



Regenerative Tourism: Opportunities and Challenges



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ABSTRACT: Regenerative tourism has appeared as a buzzword but remains largely less understood as to its overall manifestation within different destinations and communities. This viewpoint coalesces existing knowledge about the rapidly evolving concept and denotes practical ways in which destinations can incorporate various stakeholder perspectives and levels of commitment and responsibility to bring desired outcomes to fruition. Importantly, the viewpoint emphasizes that regenerative tourism is not meant to be a one-size-fits-all phenomenon, but instead a baseline to bring together mutually agreeable goals and is predicated upon different groups working responsibly, where outcomes should be regularly monitored over time and place.

KEYWORDS: responsible tourism; tourism resilience; tourism and sustainability; triple bottom line; tourism futures

Background

The travel and tourism sector plays an important role in contributing to socio-economic development, job creation and poverty reduction. However, the tourism sector has been experiencing vulnerabilities and uncertainties in recent times due to COVID-19 and other natural disasters. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (2022), the tourism sector was one of the world's largest sectors, accounting for nearly 10.3% of all jobs (333 million), and 10.3% of global GDP (USD 9.6 trillion) prior to the pandemic. Due to COVID-19 shutdowns, changes in travel requirements, border restrictions and the lack of coordination among governments to tackle the pandemic, some 62 million jobs were lost leaving around 271 million employed with a decline of 18.6% across the sector globally in 2020. The sector suffered losses of almost USD 4.9 trillion, with nearly 50.4% decline in its global contribution to GDP whereas the global economy had a decline of 3.3%. Despite the easing of border restrictions, the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) report suggests that tourism recovery will be slower than expected.

Then, as countries begin to open their national borders, many scholars are calling that the sector needs to build back better, and not continue as business as usual (Dube, Nhamo & Chikodzi, 2021). Hence this viewpoint deals with regenerative tourism with a focus on transformation of the sector going beyond sustainable and responsible tourism, not just the restoration or renewal of tourism (Zaman et al., 2022). Change of mindset in terms of

reinventing and discovering would give an impetus in achieving the goal of preserving and improving the environment through the elimination of the potential degradation of tourist destination. The potential outcome is “leaving the place behind, better than before” (Zaman et al., 2022, p. 1). This underpins the importance of regenerative tourism as a mechanism that creates opportunities for renewal to the natural and human environment, following crises and disasters (Sheller, 2021). After all, the ability of local communities to foster resilience augurs well towards their sense of identity, placemaking and realizing desired Sustainable Development Goals (Dahles, Prabawa & Koning, 2021).

Overview of regenerative tourism

Regenerative tourism pays particular emphasis on the need to create opportunities for healing the tourist destinations, balancing the social-economic-environmental impacts of tourism transformations, address the issues of climate crisis and depleting resources from the planet, reducing and managing tourism’s environmental impacts to make tourism more meaningful (Bradley, 2021; Cave & Dredge, 2020; Duxbury et al., 2020). Regenerative tourism thus goes beyond addressing the tourism impacts on the environment and takes a holistic approach in incorporating the expectations of entire communities and stakeholders in developing the capacity and making the destination attractive for tourists (Bellato & Cheer 2021; Duxbury et al., 2020; Zaman et al., 2021). This requires involvement, engagement and participation of stakeholders e.g., residents, tourists, community organizations, businesses, and all levels of government so the innovative solutions and new potential ‘regeneration initiatives’ can be identified and prioritized to accommodate the interests of communities and destinations thus evolving regenerative tourism (Bellato & Cheer, 2021; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2017).

