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**Extended Abstract**

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**Degrowth approaches as a leverage point for increasing the quality of life for inhabitants of small island tourism destinations**

A number of specific challenges related to spatial contextualities are arising from different pressures to social and ecological issues in vulnerable and/or peripheral coastal and small island tourism destinations. As is frequently the case for the more popular small island destinations, tourism is perceived both as a blessing and as a curse. Positive aspects of tourism for small islands include the sector's role as an essential part of the local economy and the provision of employment and critical infrastructure (such as public transport and logistics) (Gössling 2003). Compared to mainland destinations, common challenges and conflicts related to land use are often catalysed in these clearly delineated spaces with limited area, where actors from different sectors struggle for the 'right' approach to meeting diverse needs while providing services and infrastructure benefitting, amongst others, local citizens, tourists or external investors. Common challenges for island destinations include for example a high pressure on the island's resources (such as sweet water) or other issues related to the environmental impact of tourism, such as waste disposal and the conservation of biodiversity (Hall) but also touch upon social issues such as visitor-guest-relations (Yao et al. 2023). Recent literature on overtourism has highlighted conflicts evolving through the economic dependence on the tourism sector and its negative effects on the quality of life for islanders (Cheung and Li 2019, McLeod, Dodds and Butler 2021).

This paper argues that degrowth approaches can provide an alternative solution to neoliberal (housing) market dynamics and the above described established problems by taking the well-being of the islands' population centre stage. We thereby add to the recent uptake of degrowth approaches in the field of tourism, while acknowledging previous related research on sustainable tourism development, limits to growth, carrying capacities or community resilience (Cheer, Milano and Novelli 2019, Cheung and Li 2019). Resulting from an interest in (besides others) quality of life, locality and place, employment generation and the decommodification of tourism activity, the guiding philosophy of degrowth is directed to sustainable change (Kallis 2018), yet until today remains a largely theoretical concept. Therefore, the paper further aims to strengthen the link between existing (tourism) degrowth and quality of life scholarship, such as for example conducted by Andereck and Nyaupane (2011) or Uysal et al. (2016). We emphasise leverage points for enhancing the quality of life of local residents in the light of a high economic dependence on the

tourism sector and considering recent findings from tourism acceptance research (Seeler & Eisenstein 2023, Yao et al. 2023).

Our analysis of degrowth notions focuses on one of the most pressing issues at present, i.e. that of (the lack of) affordable housing for residents and seasonal staff. By incorporating degrowth-induced values such as the provision of decent housing for all instead of adhering to the dominant logic of housing policies that liberalize markets in the name of growth (Kallis 2018), this paper seeks to propose new ways of addressing problems many small island economies have in common (Hall 2010, McLeod, Dodds and Butler 2021). These approaches are supplemented by proposals especially made for touristic contexts, such as addressing the pressing need to reconcile host-guest convergences especially in the light of continued tourism growth trajectories (Milano, Novelli and Cheer 2019) or considering calls for regenerative tourism (Cave and Dredge 2020, Bellato, Frantzeskaki and Nygaard 2023). Finally, we seek to further explore the role of the limited amount of space as a potential catalyst for evolving conflicts between locals and guests.

Although a small amount of degrowth-related small island tourism papers already exists, this respective body of literature mainly focusses on Mediterranean or non-European island mass tourism destinations. Yet, with increasing negative impacts of the climate crises in these regions (e.g. increasing heat waves, bush fires and water shortages), which also strongly affect tourism (Arabadzhyan et al. 2021), touristic demand on the German island destinations is expected to increase (Spiekermann and Encke 2014). This entails an aggravation of existing local conflicts and necessitating awareness of regional tourism destinations for their responsibility to offer sustainable tourism which benefits both locals and guests.

We therefore develop our argument through the example of Germany's East Frisian Islands and how they anticipate and approach this projected increase in demand, focusing in particular on the unsolved issue of affordable housing for the local residents. As a popular coastal tourism destination, the East Frisian Islands in Northern Germany welcome a large number of guests, especially during public holidays in the spring and the summer season, and serve as a popular spot for second homes, often rented out as holiday flats. The islands' economies thus are highly dependent on the tourism sector which goes along with issues such as a shortage of skilled labour and accommodation (Nordwestzeitung 2018). The latter is true both for local residents seeking affordable housing independent from employers and for seasonal workers looking for temporary housing during the touristic season, adding the dimension of social sustainability within the topic of labour migration to the agenda (Salazar 2023). Due to their special situation in terms of geographic location and touristic attractiveness, the six municipalities with the highest square metre prices for owner-occupied properties in Lower Saxony are exclusively East Frisian island communities (Juist, Norderney, Langeoog, Spiekeroog, Wangerooge and Baltrum), with Juist ranking highest with 1.400 € per square metre (NBank 2023). While the income of local residents

is largely dependent on jobs created through the tourism industry, a field of tension exists between the economic dependence on one particular sector and the temporary perception of negative effects of tourism on the quality of life e.g. due to crowding during the high season. For example, many islands have had (or are still experiencing) incidents of citizens' initiatives campaigning against planned (luxury) hotel projects, e.g. most recently at Norderney (Nordwestzeitung 2024).

The results of our paper draw on a systematic review of scientific literature as well as the qualitative analysis of around 30 semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of the tourism sector, the political sphere and civil society actors from four East Frisian Islands in 2023, as well as a content analysis of relevant informal concepts (e.g. "Lebensraumkonzepte" (living environment concepts)) developed by the island municipalities and local planning agencies through participative processes with the islands' citizens.

Results suggest that adding the dimension of degrowth approaches to the process of governing tourism-induced land use conflicts may serve as a leverage point for focussing not only on economic growth and revenue rates, but keeping in mind and enhancing the quality of life of the island's residents. Through tailoring down alternative concepts of housing (although such initiatives are not always conceived in the name of degrowth, they embody many of its theoretical principles according to Kallis 2018) such as co-housing (Cattaneo 2010, Lietaert 2010), this presentation sheds light on possibilities to apply degrowth-related concepts such as de-commodification (Kallis 2018) to the above described context of prevalent conflict lines within tourism dependant island economies. For addressing the field of tension around the provision of new jobs through e.g. large hotel projects and conflicts arising through seasonality, a shortage of skilled labour and the emerging concurrency between residents and seasonal staff when it comes to affordable housing, Andriotis (2018) has found that "in the accommodation sector, the level of employment generated (as well as income) depends on the size of the establishment. In particular, small- and medium-sized enterprises provide more employment per visitor with less capital than larger ones. In contrast, international and large hotels are more capital-intensive, and have a lower employee per bed ratio for the reason that they cater for most of the tourists' needs" (p. 64 et seqq.). Against this backdrop, his proposal for policy makers to focus on degrowth as a form of development which is labour-intensive and takes under consideration the capabilities and resources of the host community while at the same time results in increased benefits to the local population is critically evaluated.

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