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Coastal, marine or blue tourism governance? Spotting academic trends through a bibliometric analysis

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Recognising the critical role of oceans in sustainable development, as emphasised by the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030), this study examines the evolution of academic research on blue tourism governance, a growing field situated at the intersection of marine sustainability, tourism development, and ocean governance. Blue tourism—encompassing coastal and marine tourism—is the largest and most economically significant component of the blue economy, yet its governance dimension remains relatively underexplored. To address this gap, a structured bibliometric analysis of Scopus-indexed publications from 1986 to 2024 was undertaken, using VOSviewer to identify conceptual patterns, thematic trends, and institutional contributions related to coastal, marine, and blue tourism governance. The results reveal a sharp increase in research output from 2010, particularly following the adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the launch of the Ocean Decade. Early literature focused predominantly on economic development and resource use, whereas recent publications increasingly emphasise sustainability, climate change, marine policy, stakeholder engagement, and integrated governance models. The findings also show growing disciplinary convergence, with environmental sciences, economics, and social sciences frequently intersecting in blue tourism governance discourse. This study clarifies the conceptual positioning of blue tourism within the blue economy framework and highlighting the shift towards governance-oriented scholarship. It identifies critical research gaps, such as including the need for adaptive, multilevel governance approaches and offers a foundation for future work aimed at enhancing the sustainability and equity of tourism in marine and coastal regions.

KEYWORDS

blue economy, sustainable development, ocean decade, coastal and marine tourism, ocean governance, VOSviewer

1 Introduction

The increasing strategic importance of oceans in sustainable development has led to a renewed emphasis on ocean-based governance, particularly under global initiatives such as the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030) (JPI Oceans, 2021). Within this evolving policy landscape, *blue tourism*—a term encompassing both coastal and marine tourism—has garnered attention as a critical economic and socio-environmental sector. Blue tourism (hereinafter BT) highly depends on healthy marine and coastal ecosystems, making its sustainability closely tied to environmental conditions. It has strong overlaps with sustainable tourism principles, particularly in balancing economic development with environmental conservation and community well-being. Blue tourism is now recognised as one of the fastest-growing and economically significant domains within the broader *blue economy*, contributing an estimated US\$4.6 trillion, or 5.2 percent of global Gross Domestic Products (GDP) in 2019 (Ocean Panel, 2022). It is a particularly vital element of the economy for small island and coastal communities, as the tourism sector represents a significant share of GDP, formal and informal employment, and foreign exchange earnings. International visitor expenditure directly accounted for more than 20% of nominal GDP in at least 15 SIDS in 2019. Some small countries, such as Seychelles, Maldives, Saint Lucia, and Antigua and Barbuda, are highly dependent on tourism, with international visitor spending making up a staggering 45% to 62% of their nominal GDP in 2019 (Bertrand and Hamilton, 2024). Yet its impacts extend well beyond economic metrics. Blue tourism exerts significant pressure on marine and coastal ecosystems, and its future viability is closely tied to effective environmental governance, climate resilience, and sustainable resource management (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005; Plan Bleu, 2020).

In this regard blue tourism aligns closely with the broader goals of *sustainable tourism*, defined as tourism that fully considers current and future environmental, social, and economic impacts, and seeks to balance the needs of tourists (overnight visitors) and same-day-visitors (UNWTO, 2016), host communities, industry actors, and ecosystems (UNWTO, 2016; Ghanem, 2017). However, despite its conceptual proximity to sustainability, the governance of blue tourism remains under-theorised. Existing research is fragmented across disciplines and often limited in its attention to institutional design, stakeholder coordination, and long-term ecological considerations (Ruhanen et al., 2010; Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2021).

Existing tourism governance research has evolved from state-centric models to emphasise multi-level governance, stakeholder participation, and adaptive, ecosystem-based approaches (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Pechlaner & Volgger, 2013). Yet, such frameworks are seldom applied systematically to the context of blue tourism. There remains limited understanding of who the major contributors to blue tourism governance research are, what dominant themes and concerns have emerged, and how the field is likely to evolve in light of contemporary environmental and

institutional pressures. Addressing this gap, the aim of this paper is to systematically map the academic landscape on blue tourism governance, identifying thematic trends, leading contributors, collaboration patterns, and research gaps that can inform future scholarship and governance-related policy development. By applying a bibliometric analysis to peer-reviewed literature indexed in Scopus, the study offers a structured overview of the field's evolution, intellectual foundations, and emerging priorities.

The bibliometric analysis explores blue tourism governance academic literature indexed in Scopus between 1986 and 2024. A structured, multi-phase review of academic literature (six scanning phases) was undertaken. The term *blue tourism* is relatively new and often overlaps with *coastal* and *marine tourism*; therefore, all three terms were included in the search, combined with governance-related to coastal, marine, and blue tourism governance. Given the varied interpretations of “governance,” the term “management” was used as a practical synonym to capture a broader set of relevant works. During the Scopus search, a series of filters was applied to refine the results. The search was limited to publications between 1986 and 2024, and only documents that included the keyword “tourism” in their abstracts were considered. The document types were further narrowed down to articles, book chapters, reviews, conference papers, and books. Researchers examined key indicators, including the number and type of publications, trends in publication over time, and the primary journals in which the research was published. Special attention was paid to the geographical origin of the publications to identify funding sponsors and affiliations. The findings from this process were then thoroughly examined and are summarised in a table (Table 1), which details the specific search strings, filters, and the number of documents found in each of the six scanning phases.

Finally, the data was exported to the software Visualization of Similarities Viewer program - VOSviewer to visually analyse keyword trends in the literature on “blue tourism” and its blue tourism governance literacy. In this final stage, firstly, the keyword analysis focused on comparing trending topics: blue tourism versus coastal and marine tourism searches, categorising the mapped terms by colours from the least to the most innovative during the studied period. The second final step of the keyword analysis explored the most relevant concerns related to “coastal, marine, blue tourism governance/management” search results and “BT governance”.

This analysis enabled a comparison of previous and more recent trends in the blue tourism governance framework. The objective is threefold: to determine the geographical and institutional profile of major research contributors; to analyse the dominant conceptual and policy-related concerns shaping the BT governance field; and to outline future directions for research and governance praxis. In doing so, this study aims to consolidate fragmented academic work, clarify conceptual boundaries, and inform a more coherent and forward-looking research agenda on blue tourism governance. By situating blue tourism within its ecological, economic, and policy contexts, the study contributes to a more integrative understanding of governance challenges and advances a research agenda oriented toward sustainability, equity, and resilience in coastal and marine tourism.

TABLE 1 Results from scanning phases.