In this context, Bellato and Cheer (2021) presented a conceptual model of regenerative tourism capacity development that considers the inclusion of people who are marginalized so all stakeholders can benefit. Furthermore, Tomassini and Cavagnaro (2022) presented a conceptual paper to envision a regenerative tourism model built on the concepts of Anthropocene, an “epistemic system influencing practices and imaginaries” (Saarinen, 2019, p. 472) and the climate crisis in exploring the possibility of envisioning circular regenerative processes for tourism. As noted by Tomassini and Cavagnaro (2022), climate crisis is termed as a crisis of culture and the imagination. The model acknowledges the flimsiness of an economic model based on the never-ending growth and nature depletion (Herrington, 2021). Their model instead incorporates the concepts of circular economy through a variety of networks and relationships taking place in the tourism space (Tomassini & Cavagnaro, 2020), long-lasting stable equilibrium (Herrington, 2021), and placemaking as a set of practices and processes for the transformation of the environments in which the people inhabit, travel and work (Richards, 2020).

The case study of the capital city of Wales, Cardiff reported that its image ‘e.g., retail and the wider cultural and creative industries’ was reinvented through the extensive change initiatives in its redevelopment and regeneration (Harris, 2015). Sport has been dominant in the city’s regeneration efforts with the development of the Millennium Stadium for staging sporting and entertainment events including Olympic games, cricket, and football matches (Harris, 2015). The reinvention / transformation requires a shift in paradigm that involves appropriate changes in the systems, mindset and practices e.g. shift in thinking from “me” to “we” and the development of compassion, empathy and collaborative actions, and the need to take a place-based, community-centered, and environment focused, a deeply engaged bottom-up approach

(Dredge, 2022, p. 1). Transformations based on the notion of regenerative tourism that are focused on protection and promotion of local identities, enhancement of visitors' experiences can be instrumental for making tourism systems resilient in the long run as opposed to traditional tourism model that revolves around increasing the number of visitors and growing economic return (Hussain, 2021). The regenerative tourism paradigm has the capacity to drive the visitor economy and promote the holistic understanding of the tourism system that integrates people, places and practices (Fuste-Forne & Hussain, 2022) and visualize tourism as a living ecosystem (Major & Clarke, 2022). Community-based tourism focused on building capacities of men and women and creating new relationships can be viewed as the enabler in converting a "show village" into a tourism destination in Thailand as the community can become a role model for transformative tourism in relation to gender equality (Nitsch & Vogels, 2022).

Keeping in view the misappropriation of Maori culture and its authenticity, barriers to Maori tourism development, and a lack of effective partnership in managing the natural environment, Matunga et al. (2020) contributed to the enhancement of Mauriora Systems Framework (MSF), which is unique to Aotearoa New Zealand to make it consistent with the aspirations of evolving perceptions of regenerative tourism. The MSF framework identifies the fundamental components for making environmental assessments to provide a mechanism for supporting culturally responsible environmental decision-making. Drawing on the indigenous cultures and their evolving perspectives, knowledge systems, Western science, and practices (Matunga et al., 2020), a conceptual framework has been presented to offer practical guidance for tourism stakeholders in working towards regenerative futures, a novel approach of regenerative tourism (Bellato et al., 2022b). The framework consists of the following dimensions: Regeneration mindset, inherent potential, systems capability, intended systems effects, tasks and resources.

Using a Playa Viva case study, Bellato et al. (2022a) further illustrated the mechanism for leveraging the framework dimensions into practice. Becken and Kaur (2021) proposed a value-based framework by drawing on the New Zealand's tourism strategies, other relevant studies, stakeholders' participations, and discussion with government employees which integrates the characteristics of regenerative tourism and cultural variables to contribute to multiple wellbeing and giving back to place. To diversify tourism practices, activities focused on api-tourism 'a kind of tourism associated with beekeeping' are considered to guarantee preservation of environment, support its regeneration, create an opportunity for small businesses to find a way to survive the traditional arts and indigenous cultures (Izquierdo-Gascoin & Rubio-Gil, 2022).

