

## Article

# Rural Tourism in and after the COVID-19 Era: “Revenge Travel” or Chance for a Degrowth-Oriented Restart? Cases from Ireland and Germany

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**Abstract:** Focusing on rural destinations and calling on the evolutionary resilience concept as a theoretical lens, this paper investigates whether COVID-19 provokes “revenge tourism” after periods of lockdown or whether the pandemic can be used as a chance for a degrowth-oriented restart that forms the foundation for a more sustainable tourism sector. Analysing tourism data and documents regarding political and economic actors’ actions in two rural destinations in Ireland (Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark) and Germany (Southeast Rügen Biosphere Reserve), the study reveals that so far, neither “revenge travel” nor a degrowth-oriented restart of tourism can be identified. Rather, current development indicates that the two rural destinations show resilience in the sense of bouncing back to the pre-COVID-19 era and a continuation of further growth-oriented rural tourism as far as possible under the conditions of political COVID-19 measures. As this development will not allow the sector to genuinely come to grips with the negative ecological and sociocultural effects of rural tourism, the paper pleads for initiation of a debate about influencing business realities on a supranational level, and in this context, about the value of rural tourism destinations and possible forms of financial compensation for degrowth in rural tourism.



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**Keywords:** rural tourism; overtourism; COVID-19; “revenge travel”; crisis; degrowth; resilience; sustainable tourism

## 1. Introduction

With annual growth rates of 3% and above in recent years, the tourism sector had been booming worldwide until early 2020 [1]. In the course of this development, many rural regions in Europe that promote small-scale tourism had become visitor magnets. Simultaneously, negative ecological and sociocultural consequences of tourism development in these regions became evident and were increasingly criticised [2,3]. However, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 and subsequent measures introduced by national governments, such as border closures; travel bans; quarantine regulations; and mandatory closures of accommodations, restaurants and tourism-related attractions in order to stop the spread of the coronavirus, the general growth-oriented development of the tourism sector came to an abrupt end. Since then, depending on current incidence values of COVID-19 infections, corona hospitalisation rates, national or regional lockdowns and restrictions with varying degrees of strictness have alternated with periods characterized by more freedom of mobility and with regard to practicing tourism activities. Meanwhile, the gradual rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine in 2021 yields hope for a general relaxation of the tense health situation [4]. However, calls for a more sustainable restart of tourism have become loud [5–7].

As rural tourism increasingly loses its small-scale character and shows signs of overtourism, the concept as such is at stake. Thus, this study aims to contribute to the debate on a sustainable future of rural tourism, discussing potential future pathways for tourism in rural destinations with respect to sustainability in and after the COVID-19 era. For this

purpose, it includes analyses of latest tourism data, focusing on two popular rural tourism destinations in Ireland (Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark) and Germany (Southeast Rügen Biosphere Reserve) that present the characteristics of a high influx of tourists accompanied by ecological and sociocultural challenges. Additionally, this study evaluates strategies of tourism providers and state actors dealing with this crisis. Thus, based on the resilience approach, this study investigates whether COVID-19 provokes “revenge tourism” as a way for tourists to relieve pandemic fatigue and a desire to catch up on missed-out holidays [8], which could lead to extensive travelling, at least in the short and medium term, or whether the pandemic can be used as a chance for a degrowth-oriented restart that forms the foundation for a more sustainable tourism sector.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 provides insight to the development of rural tourism until the end of 2019, identifies the COVID-19 pandemic as a major rupture in a steadily growing market and, by using the resilience approach as a theoretical lens, discusses the concepts of “revenge travel” on the one hand and degrowth on the other hand. Section 3 introduces the study areas and outlines the methods used in the study. Section 4 presents results, based on which Section 5 discusses potential future pathways for rural tourism destinations. Section 6 concludes and refers to limitations of the study.

## 2. Development of Rural Tourism and COVID-19

### 2.1. Development until the End of 2019: Pathway to Rural Mass Tourism

Particularly in scenic and heritage-rich rural regions, rural tourism has been discovered and developed as an alternative economic pillar in recent decades. Rural tourism centres on activities with regard to the consumption of attractive landscapes, interesting rural artefacts and cultures, and special rural experiences [9,10]. Because tourism represents a job-creating service sector that does not require highly skilled personnel, it has the capacity to compensate for job losses in the agricultural and forestry sector. Whereas the beginnings of rural tourism can be traced back to the 19th century, when it was mostly based in small rural towns, its development since the 1970s was supported by improved infrastructure and transport, particularly increased car ownership. This has made it easier for visitors to access the countryside well beyond the point of central rural towns [11].

Rural tourism is considered small-scale. It is marked by its traditional character and by having little impact on nature and rural society. Small family-owned businesses are supposed to be the main actors, and initiatives that foster cooperation and integration aim at obtaining benefits for all involved [11]. It is considered a form of sustainable tourism and, thus, opens up new perspectives for sustainable rural development.

However, the countryside has increasingly attracted tourists. Although there is an ever-growing overall enthusiasm of people to travel (According to UNWTO [1], international arrivals alone have risen from 277 million in 1980 to 1.466 million in 2019), the growing popularity of rural travel is predominantly owed to the augmented establishment of protected areas and iconic sites in rural regions that promise visitors a unique and unspoiled experience. Such places are often given particular attention by tourists when they are nationally or internationally acknowledged, for instance, as national parks or by one of the UNESCO’s conservation programs.

Hence, many rural destinations that promote rural tourism with low impact on rural landscapes and society have become visitor magnets and thus places of mass tourism. Whereas the phenomenon of overtourism has been frequently discussed in the urban context by academics and practitioners over recent years [12,13], it has hardly been referred to with regard to rural areas that focus on rural tourism. However, the development in many rural regions stands in stark contrast to the idea of small-scale rural tourism and causes multiple sustainability challenges [3,14,15].

## 2.2. COVID-19, Lockdowns and Rural Destinations' Resilience

Just like tourism in general, rural tourism was thrown into deep economic crisis in 2020 with the beginning of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, when all over the world, national governments implemented travel bans or restrictions; mandatory closures of accommodations, restaurants and tourism-related attractions; and quarantine regulations in a combination of national and regional lockdowns and with varying degrees of strictness. The objective of these measures has been to limit the spread of the coronavirus [16,17].