Scanning Phase (S.P)	N. docs	Type of docs	Timeframe (1986- 2024) and peaks	Source (journals)	City/Territory
1. Blue Tourism	637	469 articles, 22 conference papers, 96 book chapters, 28 review articles	- Few only since 2000 - Most publications since 2012, 2017 - peaks 2016-2022, 2024	1) Marine Policy, 2) Ocean and Coastal Management, 3) Frontiers In Marine Science, 4) Journal of Coastal Research	US, UK, Australia, China, Spain, Italy, India.
2. Coastal, Marine, Blue Tourism	8,728	7,065 articles, 837 book chapters, 392 reviews articles, 325 conference papers, 109 books	- Most publications since 2007, 2016 - peaks from 2013, 2020	(1) Ocean and Coastal Management, (2) Journal of Coastal Research and Science, 3) Marine Policy 4) Sustainability Switzerland 5) Marine Pollution Bulletin 6) Frontiers In Marine Science	U.S, Spain, U.K, Australia, Indonesia, China, Italy, Brazil, Canada, France
3. Coastal, Marine, Blue Tourism Governance Management	3,062	2,472 articles, 299 book chapters, 134 review articles, 103 conference papers, 54 books.	- Most publications since 2012 - peaks 2018-2021	1) Marine Policy, 2) Ocean and Coastal Management, 3) Sustainability Switzerland, 4) Frontiers In Marine Science	US, Australia, UK, Spain, Italy, China, India, and Indonesia.
4. Coastal, Marine, Blue Tourism Governance	372	287 articles, 51 book chapters, 14 books, 12 review articles, 8 conference papers	- Most publications since 2012 - peaks in 2016, 2018, 2020, 2021, 2023.	1) Ocean and Coastal Management, 2) Marine Policy, 3) Frontiers In Marine Science, 4) Journal of Coastal Research 5) Coastal Management 6) Journal of Coastal Research 7) Marine Pollution Bulletin	U.K., U.S., Australia, Spain, Italy, Germany, Canada, Indonesia, Netherlands, China
5. Blue Tourism Governance/ Management	204	155 articles, 29 book chapters, 8 books, 5 conference papers, and 7 review articles.	- Most publications since 2012 - peaks in number from 2018, 2021, 2024	1) Ocean and Coastal Management, 2) Marine Policy, 3) Frontiers In Marine Science, 4) Journal of Coastal Research	U.S., UK, Spain, Australia, Italy, China, Canada, and Asia with Indonesia, India, and Japan.
6. Blue Tourism Governance	37	28 articles, 4 book chapters, 4 review articles (4), and 1 book.	- Most publications since 2012 - peaks in number from 2021	1) Marine Policy, 2) Frontiers In Marine Science, 3) Ocean and Coastal Management, 4) Journal Of Marine Science	U.K., Australia, the U.S., Bangladesh, Germany, Netherlands, Spain, Canada, and China.

2 Blue tourism conceptual framework

2.1 Blue economy and tourism

From food supply, marine tourism, resource extraction, and blue carbon, the ocean provides various benefits to the social economy (Hamaguchi, 2025). The blue economy (BE) is an increasingly influential concept in the ocean-based sustainable development narrative. The BE builds upon the established sustainability paradigm and attempts to unify the ocean in a comprehensive framework as with the UN Law of the Sea Treaty in 1982 (Voyer et al., 2018). Although there is no globally accepted definition of the concept of “blue economy”, the World Bank (2021)

defines it as a “sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and job creation while preserving the health of ocean ecosystems”.

A “blue economy” develops when “economic activity is in balance with the long-term capacity of ocean ecosystems to support this activity and remains resilient and healthy” (UNESCO-IOC, 2021). The concept refers to the range of economic sectors - and related policies - that create sustainable wealth from the ocean and coasts, enhancing the need to address the environmental and ecological sustainability of the ocean, and promoting the ocean economy as a growth opportunity for nations (Karani and Failler, 2020). It includes established sectors such as coastal and marine tourism, fisheries and aquaculture,

maritime transport and port activities, shipbuilding and recycling, and energy (offshore), bioprospecting, and marine renewable energy, whose economic value is mainly based on or supported by marine natural ecosystems and maritime resources. The BE is a low polluting, resource-efficient and circular economy based on sustainable consumption and production patterns, and its potential contribution to sustainable job creation, food security, clean energy supply, circular economy and sustainable mobility is enormous (Plan Bleu, 2020). The BE consistently contributed between 3.0% and 4.0% of global GDP annually from 1995 to 2020. The global ocean economy has doubled in real terms, increasing from USD 1.3 trillion in 1995 to USD 2.6 trillion in 2020, with an annual average growth rate of 2.8%. It employed up to 133 million full-time equivalents globally in 2019. If current trajectories continue, the global ocean economy is expected to expand to USD 5.1 trillion by 2050, nearly quadrupling its value in 1995. However, key global forces—climate change, the energy transition, and technological innovation—are expected to disrupt these trends. These forces will be especially impactful for tourism, which is both highly climate-sensitive and dependent on healthy marine ecosystems (OECD, 2025).

Marine and coastal tourism stands out as the largest employer in the global ocean economy and a core driver of its economic output. In 2019 alone, marine and coastal tourism generated USD 789 billion in GVA, positioning it well ahead of other ocean-based sectors. Alongside offshore oil and gas, it accounted for two-thirds of total ocean GVA during the 1995–2020 period. Compared to other sectors, coastal and maritime tourism is central to the Blue Economy also in terms of the highest jobs employment around 60% of the total jobs globally (OECD, 2025). There has been a long-standing and significant economic relationship between tourism and oceanic environments. Coastal areas are some of the oldest and most popular tourism destinations (3 S model), and the BE approach and technology are opening up a wider range of oceanic territory for these uses (Picken, 2023). The World Bank (2017) refers that “coastal and ocean-related tourism comes in many forms and includes dive tourism, maritime archaeology, surfing, cruises,

ecotourism, and recreational fishing operations.” Another report of the World Bank (2022) explains that the objective of the Blue Tourism Economy transition is to expand the overlap between the BE and coastal and maritime tourism, thereby moving towards and growing Blue Tourism; ideally, the two circles overlap entirely (Figure 1).

However, the sustainability of blue tourism is tightly bound to the health of marine environments, which are increasingly threatened by pressures originating from other BE activities. For instance, fisheries and aquaculture, while central to food systems and economic livelihoods, generate wastewater during processing that can degrade water quality and marine habitats when improperly managed. This pollution undermines both fishery productivity and the ecological conditions upon which tourism depends—such as biodiversity, clean water, and intact seascapes (Casimiro et al., 2023). These effects are intensified by economic globalisation, which has concentrated industrial fisheries in coastal zones, amplifying pollution risks and displacing environmental costs onto sectors like tourism (Hamaguchi, 2025; Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2021).

Furthermore, blue tourism often overlaps spatially with *blue carbon ecosystems*—such as mangroves, seagrasses, and salt marshes—that play a vital role in carbon sequestration. Without adequate regulation, tourism infrastructure and recreational use can degrade these ecosystems, reducing their climate mitigation potential and exacerbating marine vulnerability and destination attractiveness loss. Similarly, offshore renewable energy installations, such as wind farms, while contributing to decarbonisation, may cause localised ecological disruption and visual impacts, provoking community-level conflicts with tourism and fisheries stakeholders (Hamaguchi, 2025).

These overlapping pressures highlight the deep interdependence among BE sectors and expose the limitations of siloed governance. Although often framed as a sustainable alternative to extractive industries, blue tourism faces similar pressures from pollution, habitat loss, and competing marine uses, making integrated, ecosystem-based governance essential to

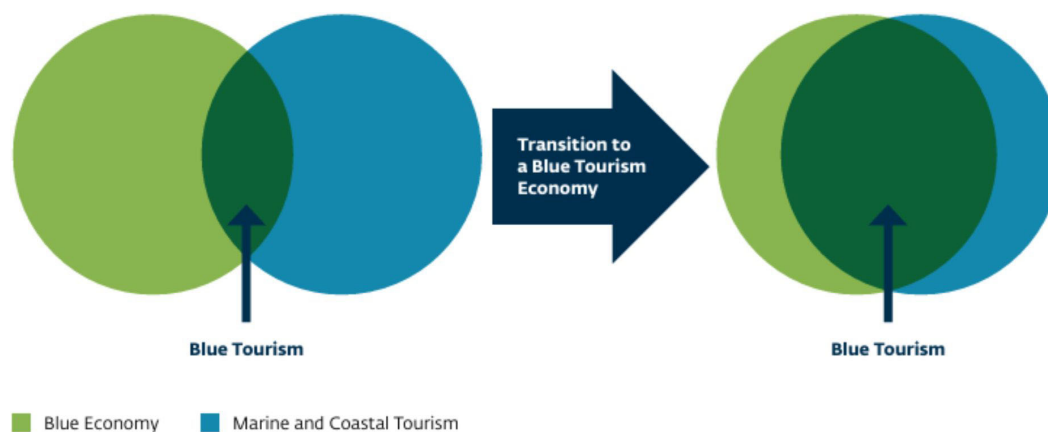


FIGURE 1

Blue tourism transition. Source: World Bank, 2022. Blue Tourism in Islands and Small Tourism-Dependent Coastal States: Tools and Recovery Strategies; from OECS Blue Economy Analytics, 2020, Internal report, licensed CC-BY 3.0 IGO.

its long-term viability (Plan Bleu, 2020). Thus, tourism can simultaneously be a pioneer of human-ocean relations, a driver of innovation, a promoter of oceanic stewardship and coloniser and exploiter of this resource rich territory (Picken, 2023).