Most of the studies on regenerative tourism are based on case studies, or a critical review of various past studies and reports, and the outcome of discussion with the various stakeholders. Not many of them provide empirical evidence. The challenges and opportunities for engaging and converting the overarching principles into practices in a regenerative program therefore remain unanswered or are hypothetical (Owen, 2007). Although the concept of regenerative tourism is not new, knowledge about tourism stakeholders' unique contributions towards the creation of practices that advance generative principles and well-being for all is still sporadic and scarce (Ateljevic, 2020; Cave & Dredge, 2020; Mathisen et al., 2022). The literature suggests that the present model of mass tourism development is responsible for the rapid deterioration of earth's resources and contributes to extreme vulnerability to natural environments and suffering for associated human beings (Ajoon & Rao, 2020). Therefore, tourism regeneration 'requires a dynamic model which embraces uncertainty, changing global

trends and shocks and policy options which are holistic and future proof' (Hussain & Haley, 2022, p. 1).

Synthesizing the scope of extant literature, it is evident that regenerative tourism lends a greater transformation than sustainable tourism. While not discounting that sustainability is important, regenerative tourism goes beyond conservation towards an enhancement of the status quo (Spatz, 2021). Some of the emergent industry practices reveal how regenerative tourism can be operationalized. For instance, rather than dwelling on reducing environmental degradation, some destinations expect visitors to be proactive in aspects such as tree planting, bringing educational resources for local schoolchildren, or engaging in community workshops to foster deeper cultural exchanges (Tedesco, 2022). These not only provide tangible cues and evidence of regenerative potential but are also instilling greater agency among visitors that they can be actively contributing towards the destination (Glusac, 2020). It should also be noted that regenerative tourism is not limited to small operators or destinations, but can be purposefully designed to larger developments, as in the case of the Red Sea Development Company in Saudi Arabia. According to Suckling (2021), this 28,000km² project, will be powered entirely by renewable energy, and help generate nutrients to support 90 islands and their coral ecosystems. Evidently, regenerative tourism is a philosophy and way of life, and can be defined and developed across different destinations.

Process implications

Tourism being a complex and multifaceted industry in its nature with non-storable or intangible products, continues to emphasize on the economic model argument based on increasing visitor numbers, which can throw carrying capacities off-balance when the number of visitors exceeds the ability of infrastructure and local communities to cope with such pressures (Hussain, 2021). The success of the tourism industry depends to a large extent on the health of tourist destinations and the extent to which local residents are willing to support tourism development initiatives. Therefore, regenerative tourism has emerged as a framework/model of significant interest for many tourism stakeholders globally. For making this model effective, there is a need to promote innovative economic models such as social entrepreneurship and initiate the systemic changes in the operation and governance of tourism in collaboration with the related stakeholders including local community (Bellato et al., 2022a; Major & Clarke, 2022). However, the question arises as to how different stakeholders can be involved and the implications that future leaders / managers could take on specific roles and shared responsibilities in the process of tourism industry transformations.

Since the inception of COVID 19, tourism professionals (e.g., consultants, destination managers, policymakers) have had a rough time in having to deal with poor / conflicting advice and sporadic policy development from different areas affecting the industry and the industry workers (Cave et al., 2022). This also triggered a massive change in the professional roles e.g., expansion from traditional tourism management to include counsellor, business coach, grants writer, advocate, teams coach, etc. forcing them to reach out for new ways of thinking and working in tourism creating new opportunities for new knowledge and learning (Cave et al., 2022). This is where the importance of transformational leadership comes into play which motivates individuals to perform above expectations focusing on intrinsic or high-level goals 'achievement and self-actualization' rather than extrinsic or low-level goals 'safety and security' (Bartol et al., 2011). The transformational leaders are characterized by their ability to influence, inspire, and engage others around them and possess a moral

character and a set of behavior that trigger those around them to be the best in what they do (Bartol et al., 2011; Burns, 1978). They are visionary, charismatic, go beyond self-interest and can establish collaboration, exercise self-awareness, communicate shared values and mobilize collective action (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

A study in which the researchers were engaged with the owners of small and value-driven tourism firm in Arctic Norway found that soil, soul and society are at the core of developing regenerative tourism activities (Mathisen et al., 2022). Consistent with the other researchers' contentions, this study also discussed the importance of multiple actors' (stakeholders) involvement at different levels of operations for converting regenerative activities into regenerative tourism practices and for constituting tourism systems that contribute to the healthy evolution of social-ecological systems (Bellato et al., 2022a). Bioregion, a holistic attitude, having a focus on the integration of knowledge and techniques in association with local communities can provide a solid foundation for establishment of objectives and activities of a regenerative tourism project (Dezio, 2020).

