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# Institutional limits of sustainability in tourism governance: changing governance rationalities in protected area tourism in Finland

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the co-evolution of tourism and the administration of Finnish protected areas (PAs), specifically focusing on how administrative legitimacy-seeking influences sustainable tourism governance. Drawing on concepts from new institutional theory, namely isomorphism (organizational convergence), legitimacy-seeking (the pursuit of societal approval), and decoupling (the separation of formal structures from practices), we analyse key policy documents and annual reports from Finnish Parks and Wildlife from 2005 to 2018. The findings of our study reveal a dual shift in PA governance: 'platformisation,' where PAs are transformed into state-orchestrated platforms that facilitate the creation of value and legitimacy through the growth of tourism, and 'corporatization,' where private sector governance logics are adopted within public administration. These shifts redefine the state's role in commercializing nature, emphasizing economic outputs and regional development mediated by tourism. We observe a decoupling of organizational practices between broader environmental policies and tourism development objectives, driven by the pursuit of legitimacy. Overall, this research contributes to the critical discourse on the evolution of PA governance. It highlights the significance of understanding these institutional constraints in the context of sustainable tourism governance and evaluates the wider environmental policy implications of tourism growth.

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## 1. Introduction

Public institutions in the Nordic countries play a crucial role in managing natural resources, such as national parks, which serve as significant tourist attractions and are integral to national identity (Parpola & Åberg, 2009). Institutions like Finnish Parks & Wildlife (P&W) exemplify stability and influence actions through shared cultural values, such as the Nordic freedom to roam. The management and use of natural resources, including protected areas (PAs), are regulated by formal organizations that embody broader informal values and norms (Kraatz & Block, 2008; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). These values and ideologies define the state's involvement, rights, and responsibilities (Meyer & Höllerer, 2016) and influence how these institutions adapt to new circumstances (Scott, 2008), such as tourism growth and its environmental impacts. Therefore, the state is critical in framing sustainable tourism and conserving PAs. To analyse the evolving role of the state in tourism, this study focuses on PAs in Finland, where northern PAs, such as national parks near ski resorts, play a pivotal role in destination marketing and branding (Puhakka, 2008).

Institutional perspectives from organizational theory and sociology (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2008), political science (Peters, 2019), and management studies (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Townley, 2002) have seldom been applied to conservation and tourism. This is surprising given the emphasis on tourism research on policy and structures influencing sustainable tourism (Bramwell et al., 2017; Hall, 2006; Sharpley, 2006), coupled with the influence of public institutions on land use, conservation, and across the tourism sector (Earl & Hall, 2021). PAs offer a microcosm for understanding broader challenges and strategies in nature-based tourism within the context of environmental change and sustainable tourism. Moreover, PA tourism illustrates how public institutions balance conservation goals with the need to justify public funding amidst tourism growth. Therefore, to thoroughly analyse tourism governance at an institutional level, examining the societal relations and socio-technical structures that shape governance rationalities is necessary (Bramwell et al., 2017). PAs provide an ideal setting for this examination, encapsulating the complexities and dynamics of managing natural resources within a tourism context.

To explore evolving PA governance rationalities and the role of tourism, this article uses new institutional theory, focusing on the convergence of public and private sector management rationalities as a form of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This convergence is initially examined through the lens of institutional legitimacy-seeking and external governance validation (Suchman, 1995), emphasizing tourism's economic impact and its expanding role in PA administration. Second, the study investigates institutional decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) as a mechanism to pursue both conservation goals and tourism growth under sustainability. In this context, decoupling involves preserving the organization's formal commitments and societal expectations despite the inherent environmental conflict between tourism growth and conservation.

Empirically, this article examines Metsähallitus, the Finnish public natural resource administrator, focusing on its P&W section. The study analyses the evolution of the administration's tourism governance from 2005 to 2018 through qualitative content analysis of annual reports and key policy documents. It explores how changing

expectations regarding public institutions, tourism growth, and sustainability have evolved within the PA context managed by Metsähallitus. The study seeks to clarify the role of legitimacy and administrative change in PA tourism governance. It addresses the following questions: How do governing institutions respond to changing societal pressures towards PAs and tourism? How does institutional change affect interpretations of sustainable tourism in PA governance? How do governing institutions maintain their legitimacy when facing contradicting expectations? Through these questions, the study addresses how neoliberalism in PAs intersects with tourism (Job et al., 2017; Slocum, 2017), analyses the evolving state role in tourism (Bramwell & Lane, 2013; Hall & Jenkins, 2004) and assesses how the public sector's emulation of private governance for legitimacy may clash with broader environmental policies.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Protected area governance

PAs have become institutionalized units involving various political, ecological, and economic motivations. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN, 2022), a PA is a 'clearly defined geographical space, recognized, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values'. The regulatory orientation in this definition is tied to protected territories and places, challenging its application to a mobile phenomenon such as tourism and its sustainability goals. Additionally, the 'fortress conservation' approach and traditional Western views of uninhabited wilderness have led to social injustices (Guha, 1989). This has sparked debates on balancing the needs of local communities and tourism, the rationale for conservation (whether for global/local ecological or human/ecological benefits), and how to frame the societal benefits of conservation (Job et al., 2017; Saarinen, 2014; Slocum, 2017).

