

# PhD Opportunity

A glowing future? A sustainability transitions approach to ephemeral light festivals in the United Kingdom

**Director of Studies:** Dr David Flood Chavez

**Supervisors:** Prof Alan Dixon

**Research Group:** [Sustainable Environments Research Group](#)

## The PhD Opportunity:

Sustainability transitions have become an important and promising research agenda with a clear focus on energy, transport, and food systems (Köhler et al., 2019). Recent developments in tourism geographies, however, have demonstrated the usefulness of integrating the sustainability transitions research agenda with tourism studies (see Niewiadomski and Brouder, 2022). As a result, opportunities have emerged to apply key concepts and frameworks from the former in the study of different forms of tourism.

For instance, Flood Chavez et al. (2024) used a multi-level perspective (MLP) to assess the ongoing sustainability transitions of a wine-tourism destination while Booyens et al. (2024) explored the relationship between tourism and energy transitions. Despite this interest, significant gaps remain in applying and understanding sustainability transitions across different tourism and recreation contexts. One specific example is ephemeral light festivals, which despite their prominence as an economic and cultural strategy used – mainly – by cities worldwide, have received little attention.

Ephemeral light festivals are increasingly popular across the United Kingdom (UK), featured not only in urban areas (e.g. Spectra in Aberdeen, Bridges of Light in Worcester, Light Up in Lancaster) but also in places isolated from urban areas (e.g. The Enchanted Forest in Pitlochry, Brodie Illuminated in Aberdeenshire, Wondrous Woods in Edinburgh).

While these festivals are often framed as innovative and culturally meaningful strategies to attract visitors during off-peak seasons, improve destinations' image, foster proximity to 'nature', and promote residents' pride (see e.g. Camprubi and Coromina, 2019; Lovell, 2024), their potential to lead to mass tourism, trigger negative reactions from residents, or homogenising the tourism experience (see e.g. Camprubi and Coromina, 2019; Giordano and Ong, 2017; Quinn, 2005), requires deeper analysis. Such an analysis must grasp the complex nature of these types of festivals within the context of sustainable tourism.

The aim of this PhD is to contribute to the growing agenda of sustainability transitions in tourism. This PhD will use a sustainability transitions approach to analyse ephemeral light festivals in the UK paying attention to their nature (e.g. temporary, recurrent, innovative, meaningful) and their potential to promote sustainability transitions in the areas they take place. As such, building on sustainability transitions research and tourism geographies, this PhD will aim to answer the following research questions:

- How do the challenges to ephemeral light festivals in the UK and the emerging responses to them influence their sustainability?
- To what extent does the nature of ephemeral light festivals (e.g. temporary, recurrent, innovative, meaningful) contribute to or hinder their transition to more sustainable tourism scenarios?
- How do ephemeral light festivals in the UK influence sustainability transitions in the regions they take place?

It is expected that the PhD will involve extensive domestic travel and brief but frequent periods of fieldwork across different light festivals in the UK to conduct interviews and other qualitative – or quantitative – methods. The cost of this to the PhD candidate is likely to be in the region of £4,000.

#### References:

- Booyens, I., Hoogendoorn, G., Langerman, K., & Rivett-Carnac, K. (2024). Path creation for an electricity transition in South African tourism. *Tourism Geographies*, 194–213. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2023.2274836>
- Camprubí, R. and Coromina, L. (2019) Residents versus visitors at light festivals in cities: the case of Barcelona, *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 11(3), 455–468. DOI: 10.1080/19407963.2019.1604530
- Flood Chavez, D., Niewiadomski, P., & Jones, T. (2024). From niches to regime: Sustainability transitions in a diverse tourism destination. *Tourism Geographies*, 173–193. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2023.2280179>
- Giordano, E. and Ong, C.-E. (2017) Light festivals, policy mobilities and urban tourism, *Tourism Geographies*, 19(5), 699–716. DOI: 10.1080/14616688.2017.1300936
- Köhler, J. et al. (2019). An agenda for sustainability transitions research: State of the art and future directions. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 31, 1–32. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2019.01.004>
- Lovel, J. (2024) Conversational entanglements in new animistic tourism, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 109. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2024.103855>
- Niewiadomski, P., & Brouder, P. (2022). Towards an evolutionary approach to sustainability transitions in tourism. In I. Booyens & P. Brouder (Eds.), *Handbook of innovation for sustainable tourism* (pp. 82–110). Edward Elgar
- Quinn, B. (2005). Arts Festival and the City. *Urban Studies*, 42, 927–943. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980500107250>

