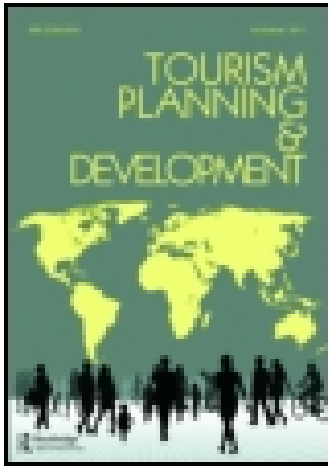


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SOAR Framework as a New Model for the Strategic Planning of Sustainable Tourism

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ABSTRACT *Planning of sustainable tourism development actually concerns planning of the environment preservation, and it encompasses a variety of research and analysis before making a decision on determining the direction of any development. This concept involves balanced economic, social, and cultural developments without endangering the environment, which enables the development at the same or a higher level. On the other hand, the strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results (SOAR) framework enhances strategic planning and implementation of processes by using a positive guiding approach to inquire into strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and measurable results. This study, with the aim of providing a suitable framework for sustainable tourism development, introduces the SOAR framework as a strategic model that is compatible with the different aspects of sustainable development including economic, social, cultural, and environmental aspects. Finally, as a new SOAR framework compatible with tourism studies, the model provides economic, social, cultural, and environmental points of view at each level that may be postulated in a SOAR framework (i.e. strengths, opportunities, apparitions, and results).*

Introduction

One of the most challenging issues in the multi-dimensional field of tourism has been the implementation of “sustainable development”, especially using it to improve management practices and processes (Söderbaum & Tortajada, 2011). Sustainable development, as an economic concept, became popular with the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987. The Brundtland Commission defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WTTC, WTO, & Earth Council, 1995, p. 30).

Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of the present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future. It is envisaged as leading to the management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems (Balasubramanian, 2005). Success of sustainable tourism planning depends on existing planning and management functions that guide appropriate developments and the ability to respond to pressure on infrastructures and

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environments that the increasing tourism demands create (Bramwell & Lane, 2000; Hall & Page, 2006). Throughout the world, tourism has been acknowledged as a tool for bringing economic benefits to a country or a specific region (Eccles, 1995). Tourism development results in several economic and social benefits for destinations (Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, & Vogt, 2005; Kwon & Vogt, 2010). According to Croes (2006) and Scheyvens and Momsen (2008), tourism spurs economic activities by creating jobs for the society.

In addition, little attention has been paid to new strategies in tourism planning, and the studies carried out in this area are very few. General texts about tourism strategic planning using the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, treats (SWOT) model include those by Ataberk and Baykal (2011), Bing-chang (2005), Ding (2003), Korunovski and Marinovski (2012), Li-bin (2012), Lordkipanidze, Brezet, and Backman (2005), Narayan (2000), Ping-qing (2007), Sariisik, Turkey, and Akova (2011), Wickramasinghe and Takano (2010), Wilkins and Hall (2001), Yao-feng and Li-li (2004), and Zhang (2012). Also, texts about sustainable tourism development include those by Alipour, Vaziri, and Ligay (2011), Buckley (2012), Byrd (2007), Coccossis and Nijkamp (1995), Liburd and Edwards (2010), Liu (2003), Lordkipanidze et al. (2005), Panakera, Willson, Ryan, and Liu (2011), Weaver (2011), Yasarata, Altinay, Burns, and Okumus (2010), and Yu, Chancellor, and Cole (2011).

Nowadays, experience shows that, if tourism is allowed to develop without any planning or specific strategies everywhere, many environmental and social problems will be emerging, and tourism problems will be more than its benefits (Eftekhari & Mahdavi, 2006). This study, with the aim of providing a suitable approach for sustainable tourism development, introduces the strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results (SOAR) framework as a strategic model.

Methodology

This research aims to provide a suitable strategic plan for sustainable tourism development and tries to introduce a SOAR model to tourism researchers. The paper is conceptual and uses a qualitative data collection method. In order to make a codification of theoretical foundations, a review of some previous research is made by using library and documentary sources. To do so, we have discussed SOAR, a strength-based framework that is built on the best points of SWOT (strengths and opportunities) in order to move beyond the “as-is” state of the organization’s environment to the “to-be” state. Furthermore, we have surveyed sustainable tourism development in the texts and extracted three sustainability pillars that are of economic, social, and environmental types. Finally, a SOAR framework compatible with sustainable tourism is proposed.

