

The background of the top half of the page is a photograph of two mountain bikers riding on a rocky trail through a forest. The biker in the foreground is wearing a red and black jersey and a helmet, and is riding a black mountain bike. The biker in the background is wearing a red shirt and black shorts. The trail is made of large, flat rocks, and the forest is dense with green trees.

FESI Position Paper

Integrating **Sport Tourism** into the Future European Sustainable Tourism Strategy

September 2026

Summary:

1. Recognise sport tourism as a strategic pillar of sustainable tourism
2. Adopt an inclusive definition of sport tourism
3. Support destinations through EU funding, sustainable infrastructure, and capacity building
4. Recognise sport tourism as a driver of employment and local economic development
5. Strengthen the evidence base on sport tourism and support sustainable destination management
6. Foster cross-sectoral cooperation to unlock the full potential of sport tourism

Introduction

The **Federation of the European Sporting Goods Industry (FESI)** welcomes the European Commission's initiative to develop a European Sustainable Tourism Strategy and supports the ambition to create a tourism ecosystem that is more sustainable, resilient, competitive, and inclusive.

As tourism evolves, travellers are increasingly seeking active, authentic, and meaningful experiences that combine wellbeing, nature, and local engagement. In this context, sport tourism represents a key component of sustainable tourism development and should be fully integrated into the future European Sustainable Tourism Strategy.

Sport tourism goes beyond major sporting events or professional athletes. It includes all forms of travel where physical activity, recreation, or leisure-based movement is a central motivation or important element of the experience, including cycling, walking, hiking, running, and outdoor activities. It enables visitors to experience destinations at a human scale, with low environmental impact, strong connections to local landscapes, cultures, and communities, while promoting active and sustainable forms of mobility.

By encouraging healthier lifestyles, supporting local economies, creating employment, reducing seasonality, and promoting low-impact forms of travel, sport tourism directly contributes to Europe's sustainability objectives. Sport tourism also represents a significant economic opportunity: for example, cycling tourism alone generates an estimated €44 billion in economic impact annually in Europe¹, demonstrating the potential of active and sustainable tourism models.

Sport tourism is already a significant contributor to the European tourism economy. A January 2026 briefing by the European Parliament estimates that **Europe accounted for around 38% of global**

¹ [European cycle tourism: a tool for sustainable regional rural development](#) (2013)

sports-tourism revenues in 2022, highlighting the strategic importance of the sector for European destinations².

This European importance reflects a broader global trend. In its recent report *Sport for People and Planet* (2026), the World Economic Forum values the contribution of sport tourism to the global economy at **\$672 billion**. Sport tourism is identified as one of the most significant contributors to the wider sports economy and as one of the fastest-growing segments of the global tourism industry³.

Sport tourism should therefore be recognised not as a separate tourism segment, but as an essential part of the transition towards a more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient European tourism model.

FESI calls on the European Commission to:

- Recognise sport tourism as a strategic pillar of sustainable tourism and adopt an inclusive definition covering all forms of active travel experiences;
- Adopt an inclusive definition of sport tourism;
- Support destinations in developing sustainable sport tourism ecosystems through infrastructure investment, capacity building and stakeholder cooperation;
- Recognise sport tourism as a driver of employment, SME growth and local economic development;
- Strengthen the evidence base on sport tourism through improved data collection, monitoring and knowledge sharing;
- Foster cross-sectoral cooperation to unlock the full potential of sport tourism

1. Recognise sport tourism as a strategic pillar of sustainable tourism

The future European Sustainable Tourism Strategy should explicitly recognise sport tourism as an integral component of sustainable tourism development.

Sport tourism reflects the transformation of tourism from traditional passive experiences towards more active, participatory, and experience-based models. It enables destinations to respond to growing consumer demand for wellbeing, outdoor activities, nature-based experiences, and healthier lifestyles.

² [European Parliament, Sports tourism: A strategic tool for sustainable and balanced EU tourism](#), EPRS Briefing (2026)

³ [World Economic Forum, Sport for People and Planet](#) (2026)

Sport tourism can also contribute to addressing some of Europe's key tourism challenges, including seasonality, pressure on popular destinations, and the need to diversify tourism offers towards more sustainable and resilient models.