As a consequence, international arrivals radically dropped by 73% from 1466 million in 2019 to 401 million in 2020 [1]. Compared to a decline of 4% in the course of the 2009 global financial crisis [1], the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the tourism sector are immense from an economic perspective. During lockdown periods, rural regions, at least, have been somewhat popular with day visitors, as they are predestined for nature-focused outdoor activities that are in line with social distancing regulations. However, most tourism businesses cannot benefit from such mainly contactless activities that hardly involve any purchases [18]. However, with increasing vaccination rates in 2021, people around the world hope for higher levels of health safety and thus fewer restrictions for tourism and travel [4].

Nevertheless, the tourism sector has been one of the most effected industries of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, in many countries, such as Germany or Ireland, tourism businesses have been supported heavily by governmental assistance schemes in order to avoid insolvency on a massive scale and the loss of thousands of jobs [19,20]. On the other hand, hope amongst tourism scholars germinated that the pandemic would create a window of opportunity for a structural change towards sustainability by means of a degrowth-oriented restart of tourism worldwide [5–7].

Degrowth as a concept to initiate and foster sustainability transitions has been put forward and discussed by scholars such as Latouche [21], Jackson [22] and Paech [23] as criticism of the strategy of green growth. Although green growth postulates that economic growth can go hand in hand with environmental conservation, opponents of this approach argue that the destruction of natural resources can only be stopped by degrowth-oriented strategies that entail a reduction in consumption and a change of consumer habits. Degrowth in tourism has been discussed in recent years as an approach to face the massive sustainability challenges that come with the ever-growing expansion of the tourism sector worldwide [24–26]. Hall [24] (p. 53) urges to interpret tourism “as part of a larger socio-economic bio-physical system”, whereas sustainable tourism is to be “without growth in throughput of matter and energy beyond regenerative and absorptive capacities”. Based on this argument, Andriotis [27] considers degrowth in tourism a strategy to rightsize the sector. However, studies investigating tourism businesses' sustainability orientation and their significance regarding regional tourism management give rise to the concern that those businesses that are characterized by a degrowth-oriented sustainability orientation are not influential enough to shake up well-established tourism structures and that, therefore, political regulation is necessary. On the one hand, these businesses are those that generate business-led grassroots innovations, a type of innovation whereby businesses direct resources to establish more sustainable modes of tourism characterized by their not-for-profit nature and that have the potential to profoundly restructure the tourism sector towards sustainability. On the other hand, these businesses are easily out-ruled by the increasing number of green growth-oriented tourism businesses that seek membership in sustainability networks as part of their green marketing strategy [28,29]. Hence, Fletcher et al. [26] (p. 1748) conclude that “drastic transformation of the tourism industry and its metabolism” is required. Similarly, Higgins-Desbiolles et al. [25] (p. 1927) plead not only for less tourism but for a complete rethinking of tourism that, with view to more justice, needs to “acknowledge, prioritize, and place the rights of local communities above the rights of tourists for holidays and the rights of tourism corporates to make profits”.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, with its massive political restrictions on the tourism sector worldwide, the discussion about degrowth in tourism was fuelled. In

order to gain a better understanding of the degrowth potential in this context, the concept of resilience offers a theoretical lens. Whereas the term 'resilience' has origins in the ecological sciences of the 1970s, referring to a natural system's ability to recover after perturbation [30], it has emerged in the social sciences more recently, where it describes "the responsiveness of individuals, organisations or systems to shocks" [31] (p. 734). In particular, an evolutionary approach to resilience offers a useful analytical framework as it moves from an equilibrium concept to a more dynamic view on resilience. According to Scott [32] (p. 597), resilience can either be interpreted from a bounce-back perspective, "based on 'return-to-normal' assumptions" or—more progressively in an evolutionary sense—as a bounce-forward approach "characterised by an emphasis on adaptive capacity and transformation". With respect to the tourism sector's resilience, scholars identify the corona crisis as a chance to initiate a bouncing forward towards genuinely sustainable paths of tourism development [5,7,16,33].

However, the relationship between sustainability and resilience needs further enlightenment. Although the two terms are often used synonymously, a more differentiated view is essential. Marchese et al. [34] highlight that important differences between the two frameworks lie in the spatial and temporal scales. On the one hand, sustainability is associated with larger spatial and longer temporal scales than resilience. On the other hand, resilience can be achieved at one specific time and place while entailing less resilience for other times or places. Marchese et al. [34] identify three general frameworks for conceptualizing the sustainability–resilience nexus in the literature. First, resilience is interpreted as a component of sustainability. Espiner, Orchiston and Higham [35] applied this approach in a study analysing nature-based tourism on the west coast of New Zealand. The authors describe that when rapid glacial retreat led to the closure of walking access to Franz Joseph Glacier, glacier tourism was at stake. As an adaptive reaction, tourism businesses focused on scenic flights and glacier landings by helicopters. This demonstrates that a destination's resilience can be high without showing sustainability, whereas the other way around, this is not possible. Hence, resilience is considered necessary but not sufficient for sustainable tourism. Second, sustainability is seen as a component of resilience. Here, it is argued that with a more sustainable system, it is easier to absorb, recover from and adapt to external shocks and stress. This approach predominantly finds application in the fields of supply chain management, public policy and business management. Third, sustainability and resilience are conceptualized with separate objectives characterized by a lack of hierarchical structure. This view is used in the field of civil infrastructure, for example [34].

For the tourism sector, the notion of resilience being a component of sustainability seems appropriate. Against this background, this study seeks to analyse whether the corona crisis is being actively used to respond to inevitable change, as advocated by Espiner, Orchiston and Higham [35]. In order to pursue evolutionary resilience in this way, alternative pathways are proposed, for example, by Matteucci, Nawijn and von Zumbusch [36], who advocate for a new materialist perspective. This new materialist perspective is characterized by a post-anthropocentric view that regards humans and non-humans as equal and intertwined. In such a paradigm, resilient forms of tourism include elements of demarketing a destination and promoting tourism forms such as creative tourism, slow tourism and proximity tourism. Creative tourism focuses on tourists' active involvement in creative activities, stimulating learning processes and "emphasising the doing rather than the being there" [36] (p. 7). Similarly, slow tourism suggests activities at a slower pace in order to enable tourists to truly engage with a destination's natural and cultural heritage. Finally, proximity tourism, with emphasis on short distances and lower-carbon transport modes of travel, can complement these forms of tourism [36].