2.2 Blue tourism historical view

Marine and coastal tourism is among the oldest and fastest-growing segments of the global tourism industry, originating in the 19th century as an elite leisure activity and expanding rapidly in the post-war era due to improved infrastructure, paid holidays, and the rise of mass travel (Hall, 2001; Bianchi, 2002). By the 1970s and 1980s, international demand was increasingly shaped by affordable package holidays, charter flights, and large-scale resort development—particularly in regions such as the Mediterranean, Caribbean, and Southeast Asia (Tonazzini et al., 2019). These developments reinforced the dominant “3S” model—sun, sea, and sand—prioritising rapid economic returns over ecological or social sustainability (Habib Alipour et al., 2020).

Governments and private actors alike increasingly viewed marine tourism as a strategic investment—stimulating employment, attracting foreign currency, and supporting regional development. Countries such as Mexico, the United States, France, and Spain pioneered coastal tourism marketing and infrastructure, while states like Florida and Hawaii forged early public-private partnerships to manage tourism growth (Miller and Ditton, 1986). In parallel, international firms—airlines, hotel chains, cruise lines—came to dominate the sector, reinforcing globalised patterns of development and creating spatial inequalities in the distribution of tourism benefits (Tonazzini et al., 2019).

Meanwhile, the elevated development of beach resorts and the increasing popularity of marine tourism (e.g. fishing, scuba diving, windsurfing, and yachting) placed increased pressure on the coast, an area for which use may already be highly concentrated in terms of agriculture, human settlements, fishing, and industrial location. These tourism and recreational pressures in the coastal zone were and are not uniformly distributed. Often, concentrated use of beaches occurs near urban environments with strong economic and social impacts on the local communities and environmental consequences on the coast’s ecosystem (Balestracci and Sciacca, 2023).

Sea resorts have become one of the most globalized businesses at the international tourist level. International companies such as airline carriers, cruise lines, global tour operators, and multinational hotel and resort brands became the lead firms in the coastal and maritime tourism sector, shaping the trends through marketing campaigns. Usually, these companies are located in developed countries, where the primary tourism income is made, generating an unbalanced benefits distribution situation (Tonazzini et al., 2019). Also, the cruise ship industry has experienced rapid growth. By the 1990s, a shift in discourse began to emerge. In response to rising environmental concerns and the influence of global sustainability agendas—including the Brundtland Report (1987) and the Earth Summit (1992)—the concept of *sustainable*

tourism gained traction. It reframed tourism not only as an economic engine, but as a practice with environmental, cultural, and social responsibilities (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005; UN, 2016).

Within this evolving discourse, *blue tourism* emerged as a term to capture the marine-specific dimensions of sustainable tourism. Like other forms of sustainable tourism, its long-term viability rests on preserving the quality and resilience of the natural and cultural assets on which it depends. The degradation of marine ecosystems diminishes both its attractiveness and its economic value. This perspective reflects a growing recognition of blue tourism’s reliance on fragile ecosystems, its vulnerability to climate-related risks, and its potential to contribute to biodiversity conservation, cultural heritage preservation, and inclusive development (Balestracci and Sciacca, 2023). More recently, BT has come to be recognised as a governance-relevant domain—requiring integrated planning, multi-stakeholder coordination, and adaptive strategies to balance economic activity with ecological integrity. This evolution marks a conceptual departure from growth-oriented tourism models, and supports the need for policy frameworks that address the cumulative pressures facing marine and coastal zones.

2.3 Blue tourism recent trends

Currently coastal and maritime tourism is growing, with rising demand for water-based activities (Wilks, 2023) and increasing focus on environmental sustainability. Alternative forms such as ecotourism or nature-based tourism have gained in popularity, supported by the expansions of marine protected areas to conserve ecosystems and biodiversity. Efforts now also aim to support education, training, and employment in coastal communities. While marine parks help protect endangered ecosystems and maintain biological diversity, agencies like the World Bank have emphasised balancing conservation with economic benefits—especially vital for less developed coastal and island regions where marine tourism is a major driver (Pearce, 1988). Sustainable coastal and ocean tourism management strategies are essential, evolving from traditional land-use planning to include environmental, socio-cultural and broader economic goals (Hall, 2001). This shift reflects not only environmental imperatives, but also the broader disruption of the tourism sector by global crises—including climate change, biodiversity loss, pandemics, conflict, and economic inequality (Rastegar et al., 2023). These systemic pressures have prompted destination managers, businesses, and governments to reassess investment strategies, adapt to shifting demand, and develop more resilient tourism models (UN Tourism, 2020).

Sub-sectors such as ecotourism, nautical tourism, and yacht chartering are expanding rapidly (Balestracci and Sciacca, 2023; Carreño and Lloret, 2021), while rising air travel costs have encouraged a return to domestic and slower travel forms. Tourists increasingly demand environmentally responsible services, diversified experiences, and access to less visited areas. This has driven greater awareness of local supply chains, sustainability standards, and the principles of circular economy and resource efficiency (WTTC, 2022).

At the same time, the post-pandemic recovery has intensified scrutiny of tourism's real economic, social, and ecological costs—especially in destinations vulnerable to overdependence, such as Small Island Developing States (SIDS), where seasonality and economic leakage remain structural issues (Ocean Panel, 2022).

In response, the BE framework—initially introduced by the UN in 2012, and later taken up by the EU, World Bank, and other global bodies—has increasingly guided tourism policy towards regenerative and inclusive models. These models seek not only to minimise environmental impact but to maximise long-term benefits for biodiversity and local communities (Yeoman et al., 2019; Ocean Panel, 2022). As such, blue tourism has become a critical domain for testing sustainable development in practice, requiring coordinated governance and integrated approaches to ensure equitable, resilient, and ecologically sound outcomes.

2.4 Blue tourism governance

Governance, as a framework for managing public affairs, has been extensively discussed in social sciences over the past two decades (Fernández-Tabales et al., 2017). While a universally accepted definition remains elusive, governance is generally understood as a shift from hierarchical control models towards more cooperative modes involving state and non-state actors in mixed public/private networks (Mayntz, 2003).

Tourism, with its inherent complexities, presents a particularly relevant field for governance analysis (Pechlaner & Volgger, 2013). Its transversality connects it with multiple sectors, necessitating a broad management perspective that extends beyond the traditional public-private relationship in destination management (Bramwell, 2011; Pechlaner et al., 2015). Furthermore, the increasing demand for stakeholder participation in decisions that affect them adds another layer of complexity (Baggio, Scott, & Cooper, 2010; Islam, Ruhanen, & Ritchie, 2017; Svensson & Nordin, 2005). In the analysis of destination governance, academics have taken an interest in management (Pechlaner et al., 2015), interactions between actors (Islam, Ruhanen, & Ritchie, 2017; Svensson & Nordin, 2005), value at the service of sustainability (Borges et al., 2013; Farmaki, 2015; Hall, 2011b) and, to a lesser extent, social participation (Nunkoo, 2015; Tosun, 2005), the definition of organizational archetypes (d'Angella et al., 2010), and the design of evaluation models (Pulido-Fernandez, 2018).

