

EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF GREEN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT TO ADVANCE SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract

Purpose – The drive for environmentally-sustainable tourism, seen as the consideration of present and future economic, social, and environmental effects while taking care of the needs of the tourist, the sector, the environment, and the host, has recently become a focus of many researchers and managers. To achieve environmental sustainability, the management of tourism organizations can benefit from introducing green human resource management (GHRM) practices as a new managerial approach to improve organizational performance. Grounded by three theories, the paper aims to address the gap in the GHRM research as part of the environmental sustainability efforts in the tourism by exploring the opportunities and obstacles for implementing such practices.

Methodology – We conducted qualitative research founded on data from semi-structured interviews with nine HR professionals and managers who are working in tourism in North Macedonia. This helped us understand their experience in the settings holistically, thus helping us better understand how GHRM can help organizations improve their sustainable practices. We choose reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as an approach to qualitative analysis.

Findings – Through this exploratory study, we address 1) the potential opportunities and challenges of implementing GHRM practices to advance the environmental performance of tourism organizations, and 2) a theoretical framework for implementing GHRM for HR managers to contribute to the development of environmentally-sustainable tourism.

Contribution – The paper represents one of the first studies on GHRM in North Macedonia and its tourism sector. As such, we aim to provide insight into the current situation as well as recommendations for the business community.

Keywords: Green human resource management, Environmentally-sustainable tourism, Sustainable development, Reflexive thematic analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Environmental sustainability and protection have gained more ground in recent years among scholars, decision-makers, and industry practitioners, especially following natural disasters, the rapid changing of the world's climate, and the presentation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs). Economic and business activity's impact on environmental problems has become more apparent (Jackson et al. 2011), leading to the need for society, involving private and public organizations to focus more on uncovering solutions to the environmental challenges so that they can move to a more sustainable future (Hoffman 2009).

In this regard, organizations have understood the importance of including sustainability in the environmental, financial, and social aspects of their operations and work. This resulted in the rise of green human resource management (GHRM) so that the human resource management (HRM) functions incorporate the environmental aspect. In fact, GHRM as key to achieving environmental sustainability represents the realization of HRM functions that have a positive impact on the environmental behavior of the employees and affirm the organizations' environmental performance. When referring to sustainability in relation to GHRM in this research, we mean environmental sustainability specifically. Sustainability, as a concept is related to the construct of the Triple Bottom Line (TBL), which incorporates an economic, social, and environmental line (Alhaddi 2015). Subsequently, one should be cautious when connecting GHRM with sustainability in general, as these contemporary HRM practices can directly influence the environmental aspect of the entire organizational sustainability (Paillé et al. 2014).

Moreover, GHRM incorporates environmental supervision in all HRM processes, ranging from the selection of employees all the way to measuring performance (Pham et al. 2020). It encourages pro-environmental actions of the employees that consist of both formal tasks and voluntary activities aimed at protecting the environment like saving electricity and water, paper recycling, and similar.

This becomes especially important for the tourism industry. As one of the biggest natural resource consumers in the world, it stands behind 5% of the global emissions of carbon dioxide (United Nations World Tourism Organization 2017). Therefore, different HRM practices that involve enhancing existing jobs with green tasks or including green jobs may be significant (Jackson et al. 2011). Employees have a responsibility to maintain the environmental and green aspects of the organization's work. Still, the adoption of GHRM practices has certain research gaps and the employees' views on them and their implementation are vital. This study offers insight into some of those GHRM-related questions in the tourism sector and their impact on the environmental performance of the organizations.

Since sustainable tourism and GHRM are fairly new subjects, there is an ongoing debate about which GHRM practices can improve organizational environmental performance and how can these be implemented. Considering the context of the Balkan countries, these concepts are even more rarely explored. As a result, this paper aims to address the gap in the research of GHRM as part of the environmental sustainability efforts in the tourism industry by exploring the opportunities and challenges of implementing such practices. This leads to a theoretical framework, which we propose for the successful implementation of GHRM practices in tourism organizations. As such, we aim to provide insight into the current situation and propose recommendations for the business community.

With this in mind, through this exploratory study, we will address two research questions:

RQ1: What are the potential opportunities and challenges of implementing GHRM practices to advance the environmental performance of organizations in the tourism sector?

