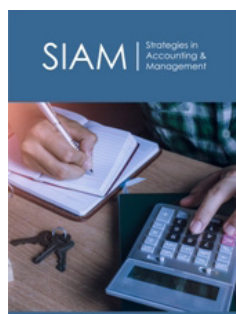


# Revitalizing San Bernardino: A Sustainable Approach to Alpine Tourism Development

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## Abstract

San Bernardino Swiss Alps, backed by a CHF 300 million investment, aims to transform the Grison Mountain village of San Bernardino into a year-round destination while preserving its natural heritage. This study investigates the sustainable development strategy implemented by the company, analysing the perspectives of local stakeholders and benchmarking against Andermatt Swiss Alps, a successful case of Alpine revitalization. While the project promises economic, social, and ecological benefits, concerns about environmental and cultural implications underline the importance of inclusive stakeholder engagement. Recommendations focus on enhancing winter and summer offerings and fostering collaborations with nearby regions. Moreover, this paper contributes to the broader discussion on sustainable tourism management in Alpine regions.

**Keywords:** Sustainable development; Destination management; Tourism; San Bernardino Swiss Alps; Stakeholder engagement; Economic impact; Ecological conservation

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## Introduction

The competitive identity of a tourist destination hinges on the seamless integration of natural, cultural, and service-oriented resources [1]. In recent decades, sustainable tourism development has become a central theme in destination management, especially in ecologically sensitive regions such as the Alps [2]. Balancing economic growth with environmental stewardship and social inclusivity presents a complex challenge for mountain destinations [3]. San Bernardino, located in the Grison region of Switzerland, is currently undergoing a large-scale transformation aimed at developing it into a premier Alpine destination: this initiative, supported by a CHF 300 million investment RSI [4], is led by entrepreneur Stefano Artioli and seeks to develop a year-round tourism model while ensuring environmental sustainability and local community engagement.

This paper examines the strategic approach underpinning San Bernardino's revitalization efforts, drawing comparisons with Andermatt Swiss Alps, a benchmark case of Alpine regeneration that successfully integrated luxury tourism, environmental consciousness, and stakeholder involvement [5]. The research contributes to the broader academic discourse on the intersection of destination development and sustainability by assessing the socio-economic and environmental implications of large-scale investments in Alpine tourism.

Given the accelerating impacts of climate change on mountain tourism, the revitalization of San Bernardino must be contextualized within broader global trends [6]. Rising temperatures and declining snowfall have forced traditional ski resorts to adapt by diversifying their offerings and investing in artificial snowmaking technologies [7]. Furthermore, the shift in traveler preferences towards experiential, eco-conscious tourism necessitates innovative approaches that align with sustainability principles [8]. The study also builds upon theoretical

frameworks such as Butler's [9] Tourism Area Lifecycle (TALC) model and Ramkissoon's [10] conceptualization of tourism impacts on community quality of life. By applying these frameworks, the paper evaluates how San Bernardino's possible stagnation phase can transition towards rejuvenation through strategic interventions.

