial for predicting the quantity and quality of freshwater in the face of projected climate change (Schindler, 2009).

Changes in temperature, precipitation, and extreme weather events can significantly impact water ecosystems. Limnologists study these effects to predict future changes and develop adaptive management strategies.

1.5 The importance of lakes for local communities

As cited before, freshwater sources and wetlands have been essential for human survival since ancient times, serving crucial purposes.

Lakes are incredibly valuable ecosystems that hold important information about the natural processes occurring in their surrounding areas, as well as the impact of human activities. They provide various essential services to humans, including water for irrigation, drinking, and industrial use. Additionally, lakes play a role in diluting pollutants, generating hydroelectric power, facilitating transportation, offering recreational opportunities, supporting fish populations, and providing aesthetic enjoyment (Postel & Carpenter, 1997; Schindler, 2009).

More in detail, lakes play a crucial role in providing drinking water and recreational opportunities for communities. Access to clean and safe drinking water from lakes is essential for ensuring the health and well-being of human populations.

Moreover, having access to clean freshwater is incredibly important for safeguarding public health. Freshwater sources are crucial in providing safe drinking water, facilitating cooking processes, and ensuring proper hygiene practices. The provision of clean water

supplies is essential for preventing waterborne diseases and guarding the well-being of communities.

Additionally, lakes offer cultural and recreational activities that contribute to the overall quality of life for people living in the surrounding areas. They are vibrant hubs serving as popular destinations for experiences like swimming, boating, fishing, and hiking.

Freshwater is also indispensable for sustaining various economic activities, including fishing, agriculture, transportation, and tourism. Lakes and inland fisheries are particularly vital as they serve as a major source of sustenance and income for millions of people in many regions. Furthermore, freshwater is of utmost importance for irrigating crops, which are heavily dependent on uncontaminated water sources for their growth. The availability of an adequate supply of freshwater is critical, as any shortage would significantly impact food production, consequently threatening both food security and people's livelihoods.

In fact, human societies depend on natural ecosystems for various essential goods and resources. These include seafood, game animals, fodder for livestock, fuelwood for cooking and heating, timber for construction and manufacturing, as well as pharmaceutical products derived from plants and other natural sources. These goods are not only vital for sustenance but also for economic activities and societal well-being (Postel & Carpenter, 1997).

Freshwaters also play a crucial role in numerous industrial processes, serving as a vital resource for manufacturing, mining, and energy production. Industries heavily depend on freshwater for tasks, including cooling machinery and cleaning materials, and they utilize it as raw material in their production processes.

Last but certainly not least, freshwater ecosystems are incredibly important in supporting the environment.

First, they provide essential ecosystem services critical for maintaining ecological balance and overall environmental health. These services include nutrient cycling, flood

regulation, water purification, and sediment transport. Nutrient cycling involves the transfer of nutrients between living organisms and their environment, while flood regulation helps to mitigate the impact of flooding events. Water purification ensures freshwater sources remain clean and accessible, and sediment transport is important for maintaining healthy aquatic habitats.

Besides providing these essential skills, these bodies of water are also harnessed for hydropower generation, serving as a renewable energy source. Hydropower plants capture the energy from flowing water to produce electricity without releasing greenhouse gases, thereby making a substantial impact on the world's energy production and playing a role in addressing climate change.

Moreover, freshwater ecosystems regulate the Earth's climate. For instance, wetlands are important carbon sinks, which means they can absorb and store large amounts of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. This process is essential for mitigating the impacts of climate change, as it helps to reduce the overall concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. By capturing and storing carbon dioxide, wetlands contribute significantly to the global effort to combat climate change and its detrimental effects on the environment.

Freshwater ecosystems are essential for supporting a diverse range of plant and animal species and play a crucial role in preserving biodiversity and providing habitats for numerous unique and endangered species.

1.6 The threat of climate change

1.6.1 How climate change is affecting lakes

The impermanence of natural landscapes is a fundamental aspect of the world. Bodies of water, such as lakes and rivers, exemplify this ever-changing nature. These water features are not static but dynamic entities with beginnings, rich histories, and eventual ends. Over time, numerous lakes have disappeared, leaving behind traces of their existence in layers

of dry sediment. Meanwhile, the remaining lakes continue to document their own history through the accumulation of sediment derived from the materials carried by the water from their surroundings. The presence of a lake in a particular location at a specific moment in time signifies that water once thrived in that area. This reinforces the idea that nothing in nature is constant, as even the presence of a lake is a testimony to the fade and flow of the natural world (Moss, 2010).

As a matter of fact, lakes are regularly affected by various events: The levels of solar radiation are in constant flux; chemical substances are released during storms and the yearly snowmelt; alterations in the climate affect the seasonal rhythms and the spread of heat, water, and nutrients from year to year (McKnight et al., 1996).

Periodically, massive groups of fish gather, bringing significant changes to the local food chain throughout their lives. Fires and other disturbances reshape the plant life surrounding lakes. This process leads to a surge in nutrient release into the basins and modifies the water balance as the vegetation regenerates.

Over the course of centuries, drastic shifts in the climate have significantly impacted them, altering their hydrological connections, water levels, and shape and even causing them to vanish temporarily (Carpenter & Cottingham, 1997).

The Earth's climate has always undergone changes, but these changes typically occur over tens of thousands or even millions of years. This slow pace allows ecosystems and their inhabitants to adapt and evolve in response to environmental shifts. However, today, we are witnessing a much more rapid pace of climatic change than ever before. This acceleration is evident in various geological records, such as fossils, rock chemistry, gas bubbles trapped in ancient polar ice, and the isotopic composition of carbonates found in chinks and limestones (Moss, 2010).

As temperatures increase, it leads to a shift in the water balance. The rising temperatures cause more ice to melt and result in higher rates of evaporation, leading to an increased accumulation of water vapor in the atmosphere, which eventually precipitates rain. While the specific effects may vary by region, on average, this leads to the retreat of glaciers

across many areas and elevated summer river flows in polar and high mountain regions with glaciers. Additionally, in winter, these changes are observed almost universally. Furthermore, these shifts and the atmosphere's adaptation to higher temperatures result in more vigorous air mass movement and a heightened frequency of extreme weather events such as hurricanes, storms, and droughts (Moss, 2010).

Lakes around the world are facing a significant threat due to the unprecedented warming of their waters. A recent study published in the journal *Nature Geoscience* (2024) and led by the South Korean Institute for Basic Sciences has highlighted the potential repercussions of continued temperature increases due to human-induced climate change. If current trends persist, it is projected that by 2100, lakes will surpass their natural temperature thresholds, leading to dramatic transformations in their ecosystems and posing a serious risk to numerous species.

One of the primary consequences of rising water temperatures is the lack of oxygen in the deeper layers of lakes. This alarming phenomenon has been observed for some time, particularly in the deeper lakes of Northern Italy. The potential impacts of this oxygen depletion warrant urgent attention and action to safeguard the health and balance of lake ecosystems worldwide.

Water is essential for life and ecosystems, forming the basis for sustainable development and inclusivity. It's crucial for human survival and many economic activities like farming, energy generation, manufacturing, and mining. Effective water management improves health, promotes gender equality, advances education, and supports livelihoods, playing a key role in sustainable economic development and poverty reduction (World Bank, 2003). Natural ecosystems provide critical services, such as purifying air and water, waste elimination, climate regulation, enhancing soil fertility, and supporting biodiversity (Postel & Carpenter, 1997). However, climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution threaten freshwater systems and their essential services, impacting human health, the environment, economic growth, and financial stability. Preserving biodiversity and water is crucial for life on Earth, yet they face growing threats from human activities (OECD, n.d.).

In the past, human water consumption was relatively small compared to the available water supply in most areas of the world. However, with population growth, increased incomes, industrial expansion, and the expansion of irrigated agriculture, the demand for water has risen significantly, surpassing the available supply in many developed and developing countries. As a result, freshwater scarcity now impacts over a billion people and threatens the ecological balance of many of the world's ecosystems (UNEP, 2006).

The average amount of freshwater needed per person for drinking, sanitation, household use, food, and industrial purposes ranges from 1,400 to 1,800 m³ globally. This quantity is essential to meet the basic requirements of individuals, industries, and agriculture in a moderately developed nation unless highly sophisticated water management systems are in place (Kalff, 2002).

The availability of water per person is projected to remain relatively stable in Europe and North America due to anticipated improvements in water management that are expected to moderate the increase in demand to two to three percent annually. However, on a global scale, the amount of water withdrawn for human use is rising by approximately 4 to 8% per year, with the majority of this increase occurring in the developing world (World Resources, 1992). Consequently, the per capita water availability is projected to diminish rapidly in regions with low precipitation, such as the Middle East, Central Asia, the northern rim of Africa, Eastern and Southern Africa (Gleick, 1993), and in water-scarce northern China (Kalff, 2002).

1.6.2 Facing the challenges of climate change

Given the increasing threats to ecological systems, there is an urgent need to identify and monitor ecosystem services at both local and global levels. It is essential to acknowledge the value of these services and integrate them into decision-making processes to ensure sustainable management and protection of our natural resources and environment (Postel & Carpenter, 1997).

Wetlands are a vital natural resource that significantly contributes to water regulation and flood prevention. Acting as expansive sponges, they slow down the flow of water to downstream areas, thereby reducing the risk of flooding (National Research Council, 1992). Furthermore, wetlands help regulate the movement of nutrients from higher elevations to streams and lakes (Johnston, 1991). They are also a major natural source of humic substances for lakes (Hemond, 1990; Wetzel, 1992).

In light of the ongoing impact of climate change, attention has turned from past effects to future possibilities. Predicting these future outcomes is quite challenging, as numerous potential scenarios exist, especially when human activities are involved. Additionally, predictions rely on the assumption that things will unfold in a predictable and proportional manner without accounting for potential feedback effects that could either slow down (negative feedback) or speed up (positive feedback) further change (Moss, 2010).

The 2007 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report outlined different scenarios based on economic and population assumptions. These serve as a starting point for considering the potential impacts of different economic and population conditions on the environment. According to the report, there are also different methods for predicting future impacts on freshwater ecosystems, including direct experimentation, space-for-time studies, paleoecological reconstruction, and dynamic modeling. An example of direct experimentation could be studying the effects of increased temperature on aquatic ecosystems in a laboratory setting, such as aquarium systems.

In considering the potential outcomes for predicting climate change, it is evident that a wide array of approaches exist to either slow down or ultimately reverse this phenomenon. However, all of these approaches currently rely on preserving an economic system built upon continuous growth and judged by its gross domestic product (GDP) as a measure of success (Moss, 2010).

Dealing with water challenges necessitates the implementation of strong public policies that set clear, measurable goals at the appropriate time and scale. It also requires clearly defined roles and responsibilities for relevant authorities, as well as regular monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring lake levels and stream flows is essential, as they serve as key

indicators of sustainable water usage (Schindler, 2009). Effective water governance plays a crucial role in shaping and executing these policies, promoting shared responsibility across different levels of government and involving a wide range of stakeholders (OECD, n.d.).

Water resource management is paramount due to its critical role in sustaining life and ecosystems. The World Economic Forum in 2003 highlighted the increasing urgency of addressing water challenges by identifying it as a top global concern in both 2013 and 2014. Effective water control is essential to address the declining availability and deteriorating quality of water. It is also crucial for ensuring fair provision based on social, environmental, and economic needs. Without sustainable water management practices, countries are at risk of hindering their growth and resilience in the face of climate change (World Bank, 2003).

The World Bank Group² is currently actively engaged in tackling these challenges through comprehensive strategies that encompass building infrastructure, strengthening institutions, and prioritizing support for vulnerable communities. By investing in water resource management in client countries, the partnership is working towards its goal of eradicating extreme poverty by 2030 and fostering prosperity for the most vulnerable 40% of the population across the globe.

The world is facing significant challenges related to water, and addressing these challenges requires solutions that involve multiple sectors. In the agriculture sector, the need to feed a growing population will lead to a 50% increase in agricultural production and a 15% increase in water usage, which is already under strain. Currently, agriculture is the largest global water user, with irrigated agriculture accounting for 70% of total freshwater withdrawals. Water scarcity is aggravated by factors such as population growth, declining groundwater supplies, and water quality issues, with climate change

² With 189 member countries, staff from more than 170 countries, and offices in over 130 locations, the World Bank Group is a unique global partnership: five institutions working for sustainable solutions that reduce poverty and build shared prosperity in developing countries.

further intensifying water stress. It's worth noting that the impact of water scarcity will be felt most acutely in poorer countries despite their lower contribution to the problem.

In the energy sector, over 1.2 billion people currently lack access to electricity. The sector's water withdrawals are estimated at approximately 15% of global water withdrawals. Looking ahead, global energy consumption is projected to increase by 35% by 2035, potentially leading to an 85% rise in water consumption by the energy sector, despite improvements in water use efficiency.

The rapid growth of cities in developing countries will also amplify the demand for comprehensive water management strategies, encompassing water supply, water quality, sanitation, drainage, recreational use, and flood management.

Natural disasters are closely linked to water, with water-related hazards accounting for 90% of all natural hazards. Their frequency and intensity are on the rise, posing substantial risks to socio-economic development.

Additionally, a large portion of the global population still lacks access to improved sanitation and water. Addressing these gaps requires integrated planning and management, with a focus on ensuring a sustainable and reliable water supply.

The various economic activities such as agriculture, energy production, industrial processes, and mining operations significantly impact the quantity and quality of water resources. This can further reduce the availability of clean water. As water becomes scarcer, allocating it among different economic sectors and ensuring that environmental water needs are met will become increasingly challenging for many countries. Failing to establish effective allocation mechanisms could hinder overall development, leading to greater income inequality and heightened environmental pressures.

The World Bank plays a crucial role in supporting communities worldwide to build climate change resilience through integrated water resources management (WRM). As a major provider of knowledge and technical assistance on water, the Bank had a significant impact, with its water portfolio representing 18% of its overall portfolio, totaling 32

billion dollars in active commitments as of 2014. These projects aimed to enhance countries' ability to respond to the challenges posed by climate change, focusing on laying the foundations for shared prosperity and poverty reduction.

Another reality facing these water challenges is the OECD³. The institution plays a crucial role in providing comprehensive support to governments for efficiently managing their water resources and delivering water-related services across diverse economic sectors and policy domains. Moreover, the OECD performs extensive analysis of biodiversity, encompassing both species and ecosystems in conjunction with water. This analysis supports governments in developing policies that aim not only to attain superior environmental advantages but also to do so in a financially feasible and all-encompassing manner (OECD, n.d.).

The OECD established a Water Governance Programme dedicated to offering guidance and support in developing and implementing effective, efficient, and inclusive water governance systems at various levels of government. This initiative also involves a comparative analysis of water governance systems at both national and subnational levels. Using the OECD Principles on Water Governance as a foundation, the program aims to streamline the complexities of water governance by focusing on policy areas relevant to water, such as the circular economy and nature-based solutions. Additionally, the project conducts policy dialogues to assist countries in their endeavors to revamp water policies. These dialogues provide an external perspective on the performance of a country's current water governance system and offer insights into potential policy options for the future, drawing from international best practices.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is the leading global environmental authority. The achievement of numerous UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) depends on the enhanced management of freshwater reserves. One of the objectives targets a 50% reduction in the number of individuals lacking sustainable access

³ The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) is a forum and knowledge hub for data, analysis and best practices in public policy. They work with over 100 countries across the world to build stronger, fairer and cleaner societies - helping to shape better policies for better lives.

to clean drinking water and fundamental sanitation. The management of water within international river basins presents significant obstacles, necessitating holistic approaches that consider the requirements of nations both upstream and downstream (UNEP, 2006).

Since 2000, the Water Framework Directive established by the European Union has been the main law for water protection in Europe. The WFD takes into account various aspects of water ecosystems. These include the consideration of living organisms like aquatic plants, bottom-dwelling invertebrates, and fish; the physical characteristics of water systems, such as flow, groundwater movement, river depth, width, and continuity; and the chemical and physical properties of the water, which encompass temperature, oxygen levels, salinity, acidity, nutrient levels, and specific pollutants (Stalzer & Bloch, 2000). This broad range of elements makes monitoring riverine systems a significant challenge. (Gregel, Turner, Miller, Melack & Stanley, 2002). The WFD requires Member States to use their River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) and Programmes of Measures (PoMs) to protect and, where necessary, restore water bodies to reach good status and prevent deterioration. Good status means both good chemical and good ecological status.

1.7 Conclusion

This first chapter analyzes the role of lakes as natural resources. Lakes are dynamic ecosystems that support a diverse range of life forms and play a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance. They serve as a fundamental source of water for various purposes including drinking, agriculture, and industrial activities, while also offering a habitat for a diverse range of species.

However, human endeavors, particularly in agriculture, industry, and urban expansion, have significantly impacted the environment, leading to water contamination and deterioration of lake ecosystems. Moreover, climate change poses a significant threat to lakes, leading to alterations in temperature, water levels, and the dynamics of the ecosystem. The warming of lake waters can lead to oxygen depletion and disrupt the delicate balance of aquatic life, accentuating the urgency for sustainable management practices to safeguard these essential resources and alleviate their adverse effects.

Many initiatives are underway to promote sustainable practices for managing lakes. The World Bank is actively assisting communities globally in enhancing their resilience to climate change by promoting integrated water resources management. The OECD is offering support to governments in effectively managing their water resources and providing water-related services across various sectors and policy areas. Additionally, the UN has implemented legislation aimed at protecting water resources in Europe.

Central to the preservation of lake ecosystems is also the role of limnological research, which aids in comprehending lake ecosystems, identifying sources of pollution, and formulating conservation strategies. Such research is imperative for upholding water quality and ensuring the sustainability of freshwater resources in the face of environmental transformations.

Lakes have historically been integral to human civilization, serving as essential sources of resources such as water, food, and transportation. Additionally, they have provided a foundation for human settlements and economic activities, shaping the development of societies. Their continued health is essential for economic development, public health, and community well-being. Nowadays, lakes have also emerged as significant tourist attractions, drawing in a rising influx of visitors due to their scenic beauty, recreational opportunities, and tranquil surroundings. The multitude of recreational activities that can be enjoyed on lakes contributes to a wide range of positive impacts from both an economic and social perspective.

In summary, lakes are vital natural resources that require careful safekeeping to ensure their health and sustainability for future generations. Addressing the challenges posed by pollution and climate change is crucial for preserving these ecosystems and the services they provide.

2. The value of lakes as touristic resources

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter highlighted the significant environmental and ecological value of lakes. However, their appeal extends far beyond their natural worth. Lakes also function as popular tourism destinations, attracting visitors with their stunning landscapes and diverse recreational opportunities. Although lake tourism has always been popular, there has been a notable uptick in interest in recent years, leading to a surge in research on the topic.

This chapter is organized into six sections. First, it traces the history of lakes as tourist destinations, from the pre-Romantic period of the 18th century to the present day, highlighting the evolving perceptions of these natural attractions. Next, several studies on lake tourism will be discussed, focusing on five International Lake Tourism Conferences held between 2003 and 2012. These conferences provided in-depth analyses of tourism's role and its relationship with sustainability. Following this, definitions of lake tourism destinations will be explored, along with various factors that influence their appeal.

The successive section offers an extensive overview of the different types of lake tourism, ranging from eco-tourism and cultural experiences to sports and luxury tourism. The variety of activities available at lakes makes them versatile destinations. Tourism is not only a significant source of income for these destinations but also has numerous other impacts. This section examines the economic, environmental, and social impacts – both positive and negative – of lake tourism. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion on sustainable tourism management. It outlines various strategies and actions that can be implemented to ensure the preservation and responsible development of lake destinations.

2.2 History of lakes as tourism destinations

Throughout history, lakes have always been highly esteemed by travelers for their beauty and tranquility (Aitchison et al., 2000). In the last century, they have emerged as appealing destinations especially in the Western world, serving as popular spots for tourism and

recreation and are also attractive for people looking to relocate for a better quality of life. However, it's worth noting that this hasn't always been the case (Hall & Härkönen, 2006).

Before the Romantic movement in the late 18th century, lakes were typically viewed solely for their practical purposes as sources of food and water. In fact, lakes, much like other wild areas, were often feared due to the prevalence of water-borne illnesses (Hall & Härkönen, 2006). However, during the Romantic movement, there was a significant shift in people's perceptions of lakes and their surroundings. With the increasing industrialization of the West, lakes and their landscapes began to be appreciated more positively (Buzard, 1983). One example of this is the Lake District National Park in England (Lake District National Park Authority, 1999), which is the most frequented national park in the country, largely due to its enchanting scenery that was immortalized by the Lake District poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the early 19th century (Walton & McGloin, 1981; Brennan, 1987).

Another essential factor in the evolution of the Romantic admiration for lake scenery is the degree to which it fostered the development of national identity and a sense of cultural independence (Hall & Härkönen, 2006). For instance, Finnish intellectuals in the late 1800s began to view the Finnish lake landscape as integral to the country's cultural identity, attributing it to playing a role in Finland's independence from Russia (Vepsäläinen & Pitkänen, 2006). Similarly, the natural beauty of the United States, encompassing its mountains, lakes, waterfalls, rivers, and forests, was perceived as a reflection of America's aspiration to establish a distinctive cultural identity separate from that of Britain and Europe (Kline, 1970; Mark, 2006).

