

DEVELOPING CULINARY TOURISM IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY: A SOLUTION FOR GREEN TOURISM

MSc. Vo Dinh Thuat*

Abstract: Culinary tourism has increasingly become a prominent trend, not only offering unique cultural experiences but also creating momentum for sustainable economic development at the local level. In the context of the urgent demand for green tourism development, linking culinary tourism with the circular economy is considered a strategic solution. This paper analyzes the theoretical foundation, potential, and current situation of culinary tourism development, while clarifying the applicability of the circular economy model to enhance product value, reduce resource waste, and minimize environmental impacts. Based on these findings, the paper proposes several solutions, including strengthening value chain linkages, applying the “zero-waste” model in culinary services, developing green products, and raising community awareness. The conclusion highlights that integrating culinary tourism with the circular economy is a practical approach to realizing green tourism in Vietnam.

• Keywords: culinary tourism, circular economy, green tourism, sustainable development.

Date of receipt: 20th May, 2025

Date of delivery revision: 26th Jun., 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.71374/jfar.v25.i5.07>

Date of receipt revision: 05th Aug., 2025

Date of approval: 28th Sep., 2025

1. Introduction

In the context of climate change, environmental pollution, and resource depletion becoming global challenges, sustainable tourism development is considered an inevitable trend to balance economic growth with environmental protection. Green tourism emerges as an important pathway, helping to minimize the negative impacts of tourism activities on ecosystems while bringing humanistic values and long-term benefits to local communities (Doan Manh Cuong, 2025). Among them, culinary tourism, with its role in promoting culture, creating unique experiences, and attracting visitors (Phan Huy Xu & Tran Minh Tam, 2017), has the potential to become a driving force for green transformation if it is harmoniously linked with the circular economy model. The circular economy in culinary tourism is not limited to waste reduction and optimal use of resources, but also aims at regenerating cultural and social values through a chain of activities, from producing clean ingredients and processing with environmentally friendly methods, to responsible consumption and reuse of by-products (Ly Hoang Phu, 2023). When these models are applied, the tourism industry not only creates sustainable experiences for visitors but also increases income for local communities, preserves natural resources, and spreads the message of green living. Vietnam's Tourism Development Strategy to 2030 identifies culinary culture as a core cultural stream and gastronomy as one of the key product lines that enhance national tourism competitiveness

and branding (Prime Minister, 2020). However, in reality, the development of culinary tourism linked with the circular economy in Vietnam still faces many limitations. Infrastructure systems remain inconsistent, environmental awareness among some businesses and tourists is still low, and circular models have only been applied on a small scale without forming a closed value chain. Therefore, researching and proposing solutions to promote the integration of culinary tourism with the circular economy is an urgent requirement, contributing to orienting green tourism development and strengthening the competitiveness of Vietnam's tourism sector in the context of global integration.

2. Research methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach, combining theoretical synthesis with practical analysis to clarify the relationship between culinary tourism development and the orientation toward a circular economy, thereby proposing solutions to promote green tourism. Specifically, the author first collected and synthesized secondary data from domestic and international scientific works, tourism industry reports, as well as policy documents related to the circular economy, sustainable tourism, and culinary tourism. Next, the study applied the method of analysis and synthesis to systematize the theoretical foundations, concepts, and sustainable development models in the tourism sector. On this basis, the author conducted comparative and contrastive analysis with the current situation of culinary tourism development in

* Van Hien University; email: thuatvd@vhu.edu.vn

Vietnam, particularly at destinations that have been implementing circular economy-based models. In addition, content analysis was employed to identify trends, influencing factors, and existing limitations, from which feasible solutions are proposed. These solutions aim to advance green tourism development, while simultaneously preserving cultural and culinary values and fostering local economic growth within a sustainable framework.

3. Research findings

3.1. Theoretical foundations of culinary tourism, circular economy and green tourism

3.1.1. Concept of culinary tourism

Culinary tourism is understood as a type of tourism in which dining experiences and the exploration of local cuisine serve as the main or significant motivation for tourists (Hall & Sharples, 2003). Beyond the simple act of consuming food, culinary tourism also encompasses visiting traditional markets, participating in cooking classes, learning about local food cultures, and engaging with agricultural and craft-producing communities (Ellis et al., 2018). In Vietnam, culinary tourism is considered one of the country's distinctive competitive advantages, thanks to the richness and diversity of its national cuisine (Nguyen Thi Hong Yen, 2024). The Vietnam Tourism Development Strategy to 2030 identifies culinary culture as a core cultural theme, with cuisine positioned as one of the key tourism products that contribute to enhancing national competitiveness and branding (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2020).

