



HOW ECO-ENTREPRENEURS ARE TRANSFORMING ITALIAN TOURISM SECTOR: EVIDENCE FROM THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

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Abstract

Purpose. This study investigates eco-entrepreneurship within Italy's hospitality sector, examining the motivations, practices, impacts, and challenges eco-entrepreneurs experience. It aims to enrich the discourse on sustainable tourism and ecological entrepreneurship in Italy.

Design/methodology/approach. The research employs a multiple-case study methodology to focus on six small-scale enterprises in the Italian hospitality industry. Data collection comprised semi-structured interviews with key informants, supplemented by secondary data analysis. The interviews were coded and analysed using NVivo 14 to extract meaningful insights.

Findings. The research reveals that personal commitment, environmental responsibility, and local heritage preservation are key drivers for eco-entrepreneurs. Key sustainable practices include resource conservation, waste management, and promoting local products. Transitioning to sustainable operations has been found to enhance reputation and customer trust, although the economic benefits of these initiatives remain unclear. The primary challenges identified are high investment costs, complex regulatory landscapes, and the need for targeted marketing to sensitise consumers towards sustainable options.

Practical and Social Implications. The findings highlight potential policy interventions to simplify the certification process and provide economic incentives for eco-friendly practices. Eco-entrepreneurs effectively demonstrate how sustainability in hospitality can engage local communities and influence consumer behaviour towards eco-conscious travel, thereby driving broader societal shifts towards sustainability.

Originality of the study. This research contributes to the limited empirical literature on eco-entrepreneurship within Italy's largely small-scale hospitality sector. It underscores the sector's potential to serve as a model for sustainable tourism practices, offering insights that could be applied to other regions and industries.

1. Introduction

Tourism is a cornerstone of economic development worldwide, but its rapid expansion has raised significant concerns about environmental degradation and resource consumption. As global awareness of sustainability grows, pressure on the tourism sector, and particularly on the hospitality industry, has increased to mitigate environmental impact while supporting local communities (Thompson et al., 2017; Gast et al., 2017).

In this context, eco-entrepreneurship has emerged as a vital catalyst for change. Eco-entrepreneurs distinguish themselves by integrating environmental responsibility and social values into their business models, thereby promoting innovative solutions aimed at balancing profitability with ecological stewardship (Anci & Haznedar, 2017). By championing sustainable practices, these entrepreneurs not only transform their operations but can also influence broader shifts towards sustainability across the tourism sector.

Although research on sustainable tourism and the rise of entrepreneurship has proliferated in recent years (Purnomo et al., 2020; Aquino et al., 2018), most studies remain focused at the international or theoretical level. Therefore, there is a notable gap in empirical research examining how eco-entrepreneurial practices materialise in specific national contexts, particularly in countries where tourism is both economically significant and culturally distinctive.

Based on these considerations, Italy represents a unique context for an investigation of this type. As one of the world's leading tourist destinations, Italy is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and environmental assets. Furthermore, the Italian hospitality sector is characterised by a high prevalence of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which, due to their size and flexibility, are often well-positioned to implement innovative and sustainable business practices (Lordkipanidze et al., 2005). However, these businesses also face distinct challenges, including regulatory complexities, high investment costs, and limited consumer awareness relating to sustainability.

Against this background, the present study investigates how eco-entrepreneurs are reshaping Italy's tourism sector, with a particular emphasis on small-scale enterprises within the hospitality industry. Adopting a multiple-case study approach, the research seeks to address the following questions:

(RQ1) What are the defining characteristics and motivations of eco-entrepreneurs in the Italian hospitality sector?

(RQ2) What obstacles and opportunities do they encounter, both generally and in the Italian context?

To answer the two research questions, the study addresses four key areas:

- Entrepreneurial profile: identify characteristics and motivations of

- these eco-entrepreneurs;
- Sustainable practices: examine the specific sustainable practices they implement;
 - Outcome and impact: assess the results and impacts of these initiatives on their business;
 - Challenges and opportunities: explore the primary obstacles and opportunities they encounter, both generally and within the Italian context.

By focusing on Italy as an empirical field, this study aims to enrich the literature on sustainable tourism and eco-entrepreneurship, providing new evidence and practical insights. The findings offer implications for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers seeking to support the growth of sustainable business models in tourism-dependent regions. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant literature, Section 3 outlines the methodology, Section 4 presents empirical findings, Section 5 discusses key implications, and Section 6 concludes with recommendations for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1 Eco-Entrepreneurship in Tourism: Concepts, Characteristics, and Context

Eco-entrepreneurship, frequently termed “ecopreneurship,” refers to entrepreneurial activities that integrate economic objectives with environmental and social considerations (Kummitha, 2021; Mananda & Sudiarta, 2024). Within tourism studies, the relevance of eco-entrepreneurship has grown significantly, responding to the mounting imperative for environmental sustainability and the transformation of the tourism economy. Eco-entrepreneurs distinguish themselves by prioritising both environmental stewardship and economic outcomes, differentiating them from traditional entrepreneurs who often pursue profit as the primary goal (Mananda & Sudiarta, 2024).