Although tourism scholars have expressed hope for degrowth in tourism in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, Isaac and Keijzer [37], amongst others, see signs of an intensified interest of tourists in travelling after long periods characterized by travel bans, border closures and quarantine regulations. This is in line with earlier findings by Wen, Huimin and Kavanaugh [38]. Some scholars are even concerned with the phenomenon of

“revenge tourism” in the post-COVID-19 era, which refers to a desire of tourists to catch up on missed-out holidays and which could lead to extensive travelling, at least in the short and medium term [39]. The notion is derived from the phenomenon of “revenge buying”, which was first described in China in the 1980s after the country had opened its market to international trade and offered purchasing opportunities to consumers after decades of economic paralysis. Similarly, “revenge travel” has been discussed lately as a way for tourists to relieve pandemic fatigue caused by forced lockdowns, quarantine regulations and social distancing measures, which had negative impacts on people’s mental health and increased individuals’ frustration levels. Thus, “revenge travel”, also referred to as “catch-up travel” [40], is considered a means of seeking vengeance on the pandemic and compensating for lost travel time [8,40–42].

Findings from current studies examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourists’ travel intentions indicate that intention to travel relates to tourists’ risk perception, which is linked to the subjective judgement of danger or economic loss during a potential holiday, as well as tourists’ perceived ability to control such risk. Both may lead tourists to alter or even cut down on travel plans [43]. This was evidenced in studies that analysed empirical data of Dutch, Spanish and French tourists’ intentions to travel during the COVID-19 crisis, especially in the summer of 2020, when governmental travel bans had been temporarily relaxed after the first corona lockdown in Europe [33,38,44]. On the other hand, “revenge travel” has been observed in countries such as China and the US [45,46], although there is still a lack of rigorous studies. Scholars such as Butcher [47] point to the positive sides of “revenge travel” that should be seen as a means of recovery of much-needed tourism incomes in pandemic-shaken economies. Vogler [40] notes that pandemic-driven changes in consumer behaviour towards domestic travel as a reaction to missing opportunities for international travel are not necessarily more sustainable. Additionally, McKercher [48] reflects that previous crises in the last 25 years had no effect on longer-term tourism development. Hence, the possibilities for profound change in the tourism sector in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic are intensely debated, with one school of thought expressing hopes for a degrowth-oriented restart and another school of thought commenting that such an approach is “not necessarily linked to the business-realities of the tourism industry” [40].

This study seeks to shed further light on current trends of tourism development and chances for structural change towards sustainability, specifically in rural regions, under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 3. Methodological Design and Study Areas

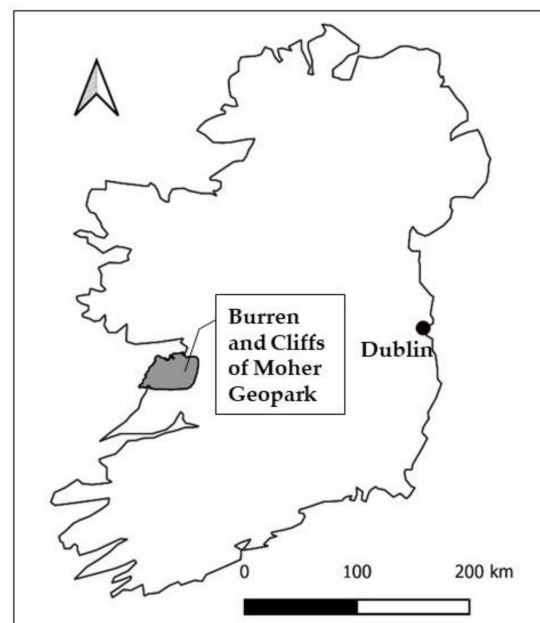
In order to unravel the underlying mechanisms of COVID-19 crisis management in rural tourism and subsequent possibilities for more sustainable rural tourism pathways, this paper draws on two case studies representing two different types of rural tourism destinations in Europe. Both rural regions reflect a development towards mass tourism, which is challenged by comprehensive ecological and sociocultural impacts. One study area was chosen that had mainly been dependent on international tourists in the pre-COVID era, whereas the other area was selected due to its focus on domestic tourism. As in the course of COVID-19, international tourism came to a standstill, especially in the European context, tourism actors’ economic hopes were pinned on domestic tourism. Hence, the two study areas showcase two distinct contexts in rural tourism with regard to becoming a potential destination area for “revenge travel” and coping with the pandemic.

In essence, the study is of a qualitative nature, and its findings cannot be generalized for all rural tourism destinations. Instead, the study aims to display particular changes in tourism in two rural destinations as a result of the pandemic, discussing whether these can be identified as “revenge travel” and analysing the ways in which economic and political actors cope with them. However, despite its overall qualitative nature, this study does not only rely on qualitative data but simultaneously incorporates a quantitative component



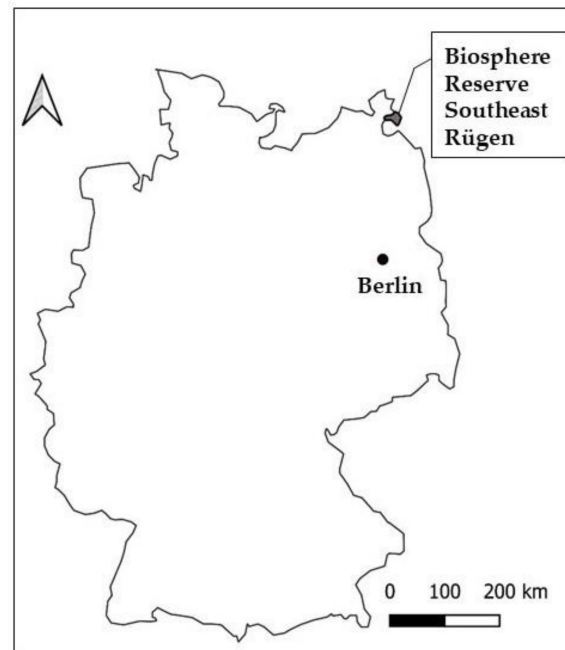
for the purpose of diagnosing potential “revenge travel” for each of the two study cases separately and is consequently characterized by a mixed-method design.