3.1.2. Concept and principles of the circular economy

The circular economy (CE) is an economic development model in which the value of products, materials, and resources is maintained for as long as possible, while waste and emissions are minimized (European Commission, 2015). Unlike the traditional linear model of "take - make - consume - dispose," CE emphasizes the principles of "3R": Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle, aiming toward closed-loop production and consumption systems (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021). When applied to culinary tourism, CE can be realized through the use of organic ingredients, green production practices, recycling of food waste, and the establishment of short supply chains.

3.1.3. Green tourism and sustainable tourism

Green tourism is considered a branch of sustainable tourism, with a focus on environmental protection, efficient resource use, emission reduction, and the enhancement of social responsibility (UNWTO, 2017).

Green tourism goes beyond the "greening" of tourism products and services, encompassing the active participation of local communities as well as raising visitor awareness about sustainable consumption (Tourism Information Center, 2025).

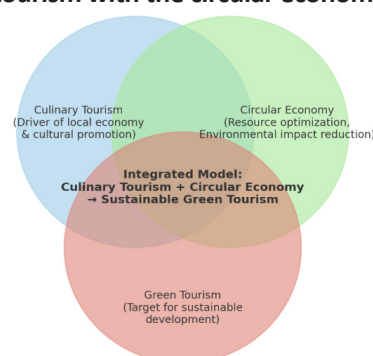
3.1.4. Theoretical framework for linking culinary tourism with the circular economy

Based on the aforementioned theoretical foundations, the framework of this study is structured around three pillars:

- Culinary tourism as a driver of local economic development and cultural promotion.
- The circular economy as a tool for optimizing resources and minimizing environmental impacts.
- Green tourism as the ultimate goal, ensuring the harmonious integration of economic, social, and environmental development.

The interconnection of these three pillars forms a model for developing culinary tourism aligned with the circular economy, thereby contributing to the overall objective of sustainable tourism development in Vietnam.

Figure 1. Theoretical framework on linking culinary tourism with the circular economy



Source: Compiled by the author

The theoretical framework demonstrates that the linkage between culinary tourism and the circular economy does not merely stop at utilizing gastronomy as a tourism product, but also opens up pathways for sustainable development and creates multiple layers of added value for both tourism and the broader economy. Culinary tourism is inherently grounded in local cultural identity, indigenous ingredients, and traditional cooking methods, while the circular economy emphasizes the principles of "reduce - reuse - recycle - regenerate." When these two elements are integrated, they can form an ecosystem in which tourism is both attractive to visitors and efficient in resource utilization, while minimizing negative environmental impacts.

First, the production of raw materials serves as the foundation. Within this framework, culinary tourism is closely tied to the use of local agricultural produce, seafood, and regional specialties. The circular economy promotes clean and organic production, limits chemical inputs, and encourages the reuse and recycling of agricultural by-products. This not only reduces production costs but also enhances the quality of culinary experiences, as visitors increasingly value “green - clean - safe” food attributes.

Next, the processes of food preparation and consumption are connected with circular principles. Restaurants and food service establishments in the culinary tourism value chain can adopt energy-efficient technologies, minimize plastic waste, and classify and recycle organic waste into fertilizer or biogas. At the same time, presenting gastronomy under a “zero waste” approach not only adds uniqueness to the tourism product but also strengthens the destination’s image as a sustainable tourism hub.

In addition, cultural and educational values are emphasized in the framework. Culinary tourism is not merely about eating and drinking, but also about conveying messages of green living, respect for natural resources, and preservation of traditional culinary knowledge. This process contributes to raising community awareness and building a closed loop in which tourists, businesses, and local residents all participate and benefit.