#### Application Process:

To begin the application process please go to

<https://www.worc.ac.uk/research/research-degrees/applying-for-a-phd/>.

**The Interview:**

All successful applicants will be offered an interview with the proposed Supervisory Team. You will be contacted by a member of the Doctoral School Team to find a suitable date. Interviews can be conducted in person or over Microsoft Teams.

**Funding your PhD:**

For information about Doctoral Loans please visit: <https://www.worc.ac.uk/study/fees-and-finance/doctoral-loans.aspx>

During your PhD you can access the Research Conference Support Scheme to support the costs of presenting your research at an external conference.

**Research at the University of Worcester**

Research is central to the University's mission to make a difference in everything that we do. We are committed to delivering excellent research which extends the boundaries of human knowledge but which also improves people's lives by enabling better health outcomes, improving food security, developing environmentally sustainable solutions for crop production and socially sustainable solutions to our ageing population, enhancing public knowledge and understanding of the past and present.

The University hence focuses its research around five high-level challenges facing society, locally, nationally and globally:

- [Human Health and Wellbeing](#)
- [Sustainable Futures](#)
- [Digital Innovation](#)
- [Culture, Identity and Social Exclusion](#)
- [Professional Education](#)

The success of our research is reflected in our continuous improvement in external research assessment processes. In the most recent Research Excellence Framework, REF 2021, the University saw a near 50% increase in the scale of its research and 12% increase in quality, building on its performance in REF 2014 when it was the UK's most improved university in terms of Research Power, a combination of scale and quality.

**Research Degrees at Worcester**

Our research students are central to our overall mission for research. They are working at the cutting edge of their disciplines and driving forward the quality of our research whilst enriching our research culture. We are looking to increase our research student numbers as a strategic imperative.

Our commitment to our students is reflected in the results of the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2025 in which we ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> for overall research student satisfaction nationally. Key to our success in this area is the Doctoral School, a focal point for all our research students.

It provides:

- day-to-day support for our students, both administrative and practical, through our dedicated team
- a Research Student Study Space with both PCs and laptop docking station
- a comprehensive Researcher Development Programme for students and their supervisors
- a programme of student-led conferences and seminars

### Research Group

[The Sustainable Environments Research Group](#) (SERG) supports and promotes transdisciplinary research at the environment-society interface, and contributes to the University of Worcester's Sustainable Futures strategic area of challenge and more widely the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SERG's research draws upon expertise from a range of disciplines including ecology, conservation, natural resource management, river science, rural and urban development, health and wellbeing, climate change, and sustainable development itself. Our impact-driven research in recent years has addressed many of the key challenges facing society and the environment, such as climate change adaptation and mitigation, flood management, air quality, enhancing biodiversity in vulnerable environments, developing climate-smart sustainable agriculture, and delivering sustainable development in the global south.

### Widening Participation:

As part of its mission statement the University is committed to widening participation for its higher degrees. Although most candidates will have an undergraduate and/or a Masters degree, the University is happy to accept applications from candidates with relevant professional qualifications and work related experience.

**For further information or an informal discussion on this project, please contact Dr David Flood Chavez [d.floodchavez@worc.ac.uk](mailto:d.floodchavez@worc.ac.uk)**