

# Beyond Sustainability: A Comprehensive State-of-the-Art Review on Regenerative Tourism

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## Abstract

Regenerative tourism is an emerging concept within tourism studies, yet it remains insufficiently understood and inconsistently applied in both academic and practical contexts. This state-of-the-art review aims to enhance conceptual precision by examining the development of regenerative tourism discourse and the factors shaping its interpretation. Grounded in a systematic analysis of contemporary literature and informed scholarly reflection, the review first traces the conceptual evolution of regenerative tourism, identifying foundational thinkers and theoretical influences that have contributed to its current form.

The review divulges that regenerative tourism's progress in scholarship is hindered by pervasive oversimplifications, particularly the narrow framing of the concept as merely "leaving a place better than it was found." Such limited perspectives continue to reinforce tourism-centric economic growth agendas, thereby constraining the paradigm's transformative potential to reshape tourism systems in alignment with ecological resilience and socio-cultural flourishing. Additionally, the discourse remains largely influenced by Western scientific knowledge structures, which often marginalize relational, place-sensitive, and community-rooted epistemologies integral to regenerative paradigms.

In response to these identified challenges, the review underscores the necessity of repositioning regenerative tourism as a place-centred, community-driven approach that fosters harmonious and reciprocal relationships between humans and the natural environment. It emphasizes that tourism geographers and scholars have a crucial role in maintaining the conceptual integrity of regenerative tourism by adopting ecological worldviews and integrating plural knowledge systems, including Indigenous perspectives. Advancing such a holistic and context-responsive orientation is essential for supporting the transformative ambitions of regenerative tourism and strengthening its theoretical and practical contributions to sustainable futures.

**Keywords:** regenerative tourism, state-of-the-art review, conceptual evolution, ecological worldview, Indigenous knowledge systems, tourism transformation, place-based development

## Introduction

The persistent shortcomings of global tourism sustainability initiatives—despite decades of policy interventions and frameworks—have heightened calls for more ambitious, transformative approaches capable of addressing the extensive ecological degradation and socio-cultural disruptions linked to tourism growth. Nearly twenty-five years after Butler's (1999) foundational state-of-the-art review on sustainable tourism published in *Tourism Geographies*, the tourism field is now confronted with a new paradigm that is rapidly gaining prominence as a potential catalyst for reshaping tourism futures: regenerative tourism (Brouder, 2020). Over the previous two decades, regenerative tourism has begun to emerge in practice and, more recently, has entered academic discourse (Dredge, 2022; Iddawala & Lee,

2025). Yet, its inherent conceptual complexity and profound paradigm-shifting implications have constrained the depth of its adoption and theoretical development within tourism scholarship.

Although regenerative tourism is increasingly discussed in academic journals and professional forums, substantial ambiguity persists regarding its epistemological foundations, practical application, and divergence from established sustainability paradigms (Becken & Kaur, 2022; Iddawala & Lee, 2025). The lack of conceptual clarity risks diluting its transformative potential and reproducing the same sector-centric growth logics that sustainability has struggled to transcend (Nikšić Radić & Dragičević, 2025).

This state-of-the-art review critically examines the evolution of regenerative tourism discourse, drawing on emerging scholarship and informed reflections from regenerative development and tourism practice. While the perspectives presented here are shaped by Western academic orientations and English-language scholarship, this review explicitly recognizes that regenerative thinking is deeply rooted in diverse place-based, Indigenous, and relational knowledge systems that have yet to be sufficiently represented within mainstream tourism literature.

The review is structured in three parts. First, the conceptual lineage and intellectual foundations of regenerative tourism are traced to illuminate the key thinkers and paradigmatic influences shaping its emergence. Second, the review interrogates how the discourse has evolved within tourism studies, highlighting conceptual distortions and oversimplifications that have impeded theoretical advancement. Third, the review proposes future directions that align more closely with the regenerative paradigm's original ethos—repositioning tourism as a facilitator of socio-ecological renewal, reciprocity, and resilience.

