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# Domestic Tourism Impacts on Local Destinations During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Canadian Case Study

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**Abstract:** The constraints imposed on travel during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. closed borders, vaccination passport) have led to a drastic drop in international tourism in favor of domestic tourism. Given this context, we analyze domestic tourism impacts on local destinations during the COVID-19 pandemic based on facts reported in daily and local newspapers. To this aim, we use Canada as a case study, where 193 articles published on domestic tourism between March 2020 and September 2021 were identified. Through content analysis, 83 different impacts were identified, of which 72.3% were negative. These impacts were then classified according to the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable tourism. We show that 47% were economic impacts, and of these impacts, the majority were negative. Finally, we identify the impacts most frequently reported in the articles. The most frequently reported positive impacts in Canada include the growth in the number of visitors to outdoor destinations and the opportunity to offset the losses caused by the absence of international tourists, while the most frequently reported negative impacts include the pressure on government to increase aid to the tourism industry and the inability of local tourists to fully substitute for international tourists. These observations put public interventions that aim to promote domestic tourism into perspective by highlighting the related opportunities and risks.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Domestic Tourism, COVID-19, Pandemic, Canada

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## 1. Introduction

Several countries around the world closed their borders at different times in 2020 and 2021 to manage the spread of COVID-19. While these closures caused the temporary suspension of international travel, they also generated an increase in domestic tourism, especially in Europe and North America [1].

On the one hand, for international destinations, while the temporary suspension of international travel has had several negative social and economic consequences, it has mainly had positive consequences for the environment. In fact, from an environmental standpoint, global greenhouse gas emissions in 2020 decreased by 7% compared to 2019, particularly due to the closure of national borders and containment measures that severely limited international and national air travel [1]. The pressure of tourism activities on flora and fauna also decreased in international destinations

that usually received millions of visitors per year, such as in Turkey [2], Egypt [3], New Zealand [4], Thailand [5], and in many European natural parks [6]. At the social and economic levels, the consequences of stopping international travel was especially negative for these international destinations, as a significant part of their economy is based on the businesses, activities, and jobs generated by tourism.

On the other hand, for local destinations, the increase in demand for domestic tourism observed in several countries had varying consequences at the economic, social, and environmental levels depending on the carrying capacity of local destinations. Such carrying capacity is defined as the number of tourists that a destination is able to support without suffering any deterioration of the physical, economic, or socio-cultural environment, or an unacceptable decrease in visitor satisfaction [1]. In Europe and North America, outdoor destinations near large urban centers seem to have taken advantage of this increase to significantly offset the lack of international tourists from an

economic standpoint [7-9]. However, from an environmental and social standpoint, many of them quickly exceeded their carrying capacity. For example, the press reported problems such as the significant increase in traffic congestion, parking problems, non-compliance with sanitary measures, looting of some public places, and complaints from local residents. Examples of these problems have been reported in Canada, including Glen Morris, Gray Sauble, Niagara-on-the Lake and Northern Bruce, as well as in the United States and Europe [10].

In this paper, using Canada as a case study, we propose an approach based on the facts reported in daily and local newspapers to identify and analyze both the positive and negative impacts of the increase in domestic tourism on the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable tourism. The approach is not only replicable in various national contexts, but also lends itself well to the study of tourism issues at the local scale, which data from national statistical surveys do not allow us to easily capture. Particularly in Canada, such a study has not yet been carried out to our knowledge. Finally, by analyzing the impacts of the increase in domestic tourism on the three dimensions of sustainable tourism, the proposed approach allows us to better understand the nature and extent of the impacts of the shift from international to domestic travel.

The remainder of this paper is divided as follows. Section 2 presents a review of the literature on the impacts of the increase in domestic tourism on the three dimensions of sustainable tourism. The review highlights that such impacts could be negative or positive, depending on the carrying capacities of the destinations. Section 3 describes the data used to identify and analyze these impacts for the Canadian case study. The data consists of a compilation of 193 press articles that were published in Canada from the start of the pandemic in March 2020 until September 2021. Section 4 presents the analysis strategy for 83 reported impacts in the daily and local newspapers. We identify, classify, and characterize these impacts according to their nature (positive or negative), the dimensions covered (economic, environmental, or social), and their occurrence within the articles. The conclusion follows, where we provide the main implications in terms of public policy.

## 2. Literature Review

As we will discuss in this section, research on domestic tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic has indicated that depending on the carrying capacities of the destinations, tourism impacts could be positive or negative in economic, environmental, and social terms.