### Research Objectives and Methodology

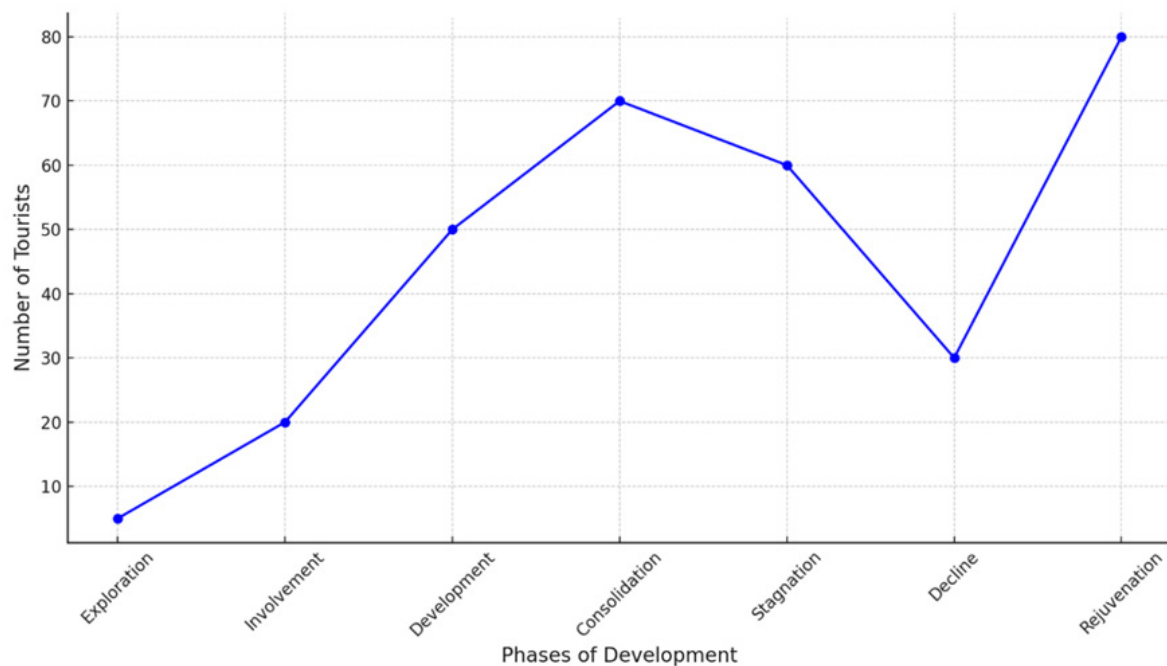
The study investigates the project's potential impacts on tourism, local stakeholders, and sustainable development. To achieve these objectives, a mixed-methods approach was employed. Primary data were collected through community surveys and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, such as local business owners and residents, between March and May 2024. Participants included 15 local business owners, representing sectors like hospitality, retail, and recreation, and 100 residents selected through stratified random sampling to ensure demographic diversity. Questions focused on perceptions of the proposed developments, anticipated benefits, and concerns about cultural and environmental impacts.

Semi-structured interviews provided deeper insights into stakeholder priorities and challenges. Key informants included municipal leaders, representatives from the San Bernardino Swiss Alps project, and local environmental groups. Interviews were conducted both in person and virtually, with discussions

lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. These qualitative data were analysed using thematic coding to identify recurring patterns and priorities. Secondary data were drawn from institutional reports, peer-reviewed journals, and case studies, with a particular focus on Andermatt's redevelopment (Financial Times, 2023) as a comparable benchmark [2]. These data sources provided context and comparative insights into the potential trajectory of San Bernardino's revitalization efforts.

### Conceptual Framework: Tourism Destination Lifecycle

The concept of Butler's Tourism Area Lifecycle provides a framework for understanding the stages of a destination's development. Figure 1 illustrates the key phases: exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and eventual outcomes of either decline or rejuvenation. Based on Butler's [9] model, San Bernardino's possible stagnation phase could necessitate innovative interventions, because rejuvenation might be critical to revitalizing its appeal in the competitive Alpine tourism market. This paper applies Ramkissoon [10] framework to evaluate socio-economic, cultural, and environmental trade-offs in tourism rejuvenation projects, emphasizing the need for integrated stakeholder participation.



**Figure 1:** Butler's tourism area lifecycle.

### Contextualizing San Bernardino

San Bernardino, situated at an elevation of 1,626 meters in the Grison region of Switzerland, embodies a rich blend of cultural heritage and natural beauty. Its strategic location on the Alpine transit route between northern and southern Europe historically made it a favored destination for noble Italian tourists drawn to the healing properties of its mineral waters. Today, this small

mountain village retains its allure through its pristine environment and unique cultural identity, combining Swiss quality with Italian charm.