Central to contemporary definitions is the notion that eco-entrepreneurs seek to innovate in products, services, and business models to reduce environmental impact and foster local economic development (Gast et al., 2017; Rahmawati et al., 2023). Their motivations extend beyond commercial opportunity, encompassing personal values, ethical commitments, and responses to societal demands for more sustainable tourism products (Cohen & Winn, 2007; Kummitha, 2020). Several studies highlight that the intent to address environmental concerns, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and local resource depletion, acts as a powerful drive for both the creation and operation of eco-entrepreneurial ventures (Schaltegger, 2002;

Mananda & Sudiarta, 2024).

Effective eco-entrepreneurship in tourism can be evaluated using several frameworks. For example, Ekamati (2017) identifies four core criteria: environmental awareness, marketing aptitude for eco-friendly products, responsiveness to local demand for sustainable goods, and the pursuit of profitability grounded in ecological values. These dimensions illustrate how eco-entrepreneurs embed stewardship principles into market-driven activities, ultimately contributing to both environmental and economic objectives (Thompson et al., 2017).

Further conceptual nuance is provided by Kainrath (2009), who delineates three foundational elements: eco-innovation, eco-commitment, and eco-opportunity. Eco-innovation encompasses the development of products, services, and technologies that address specific ecological problems (Gast et al., 2017; Rahmawati et al., 2023). Eco-commitment refers to embedding sustainability within core business operations, policies, and strategies (Schaltegger, 2002). Eco-opportunity, meanwhile, concerns the ability to recognise and capitalise on ecological trends, accessing niche markets for environmentally responsible offerings (Schaltegger, 2002).

Therefore, in the tourism context, a successful eco-entrepreneurship approach is multifaceted (Thompson et al., 2017) and includes key components such as:

- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Integrating local communities, policymakers, and businesses to ensure initiatives are contextually grounded and enjoy broad support (Thompson et al., 2017).
- **Economic Viability:** Ensuring sustainable operations are also financially robust, thereby fostering long-term adoption and the scaling of green practices (Gast et al., 2017).
- **Environmental Education:** Enhancing ecological literacy among staff, tourists, and host communities, which can improve decision-making around resource use and conservation (Thompson et al., 2017).
- **Overtourism Management:** Implementing strategies to control visitor flow and safeguard environmental and cultural resources (Thompson et al., 2017).

Moreover, Mananda and Sudiarta (2024) synthesises emerging best practices, emphasising the importance of green product development, technological innovation, sustainable resource management, community involvement, metrics for environmental performance, and strategic partnerships.

From an organisational perspective, Schaltegger (2002) stresses the necessity for broad-based managerial competencies, including integrating sustainability into corporate strategies, developing eco-friendly services, and embedding environmental considerations across all organisational levels. These skills, aligned with ongoing performance assessment, help ensure that eco-entrepreneurial activities are both impactful and adaptable

(Thompson et al., 2017).

The contextual environment, particularly the attitudes of resident and host communities, plays a significant role in facilitating or constraining eco-entrepreneurial ventures. Community support and sensitivity to environmental requirements are frequently cited as prerequisites for successful implementation of sustainable initiatives in tourism (Anci & Haznedar, 2017).

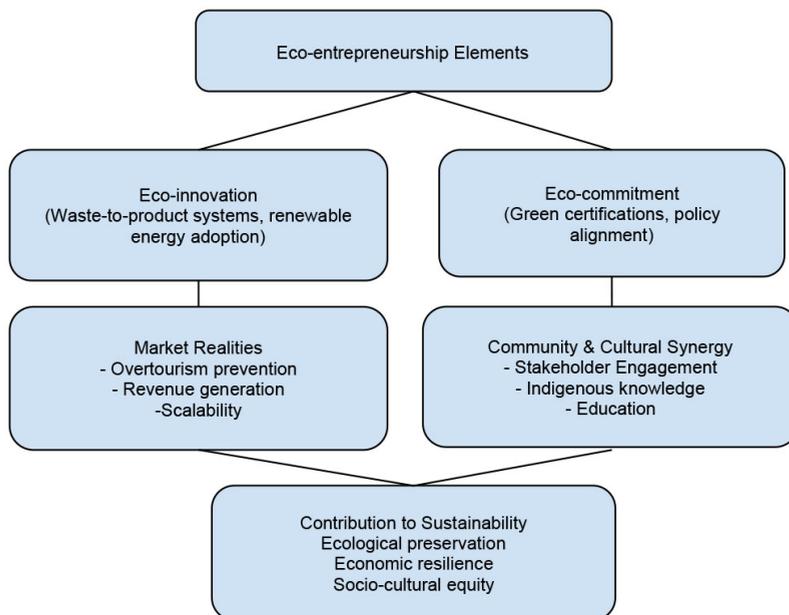
Thus, eco-entrepreneurship in tourism is characterised by:

- The integration of environmental and economic goals;
- A commitment to innovation and sustainability in both process and product;
- Proactive stakeholder and community engagement;
- And the use of managerial practices that operationalise ecological values.