One case study, the Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark, recognized by the UNESCO, is located in the west of Ireland (Figure 1), with the Cliffs of Moher as its flagship attraction. It is a rural karst landscape that is characterized by its geological uniqueness and its rich archaeological heritage. The destination looks back on a rural tourism history of around 50 years. However, the opening of a new, highly commercialized visitor centre at the Cliffs of Moher in 2007 quickly boosted visitor numbers there, reaching 1.6 million in 2019. The Cliffs of Moher are visited mainly by international tourists [49,50]. The second study area is the Southeast Rügen Biosphere Reserve, which secured UNESCO status in 1991 (Figure 2). It is located on the island of Rügen, the largest island in Germany, which is situated just off the Baltic Sea coast in northern Germany. Here, a first influx of tourists started in the 1870s, during the course of which the sea resorts Binz, Sellin and Göhren were established. Since the 1950s, development has tended towards mass tourism, and accommodation capacities have regularly been at their limits and been continuously expanded in order to satisfy the growing demand of tourists seeking beach and nature holidays [28,51,52]. On the whole island of Rügen, including Hiddensee, around 1.5 million tourists spent more than 7 million nights in 2019 [53]. Contrary to the Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark, tourism in the Southeast Rügen Biosphere Reserve mainly depends on the domestic market.



**Figure 1.** Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark in Ireland.

Tourism development in the destinations under investigation has led to various socioecological challenges. In both study areas, heavy traffic and congestion on small rural roads are major problems. The expansion of roads and parking facilities was used as an approach to ease tension. However, such interventions the rural setting have not yet led to a profound improvement of the traffic situation in the two destinations. Further sustainability challenges include the disturbance of flora and fauna and overutilization or the destruction of fragile sites. With regard to social problems, rural tourism destinations, such as the Burren and Cliffs of Moher region, that offer one anchor attraction fail to genuinely integrate small local tourism providers in order to gain benefits for all [3,54,55]. In addition, access and return travel to and from the destinations, especially when they include flights or ship cruises, as is often the case in Ireland, have increasingly become the subject of debates concerning the ecological consequences of tourism [14,15].



**Figure 2.** Southeast Rügen Biosphere Reserve in Germany.

The Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark and the Southeast Rügen Biosphere Reserve were selected as study areas for this analysis because they are destinations that draw on rural tourism, despite having lost their small-scale character in many aspects. Thus, they represent the dilemma of many rural tourism destinations that are in need of identifying more sustainable future development pathways. They also cover different types of rural tourism destinations, with one mostly having welcomed international tourists, and the other mainly having relied on the domestic market in the past. Moreover, with the Cliffs of Moher, the Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark offers one anchor attraction, whereas the Southeast Rügen Biosphere Reserve has a reputation for nature-oriented beach holidays, which results in a greater dispersion of tourists within the area.

Statistical analysis was applied in order to investigate whether the phenomenon of “revenge travel” can be identified by a significant increase in tourist numbers in the two case study areas in lockdown-free phases after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in comparison to pre-crisis conditions. Here, the investigation focuses on the summer season between June and September as the period of the year that is most relevant for tourism in the two destinations and that, after the beginning of the corona crisis, was characterized by low COVID-19 infection rates in Europe and thus few travel restrictions and a high degree of freedom of mobility. Hence, relevant data were collected for June to September 2019, the last summer season before the crisis, and compared to data collated for June to September of the years 2020 and 2021, the first and the most recent summer seasons, respectively, after the beginning of the crisis.

For the Southeast Rügen Biosphere Reserve, the data were obtained from the regional statistics office of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, the federal state in which the biosphere reserve is located. This office provides tourism statistics on the local level. As according to Statistik M-V [53], tourists spend around five days on the island of Rügen on average and thus need accommodation. The indicators used were ‘offered bed places’ and ‘occupancy rates of holiday accommodations’. Whereas the indicator ‘offered bed places’ reflects the development of accommodation capacity, the indicator ‘occupancy rates of holiday accommodation’ evaluates its actual utilization level. The analysis concentrates on Binz, the largest sea resort on the island of Rügen and partly situated within the Southeast Rügen Biosphere Reserve.

With respect to the Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark, day tourism is of high significance [29]. For this reason, the information value of accommodation-related indicators

is restricted. Moreover, availability of relevant data was limited because Fáilte Ireland, Ireland's national tourism development authority, has not provided any standard tourism statistics since the beginning of the corona crisis. Therefore, general data about overseas arrivals in Ireland was retrieved from Ireland's national statistics office. This was complemented by data concerning the number of visitors at the Cliffs of Moher, the region's anchor attraction. Visitor numbers were provided by the Cliffs of Moher visitor centre. However, they were only available on an aggregated yearly basis.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse offered bed places and occupancy rates of holiday accommodations in Binz on the island of Rügen on the one hand and overseas arrivals in Ireland and visitor numbers at the Cliffs of Moher on the other hand. Graphics were created to visualize the results.