The region offers a rich variety of natural assets and facilities for both winter and summer sports, presenting strong potential for year-round tourism development but facing several challenges that still limit its full exploitation. A primary issue is the decline

in skier numbers, which has adversely affected the local economy. Aging infrastructure, such as ski lifts and hospitality facilities, has compounded this issue, reducing competitiveness with other Alpine resorts. Seasonality poses another significant challenge, with sharp fluctuations in visitor numbers throughout the year because, during off-peak seasons, much of the infrastructure remains underutilized, leading to financial strain on local businesses and governance. Addressing these seasonal discrepancies requires strategic investments and diversification of activities to ensure sustainable economic activity throughout the year.

Climate change poses an additional challenge, as rising global temperatures and irregular snowfall patterns threaten the sustainability of traditional winter tourism. Projections from the IPCC [7] underscore the urgent need for adaptive measures. In response, San Bernardino has begun exploring eco-tourism initiatives, enhanced snowmaking technologies, and non-seasonal attractions such as wellness retreats and cultural festivals to broaden its appeal [6]. In addition to traditional tourism activities, an emerging trend in Switzerland is the integration of rural and agricultural tourism as a tool for sustainable economic diversification. Recent research highlights how immersive experiences in nature and rural landscapes not only appeal to travellers seeking authenticity but also contribute to environmental conservation and local economic resilience [11]. The concept of 'rural tourism' promotes low-impact, high-engagement activities such as organic farming experiences, wine tourism, and agritourism, which are increasingly attracting visitors who prioritize sustainability and cultural immersion over mass tourism. As Switzerland continues its transition towards sustainable tourism, incorporating elements of rural tourism could strengthen San Bernardino's positioning as a model for environmentally responsible Alpine development [11].

Preservation of cultural identity is equally critical because tourism, while economically beneficial, carries the risk of diluting local traditions and practices. To counter this, the community has initiated programs aimed at celebrating and promoting regional crafts, cuisines, and festivals, fostering a sense of pride and authenticity in the destination's offerings [2]. Considering these challenges, the San Bernardino Swiss Alps project - backed by a CHF 300 million investment - aims to rejuvenate the village as a model for sustainable Alpine tourism. By integrating innovative infrastructure, cultural preservation, and ecological stewardship, San Bernardino aims to enhance its tourism appeal while maintaining a balance between development and heritage conservation.

### Macro Trends Influencing Alpine Tourism

The Alpine tourism industry is at a pivotal juncture, shaped by a convergence of global trends that influence both visitor expectations and operational priorities. One of the most critical challenges is climate change, which has profoundly impacted snow-dependent tourism. According to the IPCC [7], rising global temperatures are projected to lead to significant snow cover reductions, rendering many ski resorts less viable. To mitigate these impacts, destinations are increasingly adopting artificial snowmaking technologies and diversifying their offerings beyond winter sports. For instance,

expanding activities such as hiking, cycling, and wellness tourism helps maintain year-round appeal [6].

Digital transformation is revolutionizing how destinations engage with visitors. Smart tourism technologies, such as mobile applications, augmented reality experiences, and real-time updates on weather and trail conditions, enhance the visitor experience and operational efficiency. Research by Gretzel et al. [12] highlights how digital innovations enable destinations to remain competitive in an era of personalized and immersive tourism. Remote work and digital nomadism are also emerging trends reshaping tourism dynamics. The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed a global shift towards flexible work arrangements, allowing individuals to combine leisure with productivity. Alpine regions like San Bernardino can capitalize on this trend by incorporating co-working spaces and long-stay packages that cater to remote workers seeking tranquil and inspiring environments [13,14].

Sustainability is another driving force influencing traveler preferences. Modern tourists increasingly prioritize eco-friendly options, such as carbon-neutral accommodations, local food sourcing, and reduced-impact activities. Gössling et al. [8] underscore the growing demand for green certifications and sustainable practices as a competitive differentiator for destinations. Finally, shifting demographics and visitor preferences are reshaping Alpine tourism. Millennials and Generation Z travelers favour experiential tourism, emphasizing unique cultural exchanges, adventure-based activities, and culinary experiences. To remain relevant, destinations must align their offerings with these preferences, integrating authentic and locally rooted experiences into their tourism strategies [15]. Alpine destinations like San Bernardino can secure their long-term viability and strengthen their position in the global tourism market.