### 2.1. Economic Impacts

At the economic level, three main positive impacts are generally discussed in the literature. First, recent research has showed that the increase in the number of local tourists has partially offset the loss of income due to the lack of international tourists [11]. For example, in Belgium, Sholtz

and De Ridder (2021) showed that citizens, on average, dedicated 19% more of their income to trips to Belgium compared to 2019 (i.e., €179.15 more) [9]. In Spain, Arbulú et al. (2021) argued that domestic tourism was able to limit the loss of income incurred due to the pandemic by contributing 33% of the number of overnight stays recorded in 2020 [12]. On the other hand, this compensation mainly benefited destinations near major centers. According to Piganiol (2021), the Airbnb platform modified its algorithms in order to present travelers with stays near the place they are making the reservation; the platform also multiplied the slogans encouraging local tourism (e.g., “travel local,” “go close,” “explore the surroundings”) [13]. Being a local destination rather than a recognized international destination has become a pledge of resilience for regions on the outskirts of large urban centers. Masclanis (2020) cites the example of the Occitanie region in France, where the tourism fabric is 70% French and strong regional demand (37% of the total) has enabled tourism operators in the region to be economically resilient [8]. Moreover, the benefits of domestic tourism were found to be greater in Western countries than in developing countries, where the tourist economy depends mainly on international tourists from Europe and North America [14].

Second, with restrictions on international travel, domestic tourism became a key economic option in regions where tourism is a major source of employment, along with the maintenance of basic local services, such as retailers and resorts. Lapointe (2020) highlights the example of the Charlevoix region in Quebec, where 30% of jobs depend on the tourism industry, as well as the Tadoussac region, which welcomes an estimated 375 visitors per resident but struggles to keep its local services outside the tourist season [15]. Cloutier and Renard (2020) argue the important role of local agro-tourism in times of COVID-19 – particularly in Quebec cider industries – as they highlight the contribution of local agri-food consumption by domestic tourists to reviving the economy [16]. In the same vein, Romagnoli and Charron (2020) showed how local artists, artisans, and cultural companies – as standard bearers of Quebec heritage – were able to attract Quebec tourists in order to revive the local and regional economy [17].

Finally, many governmental aid programs specifically targeted domestic tourism to boost the local and regional economy [18]. Many local destinations were able to benefit from these public interventions. The OECD (2020) report gives some examples. Portugal, for instance, spent 1.7 billion euros on accommodation providers, restaurants, and travel agencies [11]. Croatia delayed the payment of tourist taxes and fees, and increased liquidity. In Iceland, the payment and collection of tourist taxes was suspended from April 2020 to December 2021, and citizens over the age of 18 received a total of 1.5 billion Icelandic kroner (approximately 10 million dollars) in the form of gift certificates for local travel. In France, the government injected nearly 18 billion euros into the domestic tourism economy [8]. Among other things, the French government modified the conditions for cancelling trips and reservations, allowing reimbursements to

be replaced by a credit or gift voucher of an equivalent amount on a future service, in order to stabilize the situation of businesses, particularly small ones [8].

Despite these positive impacts, the increase in domestic tourism also generated costs for tourism operators. First, many of the health measures imposed by governments to manage the spread of COVID-19 forced tourism operators to adapt their service offerings. These adaptation measures led to a sometimes-substantial increase in management costs for tourism operators in the accommodation, catering, retail, cultural, and leisure activity sectors. These include costs related to hygiene (e.g., purchase of cleaning products and equipment; more frequent cleaning), physical distancing (e.g., limitation of the number of places and customers; arrangement of additional spaces) and digitization for companies not yet used to investing in information and communication technologies (Briant et al., 2020). The increase in administrative costs should also be added to these costs, including the management of temporary layoffs [17] or for the hiring of additional labor to perform maintenance and cleaning tasks [18].

In sum, the operating costs and necessary investments are sometimes higher than the income potential, which still leads to the closure of some businesses. This situation was observed by Fakir and Erraoui (2021) among tourism operators who saw their expenses increase due to the purchase of various products and compulsory health protection equipment [19]. Even with an increase in the prices of services, the low volume of customers resulting from the various restrictions still leads them to closure [19].

## 2.2. Social Impacts

At the social level, the impacts of the increase in domestic tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic were perceived differently, depending on the tourism activities that prevailed before the pandemic.