By adhering to these principles, tourism eco-entrepreneurs are better positioned to foster resilient, sustainable destinations that balance profitability with environmental and social well-being (Gast et al., 2017; Rahmawati et al., 2023; Thompson et al., 2017).

The relationship between eco-innovation, eco-commitment, and contextual factors is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual diagram



Source: Author's elaboration.

2.2 Barriers, Obstacles, and Challenges to Ecopreneurship

Entrepreneurs who integrate ecological and social values into their business activities face various barriers and obstacles that can hinder the creation and growth of successful eco-sustainable ventures. According to Linnanen (2002), one main challenge facing eco-entrepreneurs is spreading environmental awareness among consumers, a necessary step in shifting consumption patterns in favour of environmentally sustainable products and services. However, this cultural and behavioural shift depends on the consumers' knowledge and willingness to purchase goods that may have higher upfront costs but offer longer-term environmental benefits (Gast et al., 2017; Pastakia, 2002).

In addition to environmental awareness, another critical barrier Linnanen (2002) highlighted is the difficulty of attracting funding. Eco-start-ups typically require substantial upfront investments in technology, innovation, and research and development (R&D), but often have slower or lower returns in the short term (Gibbs, 2006; Lordkipanidze et al., 2005). Investors seeking immediate gains may be reluctant to provide capital when payoffs depend on consumer education, emerging technologies, or policy changes (Mananda & Sudiarta, 2024). As a result, eco-entrepreneurs may struggle with high-risk perceptions and a lack of specialised funding mechanisms willing to accept elongated timelines for environmental products and services.

Lordkipanidze et al. (2005) propose a deeper taxonomy of barriers grouped according to their nature:

- **Economic and Social Barriers.** These include a general lack of start-up funding sources, high tax rates, administrative red tape, and negative societal attitudes toward entrepreneurship, especially in rural or conservative communities. These challenges are amplified when communities are unaccustomed to innovation or harbour scepticism about "green" business practices.
- **Learning-Process Barriers.** Eco-entrepreneurs frequently encounter low levels of expertise among local populations, stakeholder resistance to change (stemming from community conservatism), and limited institutional understanding of the potential benefits of sustainability initiatives such as ecotourism (Lordkipanidze et al., 2005). Without external support structures or comprehensive training programs, these firms may struggle to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to compete and scale effectively (Baxter, 2004).
- **Market Barriers.** Lack of communication channels and promotional efforts preclude eco-enterprises from informing customers about their offerings. Marketing sustainable goods often requires more consumer ed-

ucation, which results in additional costs not incurred by conventional businesses (Pastakia, 2002). Eco-entrepreneurs must also demonstrate tangible environmental value in a market driven by price, convenience, and habitual purchasing patterns (Gibbs, 2006).

Additional concerns involve whether a company typically partakes in scientific and environmental R&D that addresses its core operations (Gast et al., 2017). In that case, the organisation might include its environmental goals and their economic implications in public communication, such as financial reports or marketing campaigns. An ecopreneur's transparency capacity influences consumer trust and stakeholder engagement (Schaltegger, 2002). Moreover, the ultimate "market effect" of eco-innovation warrants careful examination: it is helpful to analyse how a firm's innovation captures market share compared to its industry average and whether competitors replicate its green innovations (Schaltegger, 2002).

Focusing on startup experiences, Schick et al. (2002) note several internal and external impediments to sustainable business pursuits: lack of accessible information on eco-friendly business processes, limited ecological knowledge among management advisors, low awareness of green market potential among entrepreneurs, and scarce public funds or incentives for sustainable enterprise development. Baxter (2004) finds that within organisational settings, further challenges arise from inadequate motivation or capacity building for Environmental Management Systems (EMSs). Businesses may perceive EMS adoption as burdensome, citing insufficient supervision, mentoring, or training on environmental best practices.

Beyond these organisational hurdles, Schaltegger (2002) maintains that an eco-entrepreneur's ultimate challenge is structural: achieving economic success while transforming consumption patterns and market structures to yield an absolute decrease in environmental impact. Ecopreneurs do so by relentlessly searching for, refining, and commercialising business ideas intended to alleviate ecological degradation. Success depends on linking environmental solutions to verifiable market opportunities, effectively communicating their green value propositions, and demonstrating profitability even in the face of long payback periods (Gibbs, 2006). Networked partnerships, with local communities, government agencies, or established industry peers, can facilitate knowledge exchange, logistic synergies, and risk-sharing, expanding the eco-entrepreneurs' potential for lasting impact (Mananda & Sudiarta, 2024).