Sustainability and Tourism Planning

Nowadays, tourism is the third largest economy in the world (Lozano-Oyola, Blancas, González, & Caballero, 2012) and has developed into one of the world’s most important industrial sectors, growing faster than the world’s gross domestic product for the last 30 years (Budeanu, 2005). Such a rapid development has been coupled with the negative impacts on the social and environmental aspects of the communities where tourism has developed (Fortuny, Soler, Cánovas, & Sánchez, 2008). While the negative impacts of tourism are of significant concern, many regions have promoted tourism development to improve their economic conditions, particularly to generate revenues to finance other social and economic development activities, and to provide direct income and employment opportunities for local people (Nepal, 2002; Salerno et al., 2013).

As such, sustainable tourism is not a specific form of tourism, but more an approach that can be used to make all types of tourism more environmentally, socially, and economically beneficial (Lozano-Oyola et al., 2012). Sustainable tourism involves the minimization of negative impacts and the maximization of positive impacts (Weaver, 2006). In an effort to incorporate sustainable concepts into tourism development, many authors such as Ioannides (1995), Robson and Robson (1996), Hardy and Beeton (2001), and Gunn (2002) have attempted to define or describe sustainable tourism development, but there is no universally accepted definition. The definition applied most often by tourism planners and in the tourism research literature was developed by the World Tourism Organization (WTO). The definition is as follows: *Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of the present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecology processes, biological diversity, and life support systems* (WTO, 1998).

All these activities are undertaken in order to avoid the intensive use of resources in some specific areas, without previous care for the preservation of the resources (Angelevska-Najdeska & Rakicevik, 2012).

This issue, as an approach, is reflected in numerous policy documents. For example, the South Australian Tourism Commission's (SATC) report Design Guidelines for sustainable tourism development (SATC, 2007) explicitly links sustainable tourism to the three sustainability pillars (economic, social, and environmental) of sustainable development and proposes 12 principles for sustainable tourism (Sharpley, 2009). Murphy (1998) identified 14 major components of sustainable development based on his interpretation of Our Common Future. A review of these components yields three general concepts that serve as the basis of sustainable development. These include environmental concepts, social concepts, and economic concepts (Byrd, 2007). Figure 1 shows a sustainable tourism model.

Stakeholder Approach

One main key to the success and implementation of sustainable tourism development in a society is the support of stakeholders (Gunn, 2002). A stakeholder is identified as any group or individual who can affect or is affected by tourism development in an area (Byrd, 2007; Freeman, 2010). Those who can offer their support in this regard are citizens, entrepreneurs, and community leaders (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999; Gunn, 2002). However, a universally accepted stakeholder definition has not been constructed yet (Carroll & Buchholtz, 1989; Timur & Getz, 2008). Freeman's original stakeholder theory was focused around the relationships that an organization may have with various groups and individuals. To include all relevant stakeholders or even crucial stakeholders may be difficult or impossible. In reality, certain stakeholders will participate while others will not participate in the planning process (Aas, Ladkin, & Fletcher, 2005). However, if planners can identify which stakeholder groups in the society are and are not actively participating in the process, the planners can at least make attempts to identify some of the non-participants' concerns about the development. Identifying the concerns of non-participants can make the process more inclusive and ultimately increase the chances for success. The first step, therefore, is to identify which stakeholder groups are likely and unlikely to actively participate in the tourism development process (Byrd & Gustke, 2011). Within the tourism development literature, there is considerable debate about how to define and identify stakeholders (Bhat & Gaur, 2012). This process in a plan is an important one, as it will also help to identify who may be directly or indirectly affected by the plan. Typical stakeholders in a tourism planning process are demonstrated in Figure 2.