Historically, the state has significantly impacted tourism and conservation, particularly in Nordic countries. As a result, PAs have also become key sites of national identity (Parpola & Åberg, 2009). In Finland, the connection between tourism and PAs has been described as 'synergetic' (Puhakka & Saarinen, 2013), highlighting the mutually beneficial relationship and the business case for conserving natural landscapes and promoting recreation (Budowski, 1976). The symbiotic governance ideal, which is the central point of analysis here, provides a 'rational institutional myth' (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 347) that guides organizations and offers them ideals, rules, and credibility as solution-providers for societal problems (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017). Thus, organizational myths reflect societal expectations of organizations (e.g. nature stewardship) rather than their specific activities (Lowndes, 1996). Consequently, institutional myths provide organizational narratives that depict 'various formal structures as rational means to the attainment of desirable ends' (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 345). The myths are deemed legitimate when they are diffuse, considered rationally effective, or based on legal mandates (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

PAs and their governing bodies must increasingly justify their existence and normative value through measurable economic impacts (Job et al., 2017; Slocum, 2017). The

maintenance and management of PAs necessitate substantial financial support from the government and, ultimately, the public. Consequently, garnering public acceptance for these expenditures is essential, especially when taxpayer money is allocated for such purposes. In Finland, the role of PAs has significantly evolved since the 1990s. Initially, their primary focus was on conservation and providing recreational opportunities for citizens. Over time, however, their focus expanded to include tourism promotion and regional development (Rytteri & Puhakka, 2012). According to recent surveys (HS, 2024; Yle, 2022), the Finnish public generally supports tax-based funding for PAs and universal access to nature.

The prioritization of tourism in PAs (Job et al., 2017; Slocum, 2017) can be interpreted in two mutually reinforcing ways. Firstly, the government may attempt to balance competing interests and needs (i.e. conservation goals, tourism, and local users). Secondly, in the Nordic context, tourism in PAs benefits from loosely interpreted free access to nature, including the ‘freedom to roam’, which applies to all visitors, not just citizens (Haukeland et al., 2023). These tendencies support the ideal of symbiotic tourism development and creating tourism spaces that promise economic and public benefits beyond just ecological conservation within and outside of PAs (Puhakka, 2008).

## **2.2. A new institutional perspective on tourism governance in protected areas**

Institutions constitute resilient social frameworks comprising cognitive-cultural, normative, and regulative components that confer consistency and significance to societal interactions (Scott, 2008). They govern the allocation of natural resources across various sectors, including tourism, and are infused with broader, informal cultural connotations, perpetuating distinct traditions and rationalities (Kraatz & Block, 2008). Institutional transformation is often a laborious process, hindered by the multiplicity of stakeholders, conflicting rationalities, legislative mechanisms, and the collective nature of their resource base (Kraatz & Block, 2008; Endres & Pakman, 2019). Consequently, institutional evolution is the product of diverse and sometimes mixed processes of rationalization and valuation. In this context, governing bodies react to external and internal stimuli, shaping their objectives and organizational ethos (Brunsson, 1994; Meyer & Höllerer, 2016; Scott, 2008). Ultimately, the role of tourism in PAs reflects broader governance rationalities of public administration and nature use in societies.

Institutional dynamics prompt standardization, or isomorphism of actors within a particular sector, leading to their structural similarity, which can be attributed to coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Coercive pressures stem from influential stakeholders, like the government, exerting control over institutions through various means, including laws, regulations, directives, and financial incentives or penalties. Normative pressures originate from within the professional community, driving institutions to conform to the norms and standards of their field to gain legitimacy, credibility, and autonomy. Mimetic pressures come into play when institutions face uncertainty and ambiguity in their goals, leading them to emulate those peers seen as exemplary. In short, coercive pressures are linked to external factors (e.g. EU, the state), while normative and mimetic pressures arise from within an organization as it seeks to align with internal standards and external perceptions of success (Frumkin & Galaskiewicz, 2004). Drawing from the new institutional perspective, this study uses

the concepts of *institutional isomorphism*, *legitimacy-seeking*, and *decoupling* to explore their influence on changing governance rationalities and the framing of sustainable tourism in PAs.

### 2.2.1. *Institutional isomorphism and public administration*

Governance serves as the mechanism through which institutions strive to achieve their objectives, ideally equipping them to navigate the demands of the political landscape by managing their internal processes effectively (Salter & Tapper, 2002). The efficacy of governance, however, often hinges on the ability of public, private, and semi-public entities to cultivate a consensus on policy issues and their resolution (Bekkers et al., 2016). Thus, the public sector's administrative culture and institutional setup are influenced by governing ideals, history, and contextual considerations. This issue not only explains states' different responses to the same challenges but also institutions' challenges to mirror external changes (e.g. climate change) (Hajer, 2003). At the same time, organizations in the same sector or linked to each other become similar over time, reflecting the institutionalization of a field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). In other words, (institutional) environments homogenize organizations, making them more compatible, and emulate their shared logics and beliefs among actors on the appropriate goals and the ways to pursue them (Tolbert & Zucker, 1983).

Isomorphism provides a framework for understanding the structural changes in PA governance, especially as they incorporate market-based logic to gain legitimacy in response to external pressures. These demands often arise from governmental directives and tourism expansion, necessitating alterations in organizational logics. For instance, public sector entities have long mirrored corporate models, incorporating strategic planning and performance benchmarks (Townley, 2002). Such public administration shifts reflect a broader trend of managerial rationalism based on business practices and metrics legitimizing actions and priorities (Townley, 2002). Thus, as a revenue-generating sector, tourism enables PAs to demonstrate economic responsibility in the public sector.

### 2.2.2. *Institutional legitimacy-seeking and corporatization of governance*

Public organizations thrive and secure their legitimacy by adeptly meeting societal expectations, upholding moral values, and embracing the customs rooted in their environments (Lowndes, 1996; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). A public organization can be seen as legitimate when its presence becomes relatively unquestioned, as it is embedded within the societal structure (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This is exemplified by institutions like the Finnish P&W, which has become taken for granted in Finland due to its stewardship of PAs (Parpola & Åberg, 2009). Reflecting this understanding, Metsähalitus acknowledges the necessity of societal approval, stating, 'Legitimacy is achieved by optimally aligning the needs of citizens, clients, partners, and stakeholders with best practices' (Consortium, 2018, p. 14).