Over the past two centuries, the popularity of lake tourism has played a significant role in the world of leisure and travel (Puczko & Rätz, 2000). The post-World War II era has witnessed an unprecedented boom in international tourism (Straszheim, 1969). This surge can be attributed to a variety of factors, including the high-income elasticity of demand and high price elasticity (Harrop, 1973). Furthermore, this rapid growth can be linked to the effects of modern industrial societies, such as increasing urbanization, population growth, higher levels of education, and increased leisure time (Askari, 1973; Jud, 1974).

Moving to the present day, the tourism industry has witnessed a surge in lake tourism, reflecting a significant shift in travelers' preferences. This growing trend can be attributed

to the affordability of lake vacations and the excitement of exploring lesser-known destinations, leading to unexpected and delightful experiences (Drintle, 2022). In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed tourists' vacation preferences, with a rising interest in lake destinations in addition to the traditional sea and mountain getaways. A new form of tourism has emerged, celebrating mountain lake destinations not only during winter but also in the summer months. These hidden gems offer low visitor numbers, reasonable costs, inviting climates, and 90% natural, untouched landscapes. This positive shift began after the pandemic, taking advantage of the pleasant weather and the easing of COVID-related restrictions.

The overcrowded airports had prompted travelers to embrace slow tourism, opting for different ways of travel. Many of these picturesque lakes, in fact, are conveniently accessible by train, providing travelers with the opportunity to savor breathtaking views from the comfort of the train carriages. Lakes have become a popular option for short getaways, offering a few days of relaxation, especially for those who have faced the challenges of post-COVID-19 life. The well-being of travelers holds a central focus, encompassing not only physical health but also spiritual nourishment. This holistic approach is made possible through outdoor activities and simple moments in nature (Drintle, 2022).

Italy, in particular, has seen significant growth in lake tourism, owing to ongoing enhancements of its territories and freshwater basins. Even in 2021, following a slight easing of the pandemic, the trend towards lake vacations remained strong, with online travel agency channels reporting a 41.3% booking rate for August and 22.1% for September in accommodation facilities near Italian lakes (Il Gazzettino, 2021).

The fascinating and unspoiled environments surrounding lakes have captivated the interest of a diverse range of travelers, from families with children to nature enthusiasts and art lovers. Visitors are drawn to the peaceful lake ecosystems, where they can relax, indulge in local delicacies, and enjoy swimming in clear waters that rival those of the sea. Furthermore, the lake presents the opportunity to blend the tranquility of a vacation with luxuries and hobbies that may be difficult to pursue throughout the year. Wine and culinary tastings, leisurely canoe expeditions, and immersive cultural excursions stand as just a few of the experiences that lake tourism offers.

In 2021, lakeside destinations in Italy obtained the third position in terms of popularity among tourists, falling behind mountain and seaside getaways, as revealed by the Italian National Tourism Agency's ENIT Study Office (Il Gazzettino, 2021). This ranking raises some intriguing questions, especially in the context of the current historical moment. ENIT President Giorgio Palmucci affirms:

«Il turismo lacuale, che ha una forte tradizione in Italia, vede una nuova fase espansiva proprio nel post Covid e nell'ottica della sostenibilità. I laghi sono un tramite non solo geografico ma anche artistico e culturale di sviluppo e conoscenza dell'Italia turistica come già avevano ben capito scrittori come Goethe a Stendhal e rappresentano anche un punto di congiunzione tra l'Italia e l'Europa. La passione per i laghi non si attenua ma si declina in chiave moderna come un'opportunità per vivere il territorio in sicurezza e libertà»⁴.

2.3 Studies on lake tourism

As seen in the previous paragraph, in the past, lakes have always been recognized as popular destinations for leisure and tourism. Nevertheless, it is only in recent years that they have become the focus of significant research in the tourism industry. Concerns about the environment, migration of people seeking better living conditions, local development, access to clean water, and environmental changes have brought tourism to the forefront for those responsible for managing and preserving the quality and sustainability of lakes and their surrounding ecosystems (Hall & Härkönen, 2006). In the present, the increasing tourist activity around lakes has also raised significant worries and

⁴ English: “Lake tourism, which has a strong tradition in Italy, is experiencing a new expansion phase in the post-COVID era and from a sustainability perspective. Lakes serve as a medium not only geographically but also artistically and culturally for the development and understanding of tourist Italy, as writers like Goethe and Stendhal had well understood. They also represent a point of connection between Italy and Europe. The passion for lakes is not diminishing but is being reinterpreted in a modern key as an opportunity to experience the territory safely and freely”.

concerns regarding the environmental impact and sustainability of these natural resources (Puczkó & Rátz, 2000; Tuohino & Lóránt, 2012).

Research into lake tourism gained momentum in the early 2000s, with the initiation of the "Lake Tourism Project" from 2001 to 2003. This significant project, initiated by the University of Joensuu (now the University of Eastern Finland), aimed to establish connections among international lake tourism researchers and lay the groundwork for the first international conferences on lake tourism (Tuohino & Lóránt, 2012). The following sections will present the events and the main topics discussed.

1st International Lake Tourism Conference, 2003: University of Joensuu, Savonlinna Institute for Regional Development and Research (Finland)

The First International Lake Tourism Conference took place in June 2003 in Finland and thoroughly examined the multifaceted connection between lakes and tourism. Participants delved into the idea of lakes serving as standalone destinations and also discussed the significance of lakes as the setting for various tourist attractions. The conference facilitated conversations on promoting lakes as tourist destinations, presenting lakes in marketing materials, and harnessing the inherent value of lakes for tourism purposes (Härkönen, 2003).

The discussions also covered various aspects of environmental concerns in the context of sustainable tourism development. Numerous topics were explored, including the potential of ecotourism as a viable approach to sustainable tourism development (Dávid, 2003). They also involved the significance of environmental preservation and natural resources (Furgala-Selezniow & al., 2003), methods for enhancing water quality and restoration (Wisniewski, 2003), and the delicate balance between conservation, recreation, and tourism (Määttä, 2003). Additionally, they addressed the environmental quality for recreational use (Rózański, 2003) and the repercussions of overuse on lake quality (Stedman & al., 2003).

The inaugural lake tourism conference was closely connected to the 7th IAST Gathering in Finland, a conference focused on sustainable development organized by the International Association for Sustainable Tourism. The lake tourism workshop at IAST

was built around four main themes: understanding the operational environment and the challenges it poses, exploring different business models and methodologies for measuring their success, delving into knowledge management, and emphasizing the crucial role of transferring innovations and knowledge for achieving success in the industry (Tuohino & Härkönen, 2003).

2nd International Lake Tourism Conference, 2005: Zhejiang University and Chun'an County Tourism Administration, Thousand – Island Lake, Hangzhou (China)

The second conference in the series of gatherings centered on the growth, communication, and activities of lake tourism took place in Hangzhou, China, in 2005. This conference was particularly notable for highlighting the significant emphasis on lake protection when compared to the previous conference in Savonlinna. The majority of the presentations at the conference were given by members of the Living Lakes International Network⁵, underscoring the critical significance of preserving and safeguarding natural resources (Tuohino & Lóránt, 2012).

The "Thousand-Island Lake Consensus" was unveiled at the close of the conference. This significant agreement, incorporating 12 key points, delved into three main areas: safeguarding and managing the lakes, advancing lake tourism, and promoting cooperation and communication among the lakes (Tuohino & Lóránt, 2012). The statement highlighted the pressing issues of pollution and the urgent need to protect the lakes for sustainable use in the long term. It also stressed the potential to harness ecological advantages for economic benefit, which could contribute to poverty reduction, increased incomes, and supported regional economic development. Additionally, the declaration acknowledged the vital importance of lakes as precious resources for the planet and humanity, underlining their irreplaceable role in people's lives (China International Lake Tourism Forum).

⁵ The Living Lakes Network is an international partnership of 130 members working in more than 60 countries to protect and restore lakes and wetlands around the world. For over 20 years, the Network has engaged with NGOs, governments, indigenous peoples and local communities to conserve critical habitats, strengthen sustainable livelihoods and educate on the benefits provided by lakes and wetlands.

3rd International Lake Tourism Conference, 2007: Department of Tourism and Regional Development, Károly Robert College, Gyöngyös (Hungary)

The third conference took place in Gyöngyös, Hungary, in 2007, focusing on the theme of promoting sustainable lake tourism. The insightful presentations at the conference extensively explored the difficulties related to the management of tourism around lakes, underscoring the distinct responsibilities associated with fostering sustainable development. Additionally, the conference addressed the effects of climate change on lake tourism, stressing the importance of understanding and mitigating its impacts (Tuohino & Lóránt, 2012).

The conference delved into a wide range of topics related to the utilization of reservoirs (Dávid & al., 2007; Galgóczy-Németh, 2007; Bujdosó & Radics, 2007). It explored sustainable development (Druva-Druvaskalne & Slara, 2007), ecotourism, and the challenges facing tourism at reservoirs (Mamcarz & Mionskowska, 2007), shedding light on the impact of climate change on lake tourism (Baros & al., 2007). Additionally, it covered the use of lakes for health and wellness and the management of lake tourism in boreal forests (McIntyre et al., 2007).

4th International Lake Tourism Conference, 2009: Lakehead University, Centre for Tourism and Community Development Research, Thunder Bay (Canada)

The fourth conference held in Thunder Bay, Canada, in 2009 continued to highlight the significant themes of sustainability and the preservation of lakes, building on the focus of previous years. The declaration by the Canadian Government in 2007 of the Lake Superior National Marine Conservation Area⁶ served as a pivotal point for the conference, shaping its discussions and objectives from a Canadian standpoint. The 4th Lake Tourism Conference delved deep into exploring the potential of conservation areas for lakes, offering a unique Canadian perspective. The primary aim was to showcase how these conservation areas could bring about positive effects on social and economic sustainability (Tuohino & Lóránt, 2012).

⁶ Lake Superior National Marine Conservation Area is a National Marine Conservation Area (NMCA) on the North shore of Lake Superior in Ontario, and is a unit of the national park system.

The Canadian conference highlighted the significant role of communities and community-based tourism in promoting sustainable and authentic travel experiences. Moreover, there was a strong emphasis on addressing educational matters, particularly the importance of catering to the needs of tourists while also safeguarding local traditions. (Tuohino & Lóránt, 2012).

5th International Lake Tourism Conference, 2012: Department of Lake and River Fisheries, University of Warmia and Mazury, Olsztyn (Poland)

The fifth conference, which took place in Poland in July 2012, continued the discussions from previous conferences, focusing on crucial environmental issues. The presentations delved into topics such as sustainable practices, conservation efforts, and the preservation of lakes, underscoring the urgent need to address these pressing concerns. Furthermore, the debates included the interplay between health and wellness in lake-related recreation and tourism, the distinctive culinary offerings found in lake regions, the array of tourist activities available at lakes and wetlands, the significance of water quality, and the delicate balance between conserving and restoring lakes while maximizing their potential for recreation and tourism through sustainable management (Tuohino & Lóránt, 2012).

To summarize, local sustainable issues were the focal point at each conference. While the main themes were consistent, each conference highlighted different aspects.

The first conference in Savonlinna primarily explored lake tourism as a subset of nature tourism, discussing both its opportunities and challenges. Meanwhile, the conference in China emphasized sustainability and lake conservation, underscoring the critical role of lake tourism in local socio-economic development. Hungary's discussions revolved around sustainability, environmental protection, and the effects of global warming on lake tourism. In Canada, the focus was on community-based tourism, with a strong emphasis on the involvement and benefits to local communities. The theme of sustainability resurfaced in Poland as well.

2.4 Lake tourism destinations

After learning about the history and studies about lakes as tourist spots, it is worthwhile to ask: what is the definition of a lake tourism destination?

In a comprehensive 1998 study by Itkonen and Kortelainen, lake resources were categorized into three distinct types: physical, functional, and symbolic resources, each serving different purposes in the context of tourism. Physically, lakes serve as more than just a picturesque background. They provide a stunning and immersive environment that stimulates the senses and creates lasting visual and sensory impressions for visitors. Functionally, they are versatile “playgrounds”, offering a wide array of recreational and leisure activities. They serve as natural settings for various independent or guided tourism experiences, catering to diverse interests and preferences. Beyond their physical and functional aspects, lakes also hold deep symbolic significance. They carry subjective meanings and personal connections for individuals, adding an emotional and cultural dimension to the overall allure of the lake landscape. These symbolic connections contribute to the unique appeal of lake tourism destinations, creating a deeper and more meaningful experience for visitors (Pigram, 1995; Itkonen & Kortelainen, 1998; Ryhänen, 2001).

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2002) established a clear definition of what constitutes a 'tourism destination':

“A local tourism destination is a physical space in which a visitor spends at least one overnight. It includes tourism products such as support services and attractions and tourism resources within one day’s return travel time. It has physical and administrative boundaries defining its management and images and perceptions defining its market competitiveness. Local tourism destinations incorporate various stakeholders often including a local community and can nest and network to form larger destinations”.

This explanation can also be applied to lake systems, encompassing not only the lake itself but also the surrounding areas and their tourism offerings.

According to the definition, for a lake to be considered a true tourism destination, it needs to have essential tourism services such as accommodations, marketing, food and beverage options, convenient access, and a well-established destination organization (Hall & Härkönen, 2006). However, there are areas that currently lack these necessary services. Managing and coordinating these elements can be complex for all destinations, and it's crucial to acknowledge the availability or absence of these services in different regions. The attractiveness of a particular area is strongly influenced by the quality of its natural environment and the available amenities. For destinations centered around lakes, it's crucial to strike a balance between preserving the natural ecosystem and introducing modern facilities and activities that can cater to visitors throughout the year (Drintle, 2022).

More concretely, lakes offer a myriad of experiences for tourists to enjoy. One of the best ways to appreciate lake tourism is by exploring the picturesque environment on foot or by bicycle during the day, followed by participating in evening events. These occasions often revolve around the culinary experiences the lakes have to offer, including local food and wine, which have always been a major draw for visitors. Embracing local cuisine is a key way to connect with the area. Furthermore, lakes host diverse ecosystems, providing fantastic opportunities for birdwatching, capturing the beauty of wildlife through photography, and embarking on nature exploration. They cater to a wide range of recreational activities, ranging from water sports such as boating, kayaking, and jet skiing to the serene pastime of fishing. Some lakes are even renowned for their suitability for diving and snorkeling. Additionally, lakes are often immersed in cultural traditions, festivals, and historical sites like ancient ruins and castles, offering profound insights into the local history. In terms of health and wellness, lakeside retreats provide tranquil settings, rejuvenating spa treatments, and ample opportunities for relaxation. For adventure enthusiasts, lakes cater to an array of exhilarating activities, including hiking, biking, and camping, making them appealing for outdoor enthusiasts.

2.4.1 Factors that influence lake tourism destinations

Lakes have always been attractive destinations for tourists, but their current and future appeal is influenced by various factors.

Numerous studies have attempted to evaluate, for example, how climate change will impact the tourism industry. A specific focus of these studies has been to understand how tourist behavior is influenced by weather, climate, travel expenses, the extent of coastline, economic prosperity, and other related factors (Gössling & Hall, 2006).

The tourism industry is also greatly influenced by weather conditions and natural features. Destinations with warmer climates are often preferred for leisure and recreational activities, while natural resources such as freshwater, biodiversity, beaches, and scenic landscapes play a crucial role in supporting tourism (Gössling & Hall, 2006). Travel decisions are heavily impacted by weather and climate. Many people choose sunny beach destinations or winter getaways based on specific weather expectations, showing how climate factors like temperature, precipitation, and humidity play a significant role in shaping tourism choices (Smith, 1993; de Freitas, 2001, 2005).

Research suggests that climate change will impact travel behavior due to changes in holiday conditions at destinations and tourists' perceptions of climate variables. Specifically, there has been a focus on understanding how rising temperatures and related factors, like rainfall, impact tourists' decisions about where to travel and when to go (Gössling & Hall, 2006). For instance, in a study that sought to identify the optimal temperatures for travel, Maddison (2001) analyzed the travel patterns of British tourists. The findings revealed that the maximum daytime temperature associated with the highest number of visits was 30.7°C. Interestingly, even slight increases above this temperature were linked to a decrease in the number of tourists. Maddison also observed that higher levels of rainfall tended to discourage tourists. In a separate study, Lise and Tol (2002) investigated various destinations that were popular among tourists from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Using factor and regression analysis, they uncovered that OECD tourists showed a preference for destinations with an average temperature of 21°C during the hottest month of the year. Both studies concluded that in the event of climate change, tourists might opt for different destinations or consider traveling during alternative times of the year.

The tourism industry is susceptible to a wide range of direct and indirect effects of climate change. As temperatures continue to increase, the appeal of numerous destinations is diminishing. In some areas, winter sports are becoming increasingly impractical and

coastal tourism is particularly at risk due to the rising sea levels. Additionally, the sector is confronting broader impacts, such as higher insurance costs due to more frequent extreme weather events, reduced access to water, compromised food security, and increased conflict in the communities where it operates.

On the other hand, the evolving climate has also led to some unexpected positive outcomes. With shifting temperatures, previously unexplored geographical locations are capturing the interest of tourists, presenting new and enticing travel prospects. For instance, there is a growing appeal for "last chance" tourism and the allure of uncharted territories. As temperatures rise, it is expected that Northern Europe, Scandinavia, and Alaska will emerge as highly sought-after destinations for travelers (Climate Change: Implications for Tourism, 2014).

In any case, lakes are truly remarkable because they showcase a constantly evolving and diverse scenery, with each season bringing its own distinctive allure that caters to the preferences of all types of travelers. This uniqueness makes lakes a truly exceptional destination that is adored by those who enjoy exploring the captivating interplay between water and land. The areas surrounding lakes provide abundant opportunities for cycling and hiking, allowing visitors to fully immerse themselves in the breathtaking natural beauty. The lake region is considered a treasure, offering breathtaking views, forgotten architectural marvels, and unspoiled natural surroundings (Drintle, 2022).

2.5 Types of tourism practices in lake destinations

Lakes and their surrounding areas offer a wide variety of tourism options, accommodating a diverse range of interests and activities. These tourism categories often overlap, and many basins provide a blend of these types of tourism to appeal to a wide array of visitor interests.

Rural tourism

The foundations of tourism development often start from the growth of rural tourism in areas abundant with lakes. While there is no single, widely-accepted definition of rural tourism, a defining characteristic is its presence in remote regions, far from urban hubs.

One common criterion for categorizing communities as urban or rural is the number of people residing in a specific area (Hall & Härkönen, 2006).

The concept of rural tourism, lacking a clear definition, is subject to a number of interpretations. Fleischer and Pizam (2002) associate rural tourism with the concept of a "country vacation," referring to a type of vacation where the tourist immerses themselves in recreational activities in a rural setting, which could include a farm, ranch, country home, or the surrounding countryside, for the majority of their vacation time. The Council of Europe defines a "rural area" as a predominantly inland or coastal region of countryside, including small towns and villages. These areas are primarily utilized for agriculture, forestry, aquaculture, and fisheries, as well as for the economic and cultural activities of rural residents. Additionally, rural areas may include non-urban recreation and leisure spaces and nature reserves and may also serve other purposes, such as providing housing.

According to Dernoï (1991), rural tourism might be conceived as tourism activities in a 'non-urban territory where human (land-related economic) activity is going on, primarily agriculture: a permanent human presence seems a qualifying requirement'. The OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) emphasizes that rural tourism should be established in rural areas, deeply rooted in rural life, and centered around the distinct characteristics of rural communities, such as small-scale businesses, expansive natural landscapes, immersion in nature and local heritage, traditional cultures, and customs. This type of tourism should prioritize sustainability by contributing to the preservation of the unique rural identity of an area and by ensuring responsible use of resources. It should also offer diverse experiences that reflect the intricate fabric of rural life, economy, and history.

So, in summary, rural tourism is often centered on the unique appeal of lakes. Visitors can join various activities such as fishing, boating, and even the creation of lakeside homes, all of which contribute to the rich and diverse rural tourism experience.

There are numerous types and forms of rural tourism. For instance, agrotourism, which refers to specific types of tourism experiences that are closely tied to the agricultural environment. This can include staying on a farm, whether in accommodations or camping, participating in educational visits, enjoying meals made from farm-fresh ingredients,

engaging in recreational activities, and purchasing farm products or handicrafts. These experiences offer a unique and direct connection to agrarian life and the rural environment. Similarly, farm tourism involves immersive experiences specifically on a farm, including staying in farm accommodations and participating in various farm activities and workshops.

Another practice is wilderness tourism, which allows travelers to immerse themselves in rural areas, observing and capturing the natural habitats of plants and animals. Activities like wildlife photography, safaris, bird watching, trekking, and hiking provide non-consumptive interactions with wildlife and nature. It's a great way to appreciate and preserve the natural environment while enjoying various outdoor adventures.

Ecotourism

Ecotourism shares many similarities with rural tourism, but it is more narrowly defined. It involves travel with a focus on minimizing environmental impact while simultaneously contributing to conservation and scientific research. The emphasis is on visiting natural areas in a sustainable and responsible manner in order to avoid the negative impacts associated with large-scale tourism development. Additionally, ecotourism aims to support local communities, promote ecological and cultural sensitivity, as well as raise awareness about environmental issues and encourage ethical travel practices.