### The Revitalization Plan

The revitalization of the area, led by San Bernardino Swiss Alps, encompasses a multifaceted approach to infrastructure development, sustainability, and community engagement. Key components of the plan include extensive upgrades to the village's amenities, the introduction of electric shuttles to reduce vehicular traffic, and the creation of pedestrian-friendly zones. Such measures aim to enhance the overall quality of life for residents while offering visitors a more immersive experience [8]. The Sport Arena represents a cornerstone of this initiative: by revitalizing the local ski facilities and introducing new year-round activities such as mountain biking and trekking, the project seeks to broaden its appeal to diverse demographics. Advanced snowmaking systems are being implemented to counteract the effects of climate change, ensuring consistent conditions for winter sports [7]. In addition, the plan prioritizes the integration of smart technologies. Features like automated ticketing systems, real-time trail monitoring, and mobile applications for navigation and event updates are being explored. Such technologies align with the principles of smart tourism, enhancing user experiences and operational efficiency [12].

Another critical component involves the expansion and diversification of accommodation facilities. New eco-friendly hotels and the refurbishment of existing lodgings aim to cater to a wider range of visitors, including families, luxury travelers, and budget-conscious tourists. These efforts not only address current deficiencies but also set a benchmark for sustainable hospitality practices [16]. The revitalization strategy also emphasizes cultural and environmental conservation. Efforts are being made to preserve local traditions and biodiversity through community-driven initiatives and eco-certification programs. By maintaining a balance between development and sustainability, San Bernardino can position itself as a model for responsible tourism development in Alpine regions [2].

### Stakeholder Perspectives

Engaging local stakeholders is crucial for the success of the San Bernardino Swiss Alps project: the community surveys conducted in

2024 revealed a mix of optimism and apprehension among residents. Figure 2 highlights the diverse groups influencing and influenced by the project, ranging from local businesses and government to environmental organizations and tourists, and illustrates the impact level of each stakeholder group on the project, measured on a scale from 1 to 5. A score of 1 represents minimal influence or concern, while a score of 5 indicates a high level of impact, either in terms of decision-making authority or the extent to which the project affects the group. While many expressed enthusiasms for the economic opportunities associated with increased tourism, concerns were raised about potential environmental degradation and cultural dilution. To address these issues, the project includes regular town hall meetings, transparent communication channels, and opportunities for residents to contribute to decision-making processes. Such initiatives aim to build trust and foster a sense of ownership among stakeholders.