In conclusion, barriers to ecopreneurship intersect finance, consumer perceptions, community readiness, institutional frameworks, and overall market inertia. However, as this literature underscores, overcoming these hurdles can lead eco-entrepreneurs to reshape current production and consumption systems to pursue a more sustainable and socially equitable economic landscape. Eco-entrepreneurship is both a catalyst for creative

disruption and an illustration of the possible synergy between ecological responsibility and commercial viability.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research aims

To meet the exploratory objective of the research, the study adopts a methodology based on multiple case studies. Multiple case studies are an appropriate research method for thoroughly understanding a phenomenon and are a widely adopted methodology in the tourism literature (Çakar & Aykol, 2021; Tasci et al., 2020)

Despite the growing academic debate on the topic, an in-depth qualitative analysis is still lacking. Therefore, we pursued the multiple case methodology precisely to build solid empirical evidence and compare what is being achieved by different cases with each other, contributing holistically to theoretical development (Dooley, 2002). The case study method is particularly well-suited to complex topics such as innovative strategies, sustainability best practices, and complex tourism offerings with multiple stakeholders involved. All of which fully fit the definition of eco-entrepreneurs adopted in the manuscript (Tasci et al., 2020).

3.2 Case Study Selection

Combining inclusion and exclusion criteria led to the selection of the most suitable cases for the analysis: 1) through the use of the OTA Booking platform, structures recognised for their focus on sustainability were chosen, and 2) hotel chains were excluded precisely to prefer only companies with an entrepreneurial figure.

Starting in 2024, accommodations to meet the Booking platform's sustainability criteria must have earned a sustainability certificate from one of the certifying bodies listed on the platform (booking.com). Many sustainability certifications come from accredited bodies, e.g., Green Key¹, Green Pearls², GSTC³, and EU Ecolabel⁴.

Across Italy, Booking recognition for sustainability was achieved by 32

¹<https://greenkeyglobal.com/eco-rating/>

²<https://www.greenpearls.com/>

³<https://www.gstcouncil.org/gstc-criteria/gstc-industry-criteria/>

⁴https://environment.ec.europa.eu/publications/tourist-accommodation-user-manual_en

structures that we contacted via e-mail to agree on availability to conduct the interviews. A total of six accommodations were interviewed, which were founded by their entrepreneur from 1995 to the most recent 2021. Table 1 provides an overview of the profiles of the six interviewed structures and the six key informants, i.e., entrepreneurs. Table 1 shows that the structures are located in five regions in north-central Italy and that most of the facilities have achieved GSTC certification, criteria aimed at fostering a common understanding of sustainable tourism (GSTC, 2025).

Table 1. Company and Entrepreneur profile.

Company	Company A	Company B	Company C	Company D	Company E	Company F
Category	Agritourism	3-star Hotel	3-star Hotel	3-star Hotel	Guesthouse	3-star hotel
Year of foundation	2021	1995	2009	2012	2016	2003
Room	50	37	23	12	6	21
Environmental certificate	GSTC criteria	GSTC criteria	GSTC criteria	Green Pearls	EU Ecolabel	Green Key (FFE)
Entrepreneur's age	25>40	55>70	40>55	40>55	55>70	40>55
Entrepreneur gender	M	F	F	F	F	F

Source: Author's elaboration.

An earlier step, compared to the conduct of the 6 interviews, involved a focus group with 7 experts in the field, which enabled us to understand better the dynamics and peculiarities of the subject matter covered, allowing us to draft and formulate the questions included in the interview protocol, not only based on the relevant literature but also on the empirical evidence that emerged from this opportunity for discussion with experts in the field.

Therefore, the study proceeded with six semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions conducted with the key informants of each company selected, i.e., the entrepreneurial figure, to discuss in depth their vision and motivation.

The interviews were conducted using the Microsoft Teams platform, recorded, and transcribed with the consent of the interviewees. They lasted, on average, about 40 minutes and were conducted between December 2024 and February 2025.

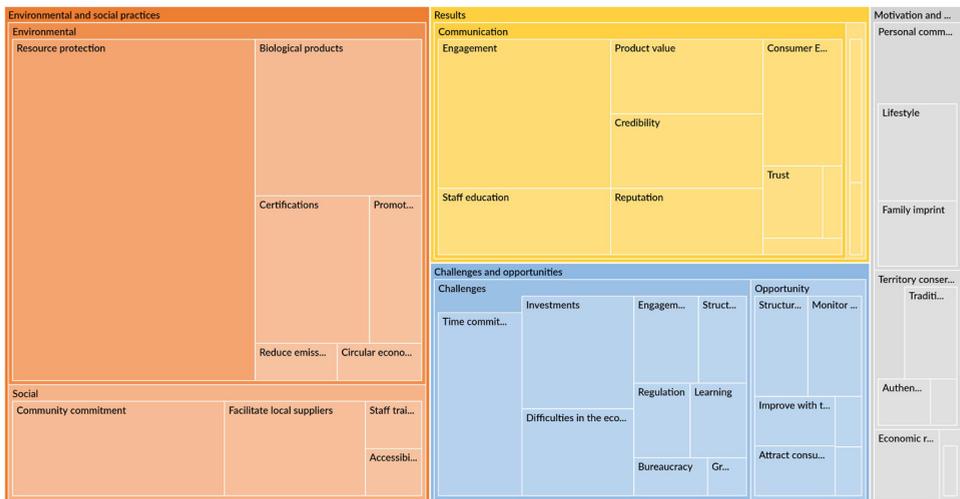
3.3 Data collection and data analysis

The interview protocol included a series of open-ended questions designed to bring out valuable insights and explore the following themes

