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## Regenerative tourism: a state-of-the-art review

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### ABSTRACT

Regenerative tourism is a nascent, often misunderstood concept in tourism scholarship and practice. Therefore, this state-of-the-art review attempts to clarify the concept by analysing the discourse development and critical influences shaping it. Our analysis draws from the emerging regenerative tourism literature and our observations. Firstly, a brief account of regenerative tourism's evolution is outlined to ground the concept's lineage emphasising the prominent thinkers and underpinning ideas. Secondly, we examine the regenerative tourism discourse and synthesise the critical misunderstandings or distortions of the concept. The review reveals that the concept's evolution in tourism scholarship is hampered by simplistic and superficial understandings such as 'leaving a place better than it was found'. The dominant pattern of centring tourism and its fiscal growth further impedes regenerative tourism's capacity to progress tourism system transformations. Furthermore, few scholars have aligned their conceptualisations with the regenerative paradigm and have instead perpetuated the centralisation of scientific tourism knowledges in Western academia. Thirdly, promising paths forward are proposed for advancing the concept in line with the regenerative paradigm's lineage. We argue that regenerative tourism should centre place and its communities to restore harmonious and reciprocal relations between humans and the rest of nature. Consequently, tourism geographers have a critical role in ensuring the concept maintains its integrity by adhering to the ecological worldview and regenerative paradigm while drawing from plural place-sourced, Indigenous, and other aligned knowledge systems.

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## Introduction

The ongoing failures by the wider tourism sector and the sustainable development approaches adopted to help overcome the overwhelming harmful impacts on the Earth and human societies have activated a growing interest in alternatives. Almost twenty-five years from Butler's (1999) *Sustainable Tourism: a state-of-the-art review*,

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published in *Tourism Geographies*, we present tourism geographers with a concept that is increasingly recognised as potentially playing a significant role in shaping the future of tourism (Brouder, 2020). Regenerative tourism has emerged in the past twenty years in practice and, more recently, in tourism scholarship. However, the complexity of the regeneration concept and its paradigm-shifting implications have thus far stalled a meaningful or impactful uptake. While the term 'regenerative tourism' is being discussed in academic journals, clarity and consensus regarding its meaning and application remain elusive.

This state-of-the-art review draws from the emerging literature and shares our perspectives and observations regarding how concepts associated with regenerative tourism have engaged with the tourism and associated hospitality field to date. Our positionalities as Western, first-language English-speaking authors with varying backgrounds and experiences shape the perspectives that inform this review. After working as a tourism practitioner for four years and as a community service manager for twenty years Loretta Bellato trained as a regenerative development practitioner. Since 2018, she has woven transdisciplinary social science research with regenerative development to investigate, develop and implement regenerative approaches to tourism. Anna Pollock is an independent consultant with 50 years of experience centred on strategic change affecting tourism, has been investigating and writing about alternative operating models based on an ecological worldview since 1995 and first publicly described her understanding of regenerative tourism in 2012. We acknowledge that thinkers and practitioners from non-Western, non-English speaking backgrounds and Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing have fundamentally shaped regenerative thinking, however, we are not positioned to represent these significant contributions or perspectives in this review.

The paper aims to guide understanding of the concept and avoids presenting prescriptive definitions. Our analysis comprises three parts based on key literature and reflections from our regenerative tourism endeavours. Firstly, a brief account of regenerative tourism's evolution is outlined to ground the concept's lineage and emphasise the key thinkers and ideas underpinning regenerative tourism. Secondly, we examine how the regenerative tourism discourse is unfolding, including synthesising the critical misunderstandings or distortions of the concept. Thirdly, promising paths forward are proposed for advancing the concept in line with its lineage.