The context and culture in which governance is enacted are crucial; governance occurs through actions based on beliefs shaped by certain traditions and discourses (Bevir, 2009). Such cultural factors have historically been clear in Finnish environmental policy, which has been based on consensus-seeking and centralized decision-making (Sairinen, 2003). However, organizational ideals and the public's expectations of them

are not static; they shift with the times (Brunsson, 1994). Public institutions have evolved from specific cultural and normative contexts to solve specific problems (Hajer, 2003). They carry their significance and traditions, making them more than instruments of political decision-making. Thus, this perspective underlines the agency of institutions between legislation, politics, and their own goals to secure public support and implement mandatory tasks. According to new institutional theory, this inherent legitimacy guides institutions' behaviors, ensuring their actions are procedurally correct and culturally resonant (Lowndes, 1996; Suchman, 1995; Endres & Pakman, 2019).

Legitimacy and credibility are essential for an institution to ensure coordinated action, especially in unclear governance areas like (sustainable) tourism. In recent decades, the idea of corporatisation of public administration has been seen as a potential solution to address the credibility of public administration. This includes adopting management ideals and practices from the private sector, shifting the focus from citizens to clients, and implementing more commercial rationalization of public governance (Brunsson, 1994; Townley, 2002). Corporatisation, as the 'generic commodification of state activities' (Ahlqvist & Moiso, 2014, p. 32), is characterised by adopting market-based mechanisms and strategies within the public sector. This shift, influenced by an economic philosophy advocating for applying corporate principles to public administration, aims to demonstrate and improve the economic viability of public services. Consequently, tourism can become an integral tool for making conservation efforts profitable.

In this study, corporatisation is understood as a phenomenon that illustrates how legitimacy is pursued in the public sector in response to societal pressures and organizational ideals. Organizations may adopt practices that demonstrate appropriateness and credibility, regardless of their direct operational value (Tolbert & Zucker, 1983). However, new ideals and challenges, such as sustainability goals alongside global tourism growth, challenge public institutions with limited jurisdiction and capability, originally designed for different purposes (Hajer, 2003).

### **2.2.3. Institutional decoupling**

To maintain legitimacy amid societal pressures, institutions may 'decouple' their formal structures from their actual operations (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This means they uphold an appearance of conformity while their practices diverge. The institutionalization of societal pressures creates rationalized myths about the roles and tasks of public institutions, which must be acknowledged to maintain acceptability and legitimacy (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017). For instance, managerial rationalism can epitomize the prevailing organizational logic. At the same time, the symbiotic tourism-conservation ideal signifies what the PA administration should deliver, each representing distinct types of rationalized organizational myths. Consequently, organizations confronting conflicting expectations and serving diverse audiences may decouple (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) their formal structures from everyday practices to cater to different constituencies without compromising their legitimacy (Lawrence et al., 1997). Decoupling serves as a strategic organizational response to conflicting societal pressures and unrealistic expectations (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017) while managing uncertainty (Meyer & Höllerer, 2016). This approach underscores the hybridization of governance rationalities and the strategic use of ambiguous goals to maintain legitimacy (Greenwood et al., 2011).

Decoupling helps preserve an organization's formal structures and maintains consistency in the eyes of stakeholders, producing the basis and means for sustainability framing. For example, strict conservation goals may be formally endorsed simultaneously with applying pragmatically adaptive management practices to accommodate further tourism growth. Such decoupling proves particularly beneficial in situations of uncertainty and ambiguity (Crilly et al., 2012). PAs are entities led by public institutions that bring state-driven public goods and values into continual interaction with market-oriented incentives and actors. Therefore, decoupling is employed to explore the conflicting nature of PA tourism governance, considering the symbiotic myth of conservation and tourism growth.

### 3. Protected area administration in Finland

Metsähallitus, established in 1859, manages the stewardship of Finland's natural resources. The institution operates as an unincorporated state enterprise. Metsähallitus is responsible for using, managing, and protecting state-owned land and water areas sustainably, balancing the expectations and goals of its owner, stakeholders, and customers (Metsähallitus, 2022). This balance of public and private sector practices is achieved by incorporating parliamentary input into their annual objectives, placing them within the context of political and public opinion trends (Raitio & Harkki, 2014). Thus, Metsähallitus is entrusted with balancing market forces with the management of public lands, endeavouring to optimize conservation, recreation, and economic benefits from state-owned resources. Today, Metsähallitus manages 41 national parks and over 5,000 sites covering 12.6 million hectares of land and water, of which approximately 4.2 million hectares are protected (Metsähallitus, 2022).

Nordic PA agencies have traditionally avoided reliance on private or third-sector support due to strong institutional capacity and legal traditions (Peters & Pierre, 1998). As a result, Finland maintains a well-developed, well-managed, and relatively well-resourced European PA system (Stolton et al., 2024). Reflecting broader Western trends, Finland's public sector is shifting towards hybrid structures that incorporate private-sector strategies and market-driven practices (Battilana & Lee, 2014), fostering collaborative governance models and demand-driven conservation funding (Puhakka, 2007).