Indeed, for many local destinations, the social impacts were mostly negative, especially for those that never received many visitors historically or are known for their tranquility. A sense of fear spread, as the pandemic evolved, among non-urban and less affected areas [20]. At the root of this fear, the risk of a massive influx of domestic travelers from urban centers is often cited. The cancellation of major events and festivals that traditionally attract tourists to large urban centers amplified this fear. Further, the transfer of mass tourism to non-urban areas led local populations to invoke arguments relating to the need to protect older populations, which are more numerous in several regions far from large urban centers [21].

The problems of cohabitation between tourists and local residents are identified among the negative social impacts discussed in the literature. Many examples have been observed in North America and Europe. In Quebec, some tourist regions expressed concern about an increased presence in second homes or an exclusively tourist clientele that would affect the local social fabric [21]. In Picton, Prince Edward County, a petition called for curbing the influx of tourists during the

pandemic, garnering 7,000 signatures [22]. In Spain, the village of Ribadesella experienced several tumultuous situations that have angered local citizens (urban tourists complaining of the noise emitted by donkeys or the crowing of a rooster in the morning). Thus, a poster campaign was deployed to “respond” to domestic tourists, asking them to adapt to local living conditions and specificities [23].

For other destinations where there was previously international overtourism, domestic tourism decreased the number of visitors, which increased the well-being of citizens, even as tourism revenues declined. For example, Snijders (2020) observed some relief in Amsterdam from the containment and halt of the influx of international tourists into the historic heart of the city [24]. Residents rejoiced at the sudden absence of noise, littering, or urine in public space. The residents gradually reclaimed their living space. Szymkowska (2020) found a similar feeling in Poland (like a “weight withdrawing” with the end of overtourism and speculation in the real estate rental market), despite fears related to the loss of income [25]. Previous research also attributes a much greater social acceptability to domestic tourism than international tourism: It tends to disperse tourists in regions that are less frequented by traditional international tourists and promotes more balanced regional development [26, 27]. Sholtz and De Ridder (2021) confirm this in their study on the Belgian case [9]: Domestic tourists declared that they intended to reduce the size of their travelling groups. Decreases in group sizes were also observed in other studies, on the grounds of fear of transmission of the virus, which aligns well with the sentiment of resident populations [28, 29].

## 2.3. Environmental Impacts

At the environmental level, the impacts of the increase in domestic tourism were generally negative because tourism demand generated greater pressure on natural spaces, protected areas, and nautical destinations.

In fact, the increased domestic tourism first created new problems, such as the introduction of new types of waste, including disposable sanitary masks and new chemical pollutants such as soap by-products and cleaning products. In addition, other emerging problems resulted from the mismatch between tourist behavior and the very nature of a destination, especially since there was also often a lack of security staff. McGinlay et al. (2020) note the appearance of unauthorized activities such as fires and BBQs in natural parks or boats in protected waterways, or the presence of various unauthorized pets [6]. In France, in the Mercantour Natural Park, shepherds complained about many dogs without a leash scaring the sheep and disrupting their work. In addition, tourists sometimes ran after sheep to take selfies with them, which caused great anxiety in these animals [30]. Abuses in terms of noise pollution and interpersonal skills were also deplored [6].

In addition, the influx of tourists in some non-urban areas, such as natural parks and coastal regions, amplified problems already observed prior to the pandemic. In regions already

weakened by climate change, for instance, an increase in the number of tourists was likely to have significant impacts [31]. Also, the drop in frequentation of certain accommodations (hotels, lodges, Airbnb, etc.) in favor of campsites or wilderness camping, where individuals are in “control” of their space, tends to lead to the development of wild and predatory tourism of local flora and fauna, which does not take into account its negative externalities (e.g., waste, air pollution) [21]. The Chatham Islands in New Zealand represent another illustrative case of saturation during the pandemic of an already fragile territory, with tourist visits in 2020 greatly exceeding the approximately 2,000 annual tourists recorded in previous years [4]. Along the same lines, McGinlay et al. (2020) showed in a study of 14 European national natural parks that considerable tourist flows exacerbated the lifestyles, behaviors, and territories of protected animals in various ways, particularly due to the need to develop more spaces for parking, more noise due to the greater presence of motorized vehicles, and the increase in incidents of non-compliance with health measures by some visitors [6].