## **The development of the regenerative paradigm**

Understanding the regenerative paradigm is essential for examining the regenerative tourism concept and its implications. As Kuhn (1970) asserted, paradigms play transformational roles when a shift in perspective occurs along with a conscious inner apprehension of the nature of life. While the regenerative paradigm may be new to many tourism practitioners and scholars, it is not unknown to practitioners, thinkers, philosophers, scientists, and economists outside of tourism. Regenerative thinking is underpinned by the ecological worldview or perspective (derived from Western, Indigenous and other place-sourced knowledges) that views life forms as comprising living systems (or complex adaptive systems CAS) nested within larger living systems

(Bellato et al., 2022; Hes & Du Plessis, 2015). All beings are subject to the laws and principles that nature has applied and honed since life emerged on Earth 3.8 billion years ago. This perspective contrasts with the prevailing paradigm based on viewing life through a mechanistic, materialistic lens that derives understanding from seeing objects separate from one another. We identify the most prominent thinkers who have shaped regenerative thinking and the evolution of regenerative tourism.

Core to the regenerative paradigm is living systems thinking as a bedrock to build the capacity of humans to align and co-evolve with life's systems (Mang & Reed, 2019). Initially developed by Charles Krone in the 1960s, living systems thinking gained traction with Capra's *The Turning Point* in 1982 and *The Web of Life* in 1997 (Du Plessis & Brandon, 2015). Capra suggested that humanity's problems should be seen as a crisis of perception due to a failure to align human ways of seeing and thinking with how nature worked. Regenerative living systems thinking has been strongly influenced by the permaculture movement founded by Mollison and Holmgren, which emerged in the 1970s and underpins various agricultural practices (permaculture, organic farming, agroforestry) now associated with regenerative agriculture (Mang & Reed, 2019).

In a landmark book, *Limits to Growth* (1972), Donella Meadows and colleagues applied their understanding of natural systems to forecast the impact of human activity some 30 years later. Afterwards, *Places to Intervene in a System* (1997) was written to conceptualise systemic transformations at the level of paradigm change (Du Plessis, 2012; Pollock, 2015). Janine Benyus published *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired By Nature* (1997) bringing living systems thinking into the lab and the classroom and intensifying interest in learning about nature's systems (Du Plessis & Brandon, 2015). In 1987, James Lovelock introduced the concept of Earth as a living system in *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*. While the concept was initially met with considerable resistance, it now forms the basis for a burgeoning community of life scientists (Konietzko et al., 2023).

Applications of regenerative concepts to the business community emerged first among architects and planners involved in the built environment and concurrently in agriculture. Carol Sanford, a global leader in regenerative business thinking, created the Regenerative Business Community in 1992. The Regenes Group, world leaders in applying regenerative principles to development projects since 1995, in 2012, published their first peer-reviewed paper on the regenerative development concept *Designing from place: a regenerative framework and methodology* (Mang & Reed, 2012). This paper provided some basic principles that position the approach as transformations of mind rather than changing techniques. Furthermore, economic activities are seen as flows of human systems that require realignment with life's processes. Thinkers such as Paul Hawken, who has published works such as *The Ecology of Commerce: A Declaration of Sustainability* (1993) and others have contributed to conceptualising economies as ecosystems closely interconnected with nature and the benefits of working with nature for business (Du Plessis & Cole, 2011).

By 2015, John Fullerton of the Capital Institute published an influential report titled *Regenerative Capitalism—How Universal Principles and Patterns Will Shape Our New Economy* that described how nature's principles could be applied to create an economy that generated value for all human and non-human stakeholders with the capacity to continuously self-evolve as opposed to one that extracted value and degenerated

social-ecological systems (Sheldon, 2022). However, Fullerton centres on financial systems, businesses and other flows that entail a financial economy as the sites for transformation while arguing for preserving capitalism. In contrast, Sanford and Haggard (2020) *The Regenerative Economic Shaper* present regenerative frameworks that promote the creation of developmental economies. They identify social institutions as the sites for systemic transformations towards a regenerative economy that support the 'wise management' of whole living systems.

Since 2015, numerous practitioners and scholars outside of tourism have introduced regenerative concepts to tourism businesses. Notable authors include Giles Hutchins, Michelle Holliday, Daniel Wahl and others cited in various books and papers such as Konietzko et al. (2023) and Major and Clarke (2021).