Document analysis was used to evaluate state actors' and local tourism providers' strategies with respect to tourism development in general and handling of the COVID-19 crisis specifically. The aim was to investigate whether these actors encourage a speedy recovery of the tourism sector to pre-crisis conditions and its further growth and thus support "revenge travel" or whether they are using the pandemic as an opportunity to redirect tourism development towards more degrowth-oriented pathways. For this purpose, the main Irish and German state actors on the national and regional level, tourism associations and tourism-related think tanks, were identified, and subsequently, eight main strategy papers and press releases with respect to current tourism development and/or COVID-19 were analysed. Additionally, the websites of the Burren Ecotourism Network (BEN) and the Southeast Rügen Biosphere Reserve's partner initiative, both networks of local tourism providers that promote sustainable tourism [56,57], were investigated. These networks were selected because it was assumed that due to their specific sustainability focus, they would most likely advocate a sustainability-driven change of tourism in the study areas. Finally, media coverage of tourism under the conditions of COVID-19 in the two case study areas was analysed. Here, four relevant news articles published by well-established and reputable media organisations were identified and thus complemented the data basis. All documents were analysed by means of qualitative content analysis that covered key categories such as 'rural businesses' response to the crisis', 'political long-term tourism strategies', 'political measurements during the crisis' and 'sustainability efforts related to COVID-19'.

#### **4. "Revenge Travel" or Degrowth in Tourism?**

##### *4.1. The Challenge of Tourists' Desire to Travel*

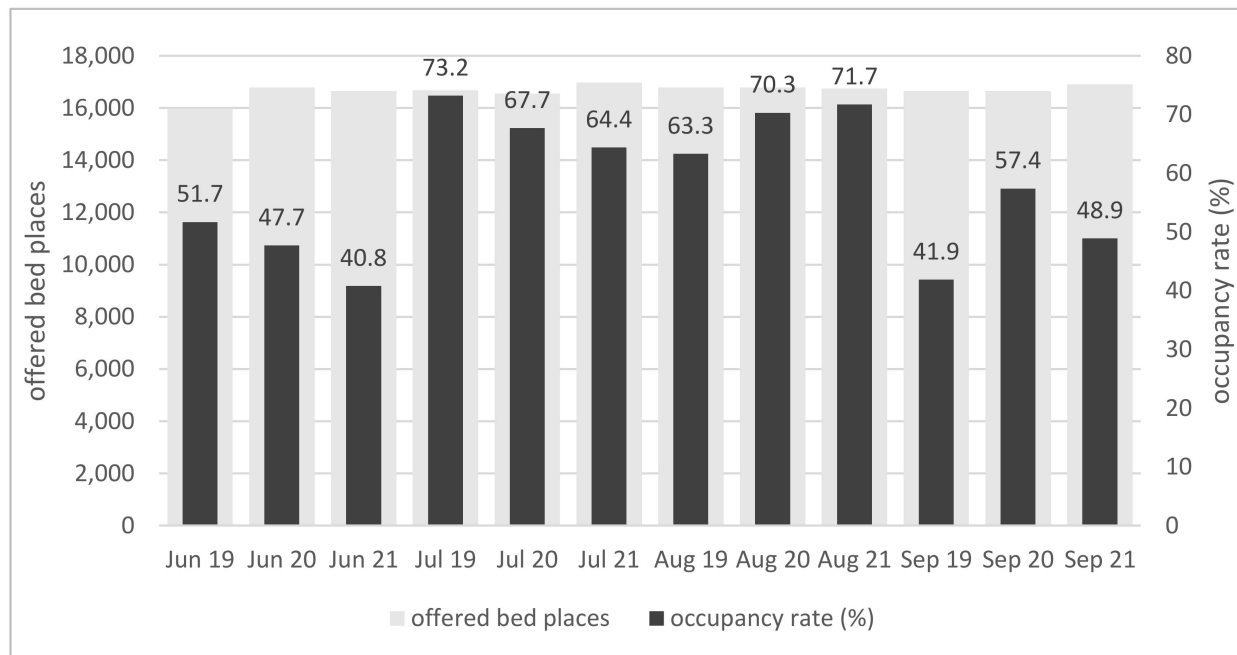
The analysis shows that a major challenge for a degrowth-oriented restart in tourism is tourists' continuous desire to travel. As investigated by FUR [58], for the German population (a sample of 2500 persons was interviewed in November 2020), despite the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the desire to travel in the following year of 2021 had only decreased moderately from 57% to 51%.

With respect to actual trips realized in 2020, proximity tourism at a regional, interregional or national level became popular as a consequence of the uncertainty associated with travelling under COVID-19 conditions, as it is considered safer and less complex to organise [37,44,59]. In Germany, this was also the case; in 2020, the number of domestic trips of five days or more increased by 22% compared to 2019. Nevertheless, the overall number of overnight stays of tourists within the country decreased significantly by 39% compared to 2019. Here, the least affected destinations in Germany were those along the northern German coasts of the Baltic Sea and the North Sea, including the island of Rügen [60].

Whereas in Binz on the island of Rügen the number of offered bed places for tourists has remained stable since June 2019, with regard to occupancy rates, an ambivalent picture is to be drawn. The pandemic, which has been characterized by high incidence values of corona infections and corresponding political lockdowns, especially in the winter seasons of 2020 and 2021, that were only loosened in late spring and early summer, had a negative



effect on bed occupancy rates in the early summers of 2020 and 2021. This reflects the high degree of uncertainty regarding infection risks and political measures. However, in the later summers of 2020 and 2021, tourists seemed to have gained confidence, although many preferred a holiday within the country. Hence, in August and September, occupancy rates in the Binz sea resort were higher than in 2019, the year prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Europe (Figure 3).