Finally, the framework highlights the creation of multi-layered added value: economic benefits (income growth, expansion of the value chain), social benefits (job creation, cultural recognition), and environmental benefits (emission reduction, efficient resource use). The integration of culinary tourism and the circular economy thus generates a “dual cycle” in which tourism stimulates the demand for green products, while the circular economy ensures that tourism develops along a sustainable and long-term trajectory.

3.2. The current state of culinary tourism in Vietnam

In recent years, culinary tourism has emerged as one of the most prominent trends in Vietnam’s tourism industry. With the advantage of a diverse cuisine deeply connected to history, culture, and regional characteristics, Vietnam holds significant potential to develop culinary tourism as a flagship product. Vietnamese cuisine has been highly praised by international experts and media, with many dishes ranked among the world’s best (Ngoc Ha, 2024). Culinary tourism has been identified as a national strategic product under the Vietnam Tourism

Development Strategy to 2030 (Prime Minister, 2025).

Vietnamese cuisine is not only beloved by domestic tourists but is also increasingly recognized on the international stage. In 2022, Vietnam won several categories at the World Culinary Awards, including Asia’s Best Culinary Destination 2022, Asia’s Best Culinary Festival 2022, Asia’s Best Restaurant 2022, and the World’s Best Hotel Fine Dining Restaurant 2022 (Tuong Bach, 2022). In 2023, Michelin Guide announced its first list of star-rated restaurants in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, significantly boosting Vietnam’s culinary tourism image in the global market. Additionally, CNN (USA) consistently listed pho and banh mi among the world’s best foods, while The Travel (Canada) ranked Vietnam in the top 5 most attractive culinary destinations worldwide. At the 5th World Culinary Awards in 2024, Hanoi - Vietnam’s culinary capital - impressively surpassed strong competitors such as Auckland (New Zealand), Cape Town (South Africa), Lima (Peru), Los Angeles (USA), Bangkok (Thailand), Seoul (South Korea), and Tokyo (Japan) to win two major categories: “World’s Leading Culinary City” and “Asia’s Leading Culinary City” (Tourism Information Center, 2024).

According to the General Statistics Office, revenue from accommodation and food services in 2024 reached 733.9 trillion VND, accounting for 11.5% of total revenue and marking a 12.9% increase compared to the previous year. Growth in 2024 compared to 2023 was also notable across several localities, such as Khanh Hoa (up 16.7%), Can Tho (up 13.7%), Hanoi (up 11.7%), Ho Chi Minh City (up 10.5%), and Binh Duong (up 9.8%) (Duc Anh, 2025).

However, the development of culinary tourism in Vietnam still faces numerous challenges. First, activities remain largely spontaneous, with few professional products carrying a strong national brand. Food safety and hygiene continue to be concerns for international visitors. Furthermore, international promotion lacks a comprehensive strategy and relies heavily on organic media coverage. Human resources in culinary tourism are also limited, particularly in terms of tour guides skilled in storytelling to connect dishes with cultural and historical narratives.

3.3. The current state of integrating culinary tourism with the circular economy in Vietnam

In the context of Vietnam implementing its National Strategy on Green Growth and promoting the circular economy (CE) in line with Resolution No. 55-NQ/TW and the Law on Environmental Protection 2020, applying CE models to culinary tourism development has increasingly gained attention. This approach not only

enhances visitor experiences but also helps minimize environmental impacts (Ly Hoang Phu, 2023).

In practice, although CE remains a relatively new concept in Vietnam's tourism sector, recent years have witnessed initial applications signaling a shift from the traditional linear economy toward a circular model. Many food service businesses, restaurants, hotels, and culinary tourism destinations have experimented with eco-friendly materials such as bamboo straws, paper straws, bagasse food containers, and biodegradable bags as substitutes for single-use plastics. Several restaurants-farmstay models in Lam Dong, Quang Nam, and Sa Pa have applied closed-loop systems, where tourists visit organic vegetable gardens, harvest ingredients by hand, prepare and enjoy meals, and later see organic byproducts processed into compost for the garden.

In major urban areas such as Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Hoi An, fine-dining restaurants and specialty coffee shops have emphasized waste reduction, recycling, and the use of local ingredients while promoting "green gastronomy" as an attractive feature for international visitors.