The Finnish land use planning framework regarding conservation and recreational use is distinguished by its multi-level and multi-scalar approach led nationally by P&W, integrating various uses, interests, and conflicts into cohesive multi-year plans (Metsähallitus, 2015). Finland's PA system comprises state-owned PAs, areas designated for conservation not yet under the Nature Conservation Act, and wilderness reserves under the Wilderness Act, forming the national core, supplemented by privately owned PAs (Stolton et al., 2024). Key tourist areas include national parks (II category in IUCN classification), wilderness areas (Ib), and state hiking areas with limited primary industry use. All PA types have statutory goals; national parks must have management and use plans and specific PA rules. PAs, including private ones, are established by the state and managed primarily by P&W (Heinonen & Juvonen, 2013). This multi-level approach ensures consistent and efficient operations nationwide, aligning with specific regulations and management plans (Stolton et al., 2024).

## 4. Materials and methods

This study draws on a qualitative content analysis (QCA) of the annual reports (2005–2018) of the Metsähallitus Consortium, the P&W section, and the Metsähallitus Statutory Assignment reports (all documents were retrieved from Metsähallitus's public digital archive). 36 annual reports (average length 46 pages) were coded and qualitatively analyzed using Nvivo. The study period captures a two-decade-long discussion about Metsähallitus's organizational form and goal-setting during relatively strong tourism growth. In Finland, guidelines and sustainable tourism contracts for PAs were established in 2004 and have been monitored since 2005 by P&W (see Metsähallitus, 2019). As the organizational structures changed, reporting practices were updated accordingly, requiring analysis of all three sets of annual reports. As a genre, the annual reports represent a communication mode of formal self-presentation directed to the public as a text, providing an ideal source for institutional-level analysis (Meyer & Höllerer, 2016).

The QCA (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2022) is grounded in key concepts from new institutional theory concerning organizational change (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). QCA is an interpretive method of generic text analysis employed to examine extensive textual data that necessitate meticulous reading, following their reduction through categorization and coding, as well as inductive and deductive interpretation (Forman & Damschroder, 2007). By employing a qualitative strategy of text immersion, categorization, and interpretation for data analysis (Forman & Damschroder, 2007), each annual report was initially evaluated for its relevance to tourism development in PAs. The data were coded based on key tourism topics, including trends (e.g. visitor trends, service development, planning efforts), organizational factors (e.g. funding, legislation, changes), and sustainability factors (e.g. regulation, infrastructure needs, climate policies, risks). Ultimately, the coding strategy focused on analysing changes in PA tourism and governance.

Procedurally, the principal author was responsible for data collection and initial categorisation based on preliminary research questions. The research team collaboratively refined these categories and assessed the accuracy of interpretations through collective discussions and iterative feedback, ensuring consistency and trustworthiness. The categorization and coding process was documented in NVivo software, ensuring systematic organization, traceability, and transparent evaluation of themes.

The results of the first review were further categorized into four units of analysis (Mayring, 2022): governance and regulation, organizational change and restructuring, tourism and service development, and descriptions of sustainability policies. These units were further analyzed to identify key events and changes over the years for a comprehensive view. Based on these categories, two primary legitimacy-seeking levels were summarized: external pressures and organizational changes and internal pressures and tourism development. Results from these focus areas are further reflected in the descriptions of sustainability policy and their implications for the symbiotic governance ideal explored in the discussion section. The main findings are organized thematically and conceptualized as two governance rationalities within PA tourism. These are defined as 'platformisation,' which responds to external pressures, and 'corporatization,' which represents the search for internal legitimacy within PA governance. These concepts underpin the decoupling of sustainability practices by reinterpreting the symbiotic governance ideal in PA tourism.

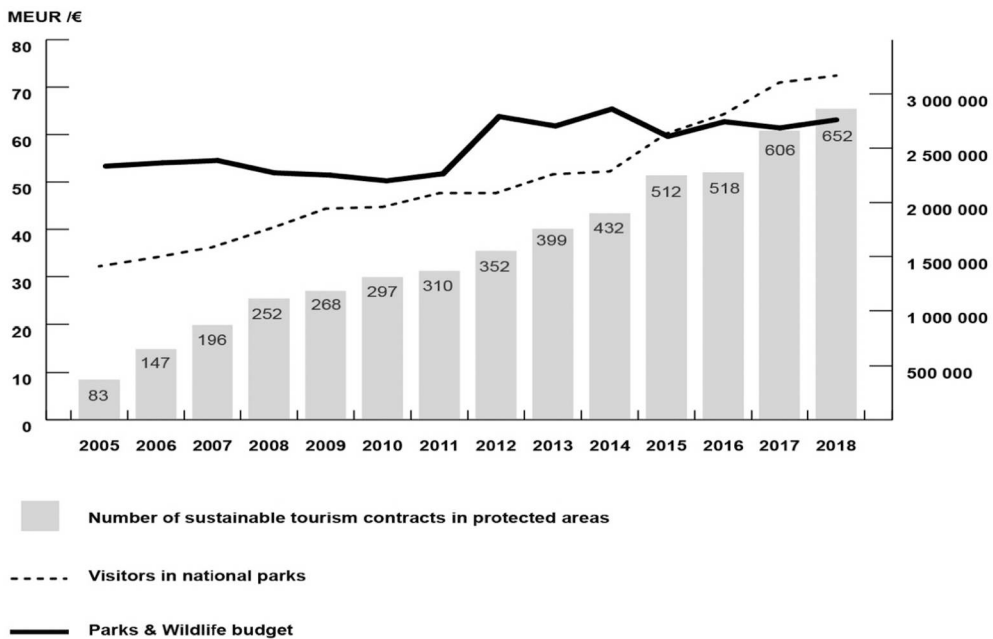
## 5. Institutional limits of sustainability in Finnish protected area tourism governance

The past two decades have seen significant changes in the P&W division of Metsähallitus. This included establishing six new national parks between 2005 and 2022 and transferring administrative duties and lands from the Finnish Army and the Museum and Heritage Agency. Finnish national parks have become increasingly popular among visitors and entrepreneurs. The number of visitors to Finnish national parks grew from 1 million in 2000–3 million annually by 2018 (Figure 1). The rapid increase in visitor numbers has created pressure for effective management and necessitated P&W’s development as an organization capable of meeting these pressures.