However, other studies showed positive environmental impacts. For example, in Europe, to accommodate the increase in the number of tourists, some governments increased subsidies to agencies responsible for the management of natural parks and protected areas, which helped to contribute to their maintenance and preservation [6]. The rise in domestic tourism also allowed for offsetting the drop in international tourism in terms of visits to natural and protected sites while helping to stabilize – at least partially – maintenance and preservation jobs. Due to a lack of labour linked to successive lockdowns and the drop in the number of tourists, some vulnerable sectors have had to close temporarily, which has helped to revitalize them. Arnaux and Da Re (2020) studied the case of the Pont du Gard in the south of France, a highly frequented biodiversity reserve that closed its doors during 2020 due to the absence of visitors and was left without any maintenance due to a lack of staff available on site. When they returned to the site at the reopening after a few months, the teams were able to observe the effects of this “release of pressure” on the local ecosystem (spontaneity of the landscape, redevelopment of wild flora, natural reinforcement of green and blue networks, etc.). Although temporary, this closure allowed a major natural tourist site to revitalize [32].

In short, the positive and negative impacts varied greatly from one tourist region and from one country to another, and according to the tourism context that prevailed before the pandemic. These regional disparities justify the relevance of developing an approach for identifying and classifying tourism impacts in order to draw up an assessment prior to public interventions in the tourism sector. In this paper, we present an analytical approach that we applied to local Canadian destinations, to show how these impacts affected them.

### 3. Data and Methods

The data used come from a compilation of daily and local

newspapers covering facts on tourism from March 11, 2020, when the pandemic was declared by the World Health Organization, to September 30, 2021. The use of daily and local newspapers offers an alternative to compensate for the limitations of national statistical data to capture issues at a local scale.

For illustration purposes, we investigate the case of pandemic tourism in Canada. Using the search engines Eureka, Google News, and local dailies from provinces across Canada, we identified all the articles reporting facts about tourism published between March 11, 2020 and September 31, 2021, using the following keywords (in English and French): *Pandemic, tourism, overtourism,, tourist, travel, traveler, vacation, local, COVID-19, COVID, Quebec, British Columbia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Northwest Territories, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Abitibi-Témiscamingue, Bas -Saint-Laurent, Capitale - Nationale, Center-du-Québec, Chaudière-Appalaches, Côte-Nord, Estrie, Gaspésie – Îles-de-la-Madeleine, Lanaudière, Laurentides, Laval, Mauricie, Montérégie, Montreal, Nord-du -Quebec, Outaouais, Saguenay – Lac-Saint-Jean, Impact, COVID-19, COVID, coronavirus, Canada, Alberta, Manitoba, Nunavut, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Yukon.*

A total of 193 articles dealing with the impacts of tourism on local destinations during the pandemic were identified after articles relayed by more than one medium were removed. The titles and links for these 193 articles are presented in the appendix.

By categorizing the articles according to the type of impacts reported and the economic, environmental, and social dimensions covered (see Table 1), we observed that in Canada, most articles were discussing both the positive and negative impacts of tourism in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, negative impacts were reported more often (170 articles) than positive impacts (140 articles), and most of the discussions focused on the economic dimension.

**Table 1.** Number of articles reporting economic, social and environmental impacts.

	Reporting positive impacts	Reporting negative impacts
Economic	139	153
Social	30	41
Environmental	6	28
Total <sup>1</sup>	140	170

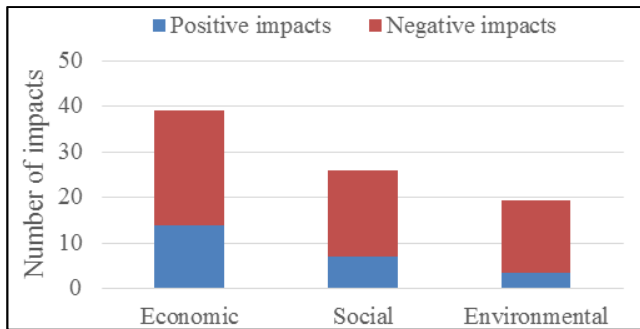
<sup>1</sup> Since each article can cover more than one dimension at a time, the total is not equal to the sum of the articles covering the three dimensions.

## 4. Analysis Strategy and Discussion

### 4.1. Analysis Strategy

To analyze the impacts of increased domestic tourism in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic, we compiled all impacts reported in the 193 articles and classified them according to the three dimensions of sustainable tourism. A total of 83 impacts were identified, of which 72.3% were

negative impacts. As shown in Figure 1, the number of reported negative impacts is far higher than the positive impacts for all dimensions.