The centralization/decentralization of tourism governance has also been a significant area of study (Caffyn and Jobbins, 2003; Yuksel et al., 2005; Gispert and Clavé, 2020). Decentralization can foster stakeholder participation, debate, and consensus-building. However, it also requires clear “rules of the game” to ensure accountability when power is distributed across multiple stakeholders (Kooiman, 1993; Goymen, 2000; Pechlaner et al., 2008). Kickert (1997) defines governance as “(more or less) stable patterns of social relations between interdependent actors, which take shape around policy problems and/or policy programs,” highlighting the network-like nature of governance (Rhodes, 1996; Healey, 1996). Policy analysis emphasizes the role of these networks in managing public-private relationships and

understanding tourism governance structures (Palmer, 1996; d'Angella et al., 2010).

Some regions with high democratic maturity and institutional transparency tend to promote the introduction of renewable energy progresses and regional development through tourism. Several studies indicate that in such contexts, renewable energy adoption progresses more effectively, and tourism can serve as a catalyst for regional development (Guo and Chai, 2025; Ben Jebli et al., 2019). In contrast, governance in the marine economy can be undermined by corruption—such as in fisheries quota rent-seeking or in the development of offshore wind farms—eroding institutional integrity and potentially reducing the effectiveness and credibility of blue tourism governance (Gomez et al., 2006; Chen, 2010). These challenges reveal the need to strengthen institutional integrity and reduce regulatory capture in BE governance.

In the context of blue tourism, effective governance requires balancing stakeholder interests, enabling collaborative planning, and building adaptive institutions that can manage environmental risks and policy uncertainty. Bramwell and Sharman (1999) argue that consensus-based governance reduces conflict, builds legitimacy through stakeholder involvement, enhancing coordinated policy-making. These benefits aligned with stakeholder theory (Freeman, 2010). These arguments are central to the concept of effective blue tourism governance. The benefits of consensus-based collaboration (Healey, 1996) directly address key challenges in tourism governance such as managing diverse stakeholders' interests, ensuring legitimacy and achieving a coordinated action across various sectors and levels.

The diverse configuration of actors, contributions and recompense, governance mechanisms and structures reveals a variety of possible institutional arrangements, which may result from deliberate strategy or spontaneous behaviours and coordination mechanisms settled into a pattern (Gispert and Clavé, 2020). Their establishment is strongly influenced by such factors as the features of heritage resources and attractions, the level of destination reputation, the impact of tourism on the local economy; in short, all factors considered in constructing the test sample (Scott & Marzano). The tourism phenomenon is developing in increasingly complex, dynamic and diverse societies (Kooiman, 1993), and it is doing so while manifesting an enormous ability to evolve. Emerging governance models—such as the “Democratic Strategy” proposed by Bono & Clavé (2020)—emphasise participation, legitimacy, and adaptive capacity, all essential elements for governing complex tourism systems in coastal and marine areas.

Moreover sustainable blue tourism governance must also be understood within the broader frame of BE governance. Defined as a formal, informal, political and institutional processes that shaping ocean-based economic activities and their social-ecological (Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2021), Blue Economy has become a central theme in policy debates. In the context of a rapidly accelerating BE and emergent efforts to ensure that this ‘blue growth’ is environmentally sustainable (Lubchenco et al., 2020) and leads to improved human development outcomes, blue governance appears constantly as related concepts referring to its long-term viability and the health of marine ecosystems, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Furthermore, the wide blue tourism development worldwide and the increasing awareness of this type of tourism's impacts on coastal and

marine areas has further highlighted the importance of effective governance (European Commission, 2014).

Tourism governance involves the processes, structures, and relationships through which decisions are made and implemented for sustainable and competitive tourism development (Bramwell and Lane, 2011). To study it, Hall (2011a) proposes a framework of governance typologies based on different actor relationships and steering modes. These approaches range from top-down, government-controlled models to bottom-up, community-led initiatives. Other perspectives emphasize stakeholder characteristics and the quality of relationships (Scott and Marzano, 2015), inter-administration coordination (Char-lee et al., 2014), and the involvement of socio-economic agents, including residents in achieving common goals (Bichler, 2021).

From environmental sciences, Termeer et al. (2010) pointed out three complementary governance models can be applied to blue tourism: i) monocentric governance - where the state holds central power and control, implementing policies in a top-down manner; ii) the multilevel governance - that recognizes that policy and administration occur across various levels (local, regional, national, international) and involves interactions between state and non-state actors, emphasising on the dispersion of power and the need for coordination across these actors, and iii) adaptive governance presented as an integrated and flexible approach to managing complex and uncertain situations (Termeer et al., 2010). Considering the transboundary and multisectoral nature of blue tourism, traditional monocentric governance is insufficient. Instead, more adaptive and multilevel approaches provide a more effective framework for addressing blue tourism's multiple scales issues, fostering collaboration (Healey, 1996) and power-sharing between stakeholders, which can lead to more equitable and sustainable outcomes (Caffyn and Jobbins, 2003). Ultimately, blue tourism governance must integrate ecological, social, and economic dimensions through inclusive, transparent, and flexible institutional mechanisms. Doing so will support equitable benefit-sharing, environmental stewardship, and long-term viability in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

3 Material and methods

This research adopts a bibliometric methodology (Zupic and Čater, 2015) to systematically map and analyse the scientific literature concerning coastal, marine, and blue tourism governance. It aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the academic landscape in this field, identifying thematic trends, leading contributors, collaboration patterns, and research gaps that can inform both scholarly inquiry and governance-related policy development. The analytical framework that has guided the development of the paper is structured around two guiding research questions:

R1. How has academic research on blue tourism (BT) governance evolved conceptually and thematically within the broader field of coastal and marine tourism (CMT) governance over the years?

R2. What are the main disciplinary, geographical, and thematic trends shaping this emerging field?

These questions have been used in the bibliometric analysis to understand the most relevant contributions, the evolution of the thematic areas, and research trends over time, and finally, to recommend future actions for proliferous research on the BT topic.

The Framework FDC: Facet – Derive – Combine (Codina, 2018) has been applied to the design of this research, explained in Figure 2. The *Facet phase* counted with the identification of the key study concepts (blue tourism and governance), type of research action (bibliometric analysis), theoretical framework, and the reflection on the methodological framework and strategy (Scopus research/VosViewer). The *Derive phase* supported the keywords' selection from the different types of sources emerging from Scopus research. During the *Combination phase*, active research was put in place by using operators and connectors through the Scopus research, organised into six scanning phases. Finally, the data were exported to the VOSviewer (Version 1.6.20 - released last October 2023) software package, widely used in studies due to its ability to analyse bibliometric data and its reliable statistical algorithms (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

The bibliometric analysis method was used as it offers valuable results from the production in the corresponding field of research, showing trends, the most cited articles, and the gathering of documents in impact journals (Junquera and Mitre, 2007). The empirical basis of the study is derived from the Scopus database, selected due to its comprehensive disciplinary coverage, robust citation tracking, and consistent metadata quality, which collectively ensure the reliability and reproducibility of bibliometric analyses. Also, it has been chosen for being a free database platform through institutional access and for offering multidisciplinary and broader coverage of literature. A systematic search was conducted in January 2025 employing the different Boolean queries (Figure 3). This work studied the number of published documents, year of publication, peaks of publication, journal (authors), and geographical scope. The search was carried out using the above-mentioned keywords. The database search was carried out, filtering by topic in the title, the abstract, and author keywords.