However, overall, the application of CE in culinary tourism in Vietnam remains limited and primarily small-scale and spontaneous. Single-use plastic consumption is still widespread, particularly at street food stalls - a core strength of Vietnamese gastronomy. Waste collection, sorting, and recycling systems for food waste are not yet synchronized; most food waste from restaurants, hotels, and tourist destinations is discarded, leading to resource wastage. Moreover, awareness of CE among businesses and food service households remains low, while the initial investment costs for green technologies and eco-friendly materials remain high, making it difficult to scale up circular models.

From a policy perspective, despite clear directions from the government, detailed guidelines for the tourism industry in general and culinary tourism in particular are still lacking, creating a significant gap between policy and practice.

It can be affirmed that the application of CE in culinary tourism in Vietnam is still in its early stages, with both opportunities and challenges ahead. With stronger policy support, synchronized infrastructure investment, and enhanced community awareness, sustainable green culinary tourism could become a strategic direction - one that not only enriches visitor experiences but also contributes to resource conservation and environmental protection, aligning with the goal of sustainable tourism development by 2030.

4. Solutions for developing Vietnamese culinary tourism in connection with the circular economy

To develop culinary tourism in a sustainable direction, Vietnam needs to integrate circular economy principles into all stages, from ingredient production, processing, and consumption to waste management. This not only contributes to enhancing the quality of culinary tourism products but also creates added value in terms of environment, economy, and society. Several specific groups of solutions can be proposed as follows:

4.1. Developing a sustainable and environmentally friendly food supply chain

To connect culinary tourism with the circular economy, building a sustainable and eco-friendly food supply chain is a central and foundational solution. Currently, many culinary products serving tourism still depend on traditional supply sources without sufficient control over production, preservation, and distribution processes, leading to risks of environmental pollution, resource waste, and reduced quality of tourist experiences. Therefore, it is necessary to encourage localities, enterprises, cooperatives, and household businesses to participate in building a closed-loop supply chain that ensures food safety while minimizing plastic waste, emissions, and other waste throughout the farm-to-table process.

First, ingredients for culinary tourism should be developed in the direction of organic agriculture, clean farming, and high-tech applications to limit chemicals, pesticides, and chemical fertilizers. Growing areas for vegetables, fruits, meat, fish, and other produce should be clearly planned and certified under VietGAP or GlobalGAP standards to ensure a stable, safe, and transparent supply. This not only enhances the reputation of Vietnamese culinary products but also helps build the story of "green cuisine" linked with agri-tourism experiences, a trend attracting growing interest from international visitors. In addition, close cooperation between farmers, cooperatives, restaurants, and travel businesses will form a sustainable value chain in which all stakeholders benefit.

Next, processing and distribution must also adopt circular solutions. Restaurants, hotels, and food service businesses should prioritize local and seasonal ingredients to reduce transportation costs and greenhouse gas emissions. Food packaging should be shifted from single-use plastics to environmentally friendly materials such as banana leaves, bamboo, recycled paper, or biodegradable boxes. Furthermore, cold storage technologies, green logistics, and short supply chains (farm-to-table) need to be widely applied

to ensure freshness while minimizing losses and food waste in circulation.

Another important factor is waste management in the supply chain. Culinary tourism facilities should sort waste at the source, reuse agricultural by-products and leftovers to produce organic fertilizers, biogas, or recycle them into new products. The “zero waste kitchen” model can become a unique highlight that enhances professionalism while spreading the message of green tourism. At the same time, the application of digital technologies such as blockchain for food traceability will increase transparency and strengthen visitor trust in the safety, quality, and sustainability of the supply chain.

In addition, government support plays a vital role in building and operating sustainable food supply chains. Incentive policies on credit, taxation, technical training, and trade promotion should be implemented to encourage stronger participation from enterprises and communities. Moreover, the issuance of standards and regulations on eco-labels, “green cuisine” certification, or “circular restaurant” labels will guide the market and improve the competitiveness of Vietnamese culinary tourism.

4.2. Applying the “zero waste” model in food services

In the context of increasing demand for cultural and culinary tourism experiences, food services have become one of the key links in green tourism development. However, this sector also generates a large amount of waste, especially single-use plastics and food leftovers. Applying the “zero waste” model in food services not only minimizes environmental impacts but also improves the image and competitiveness of tourist destinations.