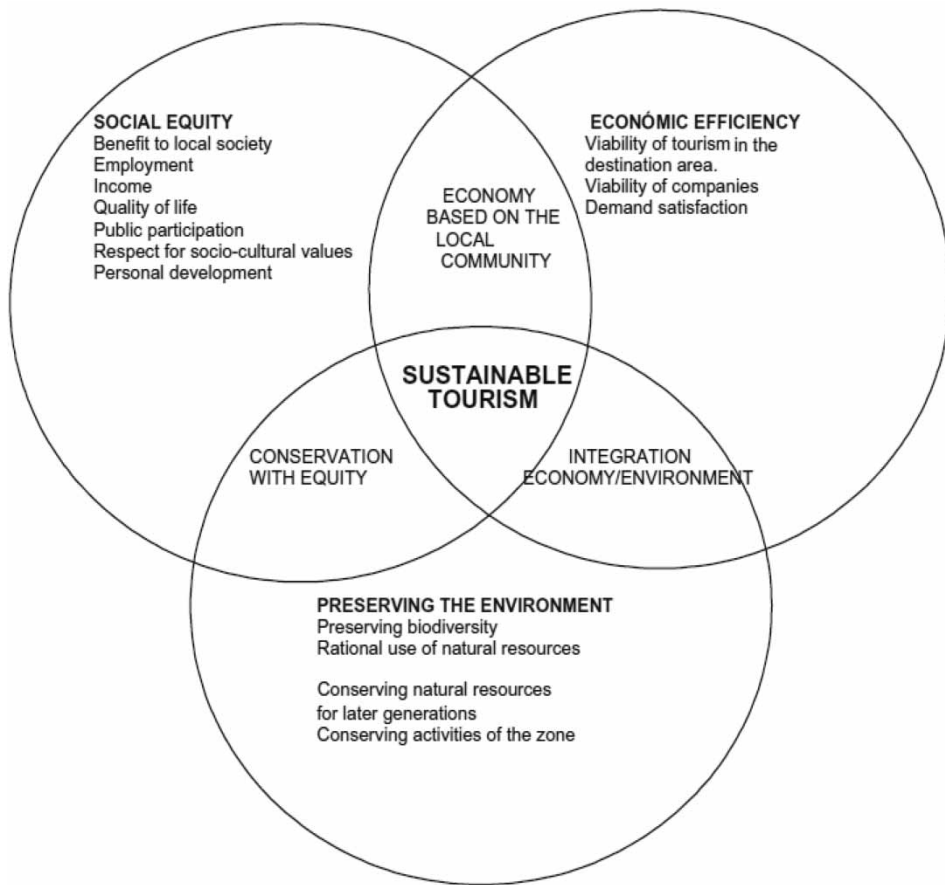


Figure 1. Sustainable tourism model.

Source: Sanagustín Fons and Fierro (2011, p. 552).

Soaring from SWOT with the SOAR Framework

For many, traditional approaches to strategy development begin with an analysis of external and internal factors, followed by some visioning, then planning. Included in the analysis phase is often a “SWOT”, a thorough examination of internal Strengths and Weaknesses, as well as external Opportunities and Threats. SWOTs are praised for capturing both the positive (strengths and opportunities) and the negative (weaknesses and threats) features. Organizations embrace this approach in the hope of gaining a “balanced” analysis of itself, in and out. By exploring the weaknesses and threats, however, organizations often cause more harm than help (Rothwell, Stavros, Sullivan, & Sullivan, 2009). Table 1 highlights the differences between the two models.

Nowadays, organizations are under increased pressure for higher levels of innovation and faster results. While the SWOT approach can uncover strengths and weaknesses, SOAR provides the enhancement of moving from an “as is” analysis to a framework of leveraging Strengths and Opportunities to co-create individual and organizational Aspirations to achieve measurable Results (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2007). Unlike a traditional SWOT analysis, which theoretically begins with strengths but typically dissolves into a discussion over weaknesses and threats, the SOAR approach begins a conversation with a strategic