For example, water saving is a particularly key issue for all 6 key informants, who have moved, for example, to use water purifiers precisely to “turn waste into a resource” (Company A). Concerning plastic, the eco-entrepreneurs are actively engaged in reducing all single-use packaging and other items typically made of plastic, favouring the use of materials such as glass and wood wherever possible. “We have replaced all the glass things, even the hangers in the rooms are made of wood” (Company C).

Figure 3 provides an overview of the most frequently discussed and coded topics in the interviews, according to the codebook created with NVivo 14. This figure highlights the relevance and number of topics discussed in the interview, in particular the multiple environmental and social practices implemented by eco-entrepreneurs and the expected results, the opportunities and challenges arising from these initiatives, and the motivations that drove these entrepreneurs to go down this path.

Figure 3. Hierarchy Chart



Source: Author’s elaboration.

4.1. Eco-entrepreneurs’ motivations

Table 2 shows that the primary motivations for an entrepreneur to be an eco-entrepreneur derive mainly from personal commitment, particularly from one’s sensibility, the lifestyle one leads, and the upbringing transmitted by one’s family regarding values. In addition to this personal commitment, there is also the desire to contribute to conserving the resources and heritage of one’s land, preserving traditions and authenticity. As argued by Company A, “For me, sustainability is not just environmental sustainability,

but sustainability as an entrepreneur and as a human being as an inhabitant of the land”.

Company D, “Saving on water, also highlights attention to the territory, which, as we know, is a big problem, especially in our region. This is very important because our region is, unfortunately, one of the regions that has dealt with drought a lot in recent years. So let’s say that my dad wanted, for economic and ecological reasons, to try to limit it as much as possible. It’s the least that should be done, especially considering that in our region, all the structures are old; therefore, it’s not easy to find structures with a low environmental impact”.

Table 2 shows that the motivation for eco-entrepreneurship does not stem from a drive from the market. It requires no special attention from the entrepreneur and is only weakly driven by purely economic reasons.

Table 2. Motivation and eco-entrepreneur vision

	Economic reasons	Market demand	Personal commitment	Family imprint	Lifestyle	Territory conservation	Authenticity	Cultural heritage	Traditions preservation
Company A	0%	0%	40,7%	29,07%	11,63%	9,3%	2,33%	1,16%	5,81%
Company B	40%	40%	20%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Company C	0%	0%	66,67%	0%	33,33%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Company D	1,55%	0%	44,19%	28,68%	12,4%	13,18%	0%	0%	0%
Company E	0%	0%	50%	47%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Company F	0%	0%	10,17%	0%	0%	47,46%	1,69%	0%	40,68%

Source: Author’s elaboration.

4.2. Eco-entrepreneurs’ environmental and social causes

Table 3 shows how eco-entrepreneurs are committed to adopting environmentally oriented practices and are particularly attentive to their impact on the local community at the social level. To achieve this, for example, they use organic products - 0 km products - precisely to convey to the public and emphasise home production and self-production, e.g. of wine, oil, meat and more, as evidenced by “We here at our place, in addition to giving tourist services, we are also organic producers of oil, wine, meat, milk, vegetables, etc. etc.” (Company A). In addition to producing such resources, they prefer products from local suppliers in the area when it is impossible.

Key informants are committed to conserving resources such as water (using collectors and purifiers), energy (using renewable energy sources, LED lighting, and electric car charging stations), and performing recycling collection. “The fact that we have garbage with recycling collection in the rooms means that we are teaching the people who work in the hotel what it means to differentiate and not waste everything” (Company D).

In addition, Company A and F are also mainly active in encouraging

sustainable mobility of both their employees and their guests, encouraging them to walk or bike to work or take public transportation “*I have employees who come when it’s not raining to work on foot or by bike, but not because I force them*” (Company A) and stimulating experiences such as walking or biking “*There is a bike path that crosses the town that comes from Austria*” (Company C).

From the point of view of commitment to social issues, eco-entrepreneurs are all engaged in the community where they reside, particularly by favouring products from local suppliers or supporting local societies (schools, universities, and sports centres) to promote the welfare of the community in which they live and in which their economic activity is located.

Table 3. Environmental and social practices

	ENVIRONMENT							SOCIAL		
	Biological products	Certifications	Circular economy	Promoting sustainable mobility	Reduce emissions	Resource protection	Accessibility	Community commitment	Facilitate local suppliers	Staff training
Company A	5,97%	0,75%	6,72%	20,9%	0%	28,36%	0%	20,9%	8,96%	7,46%
Company B	0%	10,5%	0%	0%	0%	75,63%	0,42%	8,4%	5,04%	0%
Company C	20,95%	2,86%	0%	0,95%	0,95%	60,95%	0%	13,33%	0%	0%
Company D	32,91%	20,25%	0%	0%	0%	25,63%	0%	14,87%	6,33%	0%
Company E	11,49%	14,94%	0%	0%	0%	58,62%	0%	14,94%	0%	0%
Company F	19,26%	0%	0%	33,26%	0,66%	24,07%	0,44%	8,75%	13,57%	0%

Source: Author’s elaboration.

