Beyond Sustainability: The Commitment to Regenerative Tourism

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Submission: November 11, 2025; **Published:** January 30, 2025

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Introduction

Tourism has long been recognized as one of the world's most significant socioeconomic activities, contributing over 10% to global GDP and supporting hundreds of millions of jobs worldwide [1]. Yet, its remarkable growth has come at an environmental and social cost. The massification of travel has accelerated carbon emissions, biodiversity loss, water stress, and cultural commodification [2,3]. These externalities have brought into question the legitimacy and resilience of the sector, particularly in the face of climate change and social inequity. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the vulnerabilities of a system deeply dependent on continuous mobility and extractive economic logics [4]. Against this backdrop, regenerative tourism has emerged as a new paradigm that aims not merely to sustain but to restore and enrich the ecosystems and communities upon which tourism depends.

The concept of sustainability, articulated in the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), became the dominant framework guiding tourism policy and research for decades. Sustainable tourism sought to balance economic, environmental, and sociocultural dimensions [5], yet it has often been criticized for its anthropocentric bias and incrementalism [6,7]. In practice, sustainability has too frequently been reduced to minimizing harm or achieving "less bad" outcomes, without fundamentally transforming the underlying systems of production and consumption [8]. This pragmatic but limited vision has motivated scholars and practitioners to explore regenerative models inspired by systems thinking, ecological economics, and Indigenous worldviews [9].

Regenerative tourism departs from the sustainability paradigm by emphasizing the restorative capacity of tourism systems. It aspires to actively enhance the health of social and ecological systems, creating net positive impacts [10]. Instead of aiming for equilibrium, regeneration recognizes that natural and social systems are dynamic, adaptive, and relational [11]. The goal is not simply to reduce negative externalities but to co-evolve with living systems in ways that increase resilience, diversity, and well-being. This vision aligns with regenerative development, a broader movement in urban planning, agriculture, and design that seeks to work in harmony with nature's principles [12].

There is no single definition of regenerative tourism. For some scholars, it refers to tourism that "leaves a place better than it was found" [9], emphasizing measurable improvements in ecological and social indicators. Others view it as a paradigm shift towards relational thinking, grounded in care, reciprocity, and the ethics of place [13]. The New Zealand Māori concept of Kotahitanga, or guardianship of the land, has been widely cited as a foundational influence in this regard [14]. Similarly, regenerative tourism aligns with principles of degrowth and post-capitalist thinking that challenge the industry's dependence on perpetual expansion [15].

The evolution of tourist consciousness has played a critical role in enabling regenerative approaches. Travelers increasingly seek experiences that are meaningful, authentic, and connected to local well-being [16]. Post-pandemic trends suggest a rising interest in slow travel, community-based initiatives, and nature restoration projects [4]. Yet, this growing awareness is uneven, and behavioral change remains constrained by economic structures,

technological infrastructures, and convenience-driven habits [17]. Thus, while consumer demand can catalyze regenerative practices, systemic transformation requires multi-stakeholder cooperation across governance, industry, and civil society [9].

Empirical cases of regenerative tourism are emerging globally, illustrating both opportunities and tensions. In New Zealand, the "Tiaki Promise" initiative encourages visitors to act as guardians of the environment, integrating Māori values into national tourism governance [14]. In Costa Rica, long-term ecosystem restoration projects in the Osa Peninsula have combined tourism revenues with reforestation and wildlife corridor conservation [10]. The Scottish Tourism Alliance has adopted a regenerative tourism framework, emphasizing circular economy principles, community empowerment, and heritage preservation [18]. Similarly, Bali's Green School and Green Village projects exemplify community-led regeneration through education, bamboo architecture, and permaculture tourism [19]. These initiatives share a common thread: they redefine value creation by integrating ecological restoration and cultural resilience into the tourism experience itself.