Generally, during the study period, P&W underwent structural changes focusing more on economic outputs and optimizing structures for tourism development. Government demands increased, as reflected in legislation, task assignments, and funding. In 2005, Metsähallitus reorganized to clarify its role and address task-sharing issues between Forestry and P&W, dividing P&W into three regions and four working processes: conservation, recreation, game and fishing, and regional management. Before legislation passed in 2016, Metsähallitus stressed the importance of maintaining one entity for land use and natural resource administration.

### 5.1. Economic rationalisation of governance structures

In 2015, reform exhaustion could already be identified in the annual report: ‘The multi-year search for an organization model and working with the new Metsähallitus Act have



**Figure 1.** National Park visits, protected areas tourism operators, and Parks & Wildlife’s budget from 2005 to 2018.

encumbered the setting of clear organisational goals. This unclear state of mind and incoherent leadership are reflected in all organizational evaluations' (Statutory Assignments, 2015, p. 47). No significant organizational changes were made between 2016 and 2023, though the Consortium (forestry and estates sections) has continually faced profitability and revenue pressures from the government. According to annual reports, continuous austerity put PAs in constant jeopardy, creating a 'constant crisis condition' (Ahlqvist & Moisisio, 2014, p. 29), calling for administrative changes. Indeed, the organisational modernization of P&W can be seen as a part of wider public sector reform in Finland, searching for social and financial 'fitness' and validation through economic rationalization of governance (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991).

Second, the role of private sector partners and customers became more pronounced as PAs became framed through their provision of entrepreneurial opportunities. The number of tourists visiting national parks roughly tripled from one million visitors in 2000 to more than three million in 2018 (Figure 1), although many new national parks and PAs were established during this period. Indeed, an explosion of private operators in PAs followed (doubling from 268 to 652 between 2009 and 2018 (Figure 1)). Since 2011, PA development has also been increasingly concentrated near tourist destinations, especially in the Lapland region. To respond to tourism growth and the need to create economic value through PAs, Metsähallitus positioned itself as a provider and enabler of conditions for local and regional economic development through its entrepreneurial support. Beyond its stewardship over public lands, the state, through Metsähallitus, played increasingly the role of proactive landlord, generating regional development through PAs and tourism.

A 'post-2008 austerity' mentality is evident in issues like limited funding, infrastructural 'repair debts,' organizational trimming, and management evaluations based on yearly outputs, which likely heighten the focus on tourism's economic impact on PA governance. In 2014, P&W's annual report stated, 'The public administration is expected to adhere to strict fiscal discipline and improve productivity. This is appropriate, as it concerns our collective tax funds ... Hopefully, we have also demonstrated that efficiency can mean more than accomplishing more work with fewer staff members. For P&W, it means creating added value for society, including citizens and the business sector. We hope that the future government and parliament will continue to support our work for the benefit of our country's natural and cultural heritage, as well as for the welfare of the people and the Finnish economy' (Parks and Wildlife, 2014, p. 2). In 2018, P&W reported that 'some service and guidance infrastructure is already in poor or deteriorating condition. The maintenance debt for nature sites has accumulated to 44.2 million euros; for historical sites, 72 million euros. The challenges of maintaining and repairing these structures must be addressed to ensure the growth of nature tourism and the preservation of our unique national heritage' (Parks and Wildlife, 2018, p. 2). These excerpts highlight ongoing state funding concerns and the pressure to demonstrate economic benefits of PAs, justifying organizational changes towards repositioning PAs, tourism, and the role of P&W.

This repositioning is exemplified by the state's outsourcing of maintenance services and in the example and justification of the selling of Wild North. In 2006, Wild North was described as 'one of the leading wilderness and nature tourism operators' (Consortium, 2006, p. 12). Its business had developed over the years (e.g. finding new foreign

market segments and merging with a tourism company); however, in 2012, the company was sold to ‘reform ... the role of Metsähallitus in tourism business’ (Consortium, 2011, p. 21). This strategic sale reduced competition for the private sector, realized assets and clarified the public nature of P&W’s tasks. In addition, the organizational restructuring included measures to clarify the roles of different sections and prepare Metsähallitus to receive new sites from other public organizations, enforcing its national caretaker role. In general, during the 2010s, the state’s stance on tourism growth shifted: increased tourism in PAs was frequently cited as evidence of good, collaborative, and effective administration, with its potential being prominently highlighted.

To summarize the *organizational structural changes*, PAs evolved into ‘*state-orchestrated platforms*’ (Moisio & Rossi, 2020, p. 535), centralizing the connection between tourism and its economic impact. These platforms aim to facilitate and sustain spaces for value creation and interactions with rent-paying customers (Gillespie, 2010; Srnicek, 2017). The concept of the ‘platform’ also serves as a post-political metaphor, neutralizing the agency of intermediaries by presenting them as mere facilitators (Gillespie, 2010). P&W adopted this facilitator role in land-use politics, positioning the state as a ‘condition provider for the tourism economy’ (Parks and Wildlife, 2018, p. 3).

### 5.1.1. Protected areas as tourism platforms

The platformisation of PAs represents a spatial extension and evolution of the enabler state model. Here, the state generates public benefits through the private sector and provides supportive conditions for private operators while attached to a place-tied interpretation of environmental sustainability. The state’s dual strategy of stepping back from direct tourism enterprise while intensifying its tourism promotion efforts suggests a transformation into a rent-seeking logic of public PA value. Consequently, PAs have become the geographical embodiment of tourism platforms, reflecting the state’s revised role in the tourism sector.