There are various distinct definitions and studies of ecotourism, all of which emphasize these core principles. For example, Ceballos-Lascurain (1996) refers to ecotourism as the act of traveling to natural areas that are relatively untouched and unspoiled, with the specific purpose of studying, appreciating, and taking pleasure in the beauty of the landscapes and the diverse flora and fauna. It also encompasses an interest in any cultural elements, whether historical or contemporary, found within these areas. According to the Ecotourism Association of Australia, ecotourism is nature-based tourism that includes education and interpretation of the natural environment and is managed to be ecologically sustainable. Another perspective on ecotourism, provided by Tickell (1994), describes it as a form of travel that allows individuals to revel in the amazing diversity of natural life and human cultures without causing harm to either. Ecotourism, based on the International Ecotourism Society (TIES, 2015), is a form of travel that involves

responsibly visiting natural areas to appreciate and conserve the environment while also benefiting the local communities. Those who participate in ecotourism are interested in immersing themselves in the natural environment, expanding their understanding, and developing a deep appreciation for it.

To ensure that ecotourism remains sustainable and beneficial for both the environment and local communities, TIES has provided a comprehensive set of principles and guidelines. These guidelines cover various aspects, including preparing travelers to minimize their impact on sensitive environments and cultures, reducing visitors' effects on the environment through education and leadership, ensuring that staff and employees are well-versed in company policy to prevent negative impacts, and promoting conservation of the visited regions. Additionally, the Society emphasizes providing competitive, local employment, offering environmentally sensitive accommodations, and focusing on experiential learning and appreciation of natural areas.

In 2015, the definition of ecotourism was expanded to include education as a key component. Ecotourism is now officially described as "*responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education*" (TIES, 2015). The educational aspect is designed to involve both the staff and the guests, emphasizing the importance of learning and understanding for all involved.

Cultural and heritage tourism

Cultural tourism refers to the practice of traveling for the purpose of experiencing and appreciating the cultural aspects of a destination (UNWTO, 2023). This can include activities such as visiting historical sites and monuments, attending festivals and cultural events, exploring nature, folklore, art, and going on pilgrimages. It encompasses a wide range of cultural attractions, including arts, architecture, historical and cultural heritage, culinary traditions, literature, music, and living cultures with their unique lifestyles, beliefs, and traditions (UN Tourism General Assembly, 2017). Cultural tourism is driven by a desire to discover, learn about, and immerse oneself in the tangible and intangible cultural treasures offered by a destination (UNESCO, 2024).

This type of tourism often includes heritage tourism, which involves visiting locations that embody historical significance or intangible cultural heritage. It is popular among travelers who are genuinely interested in exploring different cultures, as well as those seeking a more casual experience. Managing heritage sites involves preparing them for public visits and ensuring the conditions for an optimal tourist-heritage experience. However, this management poses various challenges, particularly for sites that attract large volumes of tourists and become iconic destinations for mass cultural tourism (Vaquero & García-Hernandez, 2024).

Cultural and heritage tourism involves a variety of experiences. Historical tours allow visitors to explore sites of historical significance located near lakes, providing a glimpse into the past. Local festivals and events offer the opportunity to immerse oneself in cultural festivities held at lakeside locations, providing a vibrant and authentic experience. Indigenous tourism is another facet that provides insight into local indigenous cultures and traditions, allowing visitors to learn and appreciate their rich heritage.

Educational tourism

Educational tourism offers a unique travel experience centered around a deep curiosity for other cultures. It allows travelers to immerse themselves in the history, languages, architecture, and cuisine of different regions. Unlike traditional forms of learning, educational tourism provides the opportunity for personal growth and learning in real-world settings. Whether it involves studying unique ecological or geological aspects of lakes or participating in academic and scientific exploration through workshops and conferences, educational tourism provides a dynamic and enriching way to expand one's knowledge. It goes beyond the confines of traditional study methods, offering a vibrant and life-changing approach to education within the tourism industry.

Adventure tourism

Adventure tourism, as defined by the Adventure Travel Trade Association (1990), encompasses activities that involve physical activity, cultural immersion, and interactions

with nature. It's not just about taking risks or pushing limits; it's about engaging with a new culture or environment while being physically active.

As the desire for unique and thrilling experiences continues to increase, the popularity of adventure tourism is on the rise. This type of tourism involves venturing beyond one's comfort zone to explore unconventional and possibly challenging destinations (Canadian Tourism Commission, 1995; Muller & Cleaver, 2000). It typically entails high levels of outdoor activity and is particularly appealing to younger travelers.

Adventure travelers often seek varying levels of risk, excitement, and serenity, and they are drawn to unspoiled, exotic locations where they can confront personal challenges (Sung et al., 2022).

There are many thrilling ways to embark on an adventure on lakes, each offering a unique opportunity to immerse in the great outdoors while soaking in stunning views of the water. From hiking and backpacking to climbing and mountain biking, there are numerous ways to take in the panoramic vistas. If seeking an adrenaline rush, zip-lining or free fall allow experiences to get a different perspective on risk. For those who prefer to be in the water, activities such as rafting, jet skiing, scuba diving, and snorkeling provide direct immersion in aquatic adventures.

Sport tourism

Also sport tourism includes a wide range of experiences, from observing sporting events as a spectator to actively participating in competitive activities. It can have wide-ranging effects, promoting social, economic, and environmental action and leaving a positive and lasting impact on destinations. This sector is rapidly growing, attracting more and more tourists interested in incorporating sports into their travel experiences. Whether it's the main purpose of their trip or not, tourists are increasingly drawn to various sporting events and activities, seeking authentic local experiences while combining their passion for sports with a desire for new destinations.

Lakes provide a wonderful opportunity for people to engage in a wide range of recreational water activities, including sailing, kayaking, stand-up paddleboarding, and

windsurfing. These activities offer individuals the chance to connect with nature, enjoy the tranquility of the water, and experience the thrill of these exciting water sports.

Winter tourism in regions with cold climates is closely linked to sport tourism. During the winter season, sports take on a different character due to the climate. Some popular activities include ice fishing, where people catch fish through holes drilled in ice-covered lakes; ice skating on the surfaces of frozen lakes; and snowmobiling, which involves riding snowmobiles on and around frozen lakes.

Wellness tourism

Wellness tourism involves individuals who travel with the specific goal of sustaining their well-being and happiness through engaging in healthy activities and experiences. It includes a holistic approach to health and wellness, aiming to restore the balance between body, mind, and spirit, and promoting overall well-being.

The Global Wellness Institute defines wellness tourism as “*travel associated with the pursuit of maintaining or enhancing one’s personal wellbeing*” (2022). In today’s world, where travel can often lead to stress and unwellness, this tourism offers a way to combat these negative effects and transform travel into an opportunity for improving overall health and wellness.

Wellness tourism is different from medical tourism. The distinction between them is often misunderstood, leading to confusion for consumers and destination marketing efforts. This misperception arises from a lack of clarity in the use of terminology by various organizations and agencies involved in promoting these markets. While there may be some similarities, the types of visitors, activities, services, businesses, and regulations are largely distinct between medical tourism and wellness tourism. Despite both relying on a region’s tourism and hospitality infrastructure, they cater to different needs and preferences.

More concretely, health and wellness tourism on lakes involves traveling to various destinations, both nationally and internationally, to visit places such as clinics, thermal baths, thalassotherapy centers, wellness SPAs, fitness centers, and wellness retreats. It also includes making use of lakeside resorts and spas for relaxation and to reap health

benefits. Another aspect of wellness tourism is the practice of yoga and meditation sessions in tranquil, lakeside environments.

Luxury tourism

Luxury tourism embodies a form of travel that is characterized by top-quality service at every stage of the journey. “*It is more than just staying in five-star hotels. It is also about exciting travel experiences in new destinations*” (CBI. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). It has evolved beyond deluxe accommodations and premium flights to encompass visits to extraordinary destinations and enjoying authentic and unique experiences. The essential components can transform any tourist experience into a luxurious one. What distinguishes luxury travel is the emphasis on service quality, customization, and top-tier accommodation.

Additionally, luxury tourism is distinguished by its high costs and the involvement of wealthy people with substantial travel budgets. These travelers expect to pay a premium for the caliber of travel experience they desire.

These experiences on lakes can involve indulging in upscale accommodations that offer picturesque views of the lake, such as luxurious lakeside resorts. Another luxurious option includes fine dining cruises, where you can savor gourmet meals while cruising around the serene waters of the lake.

2.6 Impacts and benefits of tourism on lakes

Tourism around lakes, like all forms of tourism, can have diverse effects and advantages that extend across economic, environmental, and social aspects.

2.6.1 Economic impacts and benefits

The definition of lake tourism is not clearly identified, which makes it difficult to collect specific statistics on the number of people visiting lakes for leisure and tourism. This also means that there is a lack of comprehensive analysis regarding the economic impact of lake tourism. Measuring the economic and tourism impact of lakes is complex, given that

lake tourism includes activities not only on the lake itself but also in the surrounding areas, adding to the complexity of defining and evaluating its impact (Hall & Härkönen, 2006).

Tourist flows can significantly impact the success of destinations, posing both opportunities and challenges for local and national economies. Since tourism ranks as one of the world's largest economic sectors, the sector holds immense significance for numerous destinations (Gössling & Hall, 2006).

Tourism has significant economic impacts on lakes, yielding both positive and negative effects. However, the positive effects, in particular, are noteworthy (Lake District National Park, n.d.). First of all, tourism, like all commercial activities, generates revenue in various ways. In the context of lakeside tourism, the local economy benefits significantly from visitor spending on accommodations, food services, transportation, recreational experiences, and the purchase of souvenirs. As a result, this increased demand for goods and services creates a ripple effect, supporting the growth of local businesses such as restaurants, retail outlets, and service providers.

Tourism has numerous positive impacts on destinations, particularly on the local community. One of the most significant benefits is the creation of job opportunities. The tourism industry centered around lakes supports a wide range of employment, including roles in hospitality, tour guiding, and marketing. This sector not only directly creates jobs in hotels, restaurants, tour companies, and retail establishments, but also has an indirect impact by generating employment in sectors such as construction, transportation, and agriculture.

Additionally, tourism also has a significant influence on the real estate market and property values. The influx of tourists often leads to a heightened demand for vacation homes and rental properties, which, in turn, can result in a notable appreciation of real estate prices in the area (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2024).

Tourism is also an important source of revenue for the government. The authority earns money from tourism through various taxes such as sales tax, property tax, and hotel taxes, as well as through fees like entrance fees to parks and attractions. This revenue is often reinvested to improve the tourism sector. Moreover, some of the revenue may be allocated

to conservation efforts aimed at maintaining and protecting the natural environment, such as the preservation of lakes and their surrounding areas.

While lake tourism offers substantial economic benefits, it also presents challenges such as environmental degradation, seasonal fluctuations, and potential cultural disruption.

2.6.2 Environmental impacts and benefits

Tourism has significant negative impacts on lakes from an environmental perspective.

The behavior of tourists can have a range of negative impacts on the environment, one of the most pressing being water pollution (Lake District National Park, n.d.). Increased visitor numbers can lead to higher amounts of litter and waste in and around the lake. Furthermore, chemical runoff can also contribute to this issue. Additionally, the usage of motorboats and other watercraft can lead to the introduction of oils, fuels, and other harmful chemicals into the water, posing further environmental risks.

The destination also has its drawbacks. The lack of proper waste management infrastructure can lead to the discharge of sewage and wastewater into the lake. Human activities can harm local wildlife. For example, the presence of tourists can damage vegetation and habitats along shorelines, while the development of infrastructure can disrupt the breeding and feeding patterns of wildlife in the area (Dokulil, 2014). The excessive use of land by humans has also a negative impact on ecosystems, leading to their degradation. The heightened fishing activity by tourists can lead to a depletion of fish populations. Moreover, tourists may unintentionally introduce invasive species, which can outcompete native species and cause disruption to the balance of the ecosystem.

A commonly overlooked consequence of tourism is noise pollution (Dokulil, 2014). The sounds produced by motorboats, jet skis, and recreational activities can have disruptive effects on both aquatic and terrestrial wildlife. Wildlife may experience disturbances in their natural behaviors, communication, and overall well-being.

Lastly, the transportation of tourists to and from lake destinations leads to the release of carbon emissions, contributing to environmental pollution and climate change.

In addition to the environmental impact of tourist traffic, the destination itself also adds to pollution through the provision of tourism services. The operation of hotels, resorts, and other tourist facilities results in high energy consumption, leading to an increase in the local carbon footprint. A more indirect environmental impact is due to urbanization. For instance, the development of second homes and retirement communities, which are often located in areas of environmental significance, can lead to increased pressure on water catchment areas. Activities such as deforestation (Haigh et al., 2004) and other land-use practices (Hillman et al., 2003) can result in pollution and increased sedimentation entering the lake system. In these cases, tourism-related activities can both contribute to and be affected by the environmental changes in the lake system (Puczkó & Rátz, 2000; Hadwen et al., 2003; Mosisch & Arthington, 2004; Jones et al., 2005).

Despite the presence of more negative impacts, there are also several potential benefits at the environmental level. In today's world, there is a growing emphasis on environmental awareness and education. The tourism industry has the potential to support and raise awareness for conservation efforts by funding programs that educate tourists and local communities about the local ecosystems and the significance of preserving them. The increasing interest in eco-tourism is driving the adoption of sustainable practices and fostering environmental stewardship among travelers.

Destinations can use the revenue generated from tourism to create and upkeep protected areas and wildlife reserves. Additionally, funds from tourism can be allocated to initiatives focused on restoring and rehabilitating habitats. The tourism industry is increasingly focusing on utilizing resources more efficiently. This involves allocating funds towards sustainable infrastructure, such as environmentally friendly hotels and effective waste management systems, to minimize negative effects on the environment. Furthermore, implementing renewable energy sources in tourist facilities can significantly decrease carbon emissions.

2.6.3 Social impacts and benefits

Tourism has a multitude of positive impacts on lakes from a social perspective.

Firstly, tourism plays a vital role in promoting cultural exchange by creating opportunities for meaningful interactions between tourists and local communities. These interactions contribute to a deeper understanding of diverse cultures, customs, and traditions. By engaging with local communities, tourists gain valuable insights into the ways of life, beliefs, and practices of different cultures, contributing to a more profound understanding of global diversity (Lake District National Park, n.d.).

Furthermore, the presence of tourism plays a vital role in incentivizing local institutions and government bodies to allocate resources and efforts towards the preservation and celebration of heritage sites, cultural practices, and historical landmarks. This heightened focus fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of the local community's rich and diverse heritage, thereby contributing to the sustainable development of the region (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2024).

Additionally, the positive impact of tourism on community development extends to the continual enhancement of social infrastructure. This includes the improvement and expansion of cultural and recreational facilities, ultimately leading to an improved quality of life for the residents of the area. As tourism increases, it often paves the way for improved infrastructure, including upgraded roads, expanded parks, and better recreational facilities, which serve as valuable assets for tourists as well as local residents. This rise in demand can also lead to the development of improved public services such as healthcare, security, and sanitation.

In numerous industrialized nations, lakes are undergoing significant development of second homes and retirement communities. This is part of a larger trend of people moving to areas with appealing amenities, leading many vacation destinations to gradually evolve into sizable urban centers through the phenomenon of tourism urbanization (Truly, 2002; Marcouiller et al., 2004). It's crucial to consider, however, that these valuable benefits may face challenges due to issues like deforestation and land-use practices and the resultant environmental pollution, which can negatively affect the local environment and communities.

Nevertheless, tourism plays a crucial role in promoting local community engagement by actively involving residents in initiatives focused on preserving and promoting the area's cultural and environmental aspects. This engagement helps to cultivate a sense of

ownership, pride, and responsibility among community members towards their heritage and natural surroundings.

2.7 Balancing tourism and sustainability

In order to fully maximize the positive impacts of lake tourism while minimizing any negative effects, it is crucial to embrace sustainable tourism practices. Newsome et al. (2002) discuss how the implementation of specific planning regulations can effectively reduce the adverse impact of tourism on lake resources.

The expansion of lake tourism presents global challenges that necessitate region-specific solutions (Tuohino & Lóránt, 2012). Lakes are complex ecosystems that are influenced by a multitude of factors. The well-being of a lake depends on the inputs it receives from its surroundings and the conditions within the lake itself. Consequently, effective lake management entails coordinated efforts across the entire watershed that feeds into the lake, in addition to addressing the specific conditions within the lake (Hall & Härkönen, 2006). In order to balance tourism and sustainability on lake destinations, it's essential to implement various practices.

2.7.1 Regulations and management

Tourism activities taking place on lakes should be carefully managed in a sustainable manner to safeguard the integrity of the natural environment and to guarantee the enduring success of the destination. This entails implementing practices that minimize negative impacts on the ecosystem, conserving the beauty and resources of the area, and providing an enriching experience for visitors while maintaining the ecological balance (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, n.d.).

First of all, it is crucial for tourist destinations to establish and uphold regulations affecting the proper disposal of waste, the use of watercraft, and limits on fishing activities. Effective waste disposal and recycling measures are imperative in order to mitigate pollution and preserve the environment. In addition to preserving natural habitats, it is important for authorities to designate and manage protected areas and wildlife reserves to safeguard the flora and fauna within those ecosystems. Additionally,

it is critical to prioritize and advocate for eco-friendly practices, such as promoting the widespread use of environmentally friendly products and activities. This includes developing sustainable infrastructure, such as green hotels, and implementing effective waste management systems. Furthermore, it is important to actively encourage and support the use of renewable energy sources to minimize the environmental impact and foster sustainability.

2.7.2 The involvement of local communities

In order to ensure sustainable tourism management, it is crucial to prioritize the active participation of the local community in all aspects of tourism planning and conservation efforts.

The significance of lakes as leisure and tourism hubs is derived from their profound impact on the local community. These bodies of water not only contribute to the attractiveness of a particular location but also foster economic prospects for the inhabitants. It is important to consider the community's dependence on different facets of the destination, such as accessibility, when evaluating the influence of lakes as recreational and tourist spots (Hall & Härkönen, 2006).

In 2001, Klessig underlined the critical importance of involving citizens in the decision-making processes related to the functions and significance of lakes. As societal appreciation for the value of lakes continues to increase, there is a growing interest in engaging local communities in the management and protection of these natural resources. As a result, there has been a marked increase in citizen engagement in the management and keeping of lakes.

When developing tourism projects, it is of utmost importance to thoroughly comprehend and take into account the needs and values of the local community. This involves conducting comprehensive assessments of the residents' quality of life, understanding their cultural and social values, and gaining insights into their attitudes towards tourists. Such in-depth consideration is vital for fostering and maintaining positive and sustainable relationships between the tourism industry and the host community (Jurowski, 1994; Gursoy et al., 2002).

Involving the community in natural resource management provides a wide array of advantages. Professionals in this field have the opportunity to impart crucial knowledge to citizens regarding sustainable management practices. By involving community members, the range and impact of lake management initiatives can be significantly expanded. While some citizen groups may have particular interests, public agencies can play a vital role in addressing and harmonizing these interests. Moreover, citizen groups are progressively gaining the capacity to obtain government support, including funding and access to pivotal information (Hall & Härkönen, 2006).

2.7.3 Education and awareness

One of the key pillars for ensuring the sustainability of tourism destinations is the implementation of comprehensive educational programs and awareness campaigns that target both the local community and tourists. These programs aim to foster a deep understanding of the environmental, social, and cultural impacts of tourism, promote responsible and sustainable travel practices, and empower both residents and visitors to actively contribute to the preservation and enhancement of the destination (Hall & Härkönen, 2006).

It is crucial to educate tourists about the impact of their behavior on the environment and the significance of preserving natural habitats. This can be achieved through in-depth educational workshops and interactive conferences that promote eco-tourism and sustainable practices. These initiatives can help visitors understand and appreciate the importance of responsible tourism while actively contributing to the preservation of our natural resources.

Furthermore, authorities and tourism managers have the opportunity to engage in comprehensive studies aimed at achieving long-term sustainability for the destination. This entails the establishment of research and monitoring initiatives that would necessitate adequate funding for environmental research and monitoring programs. By leveraging data, stakeholders can gain valuable insights to enhance their management practices and develop effective policies for sustainable tourism development (Hall & Härkönen, 2006).

2.7.4 Calls to action

Below are a few specific examples of calls to action regarding the sustainable management of lake tourism.

The International Lake Environment Committee Foundation (ILEC) was founded with the purpose of facilitating the exchange of international knowledge and fostering research aimed at achieving sustainable management of the world's lakes and basins.

In March 2003, ILEC took a noteworthy step on the global stage by issuing a call to action focused on promoting sustainable management practices for lakes.

This call to action outlines seven guiding principles, offering strategies and opportunities as a blueprint for the sustainable use of lakes. The principles are:

1. Recognizing that a harmonious relationship between humans and nature is crucial for the sustainable use of lakes.
2. Emphasizing the importance of starting lake planning and management actions from the perspective of the lake drainage basin.
3. Adopting a proactive, long-term approach focused on preventing the causes of lake degradation.
4. Ensuring that policy development and decision-making for lake management are based on sound science and the best available information.
5. Resolving conflicts among competing users of lake resources in a manner that considers the needs of current and future generations and the preservation of the natural environment.
6. Encouraging meaningful participation of citizens and stakeholders in identifying and addressing critical lake issues.
7. Establishing good governance practices based on fairness, transparency, and the empowerment of all stakeholders as essential elements for the sustainable use of lakes.