Positioned at the intersection of ecological regeneration, community well-being, and transformative tourism design, regenerative tourism represents more than an incremental improvement on sustainability—it demands a fundamental reorientation of how tourism systems are conceived, governed, and evaluated. Yet, without deeper engagement with its philosophical foundations and rigorous examination of its current interpretations, the concept risks being reduced to a rhetorical extension of sustainability rather than a catalyst for paradigm change. Therefore, this review contributes to scholarly advancement by disentangling regenerative tourism from superficial narratives and repositioning it within its authentic theoretical lineage. In doing so, it provides a critical platform from which tourism scholars and practitioners can more meaningfully engage with regenerative thinking. The following section explores the evolution of regenerative tourism within academic and practical domains, offering essential context for understanding its present discourse and future directions.

### **The Evolution of the Regenerative Paradigm**

A thorough grasp of the regenerative paradigm is fundamental to advancing the understanding of regenerative tourism and its broader consequences. As highlighted by Kuhn (1970), paradigms facilitate transformative shifts in worldview that are accompanied by an awakened recognition of the interconnected essence of life. Although the regenerative paradigm may appear novel within tourism scholarship and practice, it has long been embedded in the work of philosophers, scientists, economists, and practitioners across diverse disciplines. At its core is an ecological perspective—grounded in Western, Indigenous, and many localised epistemologies—that perceives all life as interrelated living systems or complex adaptive systems integrated into larger, dynamic frameworks (Bellato et al., 2022; Hes & Du Plessis, 2015). This understanding acknowledges that every form of life is

subjected to nature's enduring laws developed over 3.8 billion years of evolution (Iddawala & Lee, 2025). In doing so, it challenges the dominant mechanistic and materialistic paradigm that views entities as separate and independent.

A key component of the regenerative paradigm is living systems thinking, which aims to increase human ability to co-evolve and harmonise with the systemic processes of life (Mang & Reed, 2019; Tham & Sharma, 2023). Originating from Charles Krone's work in the 1960s, the approach gained prominence through Capra's influential publications *The Turning Point* (1982) and *The Web of Life* (1997), wherein he emphasized that humanity's challenges stem from perceptual misalignment with natural principles (Du Plessis & Brandon, 2015). Regenerative living systems thinking has been heavily shaped by the permaculture movement initiated by Mollison and Holmgren in the 1970s, which laid the intellectual groundwork for regenerative agriculture practices such as organics and agroforestry (Mang & Reed, 2019). Meadows et al.'s seminal publication *Limits to Growth* (1972) provided early systemic projections of human impacts on the planet, followed by Meadows's (1997) work on leverage points for paradigm-level transformation (Du Plessis, 2012; Pollock, 2015). Similarly, Benyus's *Biomimicry* (1997) and Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis (1987) brought scientific legitimacy and wider attention to the concept of Earth as a living system, spurring ongoing research communities (Konietzko et al., 2023).

Regenerative thinking transitioned into business discourse through architectural, planning, and agricultural applications. Carol Sanford's establishment of the Regenerative Business Community in 1992 and the Regeneration Group's pioneering work since 1995 extended regenerative principles into organizational and development contexts. Their foundational publication, *Designing from Place* (Mang & Reed, 2012), reframed regeneration as a transformation of mindset rather than a technical intervention, and reconceptualized economic systems as flows that must be realigned with ecological processes. Thought leaders including Paul Hawken further reinforced the view of economies as interdependent ecosystems and advocated for business strategies that work in synergy with nature (Duarte et al., 2024).

Fullerton's (2015) influential report *Regenerative Capitalism* later argued for restructuring financial and organizational systems around universal principles of living systems to ensure long-term value creation for both human and non-human stakeholders (Sheldon, 2022; Nikšić Radić & Dragičević, 2025). Although Fullerton's work remains grounded in a reformed capitalist framework, alternative perspectives such as Sanford and Haggard (2020) advocate systemic transformation through social institutions to cultivate developmental economies guided by the responsible stewardship of living systems.