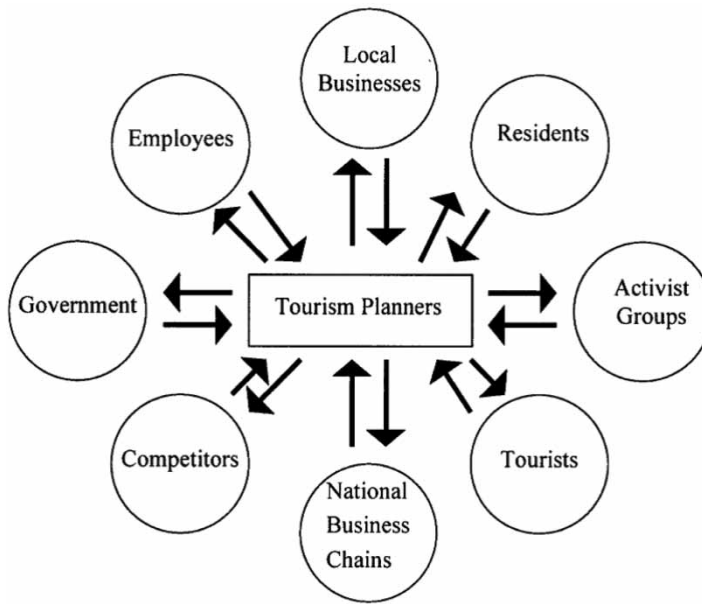


Figure 2. Stakeholders in a tourism planning process (Yigitcanlar, 2009, p. 6).

Table 1. Comparison of SWOT/SOAR.

Source: Adapted from p. 12 in Stavros and Hinrichs (2009).

SWOT analysis	SOAR approach
Analysis-oriented	Action-oriented
Weakness & threat-focused	Strength & opportunity-focused
Competition-focused— <i>Just be later</i>	Possibility-focused— <i>Be the best!</i>
Incremental improvement	Innovation & breakthroughs
Top-down	Engagement of all levels
Focus on analysis → planning	Focus on planning → implementation
Energy-depleting— <i>There are so many weaknesses and threats!</i>	Energy-creating— <i>We are good and can become great!</i>
Attention to gaps	Attention to results

inquiry and an appreciative intent. The framework in Figure 3 is used to guide the conversations.

SOAR features a disciplined approach to helping an organization identify its strengths with an eye on what works best and what are the possible opportunities for growth. Then, it builds on the aspirations of its stakeholders and creates a results driven plan.

The SOAR framework enhances strategic planning and implementation processes by using a positive guiding approach to inquire into strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and measurable results, imagine the most preferred future, create innovative strategies, plans, systems, designs, and structures, build a sustainable culture, and inspire organizational stakeholders to soar to a state of engaged high performance and execution of strategy. SOAR is recognized as a strength-based framework with a whole-system (stakeholder) approach to strategic thinking and planning (Figure 3).

STRATEGIC INQUIRY	<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are we doing well? • What are our greatest assets? 	<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are our best possible market opportunities? • How are we to best partner with others?
APPRECIATIVE INTENT	<p>Aspirations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what do we aspire? • What is our preferred future? 	<p>Results (measurements)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are our measurable results? • What do we want to be known for?

Figure 3. SOAR matrix.

Source: Adapted from p. 388 in Stavros and Hinrichs (2009), *Thin book of SOAR: Building strengths-based strategy*.

Since the creation of the SOAR framework in late 1999, SOAR has been shown to offer a wide range of options for its application so that each adopting organization can apply it appropriately to its own strategic needs. More organizations are adopting the SOAR framework every year at different levels (industry-wide, organization-wide, group, and individual). The broad categories of organizations and locations where SOAR has been applied are listed in Table 2.

How to SOAR?

As a framework, SOAR provides a flexible, strategic dialogue process to complete a strategic assessment, create a strategy and/or strategic plan, and determine appropriate action. This dialogue helps the organization's stakeholders understand what they see happening when the organization is working at its best as well as envision what the organization can become. By engaging all of the relevant stakeholders, dialogue creates the possibility for a greater understanding of the whole system. SOAR involves designing and conducting the inclusive conversations that result in action. This is done by a 5-I approach (Initiate, Inquire, Imagine, Innovate, and Implementation).

Approach

SOAR helps the strategic assessment process to take on a life of its own, starting with an inquiry to discover how the organization has succeeded in the past and present. This

Table 2. SOAR's global impact.

Source: Stavros (2013).