First, in preparation and service, restaurants, eateries, and food service establishments can minimize the use of single-use plastics by replacing them with eco-friendly materials such as banana leaves, paper, bagasse containers, or cups and straws made from bamboo, grass, or rice. Many hotels and resorts in Vietnam have already eliminated small plastic bottles in rooms, replacing them with glass bottles or water refill stations, thereby encouraging sustainable consumption habits among tourists.

Second, the “zero waste” culinary model also emphasizes food surplus management. Instead of being discarded, surplus food can be sorted for safe reuse or recycled into organic fertilizer and animal feed. Some restaurants in Europe and Asia have successfully applied technology applications to connect surplus food with charities, helping to avoid waste while delivering social benefits. This is an experience that Vietnam’s tourism sector can learn from and adopt.

Third, designing a “green menu” is another key solution. Service providers can encourage customers to choose reasonable portions, prioritize local ingredients, organic foods, and seasonal produce to reduce emissions from long-distance transport and support sustainable agriculture. Many “farm-to-table” restaurants are becoming popular with international tourists, especially those concerned about health and environmental protection.

Fourth, this model not only reduces waste but also contributes to building a “green cuisine” brand for destinations. Food service establishments adopting the “zero waste” approach are often highly valued for social responsibility, thereby attracting environmentally conscious customer groups. Moreover, telling the story of the “green journey” in cuisine helps create a distinctive mark and effectively promotes local tourism.

Thus, applying the “zero waste” model in food services is both an urgent requirement to minimize negative environmental impacts and an opportunity for Vietnam’s tourism industry to develop sustainably while generating added value for both businesses and communities.

4.3. Developing culinary tourism products linked with local culture and value regeneration

Cuisine is one of the most important factors shaping the attractiveness and identity of a tourist destination. Leveraging culinary strengths should not stop at showcasing specialty dishes but must also be closely tied to cultural stories, traditions, and local community values. For culinary tourism products to be competitive, they must be both unique and deliver authentic experiences to visitors.

To regenerate value, emphasis should be placed on restoring and preserving traditional recipes, while innovating in preparation, presentation, and service methods in line with modern consumption trends. At the same time, developing experiential tourism activities such as visiting rural markets, joining cooking classes with locals, and enjoying culinary feasts within cultural rituals will give tourists deeper insights. In this way, cuisine becomes not only a product for consumption but also a medium to convey cultural identity, thereby enhancing value and vitality for the tourism industry.

4.4. Raising awareness and capacity of stakeholders

One of the decisive factors for the success of sustainable tourism development is raising awareness and capacity among stakeholders, including local authorities, enterprises, communities, and tourists. Proper awareness will create consensus and shared responsibility in building a civilized, friendly, and sustainable tourism environment.

Training programs and capacity-building workshops should be organized for local communities on skills for community-based tourism, service management, and the preservation of natural and cultural resources. For businesses, innovation and the application of modern management technologies should be encouraged, while business ethics must be enhanced to promote responsible tourism products. At the same time, communication and education efforts targeting tourists about civilized behavior and sustainable consumption should also be emphasized to spread a positive influence throughout the industry.

4.5. Strengthening international cooperation and digital technology application

In the context of globalization, international cooperation is a key factor for modern and integrated tourism development. Expanding partnerships with international tourism organizations, regional countries, and global networks creates opportunities for knowledge exchange, resource sharing, and broader destination promotion. Through forums, fairs, and international exchange programs, Vietnamese tourism can strengthen its position and expand the international tourist market.

Alongside international cooperation, digital technology application is an important driver to enhance management efficiency and service quality in tourism. Digital platforms such as online booking systems, digital maps, artificial intelligence (AI) in travel advisory, and virtual/augmented reality (VR/AR) for destination promotion can enhance visitor experiences. Moreover, collecting and analyzing big data supports policymakers in making accurate and timely decisions for tourism development.

4.6. Improving policies, support mechanisms and long-term investment

For tourism to develop sustainably, a consistent, transparent, and long-term policy system is essential. The government and state management agencies should continue to review, adjust, and supplement legal regulations related to tourism planning, management, and development to ensure alignment with practice and international trends.