The new organizational model responds to external demands to maintain the state’s control over PAs. Platformisation addresses these pressures by offering a streamlined approach to organizational coordination, overcoming the declining relevance and efficiency of previous organizational principles (Casilli & Posada, 2019) (e.g. selling Wild North). From an institutional perspective, the platformisation of governance reflects organizational adjustments to macro-level external pressures, illustrated by P&W’s shift from direct service provision. Therefore, this process represents coerced standardization and strategic conformity to new public administration expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), while also creating opportunities to enhance tourism-mediated public value creation. This trend aligns with the government’s objective of improving public administration effectiveness by connecting it to tourism growth.

## 5.2. The corporatisation of tourism governance

Tourism growth drove the adoption of economic rationalities and organisational optimisation to maintain PAs’ ‘value for money’ (Parks and Wildlife, 2009). It influenced ideal visitor profiles, shifting tourism development locations, service development, and target audiences. Consequently, from 2010, P&W emphasized service optimization and demand-driven infrastructural maintenance, including strategic outsourcing,

digitalization, communications, branding, and integrating the national brand report (Country Brand, 2010) into its strategy. This national report justified further recreational development of PAs, particularly between 2010 and 2012.

In addition to implementing multiple thematic marketing campaigns and organizational branding, P&W introduced a project to profile its 50 key destinations. The aim was to better align 'their brand promise with customers' service experience' (Parks and Wildlife, 2013, p. 18). As a result, some national parks were branded as 'top destinations' (Parks and Wildlife, 2014). For instance, themed tourism promotion programs, like the Marine Archipelago to International Fame Program by the Consortium (2015), were also launched. This program aimed to make the archipelago and coastal tourism products more accessible to the Central European market, develop the archipelago brand, and build strong tourism networks. Additionally, the Stop-over Program collaborated with companies to plan and market attractive travel packages aimed at Asian customers with layovers in Finland lasting a few hours or days.

Simultaneously, private partnerships and subsequent joint marketing efforts were established, which tied development strategies to broader tourism trends, matched organizational structures with tourism hotspots, and PAs service development with national and regional plans. These branding activities exemplify the integration of tourism and its growth in strategic planning. Consequently, infrastructure and service development were increasingly limited to areas near ski resorts and other tourism hotspots. For example, the reports repeatedly emphasize the positive results from visitor satisfaction surveys and the regional economic impacts of the four most visited national parks located next to ski resorts (Pallas-Yllästunturi, Urho Kekkonen, Koli, Oulanka, and Pyhä-Luosto), reflecting their financial importance among PAs.

Moreover, the transfer of public lands from other sectors indicates a demand-based prioritization of services at the level of national natural resource governance. Similarly, in 2016, Metsähallitus removed close to 20% of its managed rest spots without significant changes in service quality, according to its estimation. Other responses to 'tidying up' in the reports (post-2008) include combining units and implementing efficient working practices to achieve efficiency gains, outsourcing maintenance tasks, pursuing EU project funding, and selling of non-core functions.

The focus on economic inputs is present throughout the annual reports – they estimate regional economic impacts and highlight the crucial role of the most visited national parks. Before 2009, the annual reports only highlighted P&W's annual expenses; afterward, visitors' economic impacts were foregrounded. As the 2015 report notes, 'Finland gets direct gains from our work through euros and jobs ... Visitors' regional economic impacts increased to a record-breaking 142 million ... creating new jobs for the private sector' (Parks and Wildlife, 2015, p. 2). The 'willingness to pay' to visit PAs was estimated at around 200 euros per visit (Parks and Wildlife, 2015). In 2018, P&W estimated that state funding could impact local economies tenfold. It also reported that revenues from PAs increased from 85.7 million in 2009 to over 250 million euros in 2018. Data gathering, surveys, and economic models were increasingly referenced as evidence of created value (e.g. local economic impact, employment, taxes) to justify administrative decisions, signalling specific types of knowledge production to support growth-driven management and service choices.

Integrating health effects into PAs' economic valuation exemplifies value-proofing knowledge production. Initially, domestic tourism was promoted within a public health framework – 'healthy parks, healthy people' – linking park visits to improved public health and subsequent economic benefits. In 2013, P&W stated, 'The value of the public health benefits experienced by hikers who visited Finland's national parks in 2013 is 226 million euros' (Parks and Wildlife, 2014, p. 6). Later, the focus shifted to attracting a global clientele, embracing commercial discourse with branding, service promises, and customer-focused governance. By 2015, wellness tourism was branded as a key international growth area with projects like the Finrelax-Program, aiming to make Finland a leader in wellness tourism by developing regional wellness travel products, focusing on Finnish nature, food, and sauna, including key national parks near tourism centers (Consortium, 2015). This shift indicates a change in PA governance from serving domestic visitors to targeting international tourists, demonstrating new strategies for gaining legitimacy while positioning PAs in the global tourism market.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. Commercialisation of protected areas and sustainability

P&W's sustainability framework generally comprises ecological, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions, reflecting a 'balanced' model anchored to economic growth (Hall et al., 2015). The organization's status as a national steward of nature and resources reinforces its legitimacy. Since 2014, sustainability agendas have aligned more with global policies. In 2006, the goal was to 'develop the prerequisites of nature recreation and the maintenance of protected areas' allure' (Parks and Wildlife, 2006, p. 14). Today, strategies focus on global policies, climate change, and ecosystem services, positioning Metsähallitus as a hybrid actor combining private business and public governance. This approach integrates ecosystem services, bioeconomy, and Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with sustainability and participatory interests at the core of planning, though practical metrics are lacking. Since 2017, SDGs have been emphasized and supported through the Consortium's 'Responsibility Program'.