Other examples will be presented in the next chapter. Specifically, a case study will focus on the development of nEULakes, a multifaceted network that actively engages in the

social, cultural, environmental, and economic advancement of European lakes. This participatory initiative seeks to bring about positive transformation and sustainable progress in diverse areas related to European lake systems.

In the area of tourism management, significant progress has been made, but there is still plenty of work to be accomplished. It is crucial to enhance collaboration between educational institutions and private enterprises, fostering open communication and building mutual understanding among stakeholders. One of the main challenges lies in the application of academic research findings to real-world scenarios and utilizing them to drive the development of lake tourism at both local and regional levels (Tuohino & Lóránt, 2012).

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of lake tourism, focusing in the end on the importance of sustainable development. It discusses various aspects, including the environmental concerns associated with tourism, the potential of ecotourism, and the importance of balancing tourism with sustainability.

Lakes offer a diverse range of experiences, catering to different interests and enhancing the value of lake destinations. Rural tourism allows visitors to immerse themselves in the peaceful charm of lakeside communities, while ecotourism encourages environmentally responsible travel. Cultural and heritage tourism lets tourists explore the historical and cultural significance of lake regions, and educational tourism fosters learning experiences. Adventure tourism offers activities such as hiking, kayaking, and zip-lining, while sports tourism attracts water sports enthusiasts. Wellness tourism draws individuals seeking relaxation in the natural settings of lakes, and luxury tourism offers upscale experiences.

The exploration of lake tourism reveals indeed its multifaceted nature, connecting environmental, economic, and social dimensions. As lakes continue to attract visitors with their natural beauty and recreational opportunities, it is imperative to adopt sustainable tourism practices that safeguard these precious ecosystems.

The insights gained from various International Lake Tourism Conferences underscore the importance of collaboration among stakeholders, including local communities, researchers, and tourism operators, to foster responsible management and conservation efforts.

The challenges posed by climate change and increasing tourist activity necessitate a proactive approach to ensure the long-term viability of lake destinations. By prioritizing education and awareness, it's possible to cultivate a culture of environmental management among tourists and residents alike. Furthermore, the economic potential of lake tourism can support conservation initiatives and enhance the quality of life for local communities.

Ultimately, the future of lake tourism hinges on people's ability to balance the demands of tourism with the need for ecological preservation. By embracing sustainable practices and fostering a shared commitment to protecting these vital resources, it's possible to ensure that lakes remain valued destinations for generations to come.

3. nEULakes: a network of European lakes

3.1 Introduction

This chapter delves into the intricate web of European Commission funding opportunities and the numerous collaborative networks that have emerged across Europe with a shared goal: to foster sustainability and enhance tourism, particularly around the continent's lakes. In recent years, the European Union has prioritized initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable development, and a significant portion of these efforts have been directed toward preserving natural landscapes, especially lake ecosystems.

A central theme of this chapter is the exploration of the various networks that work in tandem with EU funding programs, uniting stakeholders from different regions to drive forward projects focused on environmental stewardship and sustainable tourism. Many of these networks operate in areas surrounding lakes, where the natural beauty and ecological significance offer rich potential for both tourism and conservation.

Among these, the nEULakes network stands out. This European alliance of lakeside regions and communities exemplifies the collaborative spirit encouraged by EU tenders and grants. The chapter will provide an examination of the nEULakes network, detailing its members, their shared vision, and the projects they have pursued, highlighting both successes and challenges.

A particular focus will be given to the *ENSEMBLE* project, one of the major collaborative efforts undertaken by nEULakes. The project, aimed at advancing sustainable tourism across member lakes, serves as a case study for understanding how these networks operate. The chapter will also discuss the outcomes of the project's kick-off meeting, where stakeholders gathered to outline strategies, set objectives, and navigate the complexities of cross-border collaboration.

By analyzing the role of EU funding, the dynamics within networks like nEULakes, and the outcomes of projects like *ENSEMBLE*, this chapter will clarify the broader implications for sustainable tourism and regional development across European lake regions.

3.2 EU lakes networks

The globalization of tourism and its expanding role in the economy has created a need for international regulations to manage this phenomenon. The European Union has played a significant role in addressing this issue through various interventions and initiatives related to tourism (commission.europa.eu, n.d.).

Tourism became a central point for the European Union (EU) gradually over time, but its significance increased notably from the early 1990s onwards. In fact, in 1992, thanks to the Maastricht Treaty, tourism was recognized as a significant sector for the first time. While the treaty did not give the EU direct authority over tourism policy, it acknowledged tourism's importance for economic development and regional integration. Five years later, in 1997, the Amsterdam Treaty reinforced the importance of tourism by introducing provisions that allowed the EU to support member states in the tourism sector. This provided the EU with a mandate to encourage cooperation between member states and to promote tourism development at a European level. In 2009, there was a twist thanks to the Lisbon Treaty. This treaty was another milestone. It explicitly included tourism in the EU's list of competencies, allowing the EU to take action to support, coordinate, or supplement the actions of the member states. This gave the EU a more active role in shaping tourism policy across Europe.

More recently, tourism was integrated into the Europe 2020 strategy, which aimed at promoting smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth across the EU. The strategy recognized tourism as a key driver for economic growth and job creation.

Over the years, this sector has become even more central to the EU's agenda, particularly in the context of sustainability and digital transformation.

The European Union offers a wide range of funding and tender opportunities to support projects and initiatives that are in line with its policy objectives. These programs are dedicated to the tourism field and are provided within the framework of the 2021-2027 financial plan and the economic recovery plan for European states, Next Generation EU.

There are two main ways in which the European Union offers money: funding and tenders.

It's important to underline that, due to the significant sums involved, these projects can be complex and require careful preparation, especially when creating proposals or bids that align with the EU's rigorous standards. Familiarity with the specific regulations and criteria of each funding program or tender is essential for achieving success.

Furthermore, the management of projects during and after implementation is also highly regulated. Recipients of EU funds are required to strictly adhere to rules governing the use of the funds. This includes regular reporting on project progress, financial audits, and compliance with EU regulations on procurement, state aid, and environmental protection.

EU Funding Programs

The European Union assigns funding through a range of programs that are designed to address specific areas such as research and innovation, regional development, social inclusion, agriculture, and environmental protection. These programs are overseen by various entities within the EU, including the European Commission, national authorities, and specialized agencies.

Notable funding initiatives include Horizon Europe⁷, which emphasizes research and innovation; Erasmus+⁸, which provides support for education, training, youth, and sport; and the European Regional Development Fund⁹, which works to reduce regional disparities.

Funding can take various forms. For example, there are grants which provide money that does not need to be repaid. Financial instruments, such as loans, guarantees, and equity, offer various ways to access funding. Subsidies can also be available to support certain activities. Additionally, trust funds, prizes, and procurements in the form of public contracts are among the other types of funding that exist.

⁷ <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/programmes/horizon>

⁸ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/>

⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/funding/erdf_en

Potential applicants have the opportunity to explore potential funding sources through platforms such as the EU Funding and Tenders Portal¹⁰, which features a comprehensive list of available calls for proposals across various programs. To apply, applicants are required to submit detailed proposals explaining their project, goals, anticipated outcomes, and how their project aligns with the objectives of the funding program. Additionally, the plan should include a specified budget, timeline, and an assessment of the project's anticipated impact. Proposals undergo evaluation based on criteria including relevance, potential impact, proposal quality, and the applicant's ability to achieve results. Evaluation processes are typically conducted by impartial experts. Successful applicants then proceed to enter into a grant agreement with the managing authority, which outlines the terms of the funding, reporting obligations, and financial specifics.

3.2.1 Living Lakes Network

The Living Lakes Network¹¹ is a worldwide coalition consisting of 130 members from more than 60 countries. Their mission is to protect and restore lakes and wetlands all around the world. For the past two decades, the network has played an important role in collaborating with a wide range of stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government entities, indigenous communities, and local residents. Together, they strive to preserve ecosystems, promote sustainable livelihoods, and enhance awareness of the significant ecological and socioeconomic benefits offered by lakes and wetlands.

Improving the quality of life for local communities is also a core component of the network's mission. The livelihoods of communities residing near lakes and wetlands are frequently connected with these ecosystems, be it through fishing, farming, or tourism. Living Lakes is committed to promoting sustainable development practices to ensure that conservation initiatives support the welfare of the individuals who depend on these ecosystems. This includes initiatives aimed at providing better access to education,

¹⁰ <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/home>

¹¹ <https://livinglakes.org/>

healthcare, sustainable employment opportunities, and infrastructure development, all of which are crucial for fostering thriving and resilient communities.

In addition to on-the-ground efforts, Living Lakes promotes the use of applied sciences and technologies. Research and innovative technologies are essential for comprehending the dynamics of ecosystems, creating sustainable management approaches, and tracking outcomes.

European Living Lakes Association (ELLA)

The European Living Lakes Association (ELLA)¹² is a non-profit organization that is part of the larger international Living Lakes Network. ELLA was established in 2022 with the support of the LIFE Programme of the European Union, specifically the funding for NGOs for the Green Deal. This initiative aims to promote environmental conservation and sustainability, focusing on the protection and preservation of lakes and their surrounding ecosystems throughout Europe.

This collaboration was established with the intention of creating a collaborative workspace aimed at exchanging expertise and addressing shared challenges to promote the sustainable management of lakes and their surrounding areas, as well as the preservation of these and other water systems and their diverse ecosystems in Europe.

ELLA consists of ten European NGO partners from seven countries, including Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Spain and Turkey. Its primary goal is to encourage wetland conservation at the political level. In fact, the group collaborates closely with scientific institutions, authorities, and other stakeholders to advance wetland restoration, environmental education, research, and the enhancement of legal frameworks. Together, they organize workshops and webinars, implement demonstration projects, develop position papers, promote collaboration between stakeholder groups, foster collaboration with the business sector, and generate and share knowledge to improve the protection of lakes and wetlands.

¹² <https://livinglakes.org/ella/>

3.2.2 European Regions Research and Innovation Network (ERRIN)

The European Regions Research and Innovation Network (ERRIN)¹³ is a well-established platform based in Brussels that brings together around 120 regional organizations from more than 20 European countries. Established in 2001, ERRIN is dedicated to enhancing its members' research and innovation (R&I) capabilities at the regional and local levels. Over time, ERRIN has developed strong connections with European Union (EU) institutions and other important stakeholders, aiming to ensure that regional and local viewpoints are effectively considered in developing EU Research and Innovation policies and initiatives.

ERRIN plays an important role in facilitating the sharing of knowledge and providing a platform for regions to collaborate. The network guides its members through the entire project development process, enabling them to capitalize on opportunities for innovation. An important aspect of the network is its well-organized structure, with members actively engaging in 13 thematic Working Groups and two Task Forces. These address both specific subject areas and broader policy challenges, allowing for comprehensive collaboration and problem-solving.

The network is driven by four primary objectives. Firstly, ERRIN emphasizes the importance of regional specificity and customized strategies in EU research and innovation policies. Secondly, it serves as a connection between regional stakeholders, EU institutions, and other important partners, offering access to information and decision-makers. Thirdly, it fosters cooperation among its members to enhance project prospects. Lastly, it champions the representation of regional interests in the broader research and innovation landscape, ensuring that regional viewpoints are taken into account in EU-level discussions.

¹³ <https://errin.eu/>

3.2.3 Network of European Regions for Sustainable and Competitive Tourism (NECSTouR)

NECSTouR¹⁴, the Network of European Regions for Sustainable and Competitive Tourism, is at the forefront of shaping the future of tourism in Europe through fostering collaboration and interregional cooperation. Based in Brussels, it serves as a pivotal platform for more than 40 European regional tourism authorities and over 30 associated members, including universities, research institutes, tourism enterprises, and sustainable tourism associations. This diverse membership emphasizes the network's dedication to adopting a multi-stakeholder approach in addressing the challenges confronting the tourism sector.

The network encourages cooperation among its members, who work together to discover and exchange the most effective methods, as well as to establish important connections across Europe. It aims to assist its members in creating a more intelligent and sustainable tourism model that takes into account the needs of economic growth, environmental conservation, and cultural heritage.

NECSTouR has developed a comprehensive strategy called the "*Five S of Sustainable Tourism of Tomorrow*", which encompasses the following critical pillars: Smart Destinations, which focuses on harnessing technology and innovation to effectively manage sustainable tourism; Socio-cultural Balance, which is dedicated to preserving cultural heritage and social values while promoting tourism; Skills and Talent, emphasizing the importance of upskilling the workforce and nurturing talent within the tourism industry; Safety and Resilience, prioritizing ensuring that tourism destinations are equipped to handle crises and challenges, including those arising from climate change and pandemics; Statistics and Measurability, which underscores the significance of data-driven decision-making to assess progress and enhance sustainability outcomes. These pillars serve as the cornerstone of NECSTouR's interregional cooperation strategy, guiding members through the dynamic landscape of sustainable tourism.

The network's vision closely aligns with the objectives outlined in the European Commission's 2007 agenda for fostering a competitive and sustainable tourism sector.

¹⁴ <https://necstour.eu/>

The net aspires to shape the "*Tourism of Tomorrow*" as a paradigm that strikes a harmonious balance between the well-being of travelers, the preservation of natural and cultural heritage, and the enduring development and competitiveness of destinations and enterprises. This comprehensive vision emphasizes the crucial integration of sustainability across all facets of tourism, encompassing economic factors and environmental stewardship.

On a broader scale, NECSTouR serves as an important link between its regional members and European institutions, such as the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the Committee of the Regions. By facilitating this connection, it ensures that regional voices are heard in discussions about EU tourism policy and that regional needs and perspectives are considered when shaping future legislation.

As a member of the UNWTO's Affiliate Members Board, NECSTouR is also actively involved in advancing global tourism priorities. By aligning its work with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it supports its members in adopting and implementing sustainable tourism practices that contribute to the broader Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

3.2.4 European Network for Accessible Tourism (ENAT)

The European Network for Accessible Tourism (ENAT)¹⁵ was established in 2006 as a project-driven initiative supported by nine sponsoring organizations from six EU member states. Two years later, it evolved into a formal non-profit association registered in Brussels in 2008. Its primary goal is to facilitate the accessibility of European tourism destinations, products, and services for all visitors while also advocating for accessible tourism on a global scale.

ENAT actively brings together a diverse range of stakeholders, such as tourism providers, governmental bodies, and organizations, to foster collaboration, exchange knowledge, and develop best practices in accessible tourism. This collaboration helps create a tourism environment that is inclusive and accommodating for fragile people, including

¹⁵ <https://www.accessibletourism.org/>

individuals with physical or sensory disabilities, older travelers, families with small children, pregnant women, and those with temporary or chronic health conditions. ENAT's goal is to promote accessible tourism as a way to combat discrimination, foster social inclusion, and ensure that everyone can enjoy travel experiences equally.

However, the need for accessible tourism arises from a persistent lack of adequate infrastructure and services across Europe. Many regions continue to struggle with inadequate physical access, transportation barriers, and limited availability of accessible information, which significantly impacts the quality of the tourism experience for a wide array of travelers. These issues reflect a long history of insufficient awareness about accessibility requirements in the planning and management of tourist venues, transport systems, and infrastructure. Even though accessibility awareness has improved, substantial gaps remain, making it difficult for tourists with accessibility needs to fully enjoy the same experiences as other travelers.

In order to overcome these issues, ENAT focuses on gathering and sharing information about how to design tourism spaces and services in a way that is accessible to everyone. This is intended to ensure that everyone involved in the tourism industry, whether they are small businesses or large developers, has the knowledge and tools to put accessible solutions into practice. The underlying idea is that making tourism accessible not only enhances the experience for travelers but also contributes to the long-term success and competitiveness of the tourism sector.

ENAT's vision extends beyond Europe, reaching out to a global audience. While its roots and primary focus lie in Europe, the network has broadened its horizons to include members from diverse regions worldwide who are dedicated to promoting inclusive tourism. This global expansion mirrors the organization's goal of uniting the international tourism community to address accessibility challenges. The network's motto, "*Tourism for All*", embodies its fundamental belief that tourism should be welcoming to everyone, offering equal opportunities for individuals of all abilities and circumstances.

3.2.5 Network for the European Private Sector in Tourism (NET)

NET¹⁶, the Network for the European Private Sector in Tourism, is an alliance of representative trade associations from the private sector in European tourism. This collaboration's main objective is to collectively establish and work towards shared goals for the industry. By closely engaging with policymakers and other relevant partners, NET strives to actively contribute to the development of policies that promote the growth and long-term viability of the tourism sector.

The group is committed to shaping the future of European tourism by prioritizing the preservation of Europe as a compelling, sustainable destination for both local and international travelers. Additionally, it aims to establish Europe as a competitive landscape that fosters the success of tourism enterprises. Fulfilling this vision hinges on policymakers working together to establish an environment conducive to the growth of the sector.

To guarantee the continued prosperity of tourism in Europe, it is essential to adopt a more unified and deliberate strategy. NET is dedicated to collaborating with policymakers across different tiers of government to uphold the significance of tourism within the larger EU policy framework. This entails not only pushing for improved regulations and financial backing but also highlighting the industry's role in fostering economic development, social unity, and cultural interaction.

3.3 Introduction and overview of nEULakes network

“nEULakes (Network of European Lakes) is a participatory network for social, cultural, environmental and economic development of European lakes” (neulakes.eu, n.d.).

¹⁶ <https://net-tourism.eu/>

This initiative¹⁷ establishes a collaborative platform for minor municipalities located near European lakes, with the goal of advancing sustainable and inclusive development while safeguarding the diverse heritage and biodiversity present in these lake areas.

The concept of nEULakes was born from the strong and successful collaboration between the Municipality of Iseo in Italy and other European towns. This partnership was initially fostered through the "Festival dei Laghi"¹⁸, a cultural event that has been hosted annually in Iseo since 2010. What started as a cultural exchange has evolved over time to encompass a broader vision that includes environmental conservation, social integration, and economic progress. As the potential for collaboration extended beyond cultural activities, the network expanded to involve municipalities from diverse European countries.

In order to situate this joint initiative within a European framework, extensive discussions took place between all the involved parties, each representing a municipality situated close to lakes. The network currently consists of twelve European entities.

The primary objective is to valorize and promote their shared lake heritage. This network is strategically developed to actively involve citizens, increasing their understanding and involvement in key EU policies and funding programs that are in line with the project's specific objectives. These programs are centered around significant themes, including the preservation of the environment, fostering cultural collaboration, promoting social inclusivity, and facilitating inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

The nEULakes project places a strong emphasis on engaging citizens and their representatives in meaningful discussions, idea-sharing, and the co-creation of innovative solutions. Through organized dialogues, citizens will delve into best practices and

¹⁷ <https://www.neulakes.eu/>

¹⁸ The event's goal was to unite all of Italy's lakes in a festival that celebrated the distinct characteristics of these unique environments, encompassing their geographic, environmental, and cultural significance. The festival featured a market exhibition dedicated to showcasing the unique culinary and wine offerings of each lake through displays, tastings, and workshops. Additionally, there were art and cultural exhibits, concerts, literary discussions, and conferences. The festival also included lively entertainment and sports activities that engaged the entire Lake Iseo community (visitlakeiseo.info, n.d.).

effective strategies to value their lakes and the rural heritage in the surrounding areas. This collaborative attempt seeks to foster not just cultural collaboration but also environmental preservation, social inclusivity, and economic sustainability.

The dialogue between participants from diverse European regions is intended to facilitate the identification of synergies and innovative strategies, which can be implemented at both local and European levels to promote sustainable and inclusive growth. This engagement aligns with several key European Union strategies, including the Lisbon Strategy (aiming for economic growth), Europe 2020 (towards smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth), and related EU policies aimed at fostering sustainable and inclusive growth.

Through the exchange of best practices and innovative approaches, the network aims to develop comprehensive, long-term strategies for enhancing the value of lakes across several dimensions.

The presence of lakes plays a crucial role in shaping the local identity, influencing traditions, cuisine (including food and wine), craftsmanship, and everyday customs. The cultural importance of lakes is a unifying factor across all the municipalities involved, and nEULakes aims to showcase and safeguard these distinct local characteristics.

Preserving the natural ecosystems surrounding lakes is also of utmost importance. nEULakes promotes collaboration on important issues such as safeguarding biodiversity, managing water resources, and implementing effective waste management practices. Addressing these environmental issues necessitates both local and cross-border solutions, and nEULakes is committed to enabling the sharing of expertise and approaches to tackle these challenges.

Additionally, lakes play a central role in hosting a variety of social activities, such as recreational sports, community events, and programs that promote active aging and volunteerism. The project intends to investigate ways in which lake communities can enrich these social activities to strengthen community bonds and overall well-being.

Lastly, the network also focuses on an economic dimension. Lakes play a crucial role in supporting local economies, especially through sustainable tourism and related industries. The nEULakes initiative tries to enhance the tourism sector in ways that support local

businesses, such as restaurants, hotels, and museums, while also protecting the natural environment. Key areas of focus will include activities like guided tours and eco-tourism.

Through working together on a European scale, the municipalities can take advantage of improved information exchange, leading to greater success in local development projects. There is significant potential for collaboration, which is expected to positively impact many areas of daily life for residents close to lakes.