In addition, incentive mechanisms on taxation, land, and credit should be introduced to encourage enterprises to invest in green tourism, community-based tourism, and innovative models. Establishing a tourism development fund, prioritizing resources for infrastructure, human resource training, and heritage conservation, will also create a solid foundation for the industry. More importantly, policies must harmonize the interests of the state, businesses, and communities

to ensure sustainability and long-term development in tourism.

5. Conclusion

The development of culinary tourism in connection with the circular economy is not only an inevitable trend but also an important solution toward a green and sustainable tourism industry. By applying models such as “zero waste,” recycling and reusing resources, saving energy, and preserving local culinary values, the tourism sector can not only minimize negative impacts on the environment but also create added cultural, social, and economic value. This contributes to building a friendly, attractive, and distinctive destination image, thereby enhancing competitiveness in the context of globalization. To achieve this goal, close cooperation among stakeholders is required: government, tourism and culinary enterprises, local communities, and tourists. The State plays the role of policy maker, providing legal frameworks and infrastructure support. Businesses must take the initiative in innovation and invest in sustainable business models. Local communities need to raise awareness and actively participate in operations, while tourists play an important role in practicing responsible consumption. It can be affirmed that developing culinary tourism based on circular economy principles is the key to simultaneously achieving two objectives: environmental protection and economic growth. This is not only consistent with Vietnam’s green tourism development strategy but also contributes to the fulfillment of international commitments on sustainable development and climate change adaptation.

References:

- Doan Manh Cuong (2025). Green tourism development in the context of climate change. <https://vietnamtourism.gov.vn/post/62954>.
- Duc Anh (2025). Growth in retail sales of goods and consumer services meets government targets. <http://baokiemtoan.vn/tang-truong-ban-le-hang-hoa-va-dich-vu-tieu-dung-dai-muc-tieu-chinh-phu-de-ra-37533.html>.
- Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2021). Completing the Picture: How the Circular Economy Tackles Climate Change. <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/completing-the-picture>.
- Ellis, A., Park, E., Kim, S., & Yeoman, I. (2018). What Is Food Tourism? *Tourism Management*, 68, 250-263. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2018.03.025>.
- European Commission (2015). Closing the Loop: An EU Action Plan for the Circular Economy. Brussels.
- Hall, C. M., & Sharples, L. (2003). *Food Tourism Around the World: Development, Management and Markets*. Butterworth-Heinemann. ISBN 0-7506-5503-8.
- Ly Hoang Phu (2023). Application of circular economy in culinary tourism in Japan and some recommendations for Vietnam. *Journal of Economics and Forecasting*, No. 32. <https://kinhtevadubao.vn/ung-dung-kinh-te-tuan-hoan-trong-du-lich-am-thuc-tai-nhat-ban-va-mot-so-kien-nghi-cho-viet-nam-29185.html>.
- Ngoc Ha (2024). Culinary tourism: A new trend boosting Vietnam’s tourism. <https://vietnamtourism.gov.vn/post/57557>.
- Nguyen Thi Hong Yen (2024). Developing Vietnamese culinary tourism toward sustainability. *Journal of Economics and Forecasting Online*. <https://kinhtevadubao.vn/phat-trien-du-lich-am-thuc-viet-nam-theo-huong-ben-vung-29913.html>.
- Phan Huy Xu, Tran Minh Tam (2017). Promote Culinary Tourism in Ho Chi Minh City. *Van Lang University Journal of Science*, No. 03, pp. 78-85.
- Prime Minister of Vietnam (2020). Decision No. 147/QĐ-TTg approving the Vietnam Tourism Development Strategy to 2030. <https://vietnamtourism.gov.vn/docs/908>.
- Tourism Information Center (2024). Hanoi voted the World’s Leading Culinary City 2024. <https://vietnamtourism.gov.vn/post/58983>.
- Tourism Information Center (2025). Vietnam tourism towards green and sustainable development for the future. <https://vietnamtourism.gov.vn/post/62278>.
- Tuong Bach (2022). Can cuisine help position Vietnam’s tourism brand? <https://vneconomy.vn/automotive/am-thuc-co-the-giup-dinh-vi-thuong-hieu-du-lich-viet-hm>.
- UNWTO (2017). *Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals: Journey to 2030*. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgkz326/files/publications/UNWTO_UNDP_Tourism%20and%20the%20SDGs.pdf.