### **Applying regenerative thinking to tourism**

The earliest evidence of tourism scholars applying concepts aligning with living systems thinking was by Farrell and Twining-Ward (2004) who questioned reductionist linear approaches dominant in tourism and introduced complex systems thinking and ecological economics. Pollock (2012) addressed the question, *Can Tourism Change Its Operating Model: The Necessity and Inevitability*, by examining how tourism as a complex human system can align with nature. These reflections formed the basis for Pollock's development of the 'conscious travel' approach, a term that foregrounded regenerative tourism and applied an ecological worldview to tourism (Pollock, 2012). Various scholars and practitioners have published papers that draw from Pollock's conscious travel approach before 2019 (Bellato et al., 2023).

Due to dominant mechanistic industrial thinking, limited traction in applying living systems to tourism has been gained (Bellato et al., 2022). Despite this, Pollock's contributions have played a significant role in catalysing the development and interest in regenerative tourism approaches among practitioners and scholars. For example, *Regenerative Tourism: The Maturation of Sustainability* (2019) attracted the attention of the New York Times, whose follow-up article *Move Over, Sustainable Travel. Regenerative Travel Has Arrived* provoked debate, discussion, mentions and sharing for the word regeneration to be included in the portfolios of consultants, destinations, and industry events.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, calls to rethink tourism saw tourism scholars and practitioners beginning to consider regenerative tourism as a desirable alternative (Brouder, 2020). In the absence of conceptual clarity, scholars began investigating the notion. We have identified three interconnected core themes aligning with the regenerative paradigm that have shaped the regenerative tourism discourse thus far. While they are presented as separate themes to draw out the differences in their emphasis and arguments, their underpinnings overlap.

### **Regenerative design and development**

The regenerative design and development theme entails approaches that draw from the unique potential of place and its communities and develop the capability of humans to align with and contribute to healthy living systems. Tourism is consequently positioned as a contributor to the overall health and wellbeing of places and

communities. In 2006 and 2007, the first known tourism initiatives using regenerative development approaches were initiated by the Regenesi Group (Mang & Reed, 2012) and those who drew directly from their frameworks. Papers from architecture scholars with an interest in ecological design systems were the first to examine hotel developments scientifically (Hes & Du Plessis, 2015). Bellato et al. (2023) undertook a comprehensive examination of the transformational basis of regenerative tourism and its underpinnings. A regenerative tourism conceptual framework was proposed primarily drawing from the regenerative development lineage. Extending this framework, Bellato et al. (2022) conceptualised a 'tourism living system' drawing from living systems thinking and Pollock (2012); (Pollock, 2015).

### ***Regenerative tourism economy***

Regenerative tourism economy conceptualisations draw from regenerative economics that position economies and tourism at the centre of enquiry and transformation. From this perspective, tourism is fundamentally seen as an economic system that generates economic capital. Most tourism scholars have adopted this perspective as evidenced by the proliferation of papers drawn from authors such as Fullerton (2015) and related concepts that centre economies and modes of production such as circular economies (Hartman, 2023). Some key proponents of a tourism economy perspective include, Sheldon (2022), Cave and Dredge (2020) and Dwyer (2023).

### ***Additional contributions to the regenerative tourism discourse***

Various contributors to the regenerative tourism discourse do not fit neatly into the above themes and instead bridge various perspectives. Becken and Kaur (2021) achieve this by proposing a tourism value conceptual framework that uses values from *Te Ao Māori*. Dredge (2022) proposes ways to transition toward regenerative approaches to tourism. Indigenous scholars and leaders are also beginning to leverage regenerative tourism approaches to navigate the relations between their cultural ways of knowing, being and doing tourism (Matunga et al., 2020).

Regeneration has proved to be a difficult concept to embrace. Its proponents assert it is inconsistent with the regenerative paradigm to produce neat definitions, solutions, action steps, indicators, projected outcomes, and methods to measure progress or calculate an attractive financial return on investment. In their absence, a perceived vacuum has been rapidly filled with suppositions and varied interpretations. Skilled public relations and marketing personnel have decoded and simplified regenerative tourism as 'leaving a place better than it was found', 'giving back more than we take', or becoming 'net positive'. Some scholars have replicated these one-dimensional slogans, thus offering superficial definitions rather than deeply investigating the concept.