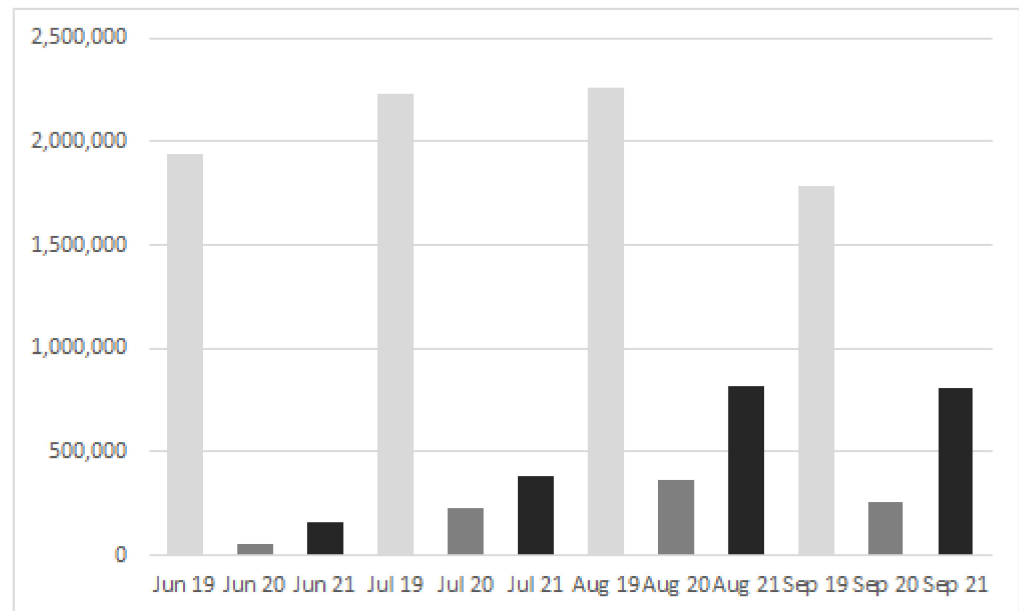


**Figure 3.** Offered bed places and occupancy rates in Binz, Southeast Rügen Biosphere Reserve, during the summers of 2019, 2020 and 2021 (data source: [60]).

Although in Binz, occupancy rates of offered bed places in August and September 2020 and 2021 were higher than in the corresponding months of 2019, it is inappropriate to classify tourists' travel behaviour in the year before the COVID-19 outbreak as "revenge travel". This development can rather be traced back to the fact that the island of Rügen is a destination that has attracted a high number of domestic tourists for decades. This was further stimulated by the trend of proximity travelling due to the uncertainties of the corona pandemic. Nevertheless, it can also be observed tourists' desire to travel to rural sea resorts like the Southeast Rügen Biosphere Reserve continues at a high level despite the COVID-19 crisis.

On the contrary, Ireland's tourism industry has been highly dependent on international tourists in recent decades. In 2019, 11.0 million tourists travelled to Ireland from abroad. They contributed about half of the trips registered [50]. Hence, due to border closures and travel bans, COVID-19 has had a severe impact on tourism on the island. In August 2020, overseas passenger arrivals amounted to only 362,600 compared to 2,256,500 in the corresponding month of the previous year (Figure 4). With view to future travel planning, a survey of around 4000 tourists from the four largest holiday source markets for the island of Ireland (Great Britain, USA, Germany and France) was conducted in March 2021 by Tourism Ireland, the Republic of Ireland's and Northern Ireland's agency responsible for marketing the island overseas. The results indicate that despite the fact that social distancing measures were in place at the time, comfort levels with taking a short break or holiday in Ireland slightly improved from 27% in December 2020 to 33% in March 2021. However, although there was a fundamental desire to travel, only 39% actually expected to do so in 2021 [61]. Nevertheless, similarly to the Southeast Rügen Biosphere Reserve, tourists' confidence levels improved during the summer of 2021, with overseas arrivals

amounting to 821,700 in August and 810,100 in September (Figure 4). Room occupancy rates dropped from 73% in 2019 to an all-time historic low of 30% in 2020 [62]. However, domestic tourism balanced some of the decline in overseas travellers, as in 2020, the number of nights by domestic travellers only moderately decreased to 23,518 compared to 29,469 in 2019 [63].



**Figure 4.** Overseas arrivals in Ireland in the summers of 2019, 2020 and 2021 (data source: [64]).

At the Cliffs of Moher Visitor Experience in the Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark, the most visited natural attraction in Ireland, visitor numbers drastically declined by 83% from 1.6 million in 2019 to 278,464 in 2020. From there, they only slightly increased to around 346,000 in 2021 ([50], email communication with Mark O’Shaughnessy, Cliffs of Moher visitor centre from 10th October 2021 and 4th January 2022). Again, it becomes apparent that this destination has been predominantly dependent on international tourists.

Overall, the data indicate that tourists’ desire to travel is continuously evident. However, lower levels of comfort have led many of them to opt for regional trips within their own country. However, coining the term “revenge travel” would be inappropriate. Although accommodation occupancy in the Southeast Rügen Biosphere Reserve was higher in the later summer periods of 2020 and 2021, it is expected that this will normalize as soon as comfort levels with regards to international travel increase again. The development of tourism in 2020 and 2021 suggests a recovery of tourist numbers along with the advancing global vaccine rollout and steadily increasing numbers according to the trend until 2019. Additionally, the interest in rural tourism destinations that was further fuelled by COVID-19 social distancing measures also seems to be continuing.

#### 4.2. The Challenge of Mainly Growth-Oriented Rural Tourism

There is a second challenge confronting the efforts for sustainable, degrowth-oriented rural tourism, which concerns the mainly growth-oriented strategy of economic and state actors, even when deliberately intermeshed with a general sustainability ethos. In Germany, as well as in Ireland, politics regarding the management of COVID-19 impacts on the tourism industry point to a quick recovery to pre-pandemic conditions on all spatial levels. In 2019, the German government commenced a broad national dialogue process that involved all relevant tourism actors, such as political actors, as well as tourism businesses, associations and non-governmental organizations, in order to develop a national tourism strategy. However, in the middle of this participatory process, the COVID-19 pandemic started, and developed ideas had to be revised in light of its dramatic impacts [19]. On the

basis of the dialogue process, in October 2020, Dr. Fried & Partner GmbH and PROJECT M GmbH [65] presented an early COVID-19-era contract study conducted for the German government discussing options for a regeneration of the German tourism sector. Here, short-term, middle-term and long-term political measure were proposed in order to “reboot” [65] (p. 8) tourism activities, many of which have been implemented already. These are clustered in fiscal, operative, indirect and institutional measures. However, the need for a sustainable restart of tourism in Germany is only mentioned briefly, and ideas for financial support are not coupled with any sustainability-linked requirements. The national tourism strategy, ultimately adopted in 2021, states the importance of a sustainable recovery of tourism activities, yet it fails to name specific measures the German government can take [19]. On the regional level, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern’s 2018 tourism concept notes that sustainability issues in the tourism sector have not yet been strategically approached by the state government, but the intention to conduct a contract study is expressed [66].