RQ2: How HR managers can implement GHRM as a management approach for developing environmentally-sustainable tourism?

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. Green Human Resource Management

As the “green wave” washed over a variety of management and organizational disciplines, the rising need for environmental sustainability, care for the environment, and mitigating the destructive effects of climate change has affected human resource management. Often dubbed green human resource management, greening HRM, or environmental human resource management, the new management discipline integrates eco-friendly management to improve organizational performance through environmental practices.

While Renwick et al. (2013) view GHRM as an extension of environmental management or an aspect of it, Jackson et al. (2011) emphasize GHRM as an expansion of traditional HRM, which is tasked with the development of environmentally-responsive and sustainable organizations. Considering this, at the core of the GHRM literature lies the matching of the environmental goals and strategic orientation of the organization with the ordinary practices of managing human resources and human capital (Gholami et al. 2016). In that essence, employees should be a part of how organizations mitigate the negative environmental impact, increase awareness about the environment, and promote adequate behavior (Jabbour 2013).

Practices of GHRM can be grouped into three components: 1) build green capacities (job planning and design, recruitment and selection, and training and development); 2) motivate the employee to think and behave green (performance management and compensation and benefits); 3) offer green opportunities (empowerment and participation of employees, organizational learning, building a green culture), which are presented in Figure 1 (Pham et al. 2020).

Figure 1: Overview of mostly implemented GHRM practices



From the perspective of the experience of a single employee, GHRM means (Pham et al. 2020):

- including environmental challenges and aspects in the job description,
- putting an accent on the environmental elements of the hiring process,
- increasing the employee's environmental skills and awareness,
- assessing if environmental goals are met by the employee during performance appraisals,
- creating a system for both monetary and non-monetary tokens and awards for the employee if the environmental goals are met,
- changing the current organizational values, assumptions, and behaviors to reflect environmentally-sustainable strategic objectives,
- developing active knowledge acquisition and exchange of environment-related ideas and discussions,
- providing opportunities for the employee to take part in environmental management-related activities,
- creating new green jobs in coordination with trade unions where the employee is a member,
- emphasizing green health and security for the employee through health and safety protocols, which are aligned with the goals of environmental management,
- enhancing a work-life balance in the employee's life related to green principles, attitudes, and actions.

Considering there is a positive link between environmental management, economic performance, and environmental performance, additional HR components fill in the gaps to have improved environmental performance (Russo and Fouts 1997). With that being said, HR functions should support the environmental management practices and

objectives in a symbiosis that will result in enhanced environmental performance for the organization.

1.2. Environmental Performance

Environmental performance in a business context objectively assesses the impacts on different levels that an organization's environmental policies and actions have (de Burgos Jimenez and Céspedes Lorente 2001). In other words, it relates to the level of achieved targets for the organization's environmental footprint. Prior research has shown that this type of performance has been measured through certifications (such as ISO 14001), which served as a basis for a matrix for environmental performance, as well as, other measures like environmental performance scales (Chow and Chen 2012). In turn, these scales measured the environmental performance through dimensions like the number of established partnerships, the level of reduced waste and harmful emissions, reduced environmental impacts of products and services, reduced risks from ecological accidents, and the level of reduced procurement of non-renewable components and materials (Paillé et al. 2014).

Environmental management literature shows that GHRM positively and directly affects the organization's environmental performance (Kim et al. 2019). GHRM practices can play an instrumental role in raising awareness for the environment and stimulating green innovation, and green behaviors, which ultimately improves the entire environmental performance (Singh et al. 2020). More precisely, practices of green training and development and increased employee participation have impacted a rise in hotel environmental performance (Pham et al. 2020).