The bibliometric analysis followed six stages, as explained in Figure 3.

In the first stage, the Search Criteria included the terms: “coastal”, “marine”, “blue”, “tourism”, “governance” and “management”. A first literature review revealed that “blue tourism” is a relatively recent concept. In many cases, academics refer to it as “coastal and/or marine tourism (CMT)”, so the three terms have been used. To face the controversy surrounding the definition of tourism governance, not easily defined, the term “management” was used as a synonym.

During the second phase, the database selected was Scopus. Six scanning phases (S.P.) have been launched to understand blue tourism's evolution and governance framework.

In stage three, the research criteria (filters) applied were the yearly range: from 1986 to 2024, capturing developments in governance discourse over the past quarter-century, the keyword

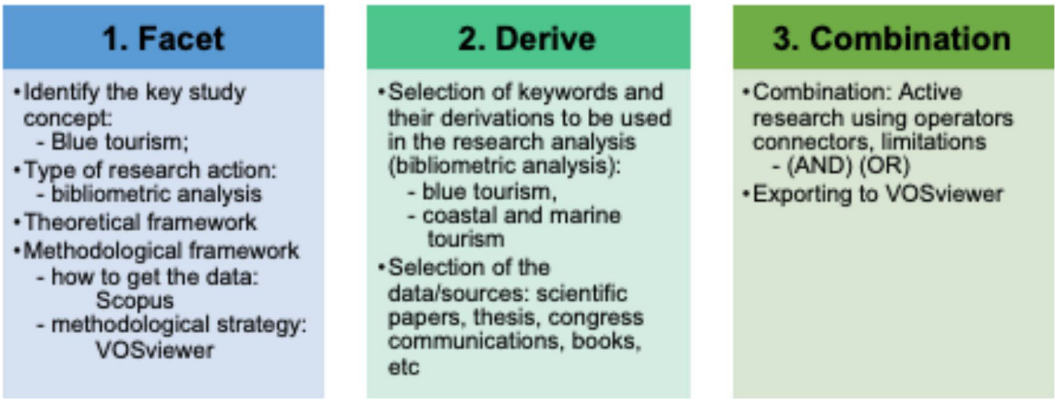


FIGURE 2
Framework FDC application.Source: Author elaboration, 2024.

“tourism” must be included in the abstracts, and the type of documents should be limited to articles, book chapters, reviews, conference papers, and books.

In the fourth stage, filtered data were collected on quantitative and qualitative indicators, including the number and type of funding documents, publication time frame, peaks, and primary journal sources. Particular attention was dedicated to the geographical origin of the publications (city/territory) to understand the funding sponsors and document affiliation.

In the fifth stage the data was exported in CSV format and processed using VOSviewer (Version 1.6.20) to analyse the keyword trends in blue tourism and blue tourism governance literacy. Finally, in the sixth phase, the results were analysed.

The analytical procedure consisted of:

1. Descriptive performance analysis – quantifying annual publication trends, identifying leading authors, source titles, and contributing institutions.

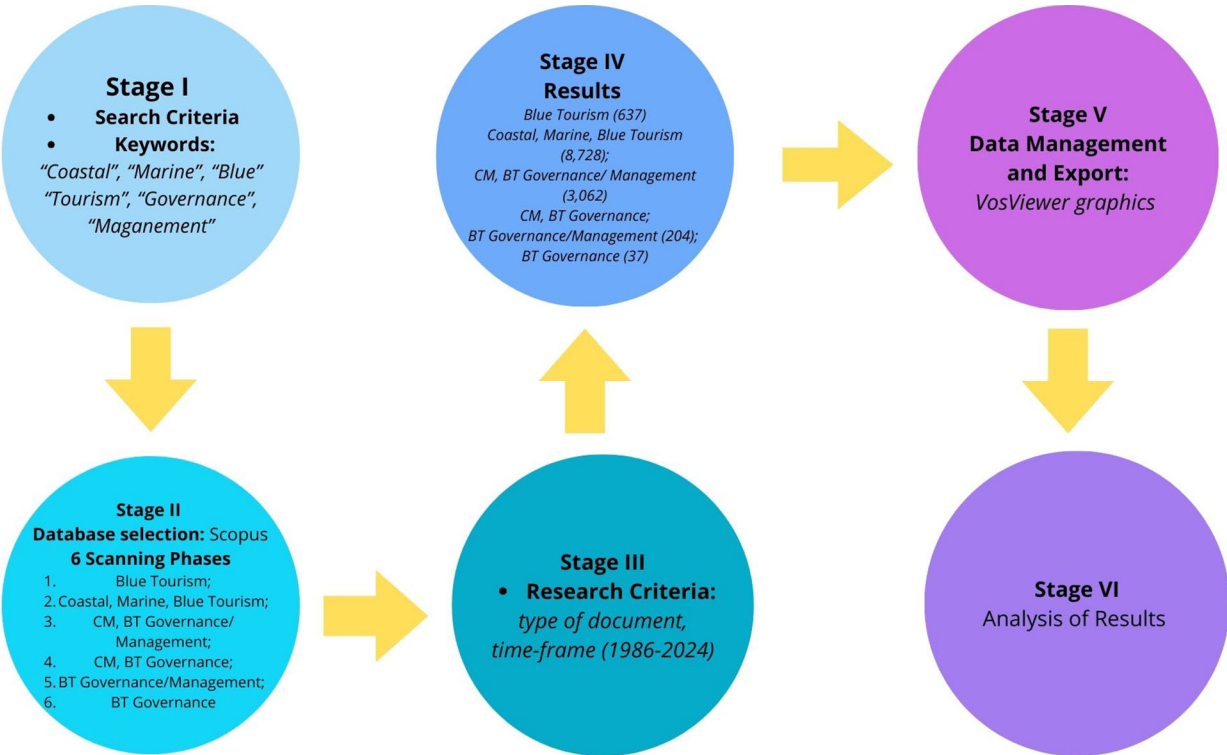


FIGURE 3
The Six stages of bibliometric analysis. Source: Author elaboration, 2025.

2. Co-authorship network analysis – mapping the structure of institutional and geographical collaboration.
3. Keyword co-occurrence mapping – detecting conceptual clusters and thematic evolutions over time.

Table 2 displays information about the six scanning phases: the used strings, the selected time-frame, the applied filters and the number of resulting documents. This study confines its scope to the *academic corpus* indexed in Scopus; consequently, the findings reflect scholarly production and citation patterns, rather than empirical evaluations of governance efficacy. The bibliometric results will highlight the most influential journals, authors, and institutions in the field. While the analysis identifies the top-ranked journals in terms of productivity and impact, a complete listing of all journals is not provided in the main text, as the corpus spans a broad and highly fragmented set of publication outlets across multiple disciplines, including tourism studies, environmental management, marine sciences, and policy research. This approach balances readability in the main narrative with the need to ensure that the underlying data remain accessible for further scholarly use.

4 Results

The first two scanning phases aimed to collect results on funding documents related to the concept of coastal/marine/blue tourism and understand all the literature trends linked to these concepts in the last decades. On September 2024, the first search string, TITLE-ABS-KEY (Blue AND Tourism), was finalised with 637 documents found, while using the second string (TITLE-ABS-KEY (coastal OR marine OR blue AND tourism), 8,728 documents were found.

Following the same synonymous concepts logic, the third scanning phase collected 3,062 results related to CMT and BT Governance/

Management. At the same time, the fourth one limited them to CMT and BT Governance with a result of 372 funding documents. In these phases, the corresponding filters used were the keywords “tourism”, and “management” or “governance” in the abstracts for the third one, and “tourism” and “governance” in the abstract for the fourth phase.