**Figure 1.** The of positive and negative impacts reported by the press by dimension of sustainability.

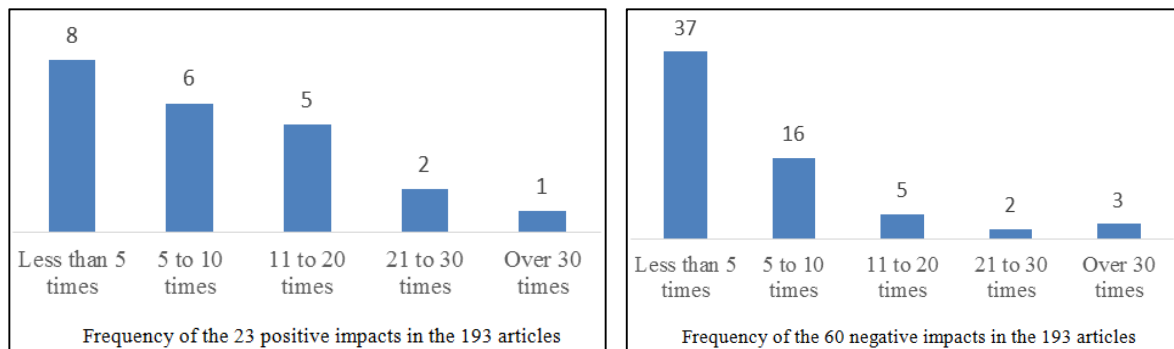
Subsequently, each dimension was subdivided into two categories of impacts, as presented in Table 2. Under the economic dimension, we distinguish the impacts reported on tourism businesses (e.g., costs, incomes) and on local economic development (e.g., attraction of public and private investments). Under the social dimension, we distinguish the impacts on the quality of life of local residents (e.g., complaints related to tourism) as well as on the experience of domestic tourists (e.g., longer length of stay). Finally, under the environmental dimension, we distinguish the impacts on the built environment (e.g., construction of new facilities) and on the natural environment (e.g., air and water pollution).

Thus, under the economic dimension, Table 2 shows that for tourism operators and businesses, the negative impacts outnumber the positive impacts. Although the possibility of

offering activities, products, and services was looked for in order to limit losses, it often entailed many additional adaptation costs in the context of a health crisis, such as the purchase of sanitary equipment, switch to digital technology, reduction in reception capacities, increase in supply costs, and recruitment issues in the context of labor shortages. However, for regional and local economic development, 8 of the 13 reported impacts were positive, including the increase in popularity of local products, expansion of the local tourist base, increased business opportunities for outdoor destinations, regional visibility gained from potential new residents, attraction of public and private investments, and online visibility thanks to the acceleration of the digital shift.

Under the social dimension, the negative impacts that were reported outnumber the positive impacts related to the quality of life of residents, while more positive impacts were identified for visitors and tourists. The increase in the number of tourists often came with difficult cohabitation between residents and tourists, for example, due to parking space saturation, goods and services shortages, or the loss of tranquility in some residential sectors. For tourists, however, more positive impacts were observed, including the drop in certain accommodation prices and the spread of the tourism season, which allows them to visit destinations earlier or later during the year.

Finally, under the environmental dimension, the reported impacts are mostly negative, both for the built environment and for the natural environment. For the built environment, problems were related to the presence of vehicles causing pollution and noise, as well the lack of sanitation infrastructure. For the natural environment, problems were related to waste, pollution, and pressure on natural areas.



**Figure 2.** Occurrences of the 83 impacts in the 193 articles.

**Table 2.** Key themes of the identified impacts.

		Total impacts reported	Positive impacts reported	Negative impacts reported
Economic impacts	Tourism-related businesses	26	6	20
	Local development	13	8	5
	Sub-total	39	14	25
Social impacts	Quality of life of locals	14	2	12
	Tourist experience	12	5	7
	Sub-total	26	7	19
Environmental impacts	Build environment	10	1	9
	Natural environment	8	1	7
	Sub-total	18	2	16
Total		83	23	60

Finally, we identified the most cited tourism impacts in the daily and local newspapers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, Figure 2 shows the number of times the impacts were identified in the 193 articles. Among the 23 positive impacts, 8 impacts were reported less than 5 times, 6 were reported 5 to 10

times, and 8 were reported more than 10 times. These 8 positive impacts listed in Table 3 are essentially economic impacts. Of the 60 negative impacts, 37 were reported less than 5 times, 16 were reported 5 to 10 times, and 10 were reported more than 10 times. These 10 negative impacts are further listed in Table 3.