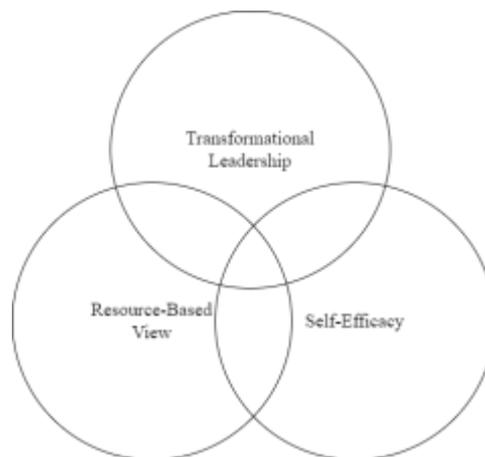
Moreover, GHRM practices can be intertwined and become an aspect of a larger formal system for environmental management. The adoption of such a system more likely leads to the high environmental performance of the organization, yet in the context of small tourism businesses, in particular, including small travel agencies, restaurants, cafes, and hotels, this may be challenging because of smaller amounts of resources and limited HR capacities (Sobaih 2018). On the other hand, Elshaer et al. (2021) have found that GHRM doesn't significantly affect the environmental performance of small businesses in the tourism sector due to a variety of possible factors such as part-time workers, which constitute the majority of the workforce in this sector. This leaves space for revisiting the concepts and how GHRM can help rather than hinder the efforts of the tourism business to boost its environmental performance. While practicing GHRM has been researched in a wide variety of contexts, little research exists on the situation in the Balkans, especially in the tourism sector, which is still reeling from the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and its health and economic effects (Colmekcioglu et al. 2022).

1.3. Theoretical Framework Through Theoretical Triangulation

Making tourism environmentally-sustainable through the wide adoption of GHRM practices is theoretically encouraged by triangulation of the theories of the resource-based view (RBV), self-efficacy (SE), and transformational leadership (TL). Figure 2

overviews the theoretical triangulation that takes into account the changes happening at an individual, managerial, and organizational level.

Figure 2: **Theories underpinning the theoretical framework**



The RBV framework focuses on the company as a principal analysis unit and understanding its competitive advantage, thus reflecting on the organization's overall performance due to intra-firm resources (Barney 2001). Considering that human resources and intellectual capital are some of the vital intangible assets of businesses, competitive advantage, founded on strong environmental performance, is more likely achieved through skilled and empowered employees, who achieve green objectives, further supporting the value, inimitability, and non-substitutability of the framework.

While the RBV theory focuses on the resources to achieve a competitive advantage, the SE theory refers to the preferred behaviors of the employees, referring to the confidence the employees have in their personal abilities to effectively complete a complex task, thus potentially contributing to positive changes in the environment (Bandura and Adams 1977). Similarly, researchers view green self-efficacy (GSE) as the employees' belief that they are able to systemize and carry out green plans and initiatives to meet environmental objectives (Farooq et al. 2021). Translating this framework to the tourism sector, employees will be more likely to participate in the environmental objectives of the tourism business to combat potential contamination and ecological disasters.

With that being said, scholars have demonstrated that managing resources and leading employees as well as encouraging their self-confidence to complete complex jobs and attain objectives can be nurtured with transformational leadership (TL) or, in this case, green transformational leadership (GTL) (Leithwood and Poplin 1992). GTL is found to both encourage employees to fulfill their green objectives as well as creative behavior to find solutions to environmental challenges. This type of leadership is instrumental in communicating a green vision for environmentally-sustainable tourism to the employees, reinforcing eco-friendly behavior, providing opportunities, and setting environmental

standards (Farooq et al. 2021). Figure 3 overviews the relationships, which are grounded in the theories explained above, between members of management and HR, who are tasked with introducing GHRM in the respective organizations in the tourism sector, and the employees.

Figure 3: Relationships grounded by theories



2. METHOD

2.1. Data Collection

Data for the study was collected through semi-structured interviews between January 2023 and the beginning of March 2023. Interviews, and semi-structured ones, in particular, have a long history in qualitative data analysis, especially for exploring thoughts, attitudes, values, and emotions about a certain topic, which often can be novel, such as the adoption of GHRM in the context of the tourism sector in North Macedonia (Kallio et al. 2016). Due to the a-priori understanding of the theoretical concepts and previous research findings on the topic, we believed that certain categories of people may present a unique and important point of view on the implementation of GHRM, which is why we employed purposive sampling for selecting the interviewees (Trost 1986). Therefore, the interviewees weren't selected randomly, yet according to how well their characteristics matched the phenomenon in question.