4.3. Eco-entrepreneurs’ results

From the point of view of the main results, Table 4 shows that the main objective is related to the engagement of consumers and employees in advancing the eco-entrepreneur’s mission. The communication conveyed on social media and other platforms about the practices and commitment adopted by the facilities leads to increased engagement but also to increased credibility and company reputation as the product offered is perceived as one of value, quality, unique, and original as claimed by Company A “*our sustainability, sustainable engagement, and an increase in value of the product we offer and the services we provide*”.

Table 4. Results from sustainable and social initiatives

	AWARNESS									ECONOMIC	
	Attracting more sensitive consumers	Consumer Education	Credibility	Engagement	Life-long business	Product value	Reputation	Staff education	Trust	Revenues	Savings
Company A	9,69%	2,64%	11,89%	24,23%	3,52%	35,68%	5,73%	3,96%	0%	2,64%	0%
Company B	0%	36,36%	0%	63,64%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Company C	0%	0%	0%	44,57%	0%	0%	7,61%	44,57%	3,26%	0%	0%
Company D	0%	12,26%	30,32%	9,68%	0%	0%	16,77%	19,35%	4,52%	0%	7,1%
Company E	0%	44,58%	15,66%	19,28%	0%	0%	7,23%	13,25%	0%	0%	0%
Company F	0%	9,69%	5,94%	51,56%	0%	17,5%	5,63%	8,13%	1,56%	0%	0%

Source: Author's elaboration.

Thus, transparent communication enhances the value of the product offered by increasing the trust of the parties involved. Transparent communication can attract an increasingly sensitive audience to the issue, getting them more involved. External and internal communication of the sustainable and social practices implemented by companies allows both the public and staff to be educated, enabling them to achieve greater involvement and motivation toward the pursuit of the common goal. On the other hand, economic aspects, savings, and revenue are considered less related and difficult to evaluate for the initiatives undertaken by companies.

4.4. Eco-entrepreneurs' opportunities and challenges

Table 5 highlights some significant opportunities, such as developing collaborations with other facilities to find guidance and comparison on the initiatives the company advocates: *"Environmental education, waste and emission management, collaboration and partnerships with supply chains and other parties, measurement of environmental performance and sustainability"* (Company A). For example, Company B: *"I use the collaboration of experienced people, people who are dedicated solely and exclusively to the knowledge of all the legislation and everything there is to do for sustainability"*.

Technology is also a key opportunity in that it enables more excellent monitoring of consumption data, resulting from the use of, for example, home automation technology, which allows greater control, attracting consumers who are increasingly attentive and sensitive to the issue *"introduce a concept of data monitoring that even especially in our industry, there is little data collection, there is not this sharing of data even at the public level that the hotelier is never returned"* (Company F).

Table 5. Eco-entrepreneurs' opportunities

	OPPORTUNITIES					
	Structures collaboration	New trends	Monitor consumptions	Improve with the use of technology	Growth	Attract consumers
Company A	0%	0%	0%	13,24%	0%	32,35%
Company B	10,87%	0%	0%	0%	42,39%	0%
Company C	22,73%	0%	0%	2,27%	0%	0%
Company D	0,54%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Company E	0%	0%	1,05%	0%	0%	0%
Company F	0%	5%	21,25%	2,5%	0%	43,75%

Source: Author's elaboration.

However, multiple obstacles eco-entrepreneurs face along their way, shown in Table 6, aspects related to the increased time needed to be spent to achieve certifications, structural limitations that make it more challenging to transform old structures into sustainable ones, the problematic assessment of economic return in addition to the need to overcome high investments, complex bureaucracy, and regulations that are not well unified as claimed by Company B *"In short, it is a path that asks for your time and commitment and sometimes you say but who makes me do it? Several times, I have been asked if there is feedback, that is, if the client notices that you are greener than someone else, no client has ever asked me to be greener, let alone complimented me."*

Table 6. Eco-entrepreneurs' challenges

	CHALLENGES								
	Time commitment	Structural limitations	Regulation	Learning	Investments	Growth	Engagement of staff and consumers	Difficulties in the economic returns evaluation	Bureaucracy
Company A	0%	0%	2,94%	15,44%	19,12%	16,91%	0%	0%	0%
Company B	26,09%	0%	4,35%	11,96%	4,35%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Company C	15,91%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	6,82%	52,27%	0%
Company D	36,22%	6,49%	1,08%	0%	0%	0%	10,81%	16,22%	28,65%
Company E	15,79%	8,42%	0%	0%	40%	0%	6,32%	28,42%	0%
Company F	7,5%	0%	0%	0%	12,5%	0%	0%	7,5%	0%

Source: Author's elaboration.