Ultimately, by working together, these towns can effectively address common obstacles, take advantage of EU funding, and develop a cohesive plan to enhance lake valorization. Through these efforts, nEULakes not only improves the welfare of local communities but also advances the larger objectives of European integration and sustainable development.

3.4 nEULakes members

The nEULakes network currently comprises twelve members and is continually expanding. It aims to provide representation for the entire European region and has made significant progress in doing so. The network includes Finland in Northern Europe, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine in the East, Ireland in the West, and Italy, Spain, France, Switzerland, Austria, Slovenia, and Croatia in Central and Southern Europe. This comprehensive representation spans Northern, Southern, Eastern, and Central Europe.

The objective is to further extend nEULakes presence across Europe, with a focus on reaching more and more minor rural centers on lakes. The next target for inclusion is Lake Vänern in Sweden (R. Venchiarutti, president of nEULakes).

Below is a brief overview of each member, including the specific municipality or entity that is in charge of overseeing the management of the lakes.

Image 2

Map of nEULakes members in October 2024



3.4.1 Visit Lake Iseo – Lake Iseo (Italy)

Visit Lake Iseo¹⁹ is the first member of the network nEULakes. The president of this tourist association, Riccardo Venchiarutti – also mayor of the town of Iseo – was the creator of nEULakes, making the destination the leader of all the activities and projects.

It is an association formed in 2018 by 23 municipalities located on Lake Iseo, including 7 neighboring hill municipalities, together with the two Provinces of Brescia and Bergamo.

The organization has as its mission the coordination of tourism projects aimed at enhancing and promoting the heritage of the territorially concerned municipalities.

In this case, the member of nEULakes is an association, not a municipality. In fact, as seen before, it's a mix of localities on the lake.

¹⁹ <https://visitlakeiseo.info/>

Lake Iseo, also called Sebino because of its distinctive S-shape, is located in an extraordinary corner of Northern Italy, in Lombardy, between the provinces of Brescia and Bergamo and it is characterized by a particularly mild climate, rich in resources, which allows a varied and complete tourist offer.

It is the fourth-largest lake in the region and is nestled between the hills of Franciacorta, known for the production of top-quality wines, and the mountains of Val Camonica. This picturesque lake is *“fringed by mountains with the Camonica valley to the north and Franciacorta wine country to the south, “ferries criss-cross the lake” linking the little towns and medieval villages on its shores”*, as described in The Week UK article titled *“The Best Lakeside Getaways in Europe”* (Forshaw, 2024).

In the center of the lake stands Montisola, Europe's largest lake island. As the fishermen of the area say, the “mother” Montisola accompanies two small “daughters,” San Paolo and Loreto, two smaller islands, which, being privately owned, are not accessible to the public.

The lake is divided into two different administrative regions. In the same way, the two shores of the lake give the area an evocative but totally different appearance: the Bergamo shore, to the west, has cliffs and crags plunging steeply into the water; the Brescia shore, to the east, is characterized by a greater variety of environments. In fact, the presence of olive trees, vineyards, and orchards gives rise to lush vegetation favored by a mild climate.

Over the years, the area's main economic activity has become tourism, especially in the spring and summer months, from April to September, a period when various events such as regattas, concerts, or village festivals are held.

The proposals for leisure time are of absolute standard. In addition to traditional water sports such as windsurfing and sailing, there are also sports facilities, beautiful trails for trekking and hiking lovers, and training routes for bikers. The calendar of events, shows, and traditional celebrations is busy in every season.

In addition, it is possible to visit beautiful medieval villages with ancient testimonies, such as castles, towers, museums and churches, or nature reserves. As written in the article *“Lake Iseo: The secret Italian summer spot”* published in the British newspaper The

Times: “*Lake Iseo is Italy in miniature. Vines dangle on southern hillsides; snow dapples ragged mountains to the north; pretty towns stroke the waterfront; there’s art and history; there is swimming, eating and loafing. Here, la vita is truly dolce*” (Buckley, 2022).

There are several reasons why a tourist chooses Lake Iseo as a destination for their vacation: to enjoy the tranquility of nature, to escape stress and busy everyday life, escape from hectic city life, explore diverse natural landscapes, experience outdoor adventures, and taste local cuisine and traditions. According to an article published in 2019 in the British newspaper “The Guardian”, Lake Iseo is among the “*quietest but most picturesque*” of Italy's lakes (The Guardian, 2019).

Iseo is located 30/40 km from the International Airport Bergamo Orio al Serio “Caravaggio” and 100 km from Milan.

Image 3

Lake Iseo



neulakes.eu

3.4.2 Manzanares el Real – Santillana Reservoir (Spain)

Manzanares el Real²⁰ is the second official partner of nEULakes, a connection that was established in 2016 when the municipalities of Iseo (Italy) and Manzanares el Real (Spain) became twinning towns. Lake Iseo serves as the president of the network, while Manzanares el Real holds the position of vice president. Together, they collaborated to recruit all the other members and expand the network.

²⁰ <https://manzanareselreal.org/es/>

This municipality has a population of 9,400 inhabitants and is located in the Northwestern area of the Autonomous Community of Madrid in Spain. The town is located at the base of La Pedriza, a renowned granite mountain range within the Sierra de Guadarrama National Park. Additionally, it is in close proximity to the scenic Santillana Reservoir, offering stunning natural landscapes and recreational opportunities for visitors and locals.

The municipality ranks as one of the largest in the Community of Madrid, boasting many unspoiled natural landscapes covering more than half of its territory. This scenery provides an ideal setting for a wide variety of sports and outdoor activities.

One of the most popular activities in La Pedriza is hiking, offering a diverse range of trails that wind through stunning landscapes, including rugged mountains, tranquil rivers, and lush forests. The paths cater to those seeking an adrenaline-pumping challenge as well as those looking for a leisurely stroll suitable for the entire family. Another sport closely associated with the mountain is climbing. This area, in fact, is home to the renowned Madrid climbing school and has been the site of many legendary climbs on its historic cliffs. In addition, there are plenty of other activities to enjoy, including cycling, running, and bird watching. Manzanares El Real is home to a diverse range of bird species, providing plenty of great opportunities to spot and appreciate them in various beautiful locations.

Nestled in the midst of natural beauty, this locality is also a treasure trove of historical landmarks. Among them, the 15th-century Mendoza's Castle stands as a testament to the medieval period, offering a look into Spain's rich heritage. The Old Castle (Castillo Viejo) shows an ancient charm, while the Cañada Real Bridge serves as a link to the past. The first paper factory in Spain stands as a testament to the region's industrial history, and the Ethnological and Archaeological Museum showcases the cultural and historical textiles of the area.

Manzanares el Real is located only 42 km from the Spanish capital, Madrid.

Image 4

Santillana Reservoir



neulakes.eu

3.4.3 Imatra – Lake Saimaa (Finland)

The municipality of Imatra on Lake Saimaa²¹ is the third member of the network nEULakes.

Imatra is situated in the southeastern part of Finland, nestled along the picturesque Vuoksi River, which flows from Lake Saimaa to Lake Ladoga. This region forms part of the Finnish Lakeland and offers a captivating holiday experience throughout the year. Lake Saimaa, often hailed as the jewel of Eastern Finland, holds the distinction of being the framework of Finnish tourism. Its breathtakingly unspoiled natural surroundings make it a compelling destination for nature enthusiasts and travelers alike.

Lake Saimaa has also been recognized internationally. The first credit came in the spring of 2021 when the region achieved UNESCO Global Geopark status²². This prestigious designation acknowledges the area's natural landscapes, hiking trails, and significant cultural landmarks. Additionally, Imatra has demonstrated its dedication to environmental sustainability by signing the Glasgow Climate Declaration and pledging to achieve CO2 neutrality by 2030.

The region is home to an array of captivating geological features, ranging from naturally occurring formations to impressive structures crafted by human hands. The giant kettles,

²¹ <https://gosaimaa.com/>

²² UNESCO Global Geoparks are internationally very popular in tourism and can be compared to national parks and UNESCO World Heritage sites (unesco.org, n.d.).

sheer cliffs, and intricate network of canals each bear witness to the rich and diverse history of the region's evolution and development over time.

Finland features 41 national parks, with two of them located in the Lake Saimaa area. Linnasaari and Kolovesi National Parks are a paradise for water sports enthusiasts and offer breathtaking natural landscapes. Along with these parks, the Lake Saimaa region is home to other unique natural wonders that attract visitors from all over the world. These diverse ecosystems not only contribute to the preservation of biodiversity but also provide people with the opportunity to immerse themselves in the splendor of nature. Finns value their natural surroundings and take pleasure in leisurely walks in the serene beauty of the region. The area offers nature trails, marked routes, and inviting campsites, making it a perfect destination for nature lovers.

Focusing on the municipality of Imatra, the birthplace of tourism, its population for the moment is around 25,000 inhabitants, but popular events easily double it. Events are very important: Imatranajo race (an international road racing championship), Saimaa Cycle Tour (an international cycling event) as well as other sports events. Imatra is also known for its culture. Some well-known events to name are Imatra Big Band and International Black and White Theater Festivals.

Imatra offers a variety of activities for visitors to enjoy. During the summer, it's possible to take a swim in the lake or coddle in the local delicacies available at the marketplaces and gourmet restaurants. In winter, the frozen-over lake provides ice fishing, cross-country skiing, and ice skating opportunities. There is also the chance to soak in the stunning views of Lake Saimaa on a relaxing cruise or participate in one of the many guided tours. Additionally, visitors can unwind and experience luxurious pampering treatments at the year-round open spas and leisure pools.

The municipality is located 250 km from Finland's capital, Helsinki (2,5 hours by train), and the closest international airport is in Lappeenranta (37 km).

Image 5

Lake Saimaa



neulakes.eu

3.4.4 Bohinj – Lake Bohinj (Slovenia)

The fourth member joining the nEULakes network is Bohinj²³ and its lake.

Settled in the embrace of the Julian Alps, Bohinj is a paradise valley that captivates all who visit. At the heart of the Triglav National Park, one of Europe's most ancient national parks, is Lake Bohinj, Slovenia's largest natural lake. This untouched lake is embraced at the base of unspoiled mountains and peaks. Agatha Christie, an English best-selling novelist, once remarked, "*Bohinj is too beautiful for murder*". Her words reflect the tranquil and picturesque scenery that makes Bohinj a setting seemingly too enchanting for one of her detective stories (Charney, 2023).

Throughout the year, the municipality of Bohinj is a source of inspiration with its captivating charm. The area is not only shaped by its natural beauty but also by the local communities. Their commitment to preserving the environment is a deep-rooted sense of pride and warm hospitality that they try to extend to all who appreciate and respect their home.

In this place, it's possible to enjoy a wide range of activities while taking in breathtaking views, interacting with welcoming locals, and immersing in the unspoiled natural

²³ <https://www.bohinj.si/>

surroundings. For instance, exploring the charming valleys and captivating meadows is recommended where traditional cheese-making and harmonious coexistence with nature are still practiced. The "Bohinjsko/From Bohinj" label ensures top-notch local quality cuisine, delightful beverages, and artisanal products sourced from local farms.

Lake Bohinj offers a variety of water activities throughout the year. During the warmer months, visitors can take a refreshing swim, go boating, try surfing, kayaking, or canoeing, indulge in some fishing, or explore the underwater world while snorkeling. In winter, although less common now, the lake occasionally freezes over, providing an opportunity for ice skating.

Bohinj is part of the Alpine Pearls network²⁴, demonstrating its dedication to promoting sustainable mobility and offering a range of public transportation options in the Alpine region. Its forward-thinking approach is underscored by its receipt of international awards, including being the first destination to earn the platinum national label from the Slovenia Green scheme for its unwavering commitment to sustainable tourism development.

Locals say that Bohinj is right at the end of the world, but it is only 25 km from Bled and is well-connected to other parts of Slovenia and Central Europe.

Image 6

Lake Bohinj



neulakes.eu

²⁴ Alpine Pearls is a transnational association of twenty-seven municipalities across the alpine regions of Italy, Austria, Slovenia, Germany, France and Switzerland, which aims to promote sustainable tourism activities for local development (<https://www.alpine-pearls.com/en>).

3.4.5 Sankt Gilgen – Lake Wolfgang (Austria)

Sankt Gilgen, the fifth member of nEULakes, is located on the northwestern shore of Lake Wolfgang (Wolfgangsee)²⁵, in proximity to Strobl and the Upper Austrian municipality of St. Wolfgang.

Austria is known for its beautiful natural landscapes, especially the Salzkammergut region, which is called the "Land of Lakes" and has over sixty lovely lakes. While Innsbruck and Salzburg are popular destinations, the town of Saint Gilgen is a hidden gem that adds to the region's charm. Saint Gilgen is a delightful mix of village appeal and trendy sophistication, seen in the stylish streets on the northern shores of Lake Wolfgangsee.

The lake offers stunning views of the Postalm promontory, which is the second largest plateau in Europe. During winter, it transforms into a beloved ski destination in Austria, while in the warmer months, it becomes a pasture for animals and an ideal setting for outdoor hiking adventures.

Lake Wolfgang boasts a rich historical and cultural heritage, having been the birthplace and home of several renowned artists. A pivotal moment in its history occurred on November 8th, 1930, when Ralph Benatzky's operetta, "*Im weißen Rössl*", premiered in Berlin. The operetta was an immediate success, captivating audiences and earning worldwide acclaim. This small lakeside town, as Benatzky's birthplace, experienced a rise in tourism, attracting enthusiasts eager to explore the roots of this celebrated musical work.

The region's artistic connections extend further, as St. Gilgen holds ties to the Mozart family. Anna Maria, the mother of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, was born in St. Gilgen, and his sister, Nannerl, also lived there for many years. These historical links add another layer of cultural significance to the lake, further enriching its appeal to visitors and historians.

Besides its history, St. Gilgen is a village with rich traditions, cultural landmarks, beautiful architecture, and unique attractions.

²⁵ <https://wolfgangsee.salzkammergut.at/>

The municipality of Sankt Gilgen is about 30 km away from the city of Salzburg.

Image 7

Lake Wolfgang



neulakes.eu

3.4.6 Ascona – Lake Maggiore (Switzerland)

Ascona and Lake Maggiore²⁶ are sometimes regarded as the sixth members of nEULakes. While Lake Maggiore differs in size from the other participating lakes, being much bigger, it has joined nEULakes specifically to participate in certain activities and projects.

Lake Maggiore, also known as Verbano, is an expansive lake that spans across the cantons of Ticino, Piedmont, and Lombardy, earning its name "Maggiore" or "superior" as the largest among the neighboring lakes. The area offers an idyllic setting for vacations in Ticino, with over 2,300 hours of sunshine annually and enchanting towns exuding a Mediterranean ambiance.

The region benefits from a climate that is ideal for the flourishing of traditional Mediterranean flora, thanks to the presence of the lake. The landscape is adorned with green islands like the Brissago Islands, where Switzerland's solitary botanical park are situated.

The ideal climate of Lake Maggiore provides the perfect conditions for a wide range of water sports. In the morning, the Tramontana wind blows from the mountains to the plain,

²⁶ <https://www.ascona-locarno.com/>

while in the afternoon, the Inverna wind blows from the plain to the mountains. These unique wind patterns make Lake Maggiore an excellent location for activities like sailing and windsurfing, which are highly favored in the Ascona-Locarno region.

Diving into and swimming in Lake Maggiore from the start of summer is also possible. The sun-kissed region experiences a quick rise in temperatures, and the towns along the shore boast beautiful light sandy beaches and fully equipped swimming areas.

Ascona, a charming municipality nestled on the shores of Lake Maggiore in the Swiss district of Locarno (Canton Ticino), is home to approximately 5,800 residents. Its setting boasts palm trees, a Mediterranean ambiance, and a gentle climate, making it a true paradise. Steeped in history, art, and culture, Ascona has transformed into a sought-after vacation destination. The town's distinctive lake promenade and picturesque, vibrantly painted houses make it really attractive and encourage people to relax, explore, and enjoy the beautiful sunsets over the lake.

In Ascona, visitors can immerse themselves in the "*Dolce Vita*" lifestyle while still having a wide range of activities to choose from. For instance, the destination is home to one of Switzerland's most prestigious 18-hole golf courses, offering a perfect opportunity for enthusiasts. Additionally, just a short boat ride away from Ascona, the captivating Brissago Islands await, inviting visitors to spend a day on the lake and admire the islands' rich botanical diversity. Furthermore, Ascona and its surrounding area offer numerous biking opportunities.

The town is also a popular tourist destination, hosting a yearly jazz festival, the "Ascona Jazz Festival".

The municipality is really close to Lugano (around 40 km) and even closer to the Italian border.

Image 8

Lake Maggiore



neulakes.eu

3.4.7 Le Bourget-du-Lac – Lake Bourget (France)

The seventh member of the network is the French municipality of Le Bourget-du-Lac on Lake Bourget²⁷.

The town is situated in the department of Savoy (South France), offering an attractive setting by the waters of Lake Bourget, which happens to be the largest natural lake of glacial origin in France. Its privileged position near the Mont du Chat adds to its allure, making it a perfect destination for those seeking natural beauty and tranquility.

Le Bourget-du-Lac, the first commercial and merchant port, has a rich history and a reputation for being an attractive and hospitable town due to its advantageous geographical location. This town has long been a hub for trade and commerce, drawing visitors and residents alike with its scenic beauty and thriving business opportunities.

Throughout history, the region has been honored by the presence of several renowned figures, each of whom has left an indelible mark on the city. The likes of Montaigne, Rousseau, Lamartine, Queen Victoria, and Clemenceau have all made significant contributions to the city's increasing reputation as a tourist destination.

Bourget-du-Lac hosts over 150 events throughout the year, with a concentration from late May to early September. These events encompass a wide range of activities, including

²⁷ <https://www.lebourgetdulac.fr/>

water sports, cycling, and automobile events, as well as cultural experiences such as music, theater, dance shows, and open-air cinema. Additionally, there are family-friendly events, including traditional and themed markets and night markets by the lake.

Besides the cultural aspect, Le Bourget-du-Lac boasts a wealth of natural heritage, offering a variety of outdoor activities, including hiking, mountain biking, and a range of water sports such as sailing, rowing, canoeing, kayaking, rafting, fishing, diving, water skiing, and wakeboarding. The lake is renowned for its fishing opportunities, with around thirty species, including char and whitefish.

Le Bourget-du-Lac is located a little more than 100 km from Lyon and 80 km from Geneva (Switzerland).

Image 9

Lake Bourget



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3.4.8 Skradin – Lake Prukljan (Croatia)

Skradin²⁸, located in Northern Dalmatia, is one of the oldest Croatian cities and the 8th member of nEULakes.

Situated at the entrance of Krka National Park, this location is a crucial nautical hub in the Adriatic and a prominent tourist hotspot in Croatia. Just four kilometers away from Skradin, there is Prukljan Lake, the second-largest lake in Croatia. One distinctive feature is its dual nature: the deeper layers contain salty water, while the surface is freshwater.

²⁸ <https://skradin.hr/hr/naslovnica/>

The region is rich in natural beauty and opportunities for exploration. In addition to being home to the magnificent "Skradinski buk" travertine waterfall system in Krka National Park, the area offers the chance to uncover the treasures of Bribirska Glavica, a significant archaeological site often referred to as the “Croatian Troy”. Furthermore, visitors can indulge in the delights of traditional cuisine while exploring the area.

The area is renowned for its untouched beauty and unique natural features, including the remarkable tufa barriers. Recognizing its exceptional ecological significance, a portion of the river Krka was designated as a national park in 1985, while the river's lower course was safeguarded as a landscape of special importance. At this juncture, the river Krka converges with the river Guduća to form a captivating ornithological reserve, offering a haven for bird enthusiasts and providing a picturesque sanctuary for a variety of bird species.

The municipality of Skradin is located about 15 km from Šibenik, where there are two international airports, and 75 km from Zadar. The city is also well connected by bus and by train to neighboring countries and European cities.

Image 10

Lake Prukljan



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3.4.9 Leitrim – Lake Allen (Ireland)

County Leitrim²⁹, situated in the North West of Ireland, is home to the county town of Carrick-on-Shannon (“Cora Droma Rúisc” in Irish, meaning “the weir of the marshy

²⁹ <https://leitrimtourism.com/>

ridge”). With a population of 4,100 inhabitants, it is strategically positioned at a crossing point of the River Shannon, a renowned inland resort in Ireland. The county is home to approximately 40 lakes, one of which is Lake Allen (also known as Lough Allen), the 9th member of the nEULakes network.

Leitrim offers a charming mix of traditional and contemporary Irish culture, with an array of shops, restaurants, and vibrant music venues. Its beautiful theater adds to the allure of this rural escape, attracting families, explorers, and those who appreciate a leisurely pace of life and the natural beauty of the great outdoors.

With its wild landscapes, Leitrim offers an ideal playground for adventures, such as kayaking, canoeing, or paddle boarding on the Shannon Blueway. For those seeking an adrenaline rush, there's also horseback riding, climbing, off-road cycling, and even surfing. The county encourages visitors to savor and cherish their travel experiences by focusing on slow adventure activities and fully immersing in nature while reconnecting with the environment.

The North West of Ireland is home to some of the most stunning peaks, offering hikers breathtaking views. There are tracks and trails suitable for walkers of all abilities. Leitrim has a well-deserved reputation as a fisherman destination, with its lakes teeming with coarse and game fish. It's an ideal destination for a leisurely holiday cruising the River Shannon. The natural landscape is also perfect for off-road cycling and even climbing.

