

Research note

Whose knowledge counts? An authorisation model for climate justice in tourism governance

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Introduction

Climate justice in tourism is increasingly invoked but unevenly realised. It is usually understood as encompassing the fair distribution of climate-related harms and responsibilities, inclusive participation in decision-making, and recognition of structural inequalities across social groups and generations (Sultana, 2022). Yet climate justice is not only a normative commitment to fairness, inclusion and recognition. It is also a struggle over whose knowledge is treated as credible, legitimate and authoritative. Participation does not necessarily confer authority. A meta-analysis of environmental governance cases found that delegated decision-making power was a more consistent predictor of outcomes than participation alone (Newig et al., 2023). Climate-justice claims may therefore be heard without shaping decisions. The key question is why some claims acquire credibility, circulate across governance arenas and become consequential, while others remain marginal.

This struggle is increasingly urgent. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change identifies climate change as generating “widespread adverse impacts and related losses and damages” that are “unequally distributed across systems, regions and sectors” (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022, pp. 9, 26). Tourism is deeply implicated in these dynamics. Accounting for approximately 8 to 11% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Tourism Panel on Climate Change, 2023), it links high-emitting consumption with climate-vulnerable destinations and precarious labour markets, while emissions continue to rise despite mitigation efforts (Gössling et al., 2021). Recent assessments suggest that tourism climate action remains uneven, with its justice implications still insufficiently developed and tested (Becken & Rastegar, 2025; Becken & Scott, 2024).

This paper therefore proposes authorisation as a critical analytical lens for tourism climate-justice scholarship. By authorisation, we refer to the process through which climate-justice claims become credible, mobile and consequential within governance. Existing work

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has shown how such claims are shaped by asymmetries of power, legitimacy and discourse, and how they circulate across groups and governance contexts (Alasuutari, 2018; McCann & Ward, 2012). However, these approaches less fully explain how particular claims gain authority in practice, understood here as the capacity to shape recognised problems, accepted evidence and consequential decisions. A focus on authorisation addresses this gap by examining how unevenly distributed epistemic resources are converted into recognised authority over climate-justice claims.

Accordingly, this paper calls for closer analysis of how climate-justice claims are authorised across interconnected tourism governance sites. We conceptualise this as an authorisation gap: the gap between the articulation or acknowledgement of climate-justice claims and their institutional recognition as authoritative within governance. The paper shifts attention from whether justice is acknowledged as a principle to how, where and under what conditions particular claims become consequential. In doing so, it develops a model for tracing how claims become heard, accumulate credibility and legitimacy, are mobilised across governance sites, and become institutionally embedded, or remain marginal.

From normative commitments to uneven practice in tourism governance

Much of the tourism climate-justice literature remains more developed normatively than operationally, offering growing clarity on justice dimensions but less analysis of how they are enacted through governance (Rastegar, 2026; Rastegar & Becken, 2025). Existing work distinguishes distributive, procedural, recognitional and epistemic justice, while emerging work extends these debates to restorative, ecological and cosmopolitan dimensions (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2026). Yet these dimensions are mediated by governance processes that determine which claims gain authority. Recognition therefore has two distinct meanings in the model. Recognitional justice concerns whether affected identities, experiences and forms of knowledge are respected. It conditions claim formation and operates throughout authorisation. Institutional recognition is narrower: it occurs when a claim is accepted as a legitimate basis for policy, funding, implementation or accountability. Procedural inclusion can therefore coexist with limited authority when marginalised knowledge is acknowledged but remains institutionally inconsequential.

Evidence shows that climate change and adaptation can reproduce inequalities where justice considerations are weakly integrated (Newell, 2021; Parsons et al., 2026). Women remain concentrated in low-paid, informal and service roles while their concerns are often marginalised in decision-making (Costa et al., 2017); migrant workers face heightened exposure to risk while lacking meaningful representation (Janta et al., 2011); and low-income communities are frequently positioned as sites of adaptation without shaping its terms, as decisions prioritise economic or technological responses over social equity (Scheyvens, 2024). Recent work in coastal tourism similarly shows that locally held accounts of climate-related loss, even when documented through participatory approaches, may be only partially translated into authoritative knowledge within governance processes (Atieno, 2025). Kenya's conservancies provide a related example: formal participation may coexist with uneven authority over land-use decisions, leaving community knowledge weakly translated into actionable influence (Kepher Gona & Atieno, 2026). These patterns reveal a persistent gap between the normative articulation of climate justice and the processes through which it becomes influential in governance.

From asymmetries to authorised claims

Addressing this gap requires closer attention to how asymmetries in expertise, legitimacy and influence are translated into differential authority over climate-justice claims. Existing approaches identify three linked problems, but less fully explain how they operate together. First, the epistemic asymmetry problem concerns unequal capacities to define problems, validate knowledge and shape decisions, leaving unclear how some actors accumulate credibility for their claims while others do not. Second, the policy mobilities problem concerns how claims become mobile across governance contexts, where they circulate, translate and are reshaped rather than transferred as fixed entities (McCann & Ward, 2012). Third, the legitimacy problem concerns why some mobilised versions of justice gain institutional recognition and decision-making force while others remain symbolic or marginal. Contemporary climate governance involves diverse actors influencing, deciding and implementing across overlapping arenas, so participation patterns alone do not reveal whose claims acquire authority (Boasson et al., 2023).