### ***The current state of play***

In recent years, regenerative tourism has diffused throughout the global community, albeit superficially, through social media channels and is driven by a widespread

latent hunger for solutions and fresh ideas. Nevertheless, this progress is in danger of stalling because inadequate attention is paid to understanding what is required for creating transformative shifts in thinking from one paradigm to another. There is a minimal shared understanding of the core elements of a regenerative approach. Very few communities, associations or companies have invested the time and money needed to understand its systems-changing implications or catalyse its true potential. The fragmentation, separation, and polarisation that dominate the current worldview have led to pervasive disassociation. Next, we outline three dominant patterns stalling the required paradigm shifts in tourism.

### ***From linear reductionism toward living systems***

Western science mostly approaches systems issues with a reductionist mindset, leading to fragmentation, specialisation, and competition. Some papers investigating regenerative tourism seek to categorise and compartmentalise the concept, with a few scholars claiming it is a form of sustainable tourism. Others have applied existing reductionist methodologies and concepts to develop simplistic, linear understandings of regeneration and tourism. Some researchers have focused on consumers as the focus of transformation rather than whole living systems. Attempts to integrate regenerative approaches into linear models tend to diminish advancements in the approach. For example, the shift towards creating net positive effects is leading some scholars to focus heavily on actions and measurement, which is inherently reductionist and cannot account for the myriad of possibilities and happenings of living systems.

By drawing from Indigenous and other place-sourced knowledges, Western scientists can weave new ways of understanding the relationships of living systems of which tourism is a part (Becken & Coghlan, 2022; Bellato et al., 2022). Viewing tourism as a CAS provides new opportunities for understanding tourism systems, co-evolution, and relationality (Dredge, 2022; Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2004; Mang & Reed, 2012). However, the perspective is often analysed from a mechanistic viewpoint where places are conceptualised as destinations, in effect, sites of production (Hartman, 2023). Instead, scholars must understand these places as living systems when examining regenerative tourism and align CAS insights with living systems thinking (Bellato et al., 2022; Dredge, 2022; Du Plessis, 2009; Pollock, 2019).

### ***From extractive growth toward contributing to growing the health and wellbeing of places and communities***

The dominant industrial paradigm separates humans from the rest of nature and thereby positions humans as controllers of nature for their profit. Consequently, extractive relationships have been established between human systems, including tourism and the places and communities they often monopolise. This pattern is evidenced by the centring of tourism and its fiscal growth and influence in most tourism scholarship. Many emerging regenerative tourism papers and practitioner projects are replicating this pattern. Consequently, they fail to question dependence on volume growth and instead position tourism competitively in the market as capable of growing indefinitely, an industrial paradigm construct (Bellato et al., 2022). While others have

focused on creating alternative economic models less harmful to the Earth and human societies, these approaches only serve to modify systems while continuing to prioritise tourism economies and preserve extractive capitalist systems.

Regenerative tourism should centre place and its communities to restore harmonious relations between humans and the rest of nature. Economies are reframed to become flows of life rather than the centre or core outcome sought. Growth is, therefore, redefined as a relational concept that describes how the various interconnected systems can build their capacity to thrive, mutually benefit and co-evolve. Regenerative practitioners have adapted the five capitals for sustainable development as dimensions of a dynamic design framework to create community and place well-being (Du Plessis, 2012). Consequently, they have revised the definitions of each capital to align more closely with living systems thinking. Adapting the five capitals elevates its applications from measuring and managing resources for the primary human benefit to guidance for whole systems capability building. Regenerative thinking invites examination of how tourism as a whole living system can contribute to the health and wellbeing of larger social-ecological systems. Tourism initiatives must contribute to net positive effects for its interconnected larger systems.

### ***From hierarchies and the concentration of knowledge as power toward co-creating plural, place-sourced ways of knowing, being and doing***

Most tourism scholarship is derived from Western scientific, mechanistic ideas. Few scholars have attempted to examine the regenerative tourism concept comprehensively, and fewer have been able to align their conceptualisations with the regenerative paradigm (Bellato et al., 2023; Bellato, Frantzeskaki, *tebrakunna* country and Bellato et al., 2023). Consequently, the literature demonstrates a confused and often diluted account. Frameworks within regenerative tourism and its underpinning paradigm are being 'cherry-picked' and reconfigured to mould within existing scientific understandings of tourism. Consequently, little attention thus far has been given to how paradigm transformations could occur in tourism. Furthermore, scholars have continued to privilege intellectual knowledges primarily derived from Western lineages over other ways of knowing, being and doing. These distorted understandings of regenerative tourism tend to use abstract language and concepts, investigate the concept as a type of tourism, and perpetuate the centralisation of scientific tourism knowledges in Western academia.