Types of organizations	Continents
For-profit organizations, at every level	Africa
Non-profit organizations	Asia
Governments	Australia, New Zealand
Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)	Europe
Education: primary, secondary, and higher education	North America
??	South America

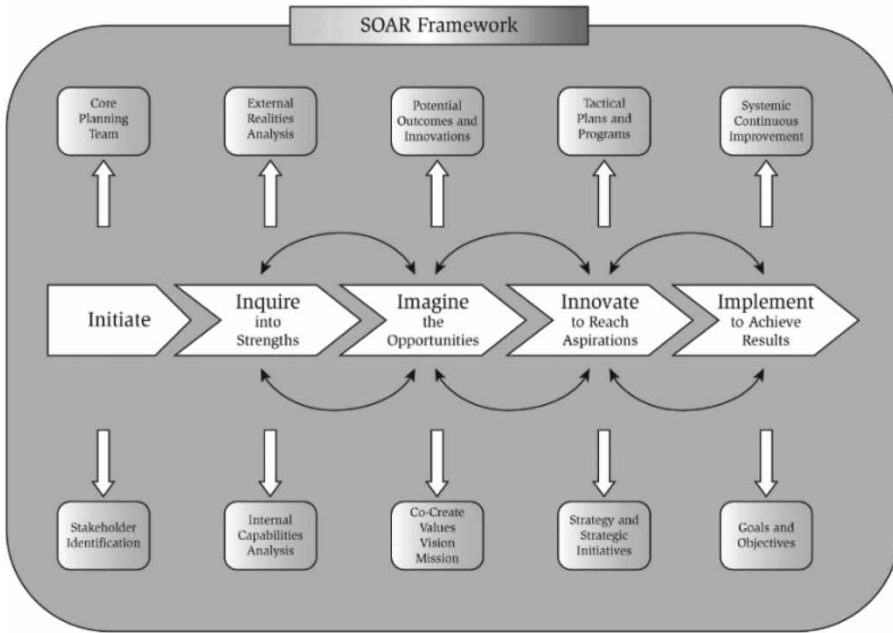


Figure 4. SOAR framework.
 Source: Stavros and Saint (2010, p. 381).

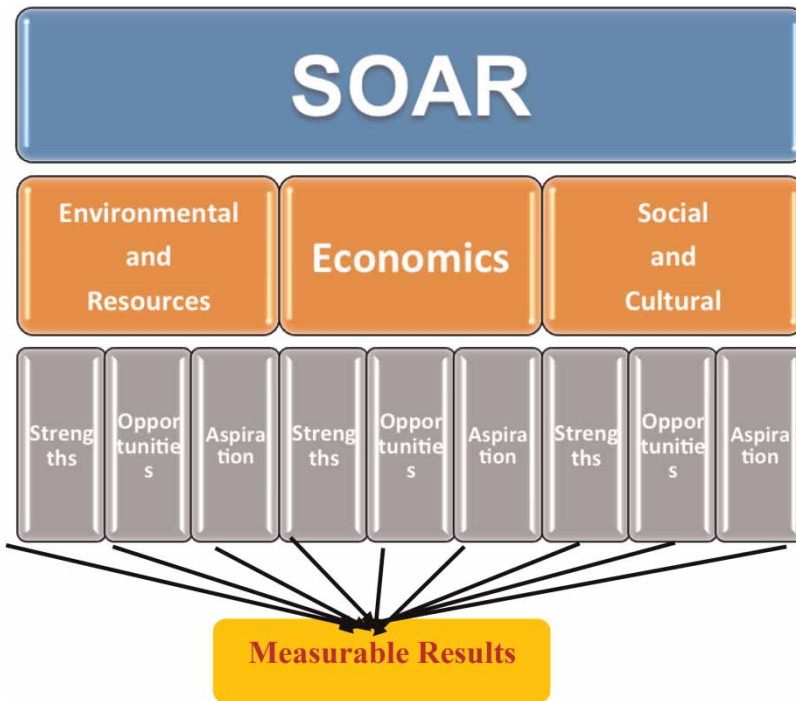


Figure 5. Sustainable tourism SOAR framework.
 Source: Authors.

Table 3. A general example of the first four stages of SOAR framework.

Source: Khavarian-Garmsir, Stavros, and Alian (2013).