Authorisation connects these problems by offering a processual account of how climate-justice claims become credible, mobile and consequential within governance. Bourdieusian thinking is valuable here because it conceptualises governance as a field in which actors occupy unequal positions and possess different forms and volumes of capital, shaping their capacity to influence decision-making across governance sites (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Epistemic capital is foregrounded because it captures actors' capacity to accumulate credibility for particular claims through expertise, institutional position and alignment with dominant policy paradigms, or, as Alasuutari (2018, p. 165) puts it, to draw on "objects or facts that [others] expect... to respect or fear". Its significance lies not simply in possessing knowledge, but in whether that knowledge can be converted into authorised claims within specific governance contexts, often in interaction with other forms of capital, including symbolic capital. Recent urban climate-governance research similarly shows that available expertise and co-produced knowledge can remain weakly connected to implementation where political capacity, resources and institutional coordination are limited (Schmidt et al., 2024).

Tracing authorisation across tourism governance sites

Because authorisation unfolds across interconnected governance sites, the scale and scope of analysis should be guided by the climate-justice claim being traced rather than by a single predefined unit of tourism governance. Tourism offers a useful setting because climate-related decisions span destinations, transport, labour, conservation and policy institutions (Becken & Scott, 2024;

Gössling et al., 2021; Rastegar & Becken, 2025). Sustainable-tourism agendas are themselves constructed through contested managerial and policy processes (Fuster-Uguet et al., 2026; Hall, 2019). This aligns with climate-governance research on overlapping sites in which decisions are negotiated and stabilised (Boasson et al., 2023; Bulkeley et al., 2014), and with network approaches that trace relationships across policy-making, industry practice, destination planning and implementation.

As a conceptual paper, we draw selectively on climate-justice scholarship, work on epistemic capital and policy mobilities, and tourism governance to propose a model of authorisation. Fig. 1 sets out the model.

Climate-justice scholarship identifies the inequalities and claims at stake; epistemic capital explains how claims acquire credibility; policy mobilities illuminate circulation and translation; and tourism governance locates these processes within interconnected sites of decision-making. Recognition justice shapes whose identities, experiences and knowledge enter and move through authorisation, while institutional recognition refers to their later uptake as authoritative bases for policy, resources and implementation.

As shown in Fig. 1, the model begins with climate-justice claims becoming backed by epistemic capital through accumulation, as actors assemble the evidence, expertise, alliances, testimony, visibility and institutional support needed to advance particular justice framings. This addresses epistemic asymmetry by asking who controls these resources, which standards validate evidence and whose knowledge is discounted. Claims are then mobilised through governance arenas within nested and interconnected tourism governance sites. They circulate through consultations, networks, policy documents, advocacy, professional forums and inter-agency processes, where they may be translated, contested, diluted, localised or blocked. Analysis can trace who carries a claim, which arenas it reaches, how its meaning changes and how institutional access, network position or policy alignment shape its mobilisation. Through institutional recognition, some claims become consequential through changes to official problem definitions, policy language, eligibility rules, budgets, implementation practices, institutional responsibilities or accountability arrangements, while others remain symbolic or excluded. Institutional recognition therefore differs from recognition justice, which is an entry condition and continuing concern throughout the model.

The feedback loops show that authorisation is iterative rather than linear. Once claims gain institutional recognition and decision-making force, they can reshape governance sites by altering priorities, institutional routines, actor coalitions and accepted problem framings. They can also reproduce or reconfigure epistemic capital by strengthening the authority of particular actors, forms of expertise and justice framings while weakening others. Stabilisation is provisional: claims may become temporarily authoritative within a governance site, policy cycle or institutional arrangement, but later be challenged, displaced or reformulated by competing claims, shifting priorities, changing material conditions or new coalitions. The model therefore operationalises authorisation as a traceable movement from credibility, through circulation, to institutional consequence, while showing how authorised claims reshape the conditions under which future claims come to count.

Thomas and Benjamin's (2023) analysis of Hurricane Dorian, Haitian migrants and loss and damage illustrates the model in a climate-vulnerable, tourism-dependent island setting. Rather than only identifying the injustices experienced by Haitian communities in The Bahamas, the authorisation lens asks how claims about citizenship, safety, loss and rights became, or failed to become, authoritative within post-disaster governance. Their analysis shows that visibility of vulnerability did not itself secure equal protection or institutional response.

At accumulation, analysis would examine whose testimony and evidence counted, how citizenship status and institutional standing shaped credibility, and why small island states' loss-and-damage claims could acquire international authority while Haitian communities' experiences remained less able to command it. At mobilisation, it would trace how rights claims travelled, or failed to travel, between affected communities, national government, civil-society organisations, humanitarian actors and international climate forums, and how they changed in transit. At institutional recognition, it would identify consequences for shelter, deportation, rebuilding, compensation and accountability rather than treating moral visibility as equivalent to political influence. The feedback loops then ask how authorised claims reproduce recovery priorities, accountability structures and destination futures. This is a conceptual application, not an empirical test of the model. It demonstrates how tourism recovery can prioritise resilience, infrastructure and visitor economies while marginalised residents' losses and knowledge remain visible but institutionally weak.

