

Systems approach to inclusive and intergenerational trail development

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Abstract

Thematic trails are increasingly recognised as multifunctional tourism products that go beyond wayfinding to serve as platforms for heritage interpretation, community engagement, and social learning. Yet their potential to serve all visitors equally, regardless of age, ability, or background, remains underexplored in the research literature. This paper examines how a systems perspective can integrate the principles of universal design, intergenerational learning, and participatory governance into a coherent framework for inclusive trail development. Drawing on a qualitative case study of the Discover Vipava Through Time, Culture and Nature trail in the Vipava Valley, Slovenia, the paper presents empirical findings from semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The results reveal that accessibility functions as a chain in which a single weak link, whether in transport, information provision, physical infrastructure, or programme design, is sufficient to disrupt an otherwise inclusive experience. The paper further demonstrates that intergenerational learning and community participation are not supplementary features but structural conditions for sustainable trail development. A causal-loop diagram is proposed that maps the reinforcing and balancing dynamics driving trail quality, and practical implications are outlined for trail planners, destination managers, and policymakers committed to socially responsible tourism.

Keywords: inclusive tourism, universal design, intergenerational learning, thematic trails, systems thinking, participatory governance

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