The main approach to sustainability has been harmonizing tourism with site-based solutions to justify additional funding for tourism growth and deteriorating infrastructure. During the study period, P&W's concerns shifted from a lack of resources to support tourism growth and resources to limiting tourism's impacts on PAs. Reports from this time highlight planning's importance to ensure tourism and recreation do not sacrifice 'authentic and unique natural and cultural values' (Parks and Wildlife, 2011). Here, the growing pressures are tied to increasing visitor numbers, potentially exceeding sustainable use. In 2018, the Director of P&W stated: "... the popularity of nature-based destinations and tourism cannot grow if investments in the quality and maintenance of their services are not made." (Parks and Wildlife, 2018, p. 2).

Governance models are normative constructs requiring an open declaration of values, especially for longstanding organizations (Meyer & Höllerer, 2016). How governance units frame sustainability goals under growth-promoting arrangements is critical (Saarinen, 2014). Sustainable tourism often follows a territorial approach, focusing on destination-level managerial mitigation of sustainability issues (Lunden & Varnajot, 2024).

This strategy makes tourism sustainable regardless of visitors' origins by narrowing the focus to the 'local' level, highlighting specific PAs, and disconnecting tourism from global impacts (Saarinen, 2014; Sharpley, 2006). Thus, sustainability becomes ambiguous and decoupled from broader environmental concerns due to inconsistent governance structures, symbolic frames, and organizational hypocrisy while simultaneously promoting the virtues of outdoor activities, public health, and environmental care. Consequently, sustainability is viewed predominantly as site infrastructure – framed to support rather than limit tourism.

Ambiguity in sustainability is evident in regulating tourism operators within PAs. Operators must adhere to sustainable guidelines for licenses, relying on self-assessments based on 'limits of acceptable change' (Metsähallitus, 2019). This self-evaluation challenges independent verification of impact and regulatory effectiveness, demonstrating how sustainability becomes a strategic response to pressures while maintaining the symbiotic governance myth.

## 6.2. Organisational decoupling and sustainability

Sustainability becomes decoupled when it merely conforms to societal and political pressures. Internally, there is a push to modernise P&W operations and present sustainability as being achieved, regardless of the broader environmental unsustainability of certain strategies or by excluding transport from sustainability considerations in tourism. An analysis of P&W shows how public sector reforms and changing expectations influenced tourism governance. Both external and internal factors have made the public administration increasingly dependent on tourism growth to justify and legitimise its role in the evolving landscape of public governance and tourism demand. This has led to a growth-oriented yet environmentally constrained model of sustainable tourism. By framing sustainable tourism as compatible with increasing tourism growth in PAs, 'sustainability' became a tool to legitimise growth and P&W, as its success was increasingly linked to visitation and tourism's economic contribution.

Successful decoupling relies on a lack of specificity, goal ambiguity, and symbolic compliance with external expectations by blending contradictory goals (Greenwood et al., 2011). Thus, ambiguity presents 'a powerful means of balancing disparate institutional demands' (Meyer & Höllerer, 2016, p. 397). From an institutional legitimacy perspective, the ambiguity related to the key goal of sustainability in P&W's governance provides the necessary bridge between tourism growth, economic rationale and *the symbiotic administration ideal*. Indeed, combining tourism growth and conservation goals is problematic under global mobility and tourism-generated emissions and environmental impacts. Here, 'sustainability' presents an example of how organizations can address and fix inherent controversies. It also allows for institutional ambiguity and discretion (Greenwood et al., 2011), allowing organizations to demonstrate their commitment to competing simultaneous norms and values (Meyer & Höllerer, 2016).

According to Douglas (1986), institutions inherently exhibit 'structural amnesia' to maintain functionality and effectiveness despite navigating incompatible goals and expectations. In other words, organizations often ignore non-operational or impossible goals to focus on more attainable ones. This leads to organizational hypocrisy (Brunsson, 1986) and strategic ignorance (McGoey, 2012). Thus, organizational hypocrisy and

strategic ignorance are crucial for hybrid organizations, such as P&W, to face contradictory expectations and may even be essential for the continuation of an organization when failing to meet expectations. Therefore, organizational hypocrisy and strategic ignorance, as aspects of organizational decoupling, explain how organizations can thrive despite conflicting values and goals, and manage conflicting expectations. Consequently, ambiguity becomes an asset to an organization's legitimacy, allowing it to separate its outputs (e.g. visitor growth) from its core values (e.g. conservation). This separation helps increase public funding, tolerance, and the overall legitimacy of the institution (Brunsson, 1994).

### **6.3. Implications of reinterpreting the symbiotic governance ideal**

Historically, P&W has been vital in legitimizing the Metsähallitus Consortium and its public image amidst land use and forestry controversies (Parpola & Åberg, 2009). Tourism has been integral to PAs, legitimizing them by offering leisure opportunities and fostering a symbiotic nature-conservation relationship (Budowski, 1976). However, the history of the symbiotic ideal comes from different types and scales of PA tourism compared to the past two decades. Despite these changes, the core principles of creating net positive values for visitors and nature remain central to PA governance's sustainability vision.