Finally, using the same synonymous concepts logic, the fifth scanning phase narrowed the search to BT Governance/Management, yielding 204 results by filtering for the keywords “tourism”, and “management” or “governance” in the abstracts. The final phase restricted data collection to BT Governance, resulting in only 37 funding documents. The filter applied included the keywords “tourism” and “governance” in the abstracts.

Table 1 shows the results per each scanning phase. For further details on these results per phase, check Annex I, which, thanks to the related figures, provides a broader and visual understanding of the different results. Appendix 1 includes the full list of all the journals resulting from the six different searches.

4.1 Evolution of blue tourism governance research from 1986 to 2024

This six bibliometric analysis scanning phase reveals a progressive narrowing of focus from broad searches on coastal/marine/blue tourism (8,728 documents) to highly specific searches on blue tourism governance (37 documents). This reflects an academic shift from general tourism-environment relationships toward more targeted governance considerations, examining relevant academic literature and funding trends identified within publications from 1986 to 2024. There is a clear trend of increasing scholarly output related to “blue tourism” and its associated concepts over time. Until the early 2000s, coastal and marine tourism was not a thoroughly investigated topic. Most documents and funding-related publications across all search strings

TABLE 2 The scanning phases: strings and filters.

Scan Phase (S.P.)	1	2	3	4	5	6
Name	Blue Tourism	Coastal, Marine, Blue Tourism	Coastal, Marine, Blue Tourism Governance/Management	Coastal, Marine, Blue Tourism Governance	Blue Tourism Governance/Management	Blue Tourism Governance
String	TITLE-ABS-KEY (Blue AND Tourism)	TITLE-ABS-KEY (coastal OR marine OR blue AND tourism)	TITLE-ABS-KEY (coastal OR marine OR blue AND tourism AND governance OR management)	TITLE-ABS-KEY (coastal OR marine OR blue AND tourism AND governance)	TITLE-ABS-KEY (blue AND tourism AND governance OR management)	TITLE-ABS-KEY (blue AND tourism AND governance)
Time-frame	From 1986 to 2024	from 1986 to 2024	from 1986 to 2024	from 1986 to 2024	from 1986 to 2024	from 1986 [2012] to 2024
Filters	-keyword “tourism” in abstracts. -Type: article, book chapter, review, conference paper, and book.	-keyword “tourism” in abstracts. -Type: article, book chapter, review, conference paper, and book.	-keywords “tourism”, and “management” or “governance” in the abstracts. -Type: article, book chapter, review, conference paper, and book.	-keywords “tourism” and “governance” in the abstracts. -Type: article, book chapter, review, conference paper, and book.	-keywords “tourism”, “management” or “governance” in the abstracts. -Type: article, book chapter, review, conference paper, and book.	-keywords “tourism” and “governance” in the abstracts. -Type: article, book chapter, review, conference paper, and book.
N. Results	637	8,728	3,062	372	204	37

are concentrated after 2010. The analysis explicitly states that the period between 2013 and 2021 yielded the most productive terms for the selected topics.

The broad search string (coastal OR marine OR blue AND tourism) yielded 8,728 documents—mostly post-2007, with sharp growth after 2016—while the narrower ‘Blue AND Tourism’ search produced 637 records, growing from 2012 and peaking in 2019, 2021, and 2024. The most targeted formulation, Blue AND Tourism AND Governance, produced 37 records—exclusively post-2012—with notable peaks in 2018, 2021, and 2024.

The Intermediate search strings exhibited similar upward trajectories: Coastal OR Marine OR Blue AND Tourism AND Governance OR Management retrieved 3,062 publications (predominantly post-2009), ...AND Governance alone yielded 372, and Blue AND Tourism AND Governance OR Management resulted in 204, with multiple peaks from 2016 onwards (2016, 2018, 2020, 2021, and 2023). The earliest publications for this search date back to 1987.

These patterns suggest a marked expansion of academic engagement with blue tourism governance over the past decade. The evolution from broad tourism–environment searches to increasingly specific governance-focused queries reflects both conceptual maturation and methodological refinement within the field. The post-2012 growth in governance-related outputs, paralleled by increased funding, underscores the consolidation of governance as a critical dimension of blue tourism research—particularly in relation to collaborative policymaking, integrated management, and conflict resolution.

4.2 Blue tourism governance: disciplinary and geographical scope

The bibliometric analysis confirms that blue tourism governance research is multidisciplinary, drawing from environmental sciences, marine and coastal management, social sciences, and business and economics. This reflects the complex governance challenges of coastal and marine tourism, which require aligning ecological stewardship, socio-economic development, and institutional frameworks. The main publication outlets—*Marine Policy*, *Ocean and Coastal Management*, *Frontiers in Marine Science*, *Journal of Coastal Research*, *Science of the Total Environment*, and *Sustainability (Switzerland)*—underscore the field’s strong policy–environmental orientation, with comparatively limited presence in tourism-specialised journals.

The results indicate that the primary region where blue tourism governance emerges as a trending research topic is Europe, featuring numerous universities in the UK, Spain, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Denmark, and France. Substantial contributions also come from the USA, Canada, and Australia, while Asia, particularly in China, Japan, and Indonesia, is emerging as a significant growth area.

Funding patterns reinforce this geography, the European region remains the leading sponsor (EU Commission, Horizon 2020 Framework Programme, European Regional Development Fund),

complemented by support from the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, the Nippon Foundation, and Australian government programmes.

Two important patterns emerge. First, the BT field’s anchoring in environmental and policy sciences—rather than tourism studies—suggests that governance is being conceptualised primarily from ecological and regulatory perspectives, leaving room for tourism-specific governance frameworks to be further developed. Second, institutional leadership and funding remain concentrated in high-income regions, creating potential geographic and contextual blind spots, particularly for developing coastal nations and small island states.

4.3 Keywords analysis and thematic trends

In the final stages, the keyword co-occurrence analysis, constructed in VOSviewer, highlights the thematic evolution of blue tourism and blue tourism governance research. Firstly, comparing the “blue tourism” (S.P.1, *finding* $n = 637$) versus coastal/marine/blue tourism (S.P.2 *finding* $n = 8,728$) searches reveals both continuity and diversification in research priorities. In Map 1 (Figure 4), for S.P.1, a minimum occurrence threshold of 25 produced 26 keywords (five duplicates removed). Map 2 (Figure 5), for S.P.2, applied a higher minimum occurrence (265), generating 30 keywords. These maps also utilise a colour scale ranging from violet to yellow, categorising the terms from the least to the most innovative, features an overlay visualization by year, with older terms represented in dark violet (2016), blue (2017), green (2019), acid green (2020), and yellow, the most recent colour (2021).

Across both dataset, core recurring terms include *tourism*, *tourism development*, *sustainable development*, and *ecotourism*—signal the field’s foundations in sustainable tourism and resource management. Older terms (violet/blue nodes, 2016–2017), such as *coastal zone management* and *environmental protection*, reflect an early focus on conservation and resource management. In contrast, more recent terms (acid green/yellow nodes, 2020–2021)—*climate change*, *ecosystem*, *marine pollution/microplastics*, and *non-human/human interactions*—indicate a growing integration of environmental change and human–nature dynamics into tourism governance debates. Notably, *blue economy*, *blue growth*, and *economic growth* emerge only in recent years, signalling BT’s increasing alignment with ocean economy frameworks.