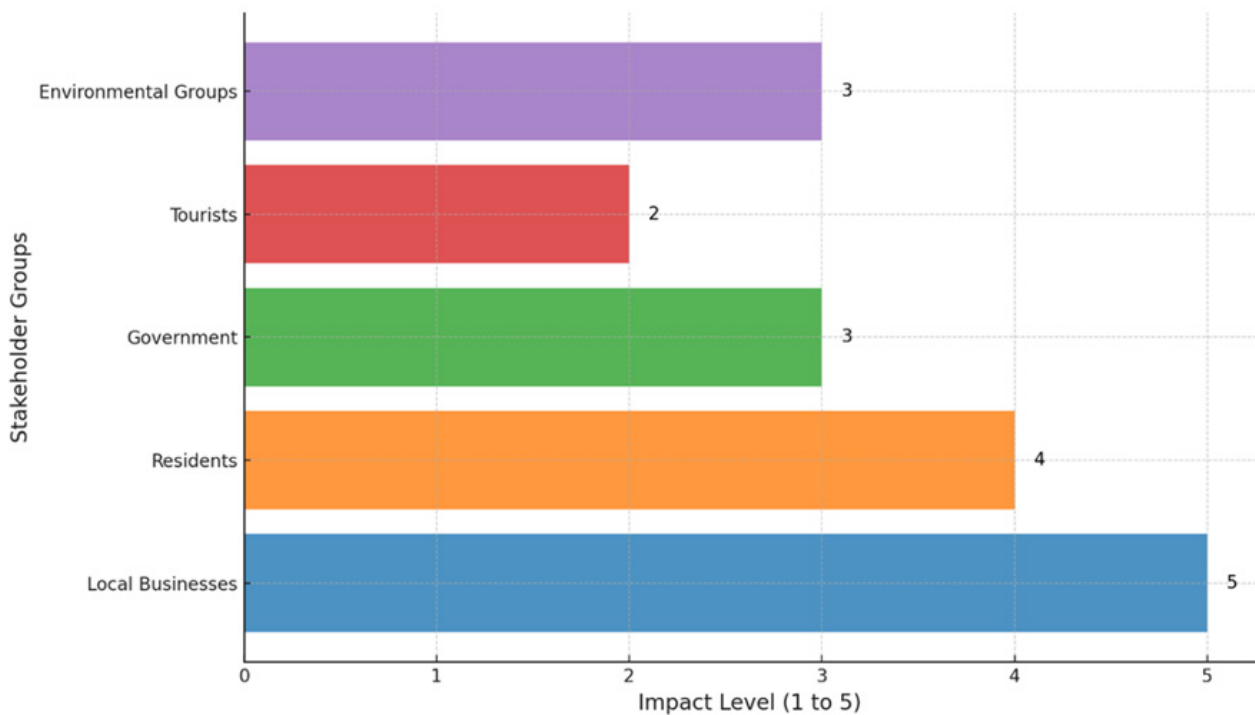


Figure 2: Stakeholder map for San Bernardino.