The interviewees were recruited from two primary pools – HR professionals who have at least one year of experience in the tourism/hospitality industry or can somehow demonstrate their knowledge of the sector and managers and business leaders of tourism organizations. We chose a sample, which would be representative of the wider population consisting of members of management and HR employees from the tourism and hospitality industry, including organizations from both the private sectors (hotels, motels, restaurants, cafes) and non-profit organizations, that work in the field. We believe that by observing this population, we can determine the GHRM practices as these profiles of employees are crucial in the decision-making processes when it comes to GHRM.

Once the population was determined, a purposive sampling method was used as we see that the outlined profiles of individuals may have a specific and important point of view on GHRM (Robinson 2014). Furthermore, we identified potential interviewees through our contacts and sent out emails to a pre-determined list of organizations that are working

in the Macedonian tourism and hospitality industries. As a result, we came up with nine individuals, who have managerial positions or are employed in an HR department at a tourism organization and were willing to participate. When the contact was established, every participant completed a written consent form for willingly participating in the study.

We carried out nine individual semi-structured interviews; each interview lasted between 40 minutes to 1 hour and was organized online. Table 1 summarizes the key demographic characteristics of the interviewees.

The size of the sample is evaluated to be adequate for gauging the general opinion of HR professionals and managers regarding GHRM practices and how they can be used for championing environmentally-sustainable tourism. Through the discussions, it was evident that GHRM is relatively new in the Macedonian managerial practice, especially in tourism and hospitality, quality of data and saturation were achieved by the last interviewee.

Table 1: Overview of characteristics of interviewees

Interviewee	Sex	Age	Ethnicity	Education	Position	Years in the organization
Person A	F	32	Albanian	Master's degree	HR manager	5
Person B	F	25	Macedonian	Master's degree	HR specialist	4
Person C	M	31	Macedonian	Bachelor's degree	Line manager	3
Person D	M	26	Macedonian	Bachelor's degree	Unit manager	6
Person E	F	40	Macedonian	Bachelor's degree	HR specialist	1
Person F	F	38	Macedonian	Bachelor's degree	Unit manager	5
Person G	F	43	Macedonian	Bachelor's degree	HR generalist	3
Person H	M	29	Serb	Master's degree	HR professional	2
Person I	F	26	Macedonian	Bachelor's degree	HR specialist	2

The questioning route we used for the semi-structured interviews included four extensive areas of inquiry: 1) familiarity of HR professionals and managers with GHRM, 2) adopted GHRM practices, 3) opportunities, and 4) challenges in implementing GHRM practices for environmentally-sustainable tourism.

2.1. Data Analysis

Our qualitative research utilizes the interpretative approach founded on data gathered from semi-structured interviews as the chosen data-gathering tool. This approach helped us to identify how to implement GHRM practices to enhance environmental performance and make tourism more environmentally-sustainable, considering the opportunities and challenges related to these practices. We carried out the data analysis through six iterative phases characteristic of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). These phases include familiarization with the data, coding, deduction of primary themes, development and review of identified themes, refinement, and definition of themes, and finally writing the findings (Braun and Clarke 2021).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The RTA process and the inductive analysis of the data have resulted in generating 27 codes, out of which we synthesized 4 connected themes with 9 subthemes stemming from the broader major themes.

3.1. Theme 1: Familiarity with GHRM

3.1.1. Subtheme 1: HR professionals and managers are aware and implement GHRM in their operations

The first theme regarding the familiarity of GHRM in Macedonian tourism organizations has found that although HR professionals and managers have basic knowledge of GHRM, they express a willingness to potentially implement GHRM to boost environmental sustainability and environmental performance. Most of them have been introduced to a few GHRM practices through the management and organized special trainings for sustainability within organizations.

The general director of the restaurant said that GHRM is the next big thing after she came from abroad, so she organized a transfer of knowledge workshop. That's how it all began.

(Person B)

3.1.2. Subtheme 2: HR professionals and managers are unaware of GHRM it represents a novel concept to them and they haven't implemented it so far

A portion of HR professionals remains unaware of GHRM practices. They consider it to be a novel concept, which they haven't heard of before.

I'm hearing about GHRM for the first time from you.

(Person C)

3.2. Theme 2: Adopted GHRM practices

3.2.1. Subtheme 3: Tourism organizations look positively towards eco-friendly travel, digitalization, recycling, and including both employees and guests in the process

The implementation of GHRM activities is the core of the second identified theme. It was evident that HR professionals and managers are willing to implement more GHRM practices, once certain barriers are lifted. The interviewees shared that tourism organizations are likely to encourage eco-friendly travel, digitalization, and recycling, and are willing to even include the guests in the GHRM practices.