A sustainable tourism strategy that does not address the growing importance of sport tourism risks overlooking a significant opportunity to strengthen Europe's tourism competitiveness while delivering environmental and societal benefits.

FESI calls on the European Commission to explicitly include sport tourism as a priority area within the future European Sustainable Tourism Strategy and ensure that its contribution is reflected across relevant tourism initiatives and actions. In this perspective, FESI calls on the European Commission to establish explicit synergies between the future European Sustainable Tourism Strategy and the ongoing revision of the Council Recommendation on Health-Enhancing Physical Activity (HEPA). Sport tourism should not only be framed as an economic driver, but also as an operational vector for public health, promoting active lifestyles and equitable access to outdoor environments.

2. Adopt an inclusive definition of sport tourism

FESI encourages the European Commission to adopt a broad and inclusive definition of sport tourism:

Sport tourism refers to travel experiences where sport, physical activity, recreation, or leisure-based movement represents a central motivation or significant component of the journey. It includes both organised sport and accessible physical activities such as cycling, walking, hiking, running, and outdoor recreation, including water sports (canoeing, paddle boating etc), involving all participants from professional athletes to recreational users, families, and individuals seeking active and sustainable travel experiences.

Sport tourism should also be understood as an inclusive model that enables participation by people of all ages and abilities, including people with disabilities, through accessible infrastructure, adapted services, reliable information, and inclusive experiences. It fosters the encounter with other people and cultures and also helps to remove barriers and prejudices in the areas of diversity, social inequality and mental isolation.

This definition reflects the reality of today's tourism landscape, where the sport tourist is not only someone attending or participating in a sporting event, but anyone choosing a destination to move, explore, and engage with their surroundings. It includes both nearby destinations and travel to other countries.

FESI encourages the European Commission to use such an inclusive definition as a reference point for future EU tourism initiatives, ensuring consistency in policy development, data collection and funding opportunities related to sport tourism.

3. Support destinations through EU funding, sustainable infrastructure, and capacity building

Sport tourism offers significant opportunities for European regions, but its development requires appropriate infrastructure, investment, and expertise.

The future Strategy should encourage Member States and regions to develop sustainable sport tourism ecosystems by integrating sport tourism into national, regional and local tourism strategies, while promoting access to appropriate EU funding opportunities, supporting capacity building, and facilitating cooperation between relevant stakeholders.

The European Commission should ensure that existing and future EU funding instruments support the development of sustainable and affordable sport tourism ecosystems, including through investments in:

- Safe, accessible, and environmentally responsible infrastructure for cycling, walking, hiking, and other outdoor activities;
- Development, maintenance, and improvement of long-distance and local routes, trails, greenways, and associated facilities, including signage and visitor information;
- Sustainable mobility solutions connecting tourism destinations and active travel networks;
- Multimodal connections between sport tourism destinations and other transport modes, including rail, bus, and waterway connections;
- Adaptation of tourism infrastructure to climate change and changing visitor patterns;
- Skills development and training for tourism and sport professionals;
- Digital tools supporting destination management, accessibility, safety, and visitor monitoring.

The European Commission should ensure that sport tourism is appropriately and visibly considered in relevant EU programmes and initiatives supporting tourism, regional development, mobility, skills and sustainability.

EU support should also encourage stronger cooperation between tourism authorities, local communities, sporting goods and outdoor gear companies, specialised retailers, sport organisations, and other relevant stakeholders to ensure that investments deliver long-term economic, social, and environmental benefits.

Support should also promote cross-border sport tourism offers and cooperation between regions and communities, including through sister-city partnerships, helping Europe strengthen its position as a leading destination for sustainable active tourism.

Destinations must be supported in managing sport tourism growth responsibly, protecting biodiversity, avoiding overcrowding, and developing high-quality experiences adapted to local conditions.

4. Recognise sport tourism as a driver of employment and local economic development

Sport tourism should be recognised as a structural tool for sustainable economic growth and regional development, contributing directly to Sustainable Development Goal 8 on decent work and economic growth.

It generates employment opportunities across a wide ecosystem, including:

- Guides, instructors, and coaches;
- Bicycle mechanics and technical specialists;
- Retail professionals;
- Equipment rental providers;
- Tourism operators and service providers.