STRATEGIC INQUIRY	<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development based on sustainable development principles. • Job creation and increased per capita income. • Improve the city's infrastructure and facilities. • Attraction Native and non-Native investors and Increasing incentives for investors to invest. • Achieve a reliable source of income in the town. 	<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of large areas of green space and gardens in the town. • Existence of skilled and educated workforce. • Variety of tourism attractions. • Existence numerous rural countryside around the town. • Having better weather than the provincial capital. • High potential for tourism in the city.
APPRECIATIVE INTENT	<p>Aspirations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City of Taft, as a tourism hub in central Iran. • City of Taft, as the largest and best equipped center for medical tourism in the country. • City of Taft as one of the main purposes of sport teams. • Employment of all jobseekers. • Create a city with beautiful landscape. • Increase incentives for investors to invest in tourism sector. • Taft as the main promenade of the provincial capital. 	<p>Results</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction the unemployment rate from 5.5 percent to 2 percent. • Reaching the park per capita in the city of 5.7 to 8 meters. • Achieve to 30 meters of green space per capita. • Incrassation of 20 service centers, bars, entertainment centers. • International Center for Heart debut Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) on Taft - Yazd road.

phenomenon occurs through an on-going conversation with the identified stakeholders of the organization. Through this dialogue, appreciative ways of knowing and learning about an organization's history and core capabilities are enriched.

SOAR is not just the conversations created from unconditionally positive questions. It is also the phased approach that is conceived of as five I's: Initiate Inquire, Imagine, Innovate, and Implement. These five phases can be thought of as steps, but each step involves cycles of SOAR thinking. The phases are briefly defined below:

- *Initiate*: The organization's leadership holds strategic conversation and formulation on how to apply SOAR and integrate it with existing strategic planning methods, processes, and applications. They also identify the relevant stakeholders.
- *Inquire*: This is a strategic inquiry into values, mission, internal strengths, and external environment to create opportunities, conversations of aspirations, and results.

- *Imagine*: A creative dialogue takes place and considers the influence of strengths, opportunities, and aspirations to create a shared vision.
- *Innovate*: A strategy is designed to create the “how and what” of the best pathway forward. Strategic initiatives are identified and prioritized to enact a change to the existing processes, systems, structures, and culture.
- *Implementation*: The energy, commitment, and tactical plans emerge to implement the strategy to achieve the results. The results are used as feedback measures for iterations and course corrections (Rothwell et al., 2009).

Sustainable tourism has three sustainability pillars of economic, social, and environmental types. Including these aspects, the proposed framework provides strengths, opportunities, and aspirations in each aspect. Finally, measurable results are offered according to the strengths, opportunities, and aspirations discussed in environmental, economic, and social aspects. Figure 5 is the final framework in this study (Figure 5).

A general example in this regard is given in Table 3. The table, which is a summary of the first four stages, is taken from the Persian article of Khavarian-Garmsir et al. (2013).

Conclusion

One of the most challenging issues in the multi-dimensional field of tourism has been the implementation of “sustainable development” plans and projects, especially using them to improve management practices and processes. This is why tourism activities should be focused on a type of resource management in which all economic, social, and aesthetic requirements are fulfilled, while simultaneously respecting cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, and biological diversity. As a result, moving towards sustainable development presents tremendous challenges. Important structural changes are needed to the ways societies manage their economic, social, and environmental affairs. Different countries may settle for different solutions, but all will have to make hard choices. Strategies for sustainable development are about making and implementing such choices, in a realistic, effective, and lasting way. Traditional approaches to strategy development begin with an analysis of external and internal factors, followed by some visioning, then planning. Included in the analysis phase is often a “SWOT”, a thorough examination of internal Strengths and Weaknesses as well as external Opportunities and Threats. SWOTs are praised for capturing both the positive (strengths and opportunities) and negative (weaknesses and threats) features. Organizations embrace this approach with the hope of gaining a “balanced” analysis of itself, inside, and outside. By exploring the weaknesses and threats, however, organizations often cause more harm than help. The SOAR framework is a strength-based strategic planning approach that builds on strategic management and moves to strategic leadership. This framework builds on SWOT, but it differs in important assumptions and approaches.

This study has attempted to introduce the SOAR framework as a suitable model for tourism studies. In doing so, we have discussed SOAR, a strength-based framework that builds on the best points of SWOT (i.e. strengths and opportunities), in order to move beyond the “as-is” state of the organization’s environment to the “to-be” state. We have also surveyed the literature on sustainable tourism development and extracted three sustainability pillars of economic, social, and environmental types. The proposed SOAR framework is compatible with sustainable tourism. Finally, there is a general example presented about the first four stages of the SOAR framework.

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