Additionally to the natural activities, the visitor centers offer a delightful display of the region's art, culture, and heritage, while charming cafes and restaurants serving local cuisine can always be found.

County Leitrim is located a two-hour drive from Dublin and a mere 45 minutes from Ireland West Airport (Knock).

Image 11

Lake Allen



neulakes.eu

3.4.10 Trakai – Lake Galvė (Lithuania)

The Trakai district³⁰, the 10th addition to the network nEULakes, is situated in the southeastern region of Lithuania, in close proximity to the capital city of Vilnius, near the town of Trakai. The area is characterized by dense forests and over 200 lakes. Approximately 21% of the district's total area is designated as protected territory.

The area surrounding Trakai is a captivating blend of ancient villages and historic castle hills, drawing not only history enthusiasts but also nature lovers. Two parks grace the Trakai region: the Trakai Historical National Park and the Aukštadvaris Regional Park. The first, established in 1991, boasts a landscape of exceptional beauty featuring over 32 picturesque lakes. Complementing this, the second, instituted in 1992, aims to safeguard the Verknė and Strėva upper reaches, with its predominantly forested terrain and 72 lakes. The lake collaborating with the nEULakes group is especially Lake Galvė, in Trakai Historical National Park.

The country's rich historical legacy and cultural significance contribute to its unity. The district's reputation is closely tied to the town of Trakai, particularly the Galvė Lake Island Castle, which stands as a symbol of the town. This remarkable castle is distinctive as it is the only island-built castle in Eastern Europe and remains one of Lithuania's most frequently visited architectural landmarks.

³⁰ <https://www.trakai-visit.lt/>

Trakai municipality is a well-maintained historical village boasting a population of over 5,000 residents. It stands as one of the most prominent tourist destinations in the country, drawing in one million visitors annually.

In 2008, Trakai was designated as a resort territory, surrounded by lush forests and picturesque lakes. The town's clean air, often attributed to its "green lungs," is enhanced by the prevalence of coniferous woodlands. This natural setting makes Trakai an ideal destination for green tourism, with 65% of the region's tourism being agrotourism. Visitors can engage in a variety of activities, such as purchasing fresh produce directly from homesteads, interacting with animals, or enjoying stays on local farms.

Trakai district lies really close to the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius (less than 30 km).

Image 12

Lake Galvė



neulakes.eu

3.4.11 Shatsk – Lake Svityaz (Ukraine)

Shatsk³¹ recently became part of the nEULakes network. This region comprises 31 settlements and is located in the northwestern region of Ukraine, sharing its borders with the Republic of Belarus and Poland.

The area boasts a rich historical background and numerous cultural landmarks. For instance, the Shatsk National Nature Park is home to a diverse range of plant and animal species and is part of the "West Polesie" Transboundary Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO-protected area situated on the borders of Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus.

³¹ <https://shatsk.com/>

In the region, there are a total of 30 lakes spread across an area of about 8,000 hectares, which collectively form one of the most expansive lake systems in Europe. The largest among these lakes is Lake Svitjaz.

The national park is home to a diverse array of around 80,000 migrating aquatic birds. This makes it an ideal destination for observing a wide variety of bird species, including some considered at risk.

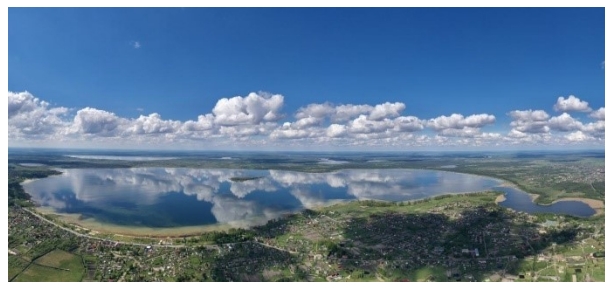
The area also serves as a scientific institution, with its scientific department collaborating with experts from other institutions to conduct ongoing research to maintain stable ecological processes, optimize disturbed natural ecosystems, and promote recreational use of the area.

The region attracts numerous visitors who come to enjoy activities like swimming in the clear lakes, cycling through scenic trails, and engaging in water sports such as canoeing.

Due to its close proximity to the Russian border, the city of Shatsk is currently not easily accessible.

Image 13

Lake Svitjaz



neulakes.eu

3.4.12 Foundation for the Protection of the Great Masurian Lakes – Masurian Lakes District (Poland)

The Foundation for the Protection of the Great Masurian Lakes³² has recently become the newest member of the nEULakes network.

³² <https://jeziora.com.pl/>

The Foundation is dedicated to promoting environmentally friendly waste management practices and actively supports initiatives focused on air protection and the utilization of alternative energy sources. Over the years, it has taken on the role of regional coordinator for numerous ecological campaigns and activities, inspiring and engaging individuals of all ages, from children to adults.

The organization, situated in Giżycko, is a non-governmental entity that works on behalf of the Masurian municipalities, aiming to benefit them. It was established in 1991 by four municipalities in the Great Masurian Lakes region, namely the City of Giżycko, the City of Kętrzyn, the City of Mrągowo, and the City and Municipality of Ruciane-Nida, along with the involvement of seven private individuals.

The Great Masurian Lakes, hidden in the heart of Poland, are a destination renowned for their transparent waters, lush woodlands, and delightful villages. This region offers a unique retreat into nature's embrace, where visitors can relax on hidden beaches or embark on scenic hikes through ancient woodlands. For those interested in history and culture, the area also invites exploration of its towns, filled with architectural treasures and intriguing museums, offering a deeper understanding of the rich heritage.

For food lovers, indulging in traditional Polish cuisine is a must. Local restaurants serve dishes made with fresh, locally sourced ingredients. Specialties like pierogi, bigos, and freshly caught lake fish offer an authentic taste of the region's culinary traditions.

The Great Masurian Lakes also offer a wealth of outdoor activities. With over 2,000 lakes, visitors can enjoy sailing, kayaking, fishing, and swimming. Boat tours allow adventurers to explore the calm waterways framed by lush forests and rolling hills. In winter, the frozen lakes become a paradise for ice sailing, ice fishing, and dog sledding enthusiasts.

The region's diverse ecosystems, including protected areas like Masurian Landscape Park and Wigry National Park, are home to a variety of plant and animal species. These areas offer sanctuary to rare and endangered wildlife, making the region a popular destination for nature lovers and conservationists.

Throughout the year, the Masurian Lakes district also hosts festivals and events celebrating traditional Polish folk music, dance, and cuisine, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in the region's rich cultural traditions.

Kaliningrad (Russia) and Gdansk (Poland) are the closest airports to this lake district.

Image 14

Masurian Lakes District



jeziora.com.pl

In conclusion, the members of the nEULakes network are municipalities, districts, or entities situated around lakes, all located within Europe. Most are small, lesser-known destinations, often regarded as hidden gems surrounded by nature. Their defining characteristic is their rural charm, with many remaining untouched and unspoiled while others are beginning to attract more significant numbers of tourists. Regardless of their current popularity, all of these destinations are committed to sustainable practices, promoting slow tourism and outdoor activities. While primarily natural areas, they also offer a rich blend of culture and tradition. Another shared feature is their accessibility, as most are well-connected to larger cities.

3.5 nEULakes initiatives and programs

In the previous sections, we outlined the main objectives of nEULakes and provided an overview of its members. But how does the network operate in concrete terms?

The nEULakes network functions through a collaborative approach, particularly when its members are interested in participating in calls for projects, often issued by the European Union. These calls can focus on a range of topics, such as environmental sustainability, cultural preservation, rural development, or tourism innovation. Each member reviews the available opportunities and decides whether a particular initiative aligns with their local needs and long-term goals.

If a project seems promising or beneficial, the network members collectively agree to apply, aiming to secure financial support from the EU or other funding bodies. To do so,

the network must submit a formal proposal that clearly outlines the objectives, methodology, and potential outcomes of the project. This proposal is a key part of the application process, and its quality can directly influence whether funding is granted.

nEULakes has its own administrative officer, who plays a crucial role in coordinating this process. This officer is responsible for consolidating ideas from all participating members and drafting a comprehensive proposal that reflects the shared vision of the network. They ensure that the proposal meets all the technical and regulatory requirements set by the European Union, such as budgetary guidelines, environmental impact assessments, and timelines for implementation.

Throughout the proposal development phase, there is an ongoing dialogue among the network members. This allows them to align their goals, contribute their expertise, and ensure that the project reflects the unique characteristics and needs of each community involved. The administrative officer integrates this input to create a unified and compelling submission.

Once the proposal is finalized and submitted, it is evaluated by the European Commission or the relevant EU body responsible for that particular call. The commission then evaluates the project's viability, its alignment with EU priorities (such as sustainability or regional development), and its potential impact. If the proposal is successful, the project receives funding, allowing nEULakes and its members to implement their shared vision.

Over time, the organization has submitted numerous proposals, experiencing both successes and failures.

Below is a list of nEULakes' successful funding projects from 2012 to the present.

- Citizenship EACEA – Europe for Citizens (2012)³³
- Erasmus (2014)³⁴
- COSME (2015)³⁵

³³ <https://www.neulakes.eu/projects/neulakes/>

³⁴ <https://www.neulakes.eu/projects/iris/>

³⁵ <https://www.neulakes.eu/projects/laktive-tourism/>

- Citizenship EACEA – Europe for Citizens (2016)³⁶
- Erasmus (2018)³⁷
- Erasmus (2019)³⁸
- Europe for Citizens (2019)³⁹
- CERV - Citizens, Equality, Rights, and Values (2023)⁴⁰
- HORIZON – Coordination and Support Actions for Circular Economy and Bioeconomy Sectors (2024)⁴¹

Regrettably, there are also certain projects that were not selected for funding and, therefore, did not receive any financial support.

- Erasmus Plus (2015) – projects “*Susport – Sustainable Sport on European Lakes*” and “*I Like the Lake – Sports on European Lakes*”
- COSME (2017) – project “*Romantic Roots – Discovering European Roots Since Prehistory through the European Lakes Grand Tour*”
- Europe for Citizens (2017 and 2018) – project “*nEUs – Next to European Seniors*”
- Creative Europe (2018) – project “*PALCO – Perfecting Atelier Lirica and Canto d’Opera*”
- CERV - Citizens, Equality, Rights, and Values (2021) – project “*ENCONTRARSE – European Nation Cohesion Network of Tourism in Rural Areas for a Responsible and Sustainable Environment*”

³⁶ <https://www.neulakes.eu/projects/town-twinning/>

³⁷ <https://www.neulakes.eu/projects/youth-and-spa/>

³⁸ <https://www.neulakes.eu/projects/citart/>

³⁹ <https://www.neulakes.eu/projects/eubylakes/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.neulakes.eu/projects/ensemble-2024-2025/>

⁴¹ <https://www.neulakes.eu/news-and-events/neulakes-wins-a-european-call-for-832400-00-euros-to-support-start-ups-in-rural-areas/>

As evident from this extensive list of funded and non-funded initiatives, each project idea was organized under a larger umbrella project and awarded a specific grant. Every initiative had a clear focus and objective, with distinct partners contributing to its development. These projects were proposed not only by members of the nEULakes network but also by various other entities, reflecting a broad and collaborative effort to address the diverse challenges and opportunities surrounding European lake regions.

3.6 Focus on the project “ENSEMBLE – Europe as a Nation for Sustainability, Equality, Mobility, Better Life and Environment”

In Autumn 2023, the nEULakes network, led by Visit Lake Iseo, successfully secured a €310,000 European tender for the *ENSEMBLE* project (*Europe as a Nation for Sustainability, Equality, Mobility, Better Life, and Environment*)⁴². This project, which promotes sustainable and accessible tourism along with fostering European awareness, was among the top proposals in the Network of Towns call under the *CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights, and Values)* program. Out of 109 project submissions, only 30 were selected, highlighting *ENSEMBLE*'s excellence.

The project is a collaboration between five partners: Visit Lake Iseo (Italy) as leading partner, the Municipality of Sankt Gilgen (Austria), the Municipality of Imatra (Finland), the Municipality of Manzanares El Real (Spain), and the Municipality of Bohinj (Slovenia).

The *ENSEMBLE* project will run for 20 months, starting on December 1st, 2023, and concluding on July 31st, 2025. A series of activities, open to the public, are being held in each partner location, with special events targeted at local municipal administrations and associations. These initiatives are working toward the shared goal of fostering sustainability, equality, and community-driven tourism across the network of lakes.

«L'obiettivo è promuovere lo scambio di buone pratiche nell'ambito del turismo sostenibile, della sostenibilità energetica ed economica, focalizzandosi sulle sfide

⁴² <https://www.neulakes.eu/projects/ensemble-2024-2025/>

più importanti degli ultimi anni, compresi cambiamento climatico, salvaguardia della biodiversità e mobilità sostenibile. (...) In particolare, verrà trattato il tema delle forme alternative di turismo sostenibile per far fronte al fenomeni di overtourism. (...) Il cicloturismo e gli itinerari a piedi sono in testa ai criteri di scelta per le destinazioni turistiche: solo in Italia, nel 2022, secondo uno studio dell'ENIT, il cicloturismo ha fatto registrare 33 milioni di presenze ed è raddoppiato nel triennio 2019-2022, secondo il rapporto "Viaggiare con la bici 2023" realizzato da ISNART-Unioncamere»⁴³ (Venchiarutti, 2023).

The *ENSEMBLE* project is designed to address the key challenges and opportunities facing rural areas in the European Union. With rural regions covering more than 80% of the EU's territory and home to 30% of its population, these areas are essential as nature reserves and agricultural hubs. They also offer a healthier and safer alternative to urban living while becoming hotspots for innovative, sustainable business models. However, rural areas face common obstacles such as demographic decline, low incomes, limited economic opportunities, poor access to services and connectivity, and low education and employment rates, particularly among women.

Through *ENSEMBLE*, the project consortium aims to directly contribute to the EU's long-term vision for rural areas by helping to create stronger, connected, resilient, and prosperous communities. This is in line with the European Commission's rural strategy up to 2040, which emphasizes the need for innovative, inclusive, and sustainable solutions to overcome climate and digital transformations. *ENSEMBLE* brings together rural municipalities to focus on sustainable management of natural resources, climate action, and the competitiveness of these regions, with the overarching goal of achieving balanced territorial development.

⁴³ English: "The aim is to promote the exchange of good practices in the areas of sustainable tourism, energy, and economic sustainability, focusing on the most important challenges of recent years, including climate change, biodiversity preservation, and sustainable mobility. (...) In particular, alternative forms of sustainable tourism will be used to address the phenomena of over-tourism. (...) Cycle tourism and walking itineraries are at the top of the criteria for choosing tourist destinations: in Italy alone, in 2022, according to a study by ENIT, cycle tourism recorded 33 million presences and doubled in the three-year period 2019-2022, according to the report "Traveling by bike 2023" carried out by ISNART-Unioncamere".

At the heart of the *ENSEMBLE* project is its commitment to strengthening local and regional governance as a means to promote EU citizenship, democratic rights, and equality. As the governance level closest to citizens, local authorities play a pivotal role in fostering participation in EU politics.

ENSEMBLE addresses this gap by fostering exchanges between different countries, building mutual understanding, and promoting tolerance. Through its initiatives, the project provides citizens with opportunities to broaden their perspectives, encouraging a deeper sense of European identity and belonging. *ENSEMBLE* is committed to bridging the divide between rural communities and EU institutions, ensuring that citizens are more engaged and actively participating in shaping their future within the European framework.

To achieve its objectives, the *ENSEMBLE* project promotes a series of exchanges among citizens from the partner countries, organizing various events to foster citizen engagement and reinforcing the implementation of EU rights and values. These events create opportunities for dialogue, collaboration, and mutual learning, encouraging participants to actively participate in their communities and become advocates for their rights.

The final event of *ENSEMBLE* will focus on increasing the visibility and awareness of the project's outcomes among various European stakeholders. By showcasing the results achieved, the event aims to ensure the project's sustainability and encourage partners to engage in further European initiatives and projects, thereby extending the impact of *ENSEMBLE* beyond its initial scope.

EU values, which include inclusion, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and non-discrimination, are fundamental to the fabric of society across EU member states. However, despite these principles being integral to the European way of life, many citizens remain unaware of how to assert their rights when they are violated.

By addressing these gaps in awareness and understanding, the *ENSEMBLE* project aims to empower citizens, equipping them with the knowledge and tools necessary to assert their rights confidently. Through its initiatives, it helps cultivate a more informed and engaged citizenry, fostering a stronger connection between individuals and the democratic processes of the European Union.

The project aims to forge a robust network of pro-European cities committed to enhancing citizen engagement and promoting the core values of the European Union. By fostering local authorities that actively listen to their citizens' needs, the project seeks to disseminate knowledge about EU principles articulated in the Charter of Rights, which includes Freedom, Equality, Solidarity, and Citizens' Rights. Through a series of 11 engaging events tailored to the project's partner municipalities, the initiative facilitates a rich exploration of cultural diversity, promotes the exchange of best practices, and supports local governance, inclusion, and democratic participation.

The initiative identifies four thematic modules, each designed to address crucial aspects of European citizenship and shared values. Each module will host two events, creating multiple opportunities for dialogue and collaboration among participants:

Right to European Citizenship

This module delves into the rights and responsibilities associated with being a citizen of the EU, fostering discussions about what citizenship means in a European context and how it empowers individuals within their communities.

Equality and Non-Discrimination

Focusing on the principles of equality and non-discrimination, this module aims to highlight the importance of inclusivity and representation in society. Activities will encourage participants to share experiences and strategies for promoting equal rights for all.

Local Sustainable Development

Addressing the pressing need for sustainable practices, this module explores local development strategies that prioritize ecological sustainability while enhancing the quality of life for citizens. Participants engage in discussions on how to align local initiatives with broader European sustainability goals.

Environmental Conservation and Biodiversity

This module concentrates on the significance of preserving natural resources and biodiversity, emphasizing the role of citizens in advocating for and implementing environmentally friendly practices within their communities.

At the culmination of the project, a final event will synthesize the insights and guidelines gathered throughout the thematic modules, resulting in a comprehensive set of recommendations for local governments. These guidelines will not only reflect European values but will also be grounded in the specific needs and aspirations of citizens, ultimately fostering the development of innovative, pro-European communities.

The *ENSEMBLE* project is designed to yield significant mid- and long-term effects, including: encouraging intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding among project partners and EU citizens, fostering a sense of community across borders; facilitating interactions among European citizens from diverse nationalities and linguistic backgrounds, encouraging them to engage in meaningful debates about EU citizenship and the rights that accompany it; raising awareness of the rich cultural and historical tapestry of Europe, fostering pride in shared heritage while recognizing the value of diversity; and cultivating a common, respectful, and dynamic European identity through activities centered around the democratic transition of the EU, enhancing mutual understanding and tolerance among citizens.

The project focuses on several key target groups to ensure broad engagement and impact.

The *ENSEMBLE* project prioritizes older adults (55+ y.o.), leveraging the partners' previous experiences with initiatives targeting this demographic. In alignment with Article 25 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, which recognizes the rights of the elderly to live with dignity and participate in social and cultural life, the project aims to reaffirm their role in the EU political landscape. By recognizing the value of their life experiences, the project seeks to involve older adults in decision-making processes, ensuring their voices guide future generations.

The project also addresses the pressing issue of youth disengagement from politics, which undermines the EU's core values. A significant proportion of young people (from 18 to 30 y.o.) lack awareness of EU history and its achievements, resulting in a disconnect from EU initiatives and a decreased sense of participation in democratic processes. *ENSEMBLE* aims to bridge this gap by actively engaging young citizens and fostering their involvement in shaping the EU's future.

The rise of Eurosceptic political parties in recent EU elections has heightened concerns about the democratic integrity and cohesion of the EU. The *ENSEMBLE* project seeks to counteract growing movements that prioritize “tradition over Europeanization,” which may threaten the stability of the European project.

Often viewed as secondary players in policymaking, associations, and NGOs play a critical role in preserving historical narratives and representing citizen interests. Their involvement is vital for fostering a robust democratic transition in Europe.

As mentioned before, the *ENSEMBLE* project is structured around eleven distinct work packages, each corresponding to a specific event and thematic focus that will be collaboratively developed by the participating partners.

The project officially commenced with a kick-off meeting (WP1) organized by Visit Lake Iseo, setting the tone for collaboration among the partner municipalities and outlining the project's objectives. The second and third work packages, overseen by Imatra, focus on the theme of EU Citizenship. These events engaged both the general public and local government representatives, facilitating discussions that aim to deepen understanding of citizens' rights and responsibilities within the EU framework. Hosted in Manzanares El Real, work packages 3 and 4 centered on the critical themes of Equality and Non-Discrimination. Participants explored these issues through interactive sessions and activities, exchanging best practices and fostering inclusive dialogues. A mid-project meeting (WP6) is scheduled to take place in Iseo, focusing on the goal of achieving a more sustainable Europe. This event will provide an opportunity for partners to assess progress and share insights on sustainable practices. In Sankt Gilgen, work packages seven and eight will concentrate on local sustainable development. These events will highlight innovative strategies for promoting sustainability at the community level, encouraging participants to collaborate on actionable initiatives. The final thematic focus will be addressed by Bohinj, where work packages nine and ten will be dedicated to environmental protection and biodiversity. Participants will engage in discussions and activities that emphasize the importance of conserving natural resources and protecting local ecosystems. The project will culminate in a final event back in Iseo, where all partners will come together to reflect on the outcomes of the various work packages. This

event will showcase the project's collective achievements, discuss the guidelines developed, and chart a path for future collaboration among the municipalities involved.