To identify thematic concerns and trace their evolution, the second co-occurrences maps examined governance-related searches - *coastal/marine/blue tourism governance/management* (S.P.3, $n = 3,062$) resulting in Maps 3 (Figure 6), and the more focused *BT governance* (S.P.6, $n = 37$), corresponded to Map 4 (Figure 7). This analysis enabled a comparison of previous and more recent trends in the blue tourism governance framework. To obtain Map 3 (Figure 6), the minimum occurrences threshold of 125 produced 27 keywords (four removed as duplicates). For S.P.6, the threshold was three, yielding 28 keywords (four removed). Across both maps, core recurring terms include *tourism*, *sustainability*, *sustainable development*, *climate change*, *coastal zone management*, and *fishery*.



governance models linked to sustainable ocean resource use. The repeated occurrence of *blue economy* and *blue growth*—terms absent in early CMT governance literature—suggests that blue tourism governance is consolidating as a distinct research field, intrinsically tied to the broader sustainable economic utilisation of ocean resources.

The consistent and rising prominence of keywords such as “climate change,” “ecosystem,” and “marine pollution/microplastics” across these searches reflects a broadening of governance agenda to incorporate socio-ecological interdependencies. This trend indicates a move beyond traditional development or conservation paradigms towards interdisciplinary frameworks that address the governance of tourism in complex marine and coastal socio-ecological systems.



5 Discussion

The findings of this article highlight the complex and, at times, contested conceptual framework surrounding blue tourism and its governance. The bibliometric analysis confirms that while blue tourism (BT) governance builds on the foundations of coastal and marine tourism (CMT) governance, it is emerging as a distinct and increasingly recognised subfield. The chronological trends across search phases show that scholarly attention to BT governance is both recent and rapidly increasing, with peaks after 2012 corresponding to global policy shifts such as the launch of the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goal, including SDG 14 that aims to conserve and sustainably use the oceans and marine resources for sustainable development and includes targets such as reducing marine pollution and increasing the economic benefits of sustainable ocean use (United Nations, 2015). Also, the Paris Agreement (2015) on climate change recognizes the important role of oceans in regulating the Earth's climate (UN Environmental Program, 2023). In 2017, the UN proclaimed the Ocean Decade (2021–2030), while in 2018 the World Bank launched the PROBLUE program. While the 21st century has seen a significant increase in literature on coastal and marine tourism, the appearance of governance-specific terms—*blue economy*, *blue growth*, *ocean governance*, *marine policy*—in the smaller, targeted BT governance dataset (S.P.6) highlights its novelty and positions it firmly within broader marine policy and sustainable ocean resource frameworks (Voyer et al., 2018).

Blue tourism is one of the most rapidly expanding sectors within the global tourism industry (Hall, 2001). For small islands and coastal areas, tourism development has been actively promoted

as a viable alternative to traditional livelihoods, aiming to reduce reliance on other sectors. Furthermore, it increasingly occupies a central role in emerging agendas related to marine spatial planning and the blue economy (Praptiwi et al., 2021). Globally, new political, legal, institutional, and governmental frameworks are being developed, introducing a novel model of maritime and marine governance (Guerreiro, 2021) and fostering synergies among various marine industries in promising areas (Van den Burg et al., 2019), with tourism often recognised as a leading economic sector within the blue economy. Disciplinary trends confirm BT governance as highly interdisciplinary, spanning environmental sciences, social sciences, marine policy, and economics, but still lacking a consolidated theoretical foundation. Geographically, Europe dominates the research landscape, with increasing but uneven contributions from Asia and Oceania, pointing to regional imbalances in knowledge production and case study diversity.

The results from this research confirms that numerous international journals are dedicated to ocean and coastal management and governance. Keyword co-occurrence maps reveal a thematic shift: early CMT governance studies prioritised environmental protection and conservation, while more recent BT governance literature integrates socio-economic development, climate adaptation, and socio-ecological concepts such as *non-human/human*. This indicates a movement from reactive management to integrated governance models balancing economic, ecological, and community priorities (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2021). The findings also point to a substantial research gap: BT governance lacks a unified conceptual framework. The marked disparity between the limited BT governance corpus (37 documents) and the broader CMT governance literature (3,062 documents)

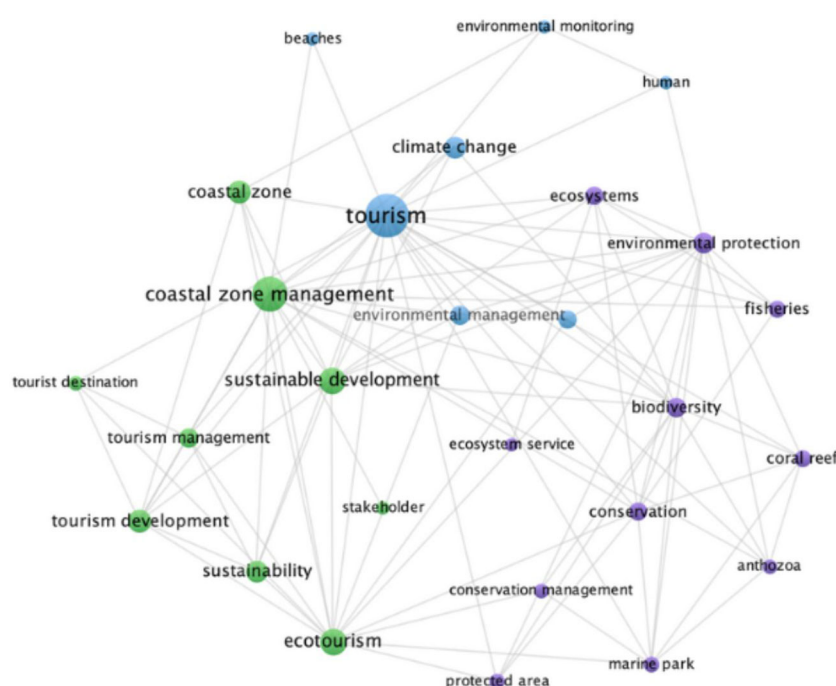


FIGURE 6
Coastal, Marine, Blue Tourism Governance/Management Keywords. Source: Author elaboration through VOSViewer (2024).

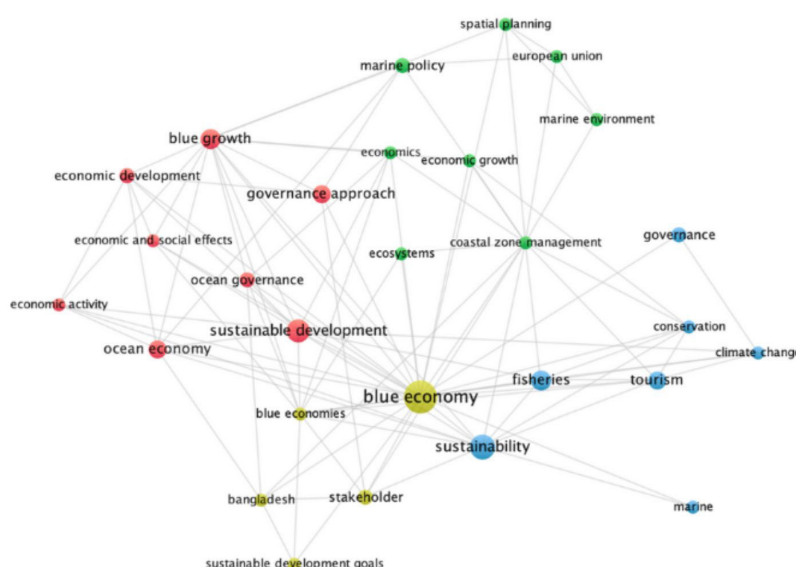


FIGURE 7

Blue Tourism Governance Keywords' Co-occurrence Map. Source: Author elaboration through VOSViewer (2024).

underscores the critical research gap. Despite its rising policy relevance, BT governance remains underdeveloped in empirical scope and theoretical depth. This gap is notable given the urgent challenges facing ocean-based economies, including climate change impacts, marine pollution, and the need for cross-sectoral cooperation to mitigate environmental externalities. Strengthening this field requires the development of shared conceptual frameworks, expansion of geographic and contextual diversity in case studies, and integration of governance approaches into cross-sectoral, data-driven decision-making. These steps are crucial for advancing BT governance from an emerging academic topic to a robust and operational policy domain.