We are slowly but surely going towards paperless HR. Old documents are shredded and recycled, and we try to print only the most necessary information.

(Person I)

To successfully implement GHRM practices in tourism, the interviewees highlighted the need for a clear green vision and suitable communication of it, green training and development, employee participation in decision-making and implementation, raising awareness, and digitalization.

3.2.2. Subtheme 4: Competitive advantage and employer branding are favored as likely results of successfully-implemented GHRM practices

Most respondents believe GHRM practices can increase the competitive advantage and help the organizations with employer branding when they position themselves as green organizations. This can significantly impact recruitment and top talent to apply for new job positions.

Our HR has seen an increase in Gen Z applicants, who are typically more aware of environmental issues. This was beneficial for us as we are looking to hire new and bright talent.

(Person E)

3.2.3. Subtheme 5: Although all GHRM practices are valuable, green training and green planning are some of the most adopted ones, while green selection is the least adopted one

Connected to that, seven of the interviewees mentioned that green training and green planning are the most important GHRM practices for the tourism sector, whereas green selection is the least popular one. Six out of nine interviewees stated they equally value all GHRM practices and couldn't decide on the one that is the least useful.

Green planning for us has a double impact – from 2020 onwards we include green plans for sustainability of our operations in the general plans and at the same the planning process is done digitally and in an eco-friendly way.

(Person H)

3.3. Theme 3: Opportunities for implementing GHRM practices for environmentally-sustainable tourism

3.3.1. Subtheme 6: Digitalization makes administrative work more accessible and saves resources

3.3.2. Subtheme 7: GHRM stimulates innovation in the workplace and better performance of employees

As opportunities for implementing GHRM practices were the subject of the third theme, the interviewees acknowledge the wide range of positive aspects. They have identified the following main opportunities: 1) better and faster access to documentation with digitalization, 2) saving resources and reduced environmental accidents, 3) following an

employee's performance is easier and more comprehensive, 4) potential for increased productivity and performance, 5) stimulating innovation and intrapreneurship.

When everyone behaves according to high green standards, we see that employees take it upon themselves to do better and minimize their personal carbon footprint at their job.

(Person A)

We have seen slight improvements in the morale and motivation of our administration team since we started implementing rudimentary GHRM practices. There is some sort of a friendly competition who will be the most eco-friendly.

(Person D)

3.4. Theme 4: Challenges in implementing GHRM practices for environmentally-sustainable tourism

3.4.1. Subtheme 8: GHRM practices require additional financial and human resources

3.4.2. Subtheme 9: Employees can be resistant to change in the way HR practices are performed, straining the communication system and the culture

Besides the opportunities, a set of certain challenges is often associated with implementing GHRM for improving environmental sustainability, especially when speaking about smaller entities. Higher costs, the need for additional training, engaging more resources, miscommunication, and resistance to change in the organization were some of the most frequently mentioned challenges HR professionals have faced in GHRM adoption.

The inflation and the COVID-19 crises have put a strain on our budgets. So, we don't have the funds to pay for software and additional training for working with digital tools.

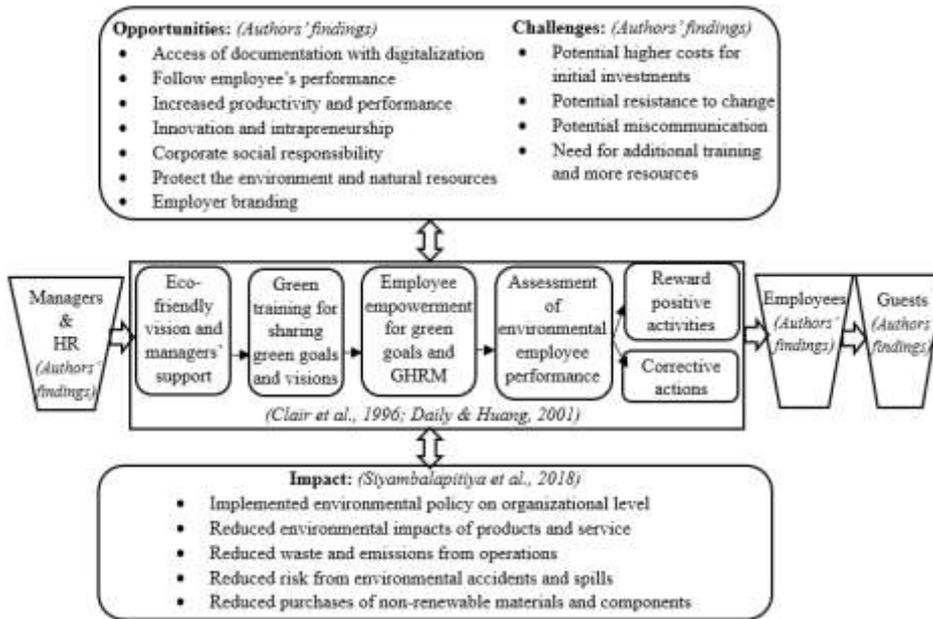
(Person G)