On the local level, in the Southeast Rügen Biosphere Reserve, a sustainability network of local tourism businesses was established in 2011. The so-called partner initiative is managed by the biosphere reserve’s administration [28]. However, as a network of enterprises committed to sustainable tourism, it has not reflected on the COVID-19 pandemic to jointly set a signal for sustainable tourism, although this crisis obviously offers a window of opportunity to point to the importance of sustainability in tourism.

Independent of the biosphere reserve’s partner initiative, Rügen’s tourism associations presented a tourism codex of COVID-19 hygiene guidelines in May 2021 in order to raise confidence in travel amongst tourists and to ensure a safe start of the tourism season [67]. At the same time, tourism businesses on the island of Rügen demanded a more rapid termination of political COVID-19 lockdown measures after the third corona wave in Germany that had massively affected tourism activities [68]. Overall, tourism businesses in the Southeast Rügen Biosphere Reserve have continued business as usual to the extent that they could with regard to political restrictions. Even the 7th Sustainability Week, held in September 2021 [69], cannot be considered a signal for structural change towards degrowth-oriented tourism, as it was an event that has been similarly organised in the late summer period for several years.

Contrary to the partner initiative in the Southeast Rügen Biosphere Reserve, the members of the Burren Ecotourism Network in Ireland considered the COVID-19 pandemic as a chance to raise awareness for sustainable tourism. Similar to the sustainability codex on the island of Rügen, a COVID-19 Safe Charter was proclaimed. Above all, as a sustainability network comprised of 65 tourism enterprises in 2021, it initiated collaborative efforts as a regional response to the crisis. These efforts include marketing measures and have mainly focused on stimulating the domestic market in order to “bridge the huge shortfall of international visitors” [70]. Hence, although BEN members acted collaboratively, the measures were oriented toward perpetuating income in times of social distancing and border closures and thus did not target structural changes in the tourism sector.

Apart from that, BEN was awarded Lonely Planet’s Best in Travel 2021 and was thus included to the top 30 places to travel to in the world, which led to considerable public attention. Here, the network benefitted from Lonely Planet’s “radical reimagining’ of its annual Best in Travel list—with the 2021 offering celebrating commitments to community, diversity and sustainability across the world” [71]. Accordingly, BEN, a local network of tourism providers, was recognized as a global leader in sustainable development.

BEN’s efforts to raise awareness regarding its network and its sustainable tourism targets (although here, the economic factor plays a vital role) need to be acknowledged. However, on the regional level, the responsible Clare County Council pushes the Cliffs of Moher Strategy 2040, a strategy paper, based on a participatory process that has been in the works since 2020 to further develop the Cliffs of Moher as an international anchor attraction. As its main results, until 2040, the draft paper formulates the target of expanding infrastructure and attractions at the Cliffs of Moher in order to increase visitor numbers from 1.6 million in 2019 to 2 million per year in 2040 [72] and to “maximise economic benefit” [73].

Therefore, the Cliffs of Moher Strategy 2040 clearly points to a growth-oriented future of tourism in the Burren, as also outlined for the whole sector in the government's Tourism Recovery Plan 2000–2023 [20], while, obviously, lip service is paid to sustainability issues.

### 5. Discussion: Potential Future Pathways for Rural Tourism Destinations

Tourism development in the two study areas indicates that the concept of rural tourism as such is at stake. Regarding rural sustainability transitions, tourists and tourism businesses in rural tourism destinations alone are not likely to initiate and realize a profound paradigm shift away from a growth-driven paradigm, particularly not within an acceptable timeframe [3,14,28,29]. However, at this point, state actors do not seem to push towards degrowth in tourism in order to rightsize the sector [27], not to mention to be ready for a complete restructuring of the industry as demanded by Higgins-Desbiolles et al. [25] and Fletcher et al. [26]. Instead, they recognize quick economic recovery as necessary, similarly to responses to previous crises [22,47,48], without linking COVID-19 recovery schemes to any sustainability requirements. In this sense, resilience is interpreted as a bounce-back, short-term survival and hardly overlaps with aspects of long-term sustainable development. Tragically, in the corona crisis, governmental aid programs have fuelled this rather unhealthy relationship between resilience and sustainability.

Nevertheless, the data do not suggest "revenge travel" by tourists to rural tourism destinations in periods of loosened COVID-19 social distancing measurements, although rural destinations that had been mainly visited by domestic travellers in the pre-corona era seem to further benefit due to the trend of proximity travelling. Overall, the results point to a continuous increase in tourism activities in a way that was experienced before the COVID-19 pandemic, and thus, again, to rural destinations' resilience in a bounce-back manner.

Hence, there are various options for future pathway development for rural tourism destinations that are positioned within a wider spectrum confined by two extremes. First, in the post-COVID-19 era, such destinations may give up on the concept of rural tourism and opt for mass tourism in the hope of being able to solve the arising sustainability conflicts along the lines of Weaver's [74] suggested incremental path concept, where regulations such as visitor number restrictions or fees are implemented in order to diminish the most negative impacts of tourists on the destinations. Here, discussions may arise about critical threshold levels, which might be increasingly adapted in a growth-oriented sense. Thus, with an evolutionary perspective, Weaver [75] pleads for an eventual amalgamation of small-scale tourism and mass tourism while bearing in mind aspects of sustainability. Following this path, the business realities of the tourism industry are not ignored, and its economic relevance is taken into account [40,47]. However, according to Gössling, Scott and Hall [16], such an approach is regularly characterized by paying lip service to sustainability targets rather than implementing an evidence-based strategy.

Second, forming the other extreme, in rural tourism destinations, the boundaries between market and state may be redefined. This involves continuous efforts to enhance evolutionary resilience in tourism that is conceptualized as a component of sustainability, as proposed by Espiner, Orchiston and Higham [35]. Therefore, resilience building is to be harmonized with sustainability principles. Instead of sticking to a general growth ethos, regional state actors identify and support particularly degrowth-oriented local stakeholders and implement degrowth-oriented measures in order to rightsize tourism hand in hand as a first step and eventually transition to a steady-state economy [24]. Thus, new partnerships between the state and other tourism stakeholders are essential in order to generate business-led grassroots innovations [29]. Here, it is important that the focus is set on elements of regional governance, with cooperation between rural businesses, civil society movements at the grassroots and politics on equal footing, as one-sidedly implemented political sustainability regulations often lead to acceptance problems and conflicts within the tourism sector. Therefore, incentives for voluntary compliance with

sustainability criteria for tourism providers and a regular intensification of these can help to ease tensions and gradually convince more tourism businesses to join in.

