

Beyond Sustainability: Why Tourism Must Embrace Regenerative Paradigms Now



Abdelrahman Ahmed Abdelhai Abdelghani* and Hebatallah Ahmed Mokhtar Ahmed

Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia

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*Corresponding author: Abdelrahman Ahmed Abdelhai Abdelghani, Applied College, Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Al-Kharj, Saudi Arabia

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Introduction

The tourism sector stands at a critical juncture. Despite three decades of sustainability rhetoric, the evidence of failure is overwhelming and undeniable. Global tourism contributes approximately 8% of carbon emissions, a figure that doubled between 2009 and 2019, growing at 3.5% annually-twice the rate of the global economy [1]. Destinations continue to experience environmental degradation, cultural commodification, and economic leakage that diverts revenues away from host communities [2]. The sustainable tourism framework, for all its well-intentioned conferences and policy documents, has not prepared the sector for the existential challenges ahead [3]. We must acknowledge this uncomfortable truth: sustainability, as currently practiced in tourism, has fundamentally failed.

This failure stems not from lack of effort but from flawed conceptual foundations. Sustainability frameworks operate on a minimization logic-reduce harm, lessen impact, mitigate damage-while the tourism industry continues its relentless pursuit of growth [4]. This approach is akin to asking a patient hemorrhaging from multiple wounds to simply bleed more slowly. What destinations urgently require is not damage control but active restoration. The tourism sector must move beyond the insufficient goal of “doing less harm” toward the transformative aspiration of “creating better.” This shift demands embracing regenerative tourism paradigms that fundamentally reimagine the relationship between tourism and place [5].

The Inadequacy of Current Sustainability Models

The sustainable tourism agenda, rooted in the Brundtland Commission’s 1987 definition, has been hamstrung by three critical

flaws. First, it placed misguided faith in governmental and supra-governmental organizations to drive change, overlooking the uncomfortable reality that politicians are reluctant to implement policies that constrain tourist behavior, as tourists are voters [6]. Second, sustainable tourism has been treated as a technocratic challenge-zoning regulations, carrying capacity calculations, certification schemes-rather than the profoundly political issue it represents [7]. Third, and perhaps most damaging, sustainability has been conceptualized as a destination to reach rather than a continuous journey of adaptation and transformation [8].

These conceptual limitations have created space for pervasive greenwashing, where tourism enterprises proclaim environmental consciousness while maintaining fundamentally extractive practices. Hotels with solar panels continue to drain water supplies with sprawling pools in arid regions; “eco-lodges” burn diesel generators while marketing rustic aesthetics; destinations trumpet carbon neutrality through dubious offset schemes while actual emissions soar [9,10]. Meanwhile, economic leakage in some destinations reaches 80%, with the majority of tourism revenues flowing to international corporations rather than resident communities, perpetuating neo-colonial patterns of wealth extraction [11].

Moreover, the climate crisis has rendered incremental sustainability improvements woefully inadequate. Tourism destinations require immediate, radical decarbonization to limit warming to 1.5°C, yet the sector lacks both the political will and operational frameworks to achieve this trajectory [12]. Protected areas, ostensibly managed sustainably, face chronic underfunding that undermines conservation objectives even as

tourism visitation increases [13]. The evidence is unequivocal: sustainability discourse has provided rhetorical cover for business-as-usual while destinations deteriorate.

Regenerative Tourism: A Paradigm Shift

Regenerative tourism represents not merely an extension of sustainability but a fundamental paradigm shift rooted in different assumptions about tourism's purpose and potential [14,15]. Where sustainability asks, "How can we minimize tourism's negative impacts?" regenerative thinking asks, "How can tourism actively restore and enhance the ecological, social, and cultural systems of destinations?" [16]. This distinction is not semantic; it requires transforming tourism from an extractive industry into a force for positive systemic change.

The regenerative paradigm draws from ecological principles, indigenous knowledge systems, and living systems theory [17]. It recognizes that destinations are not static backdrops for tourist consumption but dynamic, interconnected systems requiring active care and renewal [14]. Regenerative tourism thus prioritizes creating net positive impacts across the triple bottom line: environmental restoration, authentic community empowerment, and cultural revitalization [7,18].