When the HR director first spoke about GHRM, we all thought that this will require extra unpaid effort from us. It took a long time and lots of conversations to make everyone realize how we can benefit from these practices.

(Person F)

The major findings together with findings from prior models (Clair et al. 1996; Daily and Huang 2001; Siyambalapitiya et al. 2018) are presented in a theoretical model for GHRM implementation in tourism in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Framework for implementing GHRM practices in the tourism sector



According to the findings, the level of awareness among HR professionals is pretty high about GHRM, yet its adoption in environmentally-sustainable tourism is still in its early stages. From their perspective, a change in the strategic direction of the organization towards eco-friendliness plays an instrumental role and serves as a foundation for the rest of the activities. Another important aspect is the acceptance of the employees, which can be accelerated through heightened participation in planning and implementing GHRM practices as well as creating environmental performance measures. According to the interviewees, when GHRM practices are adopted the right way, they are more likely to change the environmental performance and the level of environmental sustainability of the tourism organization for the better. This is complementary to past insights about the significance of GHRM in the modern age

CONCLUSION

The literature so far has discussed green human resources through its prism of benefits, correlation with other constructs, and in a variety of contexts, yet little is known about how GHRM can be implemented in the tourism sector of a developing country like North Macedonia and the Balkan context. To address this gap, this research explores how GHRM can be successfully implemented in tourism organizations in North Macedonia to improve environmentally-sustainable tourism and environmental performance, considering the opportunities and challenges of this HR approach.

Therefore, the study makes a couple of contributions. The practical contribution can be seen that the study set out to explore how to implement GHRM as a management approach for developing environmental sustainability tourism and presents a framework that can be further tested. Another contribution is the overview of the potential opportunities and challenges for implementing these practices in the backdrop of a specific industry – tourism and hospitality. For the scientific community, this research is a contribution to the existing GHRM literature by extending the discussion on environmental sustainability and HRM to new contexts and aspects. Researchers can further test and modify the recommended research framework paired with opportunities, challenges, and impact when discussing GHRM and green performance. Furthermore, the research is one of the first to empirically take a closer look at the state of GHRM adoption in Macedonian tourism and hospitality organizations.

Yet, the study comes with a set of limitations, which at the same time represent opportunities for future research. More precisely, the research uses only a qualitative method as it is an exploratory study, which wants to understand how GHRM can be adopted to boost environmental performance and promote environmentally-sustainable tourism. That's why there is no positivist validation, which may be achieved through a quantitative research method. Since the study was conducted in the Republic of North Macedonia, it isn't a one-fit-all solution and representation for all developing countries or the countries in the region, where even small aspects can differ and change the outlook of GHRM adoption. Our subjective interpretation of the data from the semi-structured interviews can be considered a limitation. As a result, being cautious is vital when it comes to generalizing the findings to other contexts. Future research can address this. What's more, other researchers can continue and analyse the impact of GHRM adoption on other constructs and aspects like job satisfaction and engagement and across other industries like education, non-profit, agriculture, and more.

By interpreting the data from the semi-structured interviews using a reflexive thematic analysis, we identified the willingness of HR professionals and business leaders in tourism to adopt more GHRM practices, especially green training and development, and green planning, to empower employees and guests to consider the impact on the environment in everything they do, thus improving environmental performance and making tourism environmentally-sustainable.

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