From being heard to becoming consequential

Taken together, this paper argues that climate justice in tourism cannot be understood only through the presence of justice principles, participatory processes or recognition language. Being included, consulted or heard does not necessarily mean that a claim becomes consequential. The central question is how particular claims become credible, mobile and consequential within governance while others remain symbolic, localised or marginal. Authorisation therefore offers a way to examine the political and epistemic processes through which climate-justice claims move from articulation towards influence. In this sense, authorisation names the process, epistemic capital names one key resource within it, mobilisation captures circulation and translation, and institutional recognition names the point at which claims acquire decision-making force.

The contribution is deliberately bounded. The model does not replace normative climate-justice scholarship or claim to integrate entire scholarly traditions. It offers a focused connection between selected insights on justice, epistemic capital, policy mobilities and tourism governance. This matters because the authority of a claim shapes whose losses are counted, whose knowledge is trusted, whose rights are acted on and which futures become governable. Its practical questions are: whose evidence becomes credible; through which arenas can a claim travel; where is it transformed or blocked; and what institutional changes show that it has acquired authority?

The model also creates connections with wider debates in the social sciences on climate justice and governance, including debates on scale, participation, legitimacy, structural inequality and the movement of knowledge into decisions. Tourism is a particularly useful setting for this analysis because it connects these dynamics across destinations, labour markets, conservation areas, transport

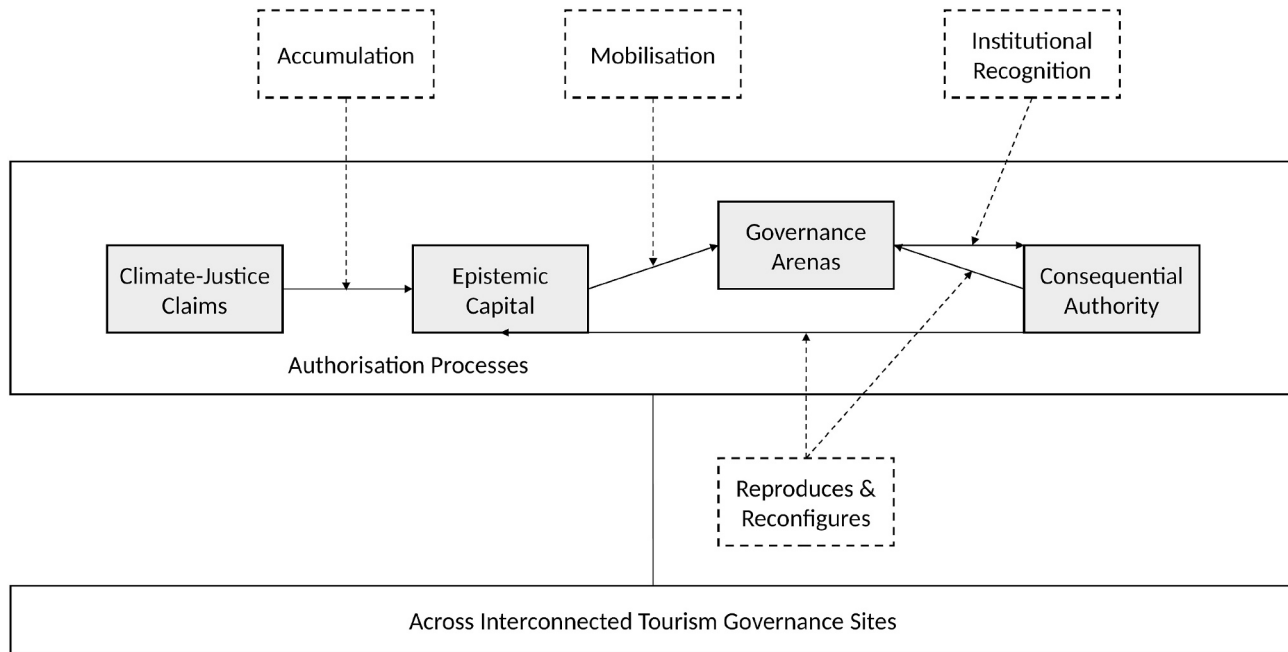


Fig. 1. An authorisation model for climate justice in tourism governance.

systems, climate-planning processes and visitor economies.

Future research should test and refine the authorisation model empirically across tourism policies, recovery plans, conservation governance, labour disputes, transport transitions, adaptation planning and nationally determined contributions. Comparative work could examine how forms of evidence, expertise and institutional access affect the accumulation and mobilisation of claims; when institutional recognition changes decisions, resources or implementation; and how authorised claims reproduce or reconfigure future governance conditions. Such work would strengthen tourism climate-justice research by showing not only where justice claims are excluded, but how they become, or fail to become, consequential in practice.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Joseph Mellors: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Conceptualization. **Lucy Atieno:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Judy Kepher Gona:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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