When drawing upon the regenerative paradigm, plural, place-sourced ways of knowing, being and doing are co-created among diverse tourism stakeholders. Tourism scholars are therefore encouraged to partner with diverse stakeholders and develop, add, or adopt new methodologies that align with this approach. Examining regenerative tourism then becomes a collaborative project that adds value to transforming social-ecological systems and helping people transition towards a regenerative paradigm. Abandoning a knowledge expert position opens opportunities for scholars to become lifelong experiential learners and co-creators alongside other knowledge holders such as regenerative practitioners, Indigenous Elders, and other place-knowledge holders. Alignment with the regenerative paradigm and its lineage will guide researchers to select appropriate methods and scientific theories to

support the development of rigorous frameworks that can be tested in each unique place.

## Promising paths forward

Currently, a sea change is occurring at the most senior levels of governments. Within a few weeks of each other, leaders of the World Trade Organisation, the World Economic Forum and the United Nations referred to a global polycrisis. This is a call for a profound level of systems change. A vacuum of ideas is forming that only regenerative thinking can fill. Furthermore, the challenge is no longer confined to one sector - the task involves all sectors and all stakeholders: humans and non-humans, individuals, enterprises, communities, governments, regions, and countries. The conditions for regenerative tourism scholarship to advance and have transformational impacts on tourism must be created. New ways of measuring tourism success are beginning to prioritise wellbeing and healing as ways forward (Becken & Kaur, 2021). Additionally, increasingly adopting transdisciplinary research will build knowledge with practitioners and place-knowledge holders, and mutually beneficial partnerships with communities or leaders working on regenerative tourism projects. Comprehending the nature of worldviews, system thinking, and how nature works are essential prerequisites. Collaboration with multiple stakeholders will also be a core skill for this research. However, investment in training and dedicated empirical research is required to create a robust grounding of regenerative tourism scholarship.

Indigenous and decolonial scholars are elevating the importance of reframing relationships and reciprocity as core interests of tourism (Lee & Eversole, 2019). Alternative worldviews and concepts derived from non-Western paradigms are also emerging in tourism. Notably, scholars are engaging with theories, disciplines and concepts not commonly addressed in tourism, adding to the tapestry of potential new and unexpected ways to imagine tourism systems. Consequently, tourism geographers have a critical role in ensuring the concept maintains its integrity by adhering to the ecological worldview and regenerative paradigm while drawing from plural place-sourced, Indigenous, and other aligned knowledge systems. Hence, much remains unexplored regarding how tourism approaches derived from the regenerative paradigm can be co-created. Going beyond the field of tourism will continue to be core to the advancement of this concept due to its inherent decentring of tourism and focus on the health and wellbeing of whole complex systems, of which tourism is a contributor.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

*Loretta Bellato* is a settler woman of Italian heritage from Melbourne, Australia. She is an early career researcher who recently completed PhD studies at Swinburne University of Technology, examining tourism's contributions to the regenerative development of urban social-ecological

systems. Loretta is a Regenesi Regenerative Practitioner Series graduate, Master of International Development, RMIT and Master of International Sustainable Tourism Management, Monash University and has extensive practitioner experience in community health and tourism sectors. She is currently an adjunct researcher at the Centre for Urban Transitions, Swinburne University of Technology, a regenerative development consultant and a local government officer.

**Anna Pollock** is a white, English Canadian woman currently residing in the UK. She has worked in tourism for 50 years, primarily as a researcher, and strategist with a focus on destinations. She considers herself a 'Neo-generalist' who prefers to see connections and relationships - the big picture and change dynamics that have led to her receiving three international visionary awards. She has supplemented her first degree in Geography by studying the diverse works of Ken Wilbur, Fritjof Capra, Danah Zohar, and Carol Sanford and participated in the Regenerative Practitioner Series all leading to a focus on systems change and paradigm shifts.

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