Here, the COVID-19 pandemic can provide a window of opportunity to reset locked-in structures in the tourism sector in general [5] and in rural tourism in particular, open up new and more sustainable pathways and thus strengthen rural tourism resilience with regard to sustainability in the sense of a bounce-forward perspective [32]. Thus, tourism providers may “convert this crisis disruption into transformative innovation” [6] (p. 313) and promote sustainable rural change in the longer term if new framing conditions are set up that facilitate the generation of innovative business models and networking amongst tourism businesses in which ecologically sound and socioeconomically constructive rural tourism can operate and if strict capacity limits are realized. Travel restrictions put into place in order to prevent further spread of the coronavirus may be used as a measure to rightsize tourism. In this way, rural tourism destinations that used to be under pressure prior COVID-19 can improve their sustainability resilience by applying a bounce-forward strategy instead of bouncing back to pre-crisis conditions. After the 2008 global financial crisis, Jackson [22] (p. 17) emphasized that “there is no better time to make progress towards a more sustainable society”. This applies even more to the aftermaths of the much stronger COVID-19 crisis.

Hence, if rural destinations seek to retain the concept of rural tourism as a small-scale alternative to mass tourism, a rightsizing of tourism arrivals will be inescapable as a first step for many regions by means of temporary degrowth [27] before considerations with respect to a complete rethinking of the tourism sector [25,26] can be made. Against this background and with respect to degrowth, Jackson [22] generally suggests an unravelling of the social logic of consumerism in order to be able to provide incentives for consumers to resist. Tourism as a service sector is characterized by its mainly non-materialistic nature. For many people, travelling is a renunciation of materialistic consumption, which instead allows them to get to know new places, to see and do exciting things, to spend time with family and friends and thus gain extraordinary, authentic and memorable experiences that are strongly associated with positive emotions and fantasies. Hence, travelling needs to be considered from an experiential view of consumption [76,77]. Numerous scholars have addressed the issue of experiential marketing in order to explain how tourism businesses and destinations can successfully sell their tourism services [77–79]. However, there is a lack of understanding of the role of tourists’ materialistic values with respect to their perspective on degrowth. From a destination’s point of view, pursuing ideas of a new materialist governance paradigm in tourism, as brought forward by Matteucci, Nawijn and von Zumbusch [36], may help to make further progress here. Besides reducing the number of tourists, for the Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark, this may mean consciously seeking to shift the proportions between international and domestic tourists to benefits of the domestic market, thus promoting proximity tourism. Tourism management in the Southeast Rügen Biosphere Reserve may support tourists’ involvement in creative activities in fields such as fishery, the making of local products or scientific monitoring.

## 6. Conclusions

Focusing on rural destinations and calling on the evolutionary resilience concept as a theoretical lens [32], this paper investigated whether COVID-19 provokes “revenge tourism” or whether the pandemic can be used as a chance for a degrowth-oriented restart that forms the foundation for a more sustainable tourism sector. Using two rural destinations in Ireland (Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark) and Germany (Southeast Rügen Biosphere Reserve) that have developed into mass tourism destinations as case study areas, the study revealed that so far, neither “revenge travel” nor a degrowth-oriented restart of tourism can be identified. Rather, current development indicates that the two rural destinations under investigation show resilience in the sense of bouncing back to the pre-COVID-19 era and a continuation of further growth-oriented rural tourism as far as possible under the conditions of political COVID-19 measures.



Thus, the results of COVID-19-influenced tourism development in the two case study areas generally correspond to tourism development in and after previous crises [22,48]. However, this will not allow the sector to genuinely come to grips with the negative ecological and sociocultural effects of rural tourism that is increasingly losing its small-scale character and showing signs of overtourism [3,29]. Instead, business as usual, meaning tourism business as it was practiced before the corona pandemic, seems to be likely with regard to future rural tourism development, as at this point, similarly to other crises in the past [21], neither tourists nor tourism providers nor national or regional political actors are willing to take action towards profoundly restructuring the tourism market.

Thus, theoretically, the study results imply that crises, even if they are severe, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, do not stop people's desire to travel, although the phenomenon of "revenge travel" was not of relevance in the two study areas. Findings from earlier crises are confirmed [48]. Moreover, the paper unravelled that the corona crisis does not vastly yield bounce-forward-associated mechanisms of coping and debating future pathways for rural tourism destinations by economic and political actors. It is remarkable that some timid attempts at alternative reaction could be found by economic actors in the Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark, a rural tourism destination that was dependent mostly on international tourists prior COVID-19 and—in contrast to the Southeast Rügen Biosphere Reserve, which had already focused on domestic tourism prior the pandemic—experienced enormous consequences for the regional tourism sector due to international travel restrictions during the crisis. However, these attempts are not strong enough to lead to structural, degrowth-oriented change with respect to sustainable pathways for rural tourism.

Hence, with regard to managerial implications, political incentives from a higher level, such as the European Union, and continuous resilience building in line with sustainability principles seem appropriate. However, here, a broad debate in academia and society about influencing business realities and the value of rural tourism destinations should be initiated. Against this background, it is important to discuss in which forms financial compensation can be made to rural actors for a reduced use of tourism resources in rural regions that would otherwise be commercialized more intensely and thus exceedingly stressed.

Finally, it is important to reflect on the limitations of this study. This paper builds on only two study cases, both located in Europe. Although both rural tourism destinations show signs of overtourism, one focuses on the domestic market, and the other one mainly depends on international tourists. However, these two cases cannot cover the whole spectrum of rural tourism destinations. Additionally, available data regarding tourism development in the case study areas since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic were limited. Hence, further research on tourism and resilience in rural destinations under the conditions of the corona crisis is needed.

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