*Table 3. Impacts cited more than 10 times.*

Most cited positive impacts	Most cited negative impacts
<b>ECONOMIC</b>	
Tourism-related businesses	
Offsetting opportunity for the losses caused by the absence of international tourists	Domestic tourism is unable to fully offset the absence of international tourists
Increase in spending by Canadians on domestic tourism	Cancellation, postponement, or reduction in the number of events due to health measures
New opportunities for businesses offering outdoor-related goods, services, and activities	Lower revenue due to the decrease in the overall number of tourists
Increase in revenue in the agritourism businesses	Lower revenue due to the drop in the occupancy rate of accommodations
Maintenance or increase in demand for camping and lodging in natural parks	Closures of tourism businesses due to overly strict sanitary measures
Stimulation of innovation and creativity among tourism operators	Lower revenue due to health measures that require a reduction in reception capacities
	Lower expense of local tourists compared to international tourists
	Dismissal of employees due to the temporary or partial suspension of business activities
	Decrease in opening hours due to lack of manpower
	Temporary or partial suspension of business activities
	Increased management costs due to strict health measures
	Few adaptation alternatives, unlike teleworkable activity sectors
Regional and local development	
Increase in the number of visitors to outdoor destinations (e.g., beach, hiking)	Pressure on governments to increase aid to the tourism industry
Attraction of new visitors and tourists in non-urban areas	Lower domestic tourist base in destinations close to provincial or national borders
Attraction of public and / or private investments	The few job opportunities are low-paid jobs
Increase in local consumption and buying	Business recovery can take time
New economic opportunities for regions with natural areas and beaches	
<b>SOCIAL</b>	
Quality of life of locals	
Attraction of new residents	Difficult cohabitation between tourists and residents
	Increase in residents' dissatisfaction with tourists
Tourist experience	
Opportunity for longer stays for domestic tourists compared to previous years	Need to implement regulatory measures
Opportunity to visit destinations earlier or later during the year	Few or no major attractions and events
<b>ENVIRONMENTAL</b>	
Natural environment	
	Decrease in transport services to destinations far from large urban centers
	Increase in cases of wild camping
	Littering on beaches
Built environment	
	Illegal parking of vehicles on private or prohibited land
	Saturation of parking spaces
	Lack of public service and equipment capacity

## 4.2. Discussion

The paper shows that the increase in domestic tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic did not have only advantages. Although such an increase allowed tourism businesses in these destinations to maintain or even increase their revenues, it also generated operating costs (e.g., purchase of sanitary equipment, space planning), social problems (e.g., problems of cohabitation between locals and tourists) and environmental issues (e.g., new waste and pollutants).

For some destinations, the influx of local tourists compensated for undertourism, that is, it limited losses due to the absence of international tourists. Indeed, the costs were lower for these destinations because they already had sufficient reception capacity in terms of space, services,

and accommodation, and they already had reservation systems.

Thus, for these destinations, the influx of local tourists meant the maintenance of jobs as well as increases in well-being and quality of life if they were too busy before the pandemic. Also, it was easier to obtain government assistance because they were already used to applying for such funds.

For other destinations, this increase generated a form of overtourism, as their carrying capacity is limited in terms of space, accommodations, and services to meet needs that were non-existent before the pandemic. For these destinations, the operating costs were higher because of the need to expand their products, spaces and services, and to develop new reservation systems. In addition, small destinations of less

than a few thousand inhabitants were affected not only by the lack of labor due to the pandemic, but also by the fact that they were previously known for their tranquility: more tourists and tranquility is not a good combination.

## 5. Conclusion

Media content analysis offers an original exploratory reading of the tourism impacts observed in various Canadian regions and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Daily and local newspapers provide an alternative source of information in a context where statistical data is limited to capture issues at the local scale.

This paper shows not only the limits but also the potential of such an approach to provide insights on tourism impacts at the local level. While the analysis does not allow for quantifying, it helps identify local problems and opportunities attributed to the increase of domestic tourism on the three dimensions of sustainable tourism. Furthermore, the approach allows us to better understand the nature and extent of the impacts of the shift from international travel to domestic travel.

The positive and negative impacts vary from one tourist region and from one country to another, and according to the tourism context that prevailed before the pandemic. These regional disparities justify the relevance of developing an approach for identifying and classifying the impacts that regions and countries can adopt in order to draw up an assessment prior to public interventions in the tourism sector.

Policy measures taken by both local and national governments should therefore consider the characteristics of the destinations. The list of issues presented in this paper could thus serve as a framework in order to carry out a more extensive analysis of the potential problems related to the substitution of international tourism by domestic tourism, as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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