All of the events within the *ENSEMBLE* project must be reported to the European Commission through a thorough process known as “dissemination”. This essential phase ensures that the project’s activities, outcomes, and learnings are effectively communicated to a broader audience, fostering transparency and encouraging engagement. The dissemination process employs various methods to maximize outreach and visibility, including videos, press releases, interviews, and social media campaigns.

3.6.1 Kick-off meeting in Iseo

The *ENSEMBLE* project kicked off with its inaugural event at Lake Iseo from February 19th to 22nd, 2024. This event served as a platform where institutional representatives from the five partner municipalities gathered to discuss pressing issues in sustainable tourism while immersing themselves in the region's stunning natural beauty and cultural heritage.

A highlight of the event was the official welcome of two new municipalities into the nEULakes network: Le Bourget-du-Lac (France) and Skradin (Croatia).

On February 21st, a pivotal meeting was held for local stakeholders, focusing on essential topics such as sustainable development, slow mobility, and the importance of bike paths and walking trails. With the global tourism landscape evolving rapidly, the discussions provided a forum for stakeholders to explore innovative approaches that can benefit both the environment and local communities.

The event featured an impressive lineup of speakers who contributed valuable insights into the intersection of tourism and sustainability.

Professor Roberto Savona from the University of Brescia opened the dialogue by addressing the complex global economic landscape. He highlighted how factors like financial instability, raw material shortages, and geopolitical conflicts are reshaping tourism trends, particularly in sensitive areas like lakes. His remarks prompted attendees to consider the broader implications of these challenges for future tourism initiatives.

Later, Nicolas Mercat, Mayor of Le Bourget-du-Lac and president of the “Vélo et Territoire” Association, discussed the impact of cycling infrastructure on tourism choices. His assertion that 75% of tourists factor in the availability of bike paths when selecting a destination emphasized the potential of cycling tourism. His insights resonated particularly well, as many in attendance recognized that building sustainable transport options can enhance the attractiveness of their regions.

From the Municipality of Imatra in Finland, Tea Laitimo, Head of International Affairs, shared her experiences in promoting cycling tourism in Northern Europe. She emphasized how successful initiatives there could serve as a model for other municipalities, showcasing that investing in cycling infrastructure not only benefits tourists but also fosters healthier lifestyles among residents.

José Luis Labrador Vioque, Mayor of Manzanares El Real in Spain, shifted the focus to outdoor sports, specifically free climbing. By highlighting La Pedriza, a renowned climbing destination in the Sierra de Guadarrama mountain range, he painted a picture of how diverse outdoor activities can bolster tourism and local economies. His vision for integrating adventure sports into sustainable tourism strategies sparked enthusiastic discussions about potential collaborations between partner municipalities.

Later, Norbert Kofler, CEO of Outdooractive Italy, shared his expertise on the growing trend of longer hiking paths. He underlined the increasing demand for immersive outdoor experiences, which can attract both local and international tourists.

Finally, Monika Ravnik, Deputy Mayor of the Municipality of Bohinj in Slovenia, underscored the importance of protecting natural spaces as part of sustainable tourism. Her advocacy for enhancing parks and natural areas resonated deeply with attendees, highlighting the need for tourism strategies that prioritize environmental stewardship while benefiting local communities.

The event at Lake Iseo not only marked a significant milestone for the *ENSEMBLE* project but also set the stage for ongoing collaboration among the partner municipalities. Through thoughtful discussions, knowledge sharing, and the welcoming of new members, the project aims to create a dynamic network of pro-European cities committed to the principles of sustainability, inclusion, and cultural exchange.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a comprehensive overview of the European Union's funding mechanisms and tenders, particularly in relation to tourism and sustainability. By highlighting the role of EU programs, it is clear that these funding opportunities have been instrumental in driving forward initiatives that support sustainable and inclusive tourism development across Europe.

The chapter also explored several key European networks that play a vital role in sharing knowledge, fostering collaboration, and advancing sustainability in tourism. Networks such as the Living Lake Network (and its subnetwork ELLA), the European Regions Research and Innovation Network (ERRIN), the Network of European Regions for Sustainable and Competitive Tourism (NECSTouR), the European Network for Accessible Tourism (ENAT), and the Network for the European Private Sector in Tourism (NET) exemplify how cooperation and exchange of best practices among diverse stakeholders can lead to stronger, more sustainable tourism practices across Europe.

The central focus of the chapter has been on the nEULakes network, a significant initiative that unites small municipalities located near minor European lakes. This network stands out as a collaborative platform where members share knowledge, experiences, and best practices to advance sustainable development while protecting the rich heritage and biodiversity of these lake areas. One of the defining features of nEULakes is its ability to mobilize members to apply for EU calls, pooling resources and expertise to secure funding for initiatives that enhance sustainability and inclusivity in their respective regions. The list of successful projects, along with those that did not secure funding, offers insight into the challenges and opportunities inherent in this collaborative process.

A significant project that embodies the mission of nEULakes is *ENSEMBLE – Europe as a Nation for Sustainability, Equality, Mobility, Better Life, and Environment*, which was successfully funded in 2023. The project promotes sustainable and accessible tourism while fostering European awareness, contributing to a more cohesive European identity through environmental stewardship. The kick-off meeting, held in Iseo, brought together experts who discussed critical topics such as sustainable development, slow mobility, and the importance of enhancing bike paths and walking trails for both locals and visitors.

In conclusion, this chapter has demonstrated how EU funding, combined with the collaborative efforts of European networks like nEULakes, plays a pivotal role in advancing sustainable tourism across Europe. The success of projects like *ENSEMBLE* underscores the potential of such networks to make tangible contributions to sustainability, inclusivity, and the preservation of cultural and natural heritage, offering an outline for future initiatives in the field of sustainable tourism.

4. Stakeholders perspectives: exploring lake tourism and sustainability at nEULakes

4.1 Introduction to the empirical analysis

This chapter provides an analysis of the perspectives and practices of nEULakes network members based on interviews conducted with representatives from municipalities and tourism organizations involved in the network.

The goal was to deeper understand the network's internal dynamics and to provide a clearer picture of the people and organizations that drive the network's efforts. By capturing the voices of these key stakeholders, this chapter offers a rich, qualitative exploration of how the network operates, the challenges and opportunities its members face, and the strategies employed to ensure that lake tourism destinations remain sustainable in the face of growing environmental and economic pressures. In addition to the individual perspectives on lakes, tourism, and sustainability, this chapter also seeks to highlight how the nEULakes network serves as a platform for fostering collaboration and innovation across its member destinations, contributing to a more unified and sustainable approach to managing European lake tourism.

In total, ten of the twelve nEULakes members were contacted between August and October 2024 for interviews, and responses were received from seven members. The Municipality of Shatsk and the Foundation for the Protection of the Great Masurian Lakes were not included in this phase of the research, as they had only recently joined the network and had not yet participated in any significant projects. Among the ten contacted, the municipalities of Bohinj, Sankt Gilgen, and Ascona did not respond.

Table 1
Interviews information

nEULakes member	Role of the interviewee	Date of the interview
Skradin, Lake Prukljan	Director of the Skradin Tourism Board	27 th August 2024
Le Bourget-du-Lac, Lake Bourget	Mayor of Le Bourget-du-Lac, vice president of the tourist office, and president of the "Vélo et Territoire" Association	30 th August 2024
Trakai, Lake Galvė	Representative of the Trakai District Municipality Administration	11 th September 2024
Leitrim, Lough Allen	Volunteer of the Leitrim Tourism Network	19 th September 2024
Manzanares el Real, Santillana Reservoir	Assistant to the mayor of Manzanares el Real	1 st October 2024
Visit Lake Iseo, Lake Iseo	President of Visit Lake Iseo, mayor of Iseo, and president of nEULakes + Administrative coordinator of nEULakes	30 th September 2024 – 1 st October 2024
Imatra, Lake Saimaa	Senior advisor of GoSaimaa	9 th October 2024

The interviews were conducted using a range of methods to accommodate the availability and preferences of each stakeholder. Some participants were interviewed via video calls, others through regular phone calls, while a few provided written responses to the interview questions. These flexible formats ensured that as many stakeholders as possible could participate in the study. Most of the interviews were conducted in English, except for the Municipality of Manzanares el Real, where the interview was conducted in Spanish, and portions of the interview with Visit Lake Iseo, which were led in Italian.

The meetings faced three main topics: sustainability practices, tourism sustainable management, and the role of the nEULakes network in these processes. A list of the interview questions can be found in the attachments of this thesis.

4.2 Findings from the interviews

4.2.1 Section 1: Lakes and sustainable management

The first section of the interview focused on how each lake is managed with respect to sustainability and climate change. Stakeholders were asked to provide an overview of their lake, its ecological challenges, and the strategies they implement to promote sustainable practices. This section also explored the extent of local community involvement in lake management and examined how municipalities or tourism bodies collaborate with other organizations to enhance sustainability efforts.

In each interview, the stakeholders introduced themselves and explained their roles in relation to their respective lakes. I had the pleasure of speaking with Riccardo Venchiarutti, president of Visit Lake Iseo, mayor of Iseo, and president of the nEULakes network, along with Giulia Ghitti, the administrative coordinator of the network. Representing the Spanish municipality was Ruth Salas Herrero, assistant to Jose Luis Labrador Vioque, the mayor of Manzanares el Real. I also gained valuable insights from Tea Laitmo, senior advisor at GoSaimaa, the tourism board of the Imatra region. One particularly interesting interview was with Nicolas Mercat, mayor of Le Bourget-du-Lac, vice president of the tourist office and president of the "*Vélo et Territoire*" Association. I also had the opportunity to speak with Leslie O'Hora, a volunteer with the Leitrim Tourism Network, a public organization comprising tourism-related businesses in the region. Other key voices included Bernarda Marasovic, director of the Skradin Tourism Board, and Dovilė Bagdanavičienė, representative of the Trakai District Municipality Administration.

Each of these stakeholders is actively involved in either municipal roles or organizations connected to tourism, which allows them to directly oversee the management of their lakes and maintain a comprehensive perspective on the environmental and tourism-related challenges they face.

Next, each stakeholder described their respective lakes and the surrounding environmental aspects. Although the lakes share many similarities, each presents distinct characteristics.

For instance, the Santillana Reservoir is a protected lake where activities like navigation and swimming are prohibited. As a dam, the water is primarily used for drinking, and being located in a National Park, it is part of a highly protected natural environment.

Moreover, Lake du Bourget, France's largest natural lake, stretches 20 kilometers from South to North and 3 kilometers from West to East, and it is situated in the Savoie region. The lake is surrounded by 28 towns and villages, with about 77,000 inhabitants in total. While it is a popular tourist destination, it attracts mostly day visitors rather than long-term tourists. During summer weekends, between June and early September, it sees around 10,000 visitors each day. There is a municipal camping ground with around 1,000 residents during the season, but accommodations such as hotels are mainly concentrated in Aix-les-Bains, a Roman thermal city known for its spa tourism, where visitors usually stay for about three weeks.

On the other hand, in Ireland, the county of Leitrim is home to some of the country's highest concentrations of lakes, with Carrick-on-Shannon serving as the central town. One notable lake is Lough Allen, a wild and unspoiled body of water with very little activity. This is partly due to its northern location on the Shannon River network, which historically made navigation difficult. Boating access has only become possible in the last 10/20 years, thanks to the development of the EU-funded Shannon-Erne Waterway.

Another example is Skradin, in Croatia, a unique destination as it sits at the confluence of the Krka River and the sea, creating the Prukljan Lake. It is renowned for its proximity to the Krka National Park, famous for its waterfalls and natural beauty. Prukljan Lake is Croatia's second-largest, stretching over 11.5 kilometers.

Similar to Leitrim, the Trakai District in Lithuania boasts an impressive network of over 200 lakes, with the town of Trakai located on a peninsula surrounded by interconnected lakes. The district includes Trakai Historical National Park and two regional parks, with 21% of the area classified as protected. Life there is deeply intertwined with its lakes, offering a scenic and historically rich environment.

Each of these destinations places a strong emphasis on sustainability, with climate change being one of the major challenges they face. All the representatives agreed that sustainability is central to their daily work and future goals. Climate change is significantly affecting the lakes' functioning and surroundings, particularly through higher temperatures, which impact water quality and extend the tourism season. Key issues include rising temperatures, increased extreme weather events, and changes in water quality.

In Imatra, warming temperatures are causing issues with ice cover on Lake Saimaa. However, water pollution and quality are well-controlled. The region is proactive: having signed the Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism and implemented its own Climate Action Plan (CAP), Imatra is committed to becoming carbon-neutral by 2030, with its climate program supporting these goals.

For Le Bourget-du-Lac, sustainability is a growing concern due to the rapid increase in visitors, particularly since COVID-19. The last two years have seen unprecedented temperatures exceeding 40°C, which has attracted more tourists to the lake. Managing accessibility has become a priority, as overcrowding leads to parking chaos, especially with around 2,000 visitors on peak days. The municipality has begun redesigning the lakeshore by removing hundreds of parking spaces and encouraging alternatives such as walking, public transport, and cycling.

In Leitrim, climate change also poses challenges, particularly for businesses like cycling tourism, which are affected by increased rainfall. This makes outdoor activities less appealing for tourists, especially families.

Moving to Manzanares, the city council, alongside regional and national efforts, focuses on sustainability across the municipality and the lake, particularly given the area's protected status. A recent Next Generation project aims to create an accessible pedestrian bird-watching trail that promotes tourism without harming biodiversity.

In Skradin, sustainability is also a priority, with strict regulations limiting fishing and swimming to certain areas within Krka National Park. Although Croatia is discussing sustainability more seriously now, new laws are still being formulated to manage tourism and environmental protection more effectively. The country is in a transition period,

especially in southern regions like Dalmatia, where practices like recycling are less widespread than in the North. Additionally, the economic shift following Croatia's adoption of the euro has led to higher prices, reducing the number of tourists. Interestingly, this economic factor has unintentionally made the area more sustainable by reducing overcrowding, though it has sparked a mixed response from locals.

At Lake Galvè, climate change has led to variations in water levels and biodiversity. The Trakai district is focused on reducing pollution through ecological transport on both water and land. Regular clean-up events are organized, involving residents and divers to maintain the lakes' cleanliness. Slow, sustainable tourism is promoted, with a focus on environmental conservation, local culture, and traditions. The district also prioritizes reducing car traffic by encouraging cycling and walking, installing solar panels, and preserving the historical and cultural heritage of the region.

When discussing sustainability, the representatives were asked about their collaborations with other stakeholders (e.g., government bodies, NGOs, businesses) to promote sustainable tourism around their lakes and, more importantly, about their relationship and involvement with the local community.

In 2021, Visit Lake Iseo initiated a project called "*Outdooractive Community*", encouraging local hikers to contribute GPS tracks, descriptions, and pictures of trails. Over three years, this resulted in the "*Sport and Nature*" section on their website featuring more than 120 itineraries. This resource not only helps visitors but also streamlines the work of tourist office operators by providing readily accessible information. Furthermore, Visit Lake Iseo has strong partnerships with the Lombardy Region, the provinces of Brescia and Bergamo, as well as Visit Brescia and Visit Bergamo, collaborating on marketing strategies, social media, educational tours, and promotional materials. In addition, the organization hosts events, conferences, and workshops to promote sustainable tourism. One example is the "*Fondali Puliti*" (Clean Seabeds) event, where environmental groups and local authorities join forces to clean the lake and raise awareness about environmental protection. Other initiatives, such as "*Goletta Verde*", run by Legambiente, monitor pollution levels in the lake, and the Health Protection Agency (ATS) conducts regular assessments of water quality and safety for bathing.

On the other hand, Lough Allen and the Leitrim Tourism Network work with Good Energies Alliance, an NGO, and various local community groups and sports clubs.

Ruth Herrero shared that in Manzanares, the local community is actively involved in sustainable management decisions. Citizen participation is encouraged for smaller projects, allowing locals to have a say in aesthetic and practical details.

In Skradin, instead, the local community engages in selecting the events they wish to host, while in Trakai, Lithuania, residents are actively involved in lake-cleaning initiatives, such as the “*Totoriškės Lake*” campaign. To mark Trakai’s 702nd anniversary, 125 volunteer divers participated in a cleanup. Regular collaborations with organizations like Nardymo Akademija and “Save the Baltic Sea” help promote sustainability. The Trakai municipality has a strong focus on ecological education, promoting recycling and waste management, and it coordinates efforts with various stakeholders, including national and EU bodies, to manage lakes and ensure environmental protection.

Lake Saimaa works closely with the local community on projects related to water quality and sustainability, with support from Lappeenranta Technical University’s “*Universoma Junior University*” program, which engages young people. The region’s active GMO GoSaimaa organization focuses on promoting sustainable tourism, especially for international visitors.

One particularly inspiring example comes from Le Bourget-du-Lac in France. Three years ago, the community held a large meeting involving 700 participants – including tourists, residents, and schoolchildren – to co-design the future of the lakeshore. This collaboration led to a shared vision, though recent changes, such as the introduction of paid parking, have sparked resistance from locals despite prior agreement. While tourists are accustomed to paying for parking, local residents, who make up only 5% of the summer weekend visitors, have expressed dissatisfaction. The municipality is considering offering annual parking passes at reduced rates for locals. In terms of sustainability, Le Bourget-du-Lac aims to protect its natural reserves and is pursuing the UNESCO “*Man and the Biosphere*” label to further restrict access to certain areas for conservation. The municipality collaborates with numerous stakeholders, including the Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Infrastructures, NGOs, and local governments, holding biannual meetings to manage lake-related activities. The involvement of the university in

studying the effects of climate change on the lake's temperature, noise pollution, and environmental impact has been crucial in guiding sustainable tourism policies.

4.2.2 Section 2: Balancing sustainability and tourism

The second section of questions delved into the intersection of sustainability and tourism. Here, stakeholders were asked to reflect on the positive and negative impacts of tourism on their lake destinations, with particular attention to how they balance the economic benefits of tourism with environmental preservation. This part of the interview also invited participants to share best practices in managing tourism sustainably, highlighting unique or innovative approaches that have been effective in their respective destinations. Additionally, challenges related to over-tourism, seasonality, and maintaining natural beauty while accommodating visitors were discussed.

The first aspect interviewees needed to address was the complex impact of tourism on their lake areas, evaluating both its positive and negative effects.

In the case of Lake Iseo, tourism began to gain traction in the late 1960s, although the lake had already enjoyed a certain level of popularity during the interwar period, thanks to the so-called "popular trains". These trains brought Sunday excursionists from nearby Brescia to the shores of the lake, allowing them to enjoy a day of bathing in its refreshing waters. Over the last 40 years, however, tourism has truly transformed the area. Particularly in Iseo itself, the growth has been remarkable, with the town now accounting for nearly 50% of all visitors to the lake.

On one hand, the economic and employment benefits of tourism in Lake Iseo cannot be overstated. For a town like Iseo, which lacks significant industrial or artisanal sectors, tourism has become the lifeblood of the local economy. Hotels, restaurants, cafes, and other tourist services have increased, providing jobs and stimulating local businesses. Tourism has brought wealth to the area, turning Iseo into a thriving hub for both locals and visitors.

However, on the other hand, the increasing number of tourists, while not yet as overwhelming as in other Northern Italian lakes such as Como or Garda, poses significant risks. The natural beauty of Lake Iseo, which draws visitors to the area in the first place,

could be challenged by the very act of attracting more tourists. Overcrowded public spaces, the wear and tear on infrastructure, and the overall strain on the environment are growing concerns. For instance, while tourism is welcomed for the revenue it brings, the long-term impact on the environment, if not managed carefully, could damage the region's appeal. This has prompted a renewed focus on the concept of sustainable tourism, i.e. a form of tourism that seeks to balance economic benefits with environmental stewardship. Efforts to promote eco-friendly initiatives, such as walking and cycling routes, are examples of how the region is attempting to chart a more sustainable path forward.

The experience of Imatra provides another example of tourism's double-edged sword. On the positive side, the influx of visitors has led to a range of benefits, not just for tourists but also for the local population. The development of services catering to tourists, such as improved transportation, dining, and recreational facilities, has enhanced the quality of life for residents as well. However, with the rise in tourism, certain negative consequences have emerged. One of the more visible effects is littering, which detracts from the natural beauty of the area and poses environmental risks.

Lastly, the Trakai region offers another perspective on the multifaceted effects of tourism. Like Lake Iseo and Imatra, Trakai has experienced both the positive and negative aspects of a growing tourist industry.

On the positive side, tourism has been a driving force behind economic growth in the region. The presence of tourists creates opportunities for local entrepreneurs to open hotels, restaurants, and souvenir shops, which provide jobs and stimulate the local economy. Additionally, the influx of visitors has made it possible to secure funding for the preservation and restoration of cultural heritage sites, such as the iconic Trakai Castle. Without tourism, these landmarks might struggle to receive the attention and financial support needed for their maintenance. Furthermore, tourism often drives improvements in infrastructure. Better transportation links and upgraded public services not only benefit tourists but also enhance the daily lives of local residents, making the region more accessible and comfortable for everyone. Moreover, when tourism is properly managed, it can foster a sense of community integration. Local residents have the opportunity to engage in the tourism industry, whether through direct employment or by offering unique

cultural experiences to visitors. This can generate a sense of pride in their heritage and provide opportunities for locals to share their knowledge and traditions with a global audience.