Therefore, considerable efforts are still required regarding the learning involvement and education of both staff and the public.

5. Discussions

Empirical findings underscore how personal commitment, environmental responsibility, and local heritage conservation drive eco-entrepreneurs in Italy's hospitality sector. This aligns with the literature, where Kummita (2020) and Anci and Haznedar (2017) suggest that eco-entrepreneurs are motivated by a blend of ecological aspirations and community well-being. Schaltegger (2002) similarly notes that personal motivations significantly shape entrepreneurial objectives.

Isaak (2002) argued that eco-entrepreneurship is an existential endeavour in which ideals of sustainability give meaning to entrepreneurial activities. Company D echoed this sentiment, emphasising the importance of addressing local environmental challenges like drought. The lack of market-driven demand for sustainable practices and the minimal influence of direct economic incentives corroborate Linnanen's (2002) findings, positing that eco-entrepreneurs are more driven by environmental stewardship than financial and economic gain from such initiatives.

Eco-entrepreneurs adopt many sustainable practices, predominantly in resource conservation, waste management, and promoting local products. These efforts are consistent with the framework proposed by Ekawati (2017), which highlights environmental awareness and responsiveness to community demands as critical indicators of eco-entrepreneurship.

Eco-innovation, such as using renewable energy and converting organic waste, illustrates the implementation of Kainrath's (2009) elements of eco-innovation and eco-commitment. These may include practices reported by interviewees, such as encouraging sustainable mobility and the use of organic products, which resonate with Schaltegger (2002) and Lordkipanidze et al. (2005), who emphasise precisely the promotion of innovative solutions and ethical commitment in eco-entrepreneurial ventures.

Collaborative engagement with local communities and stakeholders, as described by Thompson et al. (2017), is evident in the approach of eco-entrepreneurs who prioritise local supply chains and community welfare while also supporting local associations related to education, sports and the well-being of the community in which they operate. This demonstrates the deep embeddedness of eco-entrepreneurial activities in their social and geographical contexts, reinforcing Pastakia's (1998) assertion on the importance of territorial and community support.

Key outcomes of sustainable initiatives include enhanced reputation and increased consumer and employee engagement. As Schaltegger (2002) and Mananda & Sudiarta (2024) indicate, transparent and clear communication of sustainable practices helps strengthen credibility and trust, elevating the perceived value and quality of eco-tourism services.

However, the economic benefits remain ambiguous and challenging to quantify, reflecting Linnanen's (2002) observation on the non-financial suc-

cess metrics prevalent among eco-entrepreneurs. Aquino et al. (2018) noted that educational impact on consumers and staff, fostering greater sensitivity to environmental issues, can lead to socio-cultural benefits in the long term.

Regarding the first research question, the empirical analysis confirms that all six respondents can be qualified as eco-entrepreneurs, albeit with some specific characteristics. First of all, these are companies that Isaak (2002) would define as “green companies”, as they have become sustainable during their activity and not from their birth. Furthermore, following Walley and Taylor’s (2002) typological classification, we could define the analysed cases as similar to the so-called “ethical mavericks”, influenced by personal experience, family, or friendship networks. Finally, they are all driven by challenging environmental projects (Schaltegger, 2002) related to certification. Indeed, all respondents demonstrate their personal and environmental commitments, innovative practices, and alignment with community and ecological values, as Kummitha (2020) and Schaltegger (2002) theorised.

Addressing the second research question, the main challenges identified include high initial investment costs, regulatory complexity, difficulty quantifying economic returns, and the need to educate consumers (due to a lack of awareness). These obstacles confirm the broader barriers to eco-entrepreneurship discussed in the literature (Linnanen, 2002; Lordkipanidze et al., 2005; Gast et al., 2017). For instance, intricate regulatory requirements and fragmented sustainability certifications complicate the path for eco-entrepreneurs, corroborating Mananda and Sudiarta’s (2024) findings on the obstacle posed by an incohesive policy landscape where coordination is complex. Structural limitations of older buildings also make it arduous to retrofit sustainable practices, which also resonates with Schick et al.’s (2002) observations on the internal and external barriers to sustainable business practices.

Thus, exploring eco-entrepreneurship within Italy’s hospitality sector highlights the intersection between theoretical insights and empirical realities. The motivations, practices, and impacts observed among eco-entrepreneurs corroborate and extend the existing literature. At the same time, the challenges underscore the need for supportive policy measures, enhanced consumer education, and cohesive sustainability frameworks. The findings contribute valuable empirical evidence to the sustainable tourism discourse and underscore the pivotal role of eco-entrepreneurs in driving ecological and socio-economic resilience in the tourism sector.

6. Conclusions

This study aimed to contribute to the expanding body of research focusing on supply-side sustainable tourism by exploring eco-entrepreneurship within the Italian hospitality sector.