A recent evaluation by an independent party of the Finnish PA system (Stolton et al., 2024) suggests that P&W has shifted its focus from biodiversity conservation to emphasizing tourism in its governance. The evaluation also indicates that P&W has not adequately addressed the issue of climate change. This shift in priorities has caused internal conflicts within Metsähallitus's strategy, particularly in balancing the protection of biodiversity with the sustainable use of natural resources. Additionally, the evaluation highlights significant regional disparities in the coverage of PAs between northern and southern Finland. This is especially relevant in Finnish Lapland, given the relationship between national parks and ski resorts in the Lapland region and their impact on tourism development priorities (Lunden & Varnajot, 2024). According to the evaluation, there is also uncertainty about the role of P&W concerning whether it should function as a broad conservation agency or focus primarily on managing PAs. From this uncertainty, we identify three key implications: the impact of the platformisation of PAs as commercial tourism venues on regional development, the corporatization of PA administration to seek legitimacy for tourism and broader environmental and climate change policies.

First, sustainable tourism targets are focused on specific sites rather than the sector. From an institutional perspective, this represents organizational hypocrisy (Brunsson, 1986), where challenging goals are decoupled from administrative tasks to maintain credibility and legitimacy. Such decoupling was also found in the recent PA system evaluation, noting a tendency within P&W to avoid or 'write off some of the most intractable and significant problems' (Stolton et al., 2024, p. 28), such as climate change, directly affecting the organization's activities. By narrowing the scope of sustainability considerations, the ideal of symbiotic administration is symbolically maintained and organizationally achievable, providing legitimation for P&W.

Second, the international nature of tourism challenges existing administrative structures, jurisdictions, and governance in the context of climate change (Lunden &

Varnajot, 2024). The lack of universally accepted rules for regulating international tourism exposes the limitations of place-based sustainability governance, which suffers from a lack of authority, regulatory power, and credibility (Cajaiba-Santana et al., 2020). Consequently, regulating tourism holds limited potential for institutional legitimacy compared to place-based sustainability policies that accommodate further visitor growth.

Finally, without explicitly identifying tourism as a regulatory subject, its governability and sustainability become questionable (Saarinen, 2014). In Finland, sustainability has been decoupled from tourism development by focusing on infrastructure durability, visitor codes of conduct, and organizational resource constraints. Annual reports from governing agencies do not consider limiting tourism due to Finnish traditions of universal access. This agnostic regulatory approach allows tourism growth to align with local ecological values, potentially obstructing broader environmental regulation of tourism (Lunden & Varnajot, 2024; Stolton et al., 2024).

In general, these reports promote managerial rationalism (Townley, 2002) by emphasizing economic measures and tourism's effects. This shift suggests a more economically-driven reinterpretation of the interdependence between conservation and tourism (Puhakka, 2008). The focus on evaluating economic outcomes highlights the central role of knowledge production and evidence-based governance, such as cost – benefit analysis and service concentration based on demand (Townley, 2002). Consequently, the rationalization of governance – seen as the platformisation of PAs and corporatization of public administration – is increasingly driven by the economic benefits of PA tourism (Puhakka & Saarinen, 2013). This shift risks marginalizing broader environmental goals and climate actions that cannot be fully realized through tourism.

## 7. Conclusions

Our analysis shows how governing bodies respond to societal pressures by redefining PA tourism through platformisation and corporatization. These processes promote entrepreneurship, public-private partnerships, and consumerism in public-sector service delivery. While this enhances institutional credibility and aligns with evolving public sector expectations and the growth of the tourism sector in Finland, it raises concerns about the long-term implications for conservation goals. We identified organizational decoupling as a strategy to balance organizational values and outputs in PA governance while maintaining the symbiotic conservation-tourism governance myth (Budowski, 1976). This decoupling allows for pursuing seemingly contradictory goals: adhering to conservation ideals, ensuring free access to nature, meeting global sustainability targets, and supporting (international) tourism growth. While this approach may provide short-term legitimacy, it risks undermining the fundamental purpose of PAs by prioritizing tourism-generated economic outputs over broader environmental goals.

This study contributes to understanding PA tourism governance through three key insights. First, it demonstrates how a new institutional perspective reveals the interplay between societal pressures and legitimacy-seeking in PA administration and the central role of tourism. Second, it highlights the evolving role of public administration in tourism, showing adaptations to tourism growth and societal expectations. Third, it emphasizes the importance of viewing institutions as culturally and spatially rooted

entities, challenging rationalist, often global, and apolitical approaches to tourism and PA governance.

The study's design and results are contextually limited to the Nordic region and its national PA system. The reliance on annual reports, which are inherently promotional, further limits the level of policies and self-reporting by the governing institution. Future research could benefit from incorporating interviews with long-time staff and comparative studies across different national contexts to provide a more comprehensive picture of institutional change in PA tourism governance. While the study employs an interpretative approach, its key findings regarding the significant role of tourism in Finnish PA governance and the contradictory environmental policy goals of Metsähallitus align with recent evaluations of the Finnish PA system (Stolton et al., 2024).

As an implication for policymakers, we recommend critically reassessing tourism-driven PA governance models to better align with broader environmental and climate change objectives. This involves strengthening regulatory frameworks to address tourism's international nature and sustainability challenges beyond individual PA sites. Specifically, PA governance success should be decoupled from over-reliance on visitors' economic impacts (Stolton et al., 2024), with greater emphasis placed on the broader environmental impacts of tourism. As a national-level expert organization managing Arctic areas affected by climate change, the Finnish P&W is well-positioned to lead in biodiversity and climate change actions beyond specific sites. However, the trend towards tourism-oriented governance complicates this potential leadership role.

To conclude, focusing on the role of governing institutions and cultural norms of governance is critical to improving the environmental sustainability of PA tourism, particularly in addressing the central role of conservation in climate change and biodiversity loss. Ultimately, this calls for reassessing current PA governance and the *limits of governing institutions* in an era marked by touristification and environmental change.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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