However, the implementation of regenerative tourism faces profound conceptual and practical challenges. First, the term "regenerative" risks becoming a new buzzword without clear operational criteria, akin to how "sustainability" was co-opted by marketing discourses [17]. Measuring regenerative outcomes is inherently complex, as they involve non-linear ecological processes and intangible social transformations [9]. Moreover, many regenerative projects remain small-scale and place-based, raising questions about scalability and replicability [15]. If regeneration depends on deep place attachment and local governance, its translation into mass tourism markets could be contradictory.

Another key challenge concerns stakeholder alignment. Regenerative tourism demands collaboration among governments, businesses, residents, NGOs, and tourists themselves. Yet, these actors often hold conflicting interests and temporal horizons [8]. Private investors may prioritize short-term returns, while local communities seek long-term ecosystem integrity and cultural survival. Achieving regeneration thus entails new governance models emphasizing participation, adaptive learning, and shared accountability [11]. It also requires capacity building and education at all levels to foster regenerative mindsets and competencies [12].

Economic structures present further barriers. The global tourism system is deeply embedded in neoliberal frameworks of competitiveness, growth, and mobility [6]. Airlines, hotel chains, and digital platforms operate at scales that often undermine localized, regenerative practices. The reliance on long-haul air travel directly conflicts with climate mitigation goals [2]. To reconcile these contradictions, some scholars advocate for "regenerative degrowth tourism," promoting low-carbon,

regional, and community-centered models [15]. However, transitioning toward such paradigms requires policy innovation, fiscal incentives, and a revaluation of what constitutes "success" in tourism development.

Despite these obstacles, regenerative tourism also opens unprecedented opportunities. It provides a framework for rethinking destination management through the lens of ecosystem services, circular economy, and well-being economies [9]. Destinations that adopt regenerative principles may enhance their resilience to crises, strengthen social cohesion, and differentiate themselves in a competitive market increasingly driven by ethical consumerism [3]. Moreover, regenerative tourism encourages cross-sectoral innovation - connecting tourism with agriculture, renewable energy, education, and cultural heritage [12]. This holistic integration resonates with the United Nations' call for transformative change in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals [1].

Critically, regenerative tourism also challenges the epistemological foundations of tourism studies. It shifts focus from the individual tourist to the interdependent web of relationships that sustain destinations [11]. This ontological turn toward relationality mirrors broader debates in ecological philosophy and Indigenous scholarship [13]. By framing humans as participants rather than exploiters of natural systems, regeneration invites humility and co-creation. Yet, this philosophical richness can render the concept diffuse, complicating its translation into measurable policy instruments. The tension between regenerative ideals and institutional pragmatism remains one of the field's central research frontiers [9].

Future research must address several critical gaps. There is a need for robust indicators to evaluate regenerative outcomes across ecological, economic, and social dimensions. Comparative analyses between destinations could clarify which governance structures and business models most effectively foster regeneration. Moreover, exploring tourists' willingness to engage in regenerative practices could inform behavior-change strategies and market segmentation. Scholars also emphasize the importance of decolonial perspectives that recognize Indigenous epistemologies and community sovereignty in defining what regeneration means locally [10]. Ultimately, the credibility of regenerative tourism depends on its capacity to transform not just practices, but values - moving from extractive to reciprocal relationships between people and place.

In conclusion, regenerative tourism represents a promising yet demanding evolution of the sustainability agenda. It calls for a profound reimagining of tourism as a living system embedded in ecological and cultural webs of life. While its implementation is fraught with conceptual ambiguities, measurement difficulties, and systemic barriers, it also offers a transformative opportunity to redefine prosperity, purpose, and belonging in tourism development. Achieving this vision requires the genuine

engagement of all stakeholders - from policymakers and entrepreneurs to local residents and travelers - in co-creating regenerative futures. The shift from "do less harm" to "create better" encapsulates the moral and practical essence of this new paradigm. Whether regenerative tourism remains an aspirational ideal or becomes a tangible force for planetary healing will depend on our collective capacity to learn, adapt, and act regeneratively in the years to come.

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