The novelty of this paper lies in its systematic mapping of BT governance as a discrete research domain, offering the first bibliometric evidence of its conceptual boundaries, disciplinary anchors, and thematic evolution. By distinguishing BT governance trends from the broader CMT literature and identifying emergent governance-linked concepts, this study provides an analytical baseline for future scholarship. In doing so, it advances academic understanding of how blue economy principles are operationalised within tourism governance, thereby contributing to the maturation of a field that is both scientifically underexplored and of growing strategic relevance. It also underscores the necessity for governance models that not only address environmental vulnerabilities but also create synergies between blue economy sectors, enabling sustainable growth and alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals.

BT governance is inherently shaped by its position within the wider blue economy, where fisheries, aquaculture, shipping, energy, and conservation compete for marine space and resources. The environmental, economic, and social outcomes of one sector directly affect the viability of others. Many BT activities—such as diving, snorkelling, and jet skiing—occur in ecologically sensitive blue carbon habitats (e.g., seagrass beds, mangroves, tidal marshes), where physical disturbance, anchoring damage, and pollution can

undermine biodiversity and carbon sequestration. Poorly regulated fisheries and aquaculture further degrade water quality and scenic values, while offshore wind energy—though essential for decarbonisation—can create habitat disruption and visual impacts, generating conflicts with tourism and fisheries.

These pressures reinforce the need for governance frameworks that integrate climate objectives with ecosystem protection and conflict mediation (Leposa, 2020). In this context, as emerged from the literature, investment in coastal zone management, spatial planning, and conservation underscores the strategic role of Protected Areas (PAs) and Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) as crucial tools for safeguarding biodiversity and support sustainable blue tourism. MPAs and diverse coastal ecosystems hold significant potential for nature-based blue tourism, drawing on their natural and cultural heritage, landscapes, seascapes, and recreational opportunities (Casimiro et al., 2023). Integrating these assets into governance frameworks requires balancing biodiversity conservation alongside various economic sectors, such as fisheries and tourism, and fostering synergies between these sectors and MPA management (Tranter et al., 2022). Beyond tourism benefits, MPAs enhance ocean resilience to climate change impacts, safeguard global fisheries, and serve as key components of effective ocean governance systems (Laffoley et al., 2019).

The bibliometric analysis also highlights a shift towards ecosystem-based approaches in marine planning, reflecting a move from sector-specific management towards coordinated, multi-level governance (Caffyn and Jobbins, 2003). Historically, trends in tourism and marine environment management have often been addressed within the separate domains of coastal zone, environmental, and tourism management, lacking robust coordination and synergistic efforts towards shared objectives (Price, 1996). From this research emerged the call for more effective coastal and marine governance, integrating coastal management measures through new collaborative approaches.

This includes considering the decentralization of tourism governance to foster more inclusive, multi-level, bottom-up initiatives driven by diverse stakeholders, while carefully accounting for the motivations, roles, and influence of international actors (Das et al., 2024). Moreover, given the coexistence of multiple blue economy activities, collaborative governance is essential to minimise environmental externalities and protect long-term sectoral viability (Kearney et al., 2007; Martínez-Vázquez et al., 2021).

BE, and by extension BT, offers considerable opportunities for economic development by driving “blue growth,” which can create income, generate employment, reduce poverty, and assist in climate change mitigation, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in marine and coastal environments (Hoerter et al., 2020).

As emerged from the keyword co-occurrence analysis, BT faces urgent challenges including climate change impacts, marine pollution, and biodiversity loss - that threaten both supply and demand for tourism services and call for cross-sectoral cooperation to mitigate environmental externalities (Pathmanandakumar et al., 2021). Sea-level rise, ocean acidification (Weatherdon et al., 2016), and more frequent extreme weather events will alter marine ecosystems, infrastructure resilience, and destination attractiveness (OECD, 2016; Arabadzhyan et al., 2021). At the same time, marine pollution and microplastics are impacting several ocean-based industries, particularly those relying on a pristine environment as the BT. The forecast is of a nearly double amount of plastic entering the environment annually by 2040 compared to 2022 if there are no policy reorientations (OECD, 2025). These environmental aspects demand a urgent shift in focus from purely developmental perspectives to a more critical examination of the environmental implications of tourism in marine and coastal environments. Addressing these pressures requires governance models that prioritise resilience, cross-sectoral coordination, and ecosystem health over short-term growth imperatives. Effective ocean governance is fundamental for reducing the cumulative impacts and pressures on our oceans and seas (Laffoley, D. et al., 2018).

Ultimately, the future of BT governance lies in its ability to reconcile economic development with marine conservation, creating governance structures that are participatory, adaptive, and grounded in ecosystem-based management. By fostering synergies among the blue economy sectors and integrating tools like MPAs into a broader policy framework, BT can contribute meaningfully to sustainable coastal and marine destination development.

6 Conclusion

The increasing global focus on oceans as strategic vectors for sustainable development underscores the urgent need to value and manage marine and coastal natural assets for a sustainable future. Blue tourism (BT) represents a significant and rapidly expanding sector within the global tourism industry and has recently experienced a notable surge in research attention, particularly in relation to blue economy objectives.

This study examined the conceptual and thematic evolution of BT governance within the broader context of coastal and marine tourism (CMT) governance. The bibliometric analysis confirms that

BT governance has only recently emerged as a distinct research field, with significant growth since 2012. While it shares foundations with CMT governance, it is increasingly shaped by blue economy principles and global policy agendas such as the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development.

The temporal analysis (2016–2024) shows a marked intensification of scholarly output in the past decade, with peaks after 2012, reflecting a shift from a narrow conservation focus toward a broader thematic scope. Geographically, research remains concentrated in Europe, with expanding but uneven contributions from Asia and Oceania. This imbalance, along with the small size of the BT governance literature compared to CMT, highlights the need for more diverse case studies and inclusive perspectives from small island and developing coastal states.

The analysis also reveals a shift from narrowly focused conservation efforts toward integrated governance approaches that balance ecological integrity, economic viability, and social equity. Concepts such as climate change adaptation, marine spatial planning, and cross-sectoral collaboration now feature prominently, signalling a move toward governance models that are more participatory, adaptive, and multi-level.

Future research should prioritise interdisciplinary models and broader geographic representation to capture diverse governance contexts. Stronger theoretical foundations for BT governance as a subfield are also needed, along with research linking governance to climate adaptation and socio-economic resilience. Integrated, data-driven frameworks that connect tourism management with marine conservation, climate resilience, and community well-being will be essential to support evidence-based policymaking.

By mapping BT governance’s evolution, defining its conceptual boundaries, and identifying thematic priorities distinct from the broader CMT literature, this paper offers a critical analytical baseline for future scholarship and policymaking. In doing so, it responds to the growing strategic importance of blue economy governance and tourism’s role within it, particularly in light of escalating environmental pressures and the urgent need for integrated management approaches. This study also lays the groundwork for a more coherent and impactful research agenda—one that ensures blue tourism contributes meaningfully to sustainable ocean economies while safeguarding the ecological and socio-cultural systems on which it depends.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/[Supplementary Material](#). Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

GB: Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Writing – original draft. MN-L-A: Conceptualization, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. SG: Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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