However, tourism in the Trakai region also brings its share of challenges. One of the most pressing concerns is the environmental impact of high tourist traffic. The lakes, forests, and diverse ecosystems that make Trakai so appealing are particularly vulnerable to overuse. Without careful planning, these natural areas could suffer irreversible damage. Additionally, the volume of tourists can create noise pollution, which detracts from the tranquility that locals and many tourists value. Over time, this can lead to dissatisfaction among residents as the character of their hometown shifts to accommodate the needs of outsiders. There is also a more subtle, yet equally important, risk of cultural disruption. As tourism becomes an increasingly dominant force, local traditions and lifestyles may change in response to the demands of the global market. This can result in a loss of authenticity, as traditional practices are altered or commodified to appeal to tourists. Furthermore, tourism can worsen social inequalities, as certain segments of the population benefit more than others, leading to distortions in local markets and communities.

In light of these complexities, it is clear that sustainable tourism practices are crucial for the future of the Trakai region. By applying principles of sustainability, it is possible to maximize the positive effects of tourism while minimizing the negative impacts on the environment and local communities. The goal is to ensure that Trakai remains a vibrant, unique destination that is preserved for future generations to enjoy.

After discussing the positive and negative impacts of tourism, each stakeholder shared examples of successful initiatives that have been implemented to promote sustainable tourism in their respective regions. These examples highlight different strategies, all aimed at balancing tourism growth with environmental preservation and maintaining a positive relationship between visitors and local residents.

Le Bourget-du-Lac has embarked on a comprehensive redesign of its lakefront area, prioritizing sustainability by reshaping access to the lake and managing the flow of visitors. One key initiative has been the removal of hundreds of parking spaces from the lakeshore, relocating them to an industrial area about 15 minutes away by foot. To further

discourage car usage, parking near the lake requires now payment, while the industrial area parking is free. This move has successfully reduced the number of cars along the lake, making the area more pedestrian-friendly and quieter.

In addition, the French municipality is promoting alternative modes of transportation. They are encouraging public transport use, with buses running four times per hour, and promoting cycling and walking along scenic, car-free routes by the river. Further plans include the possible introduction of an electric tourist train to facilitate lake access and the partial closure of a road between two neighboring cities to reserve it for pedestrians and cyclists, particularly on weekends and during the summer. However, there are some challenges in adapting to these changes. While local residents living near the lake generally welcome the new policies, those living a bit farther away face some inconvenience due to the limited parking availability. Nevertheless, these measures are designed to prevent overcrowding, mitigate potential conflict between locals and tourists, and promote a more sustainable future for the lake area.

Similar to Le Bourget-du-Lac, Lake Saimaa in Finland has focused its sustainability efforts on promoting cycling and reducing car usage. The lake has become a hub for eco-friendly activities such as electric boating, which complements the area's stunning natural environment. The shift from motor vehicles to bicycles and electric boats aims to minimize the environmental footprint of tourism, preserve the pure condition of the lake, and offer visitors a slower, more immersive experience of the natural surroundings.

Another example of good practice is on Lake Iseo, where the municipality of Monte Isola has taken steps toward sustainable tourism by implementing temporary restrictions on bicycle use during peak tourist seasons, such as in August. These restrictions are designed to prevent overcrowding and alleviate pressure on local infrastructure, ensuring that the island's natural beauty and tranquil atmosphere are preserved for both residents and visitors. This policy is part of a broader effort to encourage more responsible tourism and could potentially serve as a starting point for more comprehensive sustainability initiatives in the future.

In Manzanares el Real, the town has adopted a holistic approach to sustainable tourism by diversifying its offerings. The area is home to a rare granite mountain that is renowned globally as a premier climbing destination. The municipality capitalizes on this unique

asset by organizing a variety of outdoor and cultural activities, such as mountain festivals, medieval weekends at the 15th-century castle, and internationally recognized climbing events. These activities not only promote tourism but also foster a deep connection with the town's rich cultural and natural heritage. However, sustainability regulations in the area have evolved, particularly after the lake became part of a National Park. As a result, certain water-based events, such as triathlons, are no longer allowed. The town has adapted by focusing on land-based events, such as duathlons (running and cycling).

Another case is Skradin, which offers a unique example of passive sustainable tourism. The town, located near a national park and known for its peaceful, untouched natural surroundings, has consciously chosen not to heavily advertise certain parts of the lake, such as Prukljan, in order to preserve their tranquility. While there is a city beach popular with visitors, the more remote areas are mainly enjoyed by locals and remain largely untouched by mass tourism. The area is also a favored destination for cycling and walking, with visitors coming to experience the peace, nature, and local culture rather than participate in large-scale events or activities.

Interestingly, Skradin's "unintentional" sustainability stems from its small size and the natural behavior of tourists, who typically come for relaxation rather than high-energy activities. The region's hot summers have even led to a shift in tourist patterns, with more people visiting in the cooler months of May, June, and September. This spread of tourist traffic helps to ease the pressure on the area during peak summer months.

The Croatian municipality also benefits from its growing reputation among high-profile visitors, including Bill Gates, Roger Federer, and Beyoncé, who have come to enjoy its serene environment and the privacy it offers. Despite its popularity with celebrities, Skradin maintains a low-key, tranquil atmosphere, making it a perfect destination for those seeking peace and quiet. The town is now exploring its gastronomic potential, planning events such as a risotto festival to highlight its local culinary traditions while continuing to focus on sustainable, quiet tourism that aligns with the natural and cultural offerings of the region.

These diverse examples illustrate how different lake regions are creatively addressing the challenges of sustainable tourism. From reducing car traffic and promoting cycling in Le Bourget-du-Lac and Lake Saimaa to balancing outdoor activities with environmental

protection in Manzanares el Real and Skradin, these initiatives reflect a shared commitment to preserving their natural and cultural heritage while supporting responsible tourism development.

4.2.3 Section 3: nEULakes network

The third section of the interview focused on the role of the nEULakes network in the stakeholders' activities. Questions in this section aimed to assess the level of involvement of each member in the network's projects and initiatives. Participants were asked to describe their experiences with the association, including how it has facilitated collaboration, knowledge exchange, or joint projects among members. This part also explored the perceived benefits of being part of nEULakes, as well as any areas for improvement in terms of the network's support for sustainability and tourism development.

“nEULakes was born as a participatory network to establish a structured cooperation among European citizens to exchange best practices and discuss innovative ideas on how to valorise their lakes in social, cultural, environmental and economic terms within the framework of the EU strategy for sustainable and inclusive growth”
(Giulia Ghitti, Visit Lake Iseo).

The idea of creating a network of small lake towns across Europe, united by their shared interest in sustainable tourism, was born in 2010 in Lake Iseo. The concept emerged from a local initiative, the "*Festival dei Laghi Italiani*" (Festival of Italian Lakes), which, while initially focused on Italy, soon opened up to include international contacts. The first two partnerships were established with Lake Bled in Slovenia (no longer part of the network) and Manzanares el Real in Spain. This collaboration laid the foundation for what would later become the nEULakes network.

The goal of this association was to exchange best practices and find common solutions for preserving fragile environments like lake ecosystems while promoting tourism. Starting with just a few lakes, the network gradually expanded, and today, it includes 12

members, with the most recent additions being the lakes of Masuria in Poland and Lake Svitjaz in Ukraine. Initially, the network operated informally, participating in European initiatives and calls for proposals. However, in 2023, the network formalized its structure, becoming an official legal entity named nEULakes (the network of European rural lakes). The inclusion of the term "rural" emphasizes the common characteristic of these locations as relatively small, less urbanized areas with unique environmental needs.

Ruth Herrera, representing Manzanares el Real, added an important perspective on the evolution of the network. Manzanares and Iseo officially twinned in 2016, but their relationship began in 2015 when Riccardo Venchiarutti, the mayor of Iseo, made contact with Manzanares. The connection between the two towns was strengthened by a shared commitment to developing sustainable tourism. Their collaboration led to the first direct European project under the *COSME* program, focused on enhancing the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises.

The partners in the nEULakes network overwhelmingly agree that being part of this international association brings more positive outcomes than negative ones. One of the key benefits is the opportunity to share best practices, collaborate on projects, and access funding, which are crucial for promoting sustainable tourism and environmental preservation around European lakes.

Tea Laitmo from Imatra highlights the value of international collaboration, stating:

"It's important to share best practices and apply for funding for common projects. Being part of an international network pushes us to work harder for sustainability".

This sentiment is shared by many other members, underscoring how cross-border cooperation leads to a stronger focus on sustainability.

Leslie O'Hora from Leitrim adds that the network not only provides new ideas but also fosters fellowship:

"The network can help us in a lot of ways. It gives us ideas from other countries. And the camaraderie is always good".

This sense of mutual support is one of the network's core strengths, as it allows for the exchange of experiences and innovative approaches, which can then be adapted to fit the needs of each local community.

For smaller regions like Skradin, the network offers vital support in terms of resources and collaboration. Bernarda Marasovic explains:

"We connected with them because we are a very small tourist board, and for our budget, that would be too much".

The nEULakes network helps the members overcome financial and logistical challenges by pooling resources and sharing the workload of common projects.

Dovilė Bagdanavičienė from Trakai appreciates the network's focus on sustainability, declaring:

"It's great that this network promotes lake sustainability, scientific research, and public education on ecological issues".

This commitment to education and research ensures that ecological awareness remains at the forefront of tourism development strategies.

From Manzanares el Real, Ruth Herrera emphasizes the cross-cultural learning that happens within the network:

"Lo más positivo es que conoces otras formas de trabajar, conoces a gente nueva y eso siempre es positivo de conocer otra cultura u otras formas de trabajar y de ver

la vida. Nosotros, a lo mejor los italianos y los españoles somos muy parecidos en el concepto de visión de vida. Pero siempre te ayuda a ver cómo trabajan otras personas, eso siempre aporta”⁴⁴.

Beyond professional growth, she points out how the network strengthens community engagement through projects that bring together citizens, like the September event of the *ENSEMBLE* project that focused on “equality and non-discrimination”

Finally, Giulia Ghitti from Lake Iseo reflects on the collaborative spirit within nEULakes, calling it one of the network's most valuable assets:

"The fact of having a network of partners who are always ready to cooperate is probably the strongest positive aspect".

This readiness to collaborate allows members to face challenges together, fostering a sense of unity while pushing forward shared goals.

In summary, the partners within the nEULakes network agree that the collective expertise, shared resources, and mutual support create an environment where sustainable tourism can thrive and where both municipalities and their citizens benefit from a holistic, collaborative approach.

While nEULakes has brought many positive outcomes, it also faces its share of challenges. One of the greatest difficulties has been expanding the network to include new partners beyond the original “historic” members. As Visit Lake Iseo explains:

"It has been particularly difficult to communicate our goals to potential new partners and, in some cases, even get responses from them in the first place".

⁴⁴ English: “The most positive thing is that you get to know other ways of working and meet new people. It’s always positive to learn about other cultures and approaches to life. Italians and Spaniards may share similar views, but seeing how others work is always beneficial”.

Establishing new contacts has not always been easy due to initial skepticism, often stopped by uncertainties about potential costs and the broader implications of joining an international network.

Managing events and coordinating projects across different countries adds another layer of complexity. Coordinating across municipalities with different time zones, work schedules, and administrative processes can be an overwhelming task.

There is also the challenge of navigating the different administrative structures within each partner country. The mayor of Le Bourget-du-Lac, Nicolas Mercat, shared their struggle in explaining the distinctions between municipality-level and district-level responsibilities.

Despite these obstacles, the network remains committed to overcoming obstacles. Through collaboration, patience, and shared effort, the members have continued to find ways to work together and make progress toward their collective goals of sustainable tourism and lake preservation.

In conclusion, reflecting on the future of the nEULakes network, the members shared their hopes and aspirations for its continued growth and success. One of the primary ambitions is to see the network expand to include as many European countries as possible. Extending the reach of nEULakes would not only foster greater diversity within the network but also enable more regions to benefit from shared knowledge and sustainable tourism practices.

The members are optimistic about the advantages this expansion could bring. With more countries involved, the opportunities for collaboration and knowledge exchange would multiply, strengthening the network's overall impact. Looking ahead, the members are eager to participate in more European project calls, allowing them to secure additional funding and resources to further develop sustainable tourism initiatives around their lakes.

Overall, the vision for the future of nEULakes is one of growth, collaboration, and continued learning, building on the strong foundation they have already created to make a lasting, positive impact across Europe.

4.3 Conclusion

The chapter provides an analysis of the nEULakes network, focusing on interviews conducted with representatives from various municipalities and tourism organizations involved in sustainable lake tourism across Europe. The meetings aimed to gather insights on how these stakeholders balance tourism with sustainability, engage with the nEULakes network, and address challenges such as climate change and community involvement.

Key findings from the interviews highlight the collaborative spirit within the nEULakes network, which is seen as a valuable asset for fostering unity and shared goals among partners. Despite the positive outcomes, the network faces challenges, including difficulties in expanding membership beyond the original partners and managing projects across different countries with varying administrative structures. The stakeholders expressed a desire for the network to grow, allowing for greater diversity and enhanced opportunities for collaboration and knowledge exchange.

The chapter also discusses the importance of sustainable tourism practices, with examples from various lake regions that creatively address the challenges of balancing economic benefits with environmental preservation. Initiatives such as promoting cycling, managing tourist traffic, and organizing local events reflect a commitment to responsible tourism development.

The commitment to sustainable tourism practices is evident, as stakeholders are actively seeking innovative solutions to balance tourism's economic benefits with the need for environmental protection. This focus on sustainability is vital for preserving the natural and cultural heritage of lake regions.

The interviews also showed that collaboration is the key. The nEULakes network's strength lies in its collaborative approach, enabling members to share resources, expertise, and support in achieving sustainable tourism goals. This unity is essential for overcoming challenges and fostering a sense of community among diverse stakeholders.

Its members are optimistic about future growth and collaboration. They aim to participate in more European project calls to secure funding and resources, which will further enhance their sustainable tourism initiatives and expand the network's impact across Europe.

Overall, nEULakes exemplifies a proactive approach to sustainable tourism, demonstrating the importance of collaboration, innovation, and community involvement in addressing the challenges faced by lake destinations.

In conclusion, this is a starting point for the future. The next phase will involve moving from theoretical discussions to practical implementations, ensuring that each region not only shares ideas but also becomes a model of sustainable tourism and lake management in practice.

Conclusion

This thesis aims to demonstrate the critical role that lakes play as natural and touristic resources for local communities and to evaluate the impact of collaborative networks, such as nEULakes, in fostering the sustainability of lake tourism. By investigating the complex relationship between tourism development and environmental conservation, this research has attempted to provide new knowledge on sustainable lake tourism. It underscored the need for a balanced, integrated approach that promotes economic, social, and ecological well-being in lake regions while ensuring their preservation for future generations.

The first chapter focused on lakes as essential natural resources and highlighted their multifaceted value. Lakes serve as vital ecosystems that support a wide range of biodiversity and provide crucial resources such as freshwater for drinking, agriculture, and industry. Beyond their ecological importance, lakes have historically been central to human civilization, offering food, transportation, and facilitating economic development. However, the research has also shown that lakes are under increasing pressure from human activities such as industrialization, agriculture, and urbanization, which have contributed to pollution and ecosystem degradation. Climate change further worsens these threats by altering water levels, temperature, and the overall health of aquatic life. This chapter emphasized the urgent need for comprehensive and coordinated conservation strategies, supported by international organizations like the World Bank, OECD, and the United Nations, to address these growing challenges and protect lakes from further deterioration.

The second chapter discussed how tourism can be both a blessing and a challenge for lake ecosystems. While tourism generates significant economic benefits and offers recreational and cultural value, it can also place immense pressure on fragile ecosystems if not managed responsibly. The research explored various forms of lake tourism, including rural tourism, ecotourism, cultural and heritage tourism, educational tourism, adventure tourism, sport tourism, wellness tourism, and luxury tourism, each of which presents unique opportunities and characteristics. Sustainable tourism practices, such as promoting responsible travel, reducing environmental impact, and engaging local communities, emerged as critical elements in safeguarding the long-term viability of lake

destinations. By analyzing the outcomes of International Lake Tourism Conferences, the chapter emphasized the importance of collaboration among local communities, policymakers, researchers, and industry stakeholders to ensure that tourism development is aligned with environmental conservation goals.

In chapter three, a detailed examination of the European Union's role in supporting sustainable tourism through funding mechanisms and collaborative networks provided valuable insights into how transnational cooperation can enhance tourism sustainability. The EU's financial support has been instrumental in driving forward projects aimed at promoting inclusive and environmentally responsible tourism practices across Europe. Networks such as nEULakes have proven vital in fostering knowledge exchange, best practice sharing, and joint efforts to protect natural and cultural heritage. The case study of the nEULakes network, which unites small municipalities near European lakes, showcased the power of collaboration in advancing sustainable tourism. Through the *ENSEMBLE* project and other initiatives, the network has demonstrated how sharing resources and expertise can lead to successful outcomes in promoting sustainability, inclusivity, and environmental stewardship.

Finally, the last chapter provided a ground-level view of how stakeholders are addressing the challenges of sustainable lake tourism through interviews with representatives from municipalities and tourism organizations involved in the nEULakes network. The interviews revealed a strong collaborative spirit within the network, with participants sharing a common commitment to balancing the economic benefits of tourism with the need to protect the natural environment. However, challenges such as expanding membership, managing cross-border collaborations, and dealing with administrative complexities were noted. Despite these difficulties, stakeholders expressed optimism about the network's future, underscoring the potential for growth and deeper collaboration as they seek to secure additional European funding for sustainable tourism projects.

One of the key conclusions of this thesis is that sustainable lake tourism can't be achieved in isolation. It requires a concerted effort from multiple stakeholders, such as local communities, government agencies, private sector operators, and international organizations, all working towards common goals. The nEULakes network exemplifies how a collaborative approach can create synergies that benefit both the environment and

local economies. The shared commitment to sustainability, as evidenced through initiatives like cycling programs, traffic management, and local event planning, demonstrates that tourism can be managed in a way that respects and preserves the ecological and cultural integrity of lake regions.

Looking ahead, the future of sustainable lake tourism needs to move from theory to practice. While the research has provided a comprehensive overview of the challenges and opportunities facing lake tourism, the next phase must involve the practical implementation of sustainable management strategies. Each region within the nEULakes network and beyond has the potential to serve as a model for how tourism can be used to support economic development while simultaneously protecting environmental resources. By continuing to promote collaboration, innovation, and community engagement, lake regions across Europe and the world can ensure their long-term sustainability as successful ecosystems and attractive tourism destinations.

In conclusion, this thesis highlighted that the path to sustainable lake tourism is complex but achievable. The combination of EU funding, collaborative networks, and proactive local initiatives offers a strong foundation for preserving the natural, cultural, and economic value of lakes. As stakeholders work together to address the challenges posed by climate change, pollution, and rising tourism demand, the lessons learned from networks like nEULakes will be invaluable in guiding future efforts. The success of sustainable tourism initiatives will also depend on the ability to balance development with ecological preservation, ensuring that lakes remain valued resources for future generations.

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Attachment – Interview questions

Section 1: Lakes and sustainable management

1. Can you provide a brief overview of your role and your primary responsibilities?
What is your current role or involvement in the management of tourism activities around the lake?
2. How do you define sustainable tourism in the context of your lake?
3. What are the key sustainability goals you aim to achieve?
4. How is climate change impacting the lakes you manage, and what adaptation strategies are you implementing? What measures are currently in place to combat pollution and maintain water quality?
5. How do you engage local communities in lake management activities?
6. What educational or outreach programs do you have in place to raise awareness about lake sustainability?
7. How do you collaborate with other stakeholders (e.g., government, NGOs, businesses) to promote sustainable tourism around the lake?
8. What local, national, or international policies influence your lake management practices? Are there any regulatory challenges that hinder your sustainability efforts?

Section 2: Balancing sustainability and tourism

1. What are the most significant positive and negative impacts of tourism you have observed in your area?
2. Are there any specific environmental concerns or challenges you face related to tourism around the lake?
3. How do you balance the recreational use of lakes with the need to protect and preserve them?

4. How do tourism activities affect local communities economically and socially?
5. What are the key concerns or suggestions from local residents regarding tourism development?
6. What existing policies or practices are in place to promote sustainable tourism around the lake?
7. Can you share examples of best practices or successful initiatives that have been implemented to ensure sustainable tourism around the lake?

Section 3: nEULakes network

1. Why was nEULake created? Can you describe the primary objectives of the nEULakes network and your role within it?
2. How does being part of the nEULakes network enhance your lake management and sustainability efforts?
3. How do you collaborate with other members of the nEULakes network? Can you provide examples of successful collaborations?
4. How does the nEULakes network facilitate engagement with local communities and stakeholders?
5. What challenges have you faced as part of the nEULakes network, and how have you overcome them?
6. In what areas do you believe the nEULakes network could improve to better support its members?
7. What are your future plans and goals within the nEULakes network?
8. How do you envision the nEULakes network evolving to meet the growing challenges of lake sustainability?