Sport tourists also generate demand for specialised sporting goods and outdoor gear retailers, which provide essential expertise, equipment, products, and services that enable safe and high-quality active tourism experiences. Beyond their direct contribution, active tourism also supports a wider network of local businesses, including accommodation providers, restaurants, cafés, supermarkets, cultural attractions, museums, transport services, and local shops. By attracting visitors to outdoor destinations, trails, cycling routes, mountains, coastal areas, and other active tourism sites, sport tourism can help spread economic benefits beyond traditional urban tourism centres, creating new opportunities for rural, remote, and less-visited regions across Europe.

FESI calls on the European Commission to recognise sport tourism within initiatives supporting SMEs, entrepreneurship, skills development and local economic diversification, ensuring that businesses enabling active tourism experiences are considered as key contributors to the tourism ecosystem.

5. Strengthen the evidence base on sport tourism and support sustainable destination management

Sport tourism contributes to multiple European priorities by promoting:

- Active and healthy lifestyles by significantly reducing the risks and numbers of NCDs such as diabetes or obesity;
- Low-impact mobility and outdoor recreation;
- Reduced tourism seasonality;
- More resilient destinations.

Sport tourism also supports the protection and responsible enjoyment of Europe's natural and cultural heritage by encouraging sustainable access to nature, responsible visitor behaviour, and long-term stewardship of outdoor spaces and routes.

Many European destinations are already adapting their tourism models in response to climate change. For example, mountain regions facing reduced snow reliability are diversifying towards year-round activities such as cycling, hiking, and other outdoor experiences. Sport tourism in mountain areas also plays a significant and growing role in enabling people to escape, at least temporarily, the increasingly hot temperatures experienced in lower-altitude and urban areas, as demonstrated during the summer of 2026.

Despite its growing importance, data on sport tourism remains fragmented across Europe. The European Commission should support improved data collection, monitoring methodologies and knowledge sharing between Member States and relevant stakeholders to better assess sport tourism's economic, social and environmental contributions.

Improved evidence and common methodologies would help destinations develop more sustainable sport tourism strategies, better understand visitor patterns and support evidence-based policymaking at European, national and regional level.

6. Foster cross-sectoral cooperation to unlock the full potential of sport tourism

Sport tourism sits at the intersection of tourism, sport, mobility, health, sustainability and regional development policies. The European Commission should encourage stronger coordination between relevant policy areas and facilitate cooperation between public authorities, tourism organisations, sport organisations, sporting goods and outdoor gear companies, retailers, local communities and other relevant stakeholders.

Such cooperation is essential to develop coherent strategies, avoid fragmentation and ensure that sport tourism contributes effectively to Europe's sustainability, competitiveness and wellbeing objectives. To operationalise this cross-sectoral approach, FESI calls for structured cooperation between DG MOVE, DG EAC (Sport), DG SANTE, and DG GROW to align relevant EU funding streams (such as EU4Health, Erasmus+ Sport, and ERDF). Furthermore, integrating HEPA metrics into destination monitoring frameworks would allow Member States to measure both the economic benefits and the public health savings generated by active sport tourism

Conclusion

FESI believes that Europe has a unique opportunity to position itself as the world leader in sustainable sport tourism.

This ambition can only be achieved through cooperation between European and national policymakers, sporting goods and outdoor brands, specialised retailers, tourism authorities, public institutions, event organisers, local communities, and sport tourists.

FESI stands ready to contribute its expertise and support the European Commission in ensuring that sport tourism is recognised as a key element of Europe's sustainable tourism future.

Sport tourism is a strategic enabler of a healthier, more sustainable and more resilient European tourism ecosystem. By recognising its potential and integrating it into future EU tourism policies, Europe can strengthen its competitiveness while delivering lasting benefits for citizens, communities and destinations.

About FESI:

Founded in 1960 FESI, the Federation of the European Sporting Goods Industry, is the unique pre-competitive platform representing the interests of the sporting goods industry in Europe, advancing its members' priorities and promoting initiatives that benefit the sector, EU citizens and the society as a whole. FESI represents the interests of approximately 1.800 sporting goods manufacturers (85% of the European market) through its National Sporting Goods Industry Federations and its directly affiliated member companies. 70-75% of FESI's membership is made up of Small and Medium Sized Enterprises. In total, the European Sporting Goods Industry employs over 700.000 EU citizens and has an annual turnover of some 81 billion euro.

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