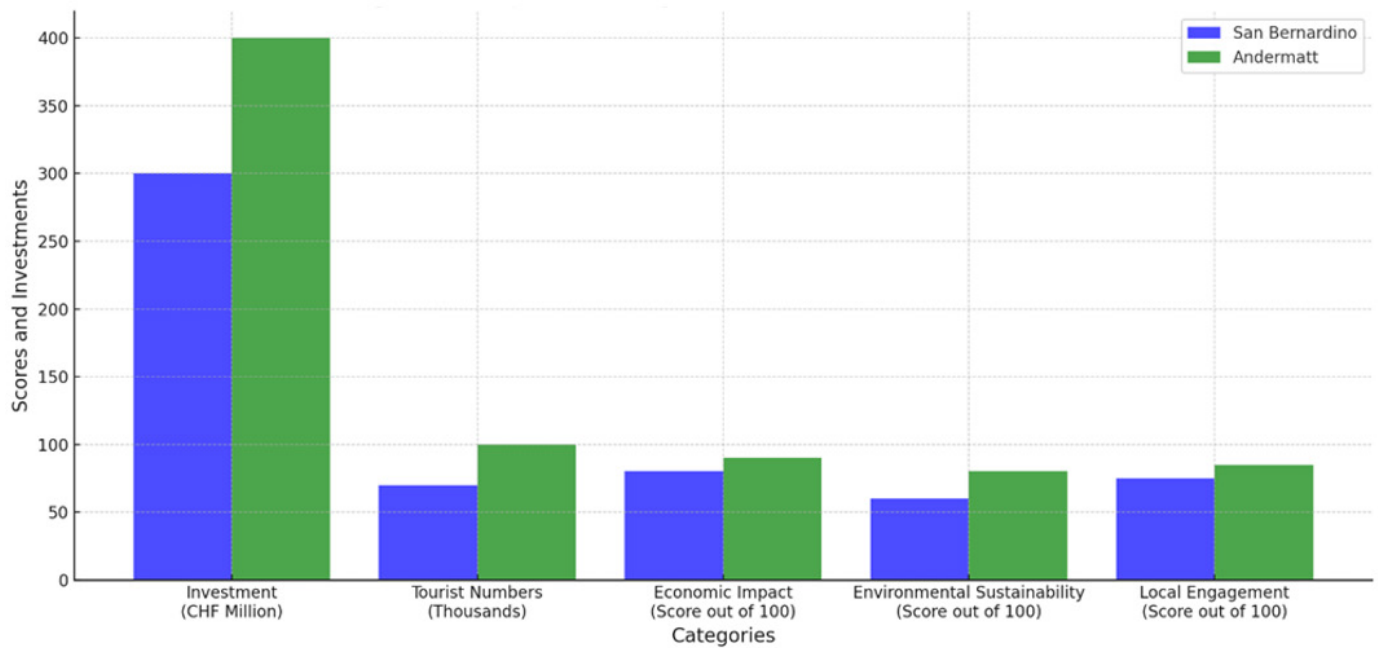
### Lessons from Andermatt

The transformation of Andermatt Swiss Alps under Samih Sawiris provides valuable insights for San Bernardino. Figure 3 compares the key metrics of the two projects, including investment levels, economic impact, and stakeholder engagement: the tourist numbers shown in the figure represent the average annual visitor count after the major investments in both destinations, reflecting the success of Andermatt’s redevelopment and the anticipated impact on San Bernardino. Andermatt’s success can be attributed to its holistic approach, which integrated luxury accommodations, diversified activities, and strategic marketing campaigns. The involvement of local communities and adherence to sustainable practices further enhanced its appeal, setting a benchmark for

similar projects.

The scoring in Figure 3 for economic impact, environmental sustainability, and local engagement was determined based on multiple indicators where the economic impact score was derived from local employment growth, revenue generation in the tourism sector; and the increase in real estate value in each destination [8]. The environmental sustainability score was assessed by evaluating measures such as carbon footprint reduction, renewable energy adoption, and conservation policies implemented in each location [6]. Finally, the local engagement score was assigned based on factors such as the level of public-private partnerships, community participation in decision-making, and the extent to which local businesses benefited from tourism development [17].





**Figure 3:** Comparative analysis of San Bernardino and Andermatt.

## Recommendations

The revitalization of San Bernardino requires a balanced approach that prioritizes sustainability, inclusivity, and innovation: expanding the range of activities offered during both summer and winter seasons is essential to mitigate the effects of climate variability and attract a broader audience. Introducing initiatives like cultural heritage festivals, eco-conscious tourism packages, and seasonal culinary experiences can further diversify the appeal of the destination [8]. Collaborations with regional partners, such as Splügen and other nearby Alpine destinations, should be formalized through strategic agreements. These partnerships can facilitate shared resources, integrated marketing campaigns, and the establishment of cross-regional transportation networks, increasing accessibility and appeal [15].

Furthermore, it is essential to incorporate advanced digital tools to enhance visitor experiences; these can include Augmented Reality (AR) trails, virtual tours of the region's history and culture, and mobile applications providing real-time information on weather, events, and local attractions. Such innovations align with current trends in smart tourism and cater to the expectations of tech-savvy travellers [12]. Stakeholder engagement remains critical. Establishing a stakeholder advisory board that meets quarterly to discuss progress, address concerns, and propose new ideas that can strengthen local support for the project. By involving residents, business owners, and environmental groups in the decision-making process, the project ensures a more equitable distribution of benefits and fosters long-term trust and collaboration [17].

## Conclusion

The San Bernardino Swiss Alps project illustrates the complexities of sustainable destination revitalization, emphasizing

the pivotal balance between economic growth and environmental and cultural stewardship [2]. Drawing on lessons from Andermatt, the initiative's success hinges on adaptive strategies, transparent governance, and active stakeholder participation. A key component is the integration of sustainability at every level, encompassing strict environmental standards, minimized carbon footprints, and the adoption of green technologies in energy and waste management [18]. By melding community-centred policies with cutting-edge innovation, the project has the potential to inspire other Alpine destinations.

On a broader scale, this revitalization effort can serve as a global model for sustainable tourism development, guiding regions seeking to rejuvenate their tourism sectors while preserving unique ecological and cultural identities [9]. By demonstrating the feasibility of balancing economic prosperity with responsible stewardship, San Bernardino Swiss Alps could become a beacon for the future of Alpine tourism. Continued monitoring, adaptive management, and collaboration will be vital to ensuring its long-term success and relevance in an ever-evolving global tourism landscape.

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