Critically, regeneration is place-based and context-specific, rejecting the one-size-fits-all approaches that have plagued sustainable tourism implementation [19]. What regeneration means for a coral reef ecosystem differs profoundly from what it means for an indigenous cultural landscape or a post-industrial urban neighborhood. This contextual sensitivity demands that local communities, as the rightful stewards of their territories, occupy central decision-making positions in tourism development [20]. Regenerative tourism cannot be imposed from outside; it must be co-created through genuine partnership where communities define what flourishing means for their particular place [21].

Five Pillars for Regenerative Transformation

Implementing regenerative tourism requires transformation across multiple dimensions. First, governance structures must shift from top-down imposition to collaborative, multi-stakeholder models that empower local communities. Destinations including New Zealand have pioneered frameworks like the Tiaki Promise, where both residents and visitors commit to guardianship of land, sea, and culture [22]. These models recognize indigenous peoples, who steward approximately 80% of remaining biodiversity, as essential partners in tourism management [23].

Second, economic models must transform to prioritize local linkages over leakages. This means actively cultivating local supply chains, supporting community-owned enterprises, and ensuring equitable benefit distribution [24]. Costa Rica's Payment for Ecosystem Services program exemplifies how tourism revenues can directly fund conservation while providing livelihoods for local communities [25].

Third, environmental practices must move beyond conservation to active restoration. Tourism operations should integrate reforestation, coral reef rehabilitation, watershed protection, and biodiversity enhancement into their core activities [26]. Visitor experiences can be designed to enable tourists to participate meaningfully in restoration projects, transforming them from passive consumers to active contributors [27].

Fourth, cultural engagement must shift from commodification to genuine reciprocity and preservation. Tourism should support traditional knowledge transmission, cultural revitalization, and community-led interpretation rather than staged authenticity [28]. This requires respecting indigenous intellectual property rights and ensuring that cultural tourism strengthens rather than erodes heritage [29].

Fifth, measurement systems must evolve beyond economic indicators to assess holistic destination wellbeing. Frameworks integrating ecological health, community quality of life, cultural vitality, and visitor transformation provide more complete pictures of tourism's true impacts [30]. These indicators should inform adaptive management approaches that respond to changing conditions and community priorities.

Confronting Implementation Challenges

The transition to regenerative tourism faces formidable obstacles. Incumbent economic interests benefit from extractive tourism models and resist structural change. Political systems prioritize short-term economic gains over long-term systemic health. Consumer expectations, shaped by decades of growth-oriented marketing, favor quantity of experiences over depth of engagement [31]. These realities demand that regenerative tourism advocates engage strategically with power structures while building grassroots alternatives.

One crucial pathway involves leveraging the growing consumer demand for meaningful, transformative travel experiences. Research indicates that 75% of travelers seek authentic cultural engagement, and wellness tourism-emphasizing holistic wellbeing-is projected to reach \$1.3 trillion by 2025 [32]. This market shift creates economic incentives for regenerative approaches that deliver profound experiences while restoring destinations.

Additionally, the climate crisis itself may catalyze change. As extreme weather events disrupt tourism patterns and carbon taxation becomes politically viable, regenerative models that reduce emissions while enhancing resilience will demonstrate competitive advantages [33]. Destinations that proactively transform may attract visitors while others face climate-induced decline.

A Moral and Practical Imperative

The case for regenerative tourism is simultaneously moral and pragmatic. Morally, the tourism sector bears responsibility for its contributions to climate change, biodiversity loss, and

cultural erosion. Having profited from destinations' natural and cultural capital, the industry possesses ethical obligations to restore what has been degraded and support the flourishing of host communities [34]. The tourism academy, practitioners, and policymakers can no longer hide behind sustainability rhetoric while destinations deteriorate.

Pragmatically, tourism's long-term viability depends on healthy destinations. Degraded ecosystems, displaced communities, and eroded cultures ultimately undermine tourism's own foundation [35]. Regenerative approaches that actively enhance destination health represent enlightened self-interest, ensuring that tourism can continue while destinations thrive.

The COVID-19 pandemic offered a momentary pause that illuminated tourism's vulnerabilities and dependencies. As the sector rebuilds, it confronts a choice: return to the extractive models that failed us, or embrace transformative regenerative paradigms [36]. The sustainability framework, for all its contributions to raising awareness, cannot deliver the radical change required. Only regenerative tourism—with its commitment to restoration, community empowerment, and systemic transformation—offers a viable path forward. The question is no longer whether we need regeneration, but whether we possess the collective courage to pursue it. The future of tourism, and the destinations it touches, depends on our answer.

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