Several research objectives were pursued, such as delineating the characteristics and motivations of eco-entrepreneurs in the Italian hospitality sector, examining the sustainable practices they have adopted, evaluating their achievements, and identifying the challenges and opportunities they have encountered. Through this exploration, the research provides valuable insights into how eco-entrepreneurial initiatives can advance broader sustainable tourism goals.

The entrepreneurs interviewed are eco-entrepreneurs, primarily driven by ethical and personal motivations. They integrate their personal beliefs into economic activities, even when short-term business benefits are not immediately apparent. These businesses are predominantly family-owned, small, or micro-enterprises, reflecting the prevalent structure within the Italian hospitality sector. This corporate feature facilitates the manifestation of eco-entrepreneur characteristics, which are less likely to be observed in more managerially structured hospitality businesses.

Environmental certifications play a pivotal role. They serve as a fundamental guide for entrepreneurs' orientation towards sustainability, even though obtaining them is often particularly complex and expensive, as well as still too little recognised by the public.

The identified limitations and barriers align with those previously documented by other researchers but appear even more pronounced within the Italian context. Notably, a lack of market awareness hinders the effective implementation of marketing strategies, e.g., sustainability communication and green practices development. Additionally, the complexity of certification procedures and the substantial investments required pose significant challenges for businesses with limited resources.

Therefore, this research, while affirming the impact of eco-entrepreneurship on sustainable tourism development, raises research questions that deserve further investigation. The necessity for longitudinal and comparative studies, currently lacking and representing a primary limitation of this research, is evident. Comparative analyses could enrich the empirical data to address critical research questions. Specifically, comparisons could be developed:

- Across socio-economic-cultural contexts: examining how diverse social, economic, and cultural contexts foster and support eco-entrepreneurship and how cultural factors influence eco-entrepreneur characteristics;
- Across legislative contexts: investigating how tourism regulations influence the need or opportunity to establish an ecologically oriented business;
- Across market contexts: assessing how consumer awareness of sustainability issues impacts eco-entrepreneurial policies;

- Across entrepreneurial activities within the tourism sector: analysing how tourism activity of belonging (accommodation, restaurants, tour operating, etc.) influences eco-entrepreneurship characteristics.

Research on eco-entrepreneurship in tourism necessitates continued and expanded efforts. Beyond the study of entrepreneurial motivations, typologies, and characteristics, understanding the drivers that can be leveraged to optimise the role of eco-entrepreneurs in the ecological transition, a critical imperative for all regions, and the pursuit of enhanced ecological equilibrium within the tourism sector will become increasingly crucial, particularly from a public policymaking perspective.

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Appendix. Table A1 – Interview Protocol

Topic	Question
Background	Accommodation data (year of foundation, number of rooms, employees and certifications obtained)
Motivation and entrepreneurial vision	1. What motivated you to start a sustainability journey in your organisation? 2. What goals have you defined to achieve?
Adopting sustainable practices	3. What specific actions have you implemented to ensure the structure becomes sustainable? 4. How do you promote your sustainable philosophy? Which role does it play in your promotion on social media? 5. How have you involved your staff in implementing these actions? 6. Have you met any difficulties in implementing these practices? If yes, which ones?
Impact/Results	7. Which impact has the implementation of these practices made?
Challenges and Opportunities	8. What are the biggest challenges for a hotel entrepreneur in managing a sustainable accommodation? 9. What opportunities do you perceive in the future of an accommodation that fully applies the principles of sustainable tourism?

Appendix. Table A2 – Codebook

Name	Files	References
MOTIVATION AND ENTREPRENEUR VISION	1	27
Economic reasons	1	3
Market demand	1	1
No clients request	1	1
Personal commitment	1	14
Family imprint	1	4
Lifestyle	1	6
Territory conservation	1	9
Authenticity	1	2
Cultural heritage	1	1
Traditions preservation	1	4
ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL PRACTICES	1	120
Environmental	1	91
Biological products	1	17
Certifications	1	11
Circular economy	1	2
Promoting sustainable mobility	1	5
Reduce emissions	1	2
Resource protection	1	54

Energy	1	21
Waste	1	19
Water	1	12
Social	1	29
Accessibility	1	2
Community commitment	1	15
Facilitate local suppliers	1	10
Staff training	1	2
RESULT	1	64
Communication	1	61
Attracting more sensitive consumers	1	1
Consumer Education	1	7
Credibility	1	8
Engagement	1	18
Life-long business	1	1
Product value	1	8
Reputation	1	7
Staff education	1	8
Trust	1	3
Economic	1	3
Revenues	1	1
Savings	1	2
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES	1	60
Challenges	1	44
Bureaucracy	1	2
Difficulties in the economic returns evaluation	1	7
Engagement of staff and consumers	1	4
Growth	1	1
Investments	1	9
Learning	1	3
Regulation	1	3
Structural limitations	1	3
Time commitment	1	11
Opportunity	1	16
Attract consumers	1	3
Growth	1	1
Improve with the use of technology	1	3
Monitor consumptions	1	4
New trends	1	1
Structures collaboration	1	4