Collectively, the above-mentioned cases allude to the process of regenerative tourism being cast in different light from sustainable tourism. It takes a courageous and advocacy role in championing proactive steps that generate outcomes akin to what Ateljevic and Sheldon (2022) propose in the form of a circular economy. In brief, the circular economy challenges existing notions of business operations for profit, and instead challenges stakeholders to consider how to enhance their business models, turning recycling for instance, to upcycling of resource utilization (Murray, Skene & Haynes, 2017). Applied to tourism, this reinforces the shift of tourism as being purely consumptive, to how visitors co-create transformative outcomes that are favorable to the destination and its local communities.

Where to from here

Globally, the tourism sector has appeared as a significant contributor in creating jobs, reducing poverty, and improving the economy. However, as evidenced from various studies the industry can be severely affected by the natural disasters, adverse impact on the local environment leading to declining support from the community, and the outbreak of health-related issues e.g. COVID-19 and SARS. Hence, there is a need to increase awareness of regenerative travel behavior across tourism stakeholders for making improved assessment of tourism destination and responsible consumption pattern of various touristic products and services (Zaman et al., 2022). This is not possible without carrying out a decent analysis of the community support for tourism development using relevant frameworks / models / theories e.g. social psychology theories including Elaboration Likelihood Model, and Heuristic-Systematic Model. The analysis would also benefit by taking a consideration of "socio-demographic aspects such as language, religion, ethnicity, occupation, and extent of urbanization, and the other underlying factors e.g., community or place attachment, residents' quality of life, personality, tolerance, and cultural values, etc." (Zaman et al., 2022, p. 16).

As discussed by Bellato and Cheer (2021), further case studies, experimental / action research focused on the investigation of approaches / mechanisms for regenerative tourism capacity development would be helpful in informing the likelihood of tourism to regenerate / restore / redevelop urban socio-ecological systems. In this process building alliance with stakeholders including marginalized people would provide further insights leading to better understandings

of the differences with and without them adding new knowledge in the regenerative tourism (Bellato & Cheer, 2021).

For initiating the systemic changes in the operation and governance of tourism the role that the social entrepreneurs can play in association with the local community can be considered as an innovative approach (Bellato et al., 2022a; Major & Clarke, 2022). Therefore, additional investigation of the process as to how they stimulate regenerative mindsets by adopting feminist approaches would provide further insights in developing an understanding of their contribution to caring, just, and regenerative tourism futures (Boluk & Panse, 2021).

Finally, regenerative tourism is nested within the increased adoption of the environmental, social and corporate governance (ESG) framework, even in the context of tourism. Essentially, the ESG framework espouses the greater need of all stakeholders to be more responsible and reflect on future-oriented strategies that are value drivers, especially to meet the needs of local communities. This may be related to businesses and their corporate social responsibility (CSR), though there is a wider spectrum of its reach from a regenerative tourism vantage point, as its focus on value embraces areas such wellbeing and quality of life indicators in tourism (Huang, Chan & Hsieh, 2022). This again emphasizes the transformative power of regenerative tourism in business model re-engineering, to formulate a more symbiotic relationship with external stakeholders.

In conclusion, it must be recognized that regenerative tourism is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Each destination has its own contextual unique attributes and local community needs that will require adaptation and a range of stakeholders to work together in order to deliver desired regenerative tourism goals. Nonetheless, the paper has documented how shared roles and responsibilities are needed at various levels of government, industry and community relations. Overall, regenerative tourism seeks to create more resilient futures for destinations and epitomizes the internalization of the Sustainable Development Goals in theory and practice.

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