More recently, regenerative principles have increasingly permeated tourism thinking and practice. From 2015 onwards, scholars and practitioners—including Hutchins, Holliday, Wahl, and others—have actively contributed to embedding regenerative concepts within tourism development and business models, as reflected in contemporary academic discourse (Major & Clarke, 2021; Konietzko et al., 2023; Iddawala & Lee, 2025).

### **Reimagining Tourism Through Regenerative Principles**

Farrell and Twining-Ward (2004) were the first to try to use living systems thinking in tourist studies. They did this by criticising the linear and reductionist models that were common at the time. They advocated instead for the application of complex systems theory and ecological economics to acknowledge tourism as an adaptive socio-ecological system. Building on similar concerns, Pollock (2012) explored how tourism, as a complex human system, might realign with natural processes, leading to the conceptualization of the

“conscious travel” approach. This approach placed regenerative perspectives at the forefront by embedding an ecological worldview within tourism planning and management. Prior to 2019, a number of scholars and practitioners began integrating components of Pollock’s work, which contributed to the early conceptual foundations of regenerative tourism (Tham & Sharma, 2023).

However, entrenched mechanistic and industrial mindsets have constrained the wide-scale adoption of living systems perspectives within tourism (Hajarrahmah et al., 2024). Despite these barriers, Pollock’s contributions were influential in stimulating scholarly and practical interest in regenerative approaches. Her 2019 publication, *Regenerative Tourism: The Maturation of Sustainability*, gained significant visibility when subsequently featured in *The New York Times* article titled “Move Over, Sustainable Travel. Regenerative Travel Has Arrived.” This media recognition broadened the discourse, prompting greater attention to regenerative concepts within consultancy services, destination planning, and tourism industry forums.

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated calls to reimagine tourism’s purpose and operational models. During this period of disruption, regenerative tourism gained momentum as a forward-looking alternative capable of addressing tourism’s social-ecological challenges more holistically (Brouder, 2020; Nikšić Radić & Dragičević, 2025). As scholarly engagement with the topic increased—despite ongoing ambiguity surrounding its conceptual boundaries—three interrelated thematic directions emerged within the evolving discourse. Although each theme emphasizes different aspects of regeneration, they share common roots in regenerative thinking and collectively contribute to the evolving conceptual architecture of regenerative tourism (Paddison & Hall, 2024).

### **Regenerative Design and Development**

The regenerative design and development perspective emphasizes methods that are grounded in the distinct capacities of places and their communities, while fostering human capabilities to support and enhance the functioning of living systems. Within this framing, tourism is reconceptualized as a mechanism that strengthens the ecological, social, and cultural wellbeing of destinations. The earliest identifiable application of regenerative development within tourism emerged in 2006–2007 through initiatives led by the Regenes Group and other proponents who adopted their methodologies (Mang & Reed, 2012). Scholarship from architecture and ecological design fields subsequently contributed foundational insights, particularly through scientific assessments of regenerative approaches in accommodation infrastructure (Hes & Du Plessis, 2015). Building on these foundations, Bellato et al. (2023) explored the transformative principles underpinning regenerative tourism and proposed a conceptual framework informed primarily by regenerative development theory. Further extending this work, Bellato et al. (2022) introduced the concept of a “tourism living system,” integrating living systems thinking and earlier work by Pollock (2012, 2015) to position tourism within broader ecological interdependencies.

### **Toward a Regenerative Tourism Value System**

The regenerative tourism economy perspective derives from regenerative economic theory, which situates economic systems—including tourism—at the core of transformative change. Within this view, tourism is primarily conceptualized as an economic mechanism responsible for generating, circulating, and reinvesting capital in ways that enhance socio-ecological wellbeing. This approach has gained considerable scholarly attention, as reflected in a growing volume of research informed by Fullerton’s (2015) work and related economic

models such as circular economies that shift production and consumption toward restorative processes (Hartman, 2023). Leading contributors to this discourse, including Sheldon (2022), Cave and Dredge (2020), and Dwyer (2023), emphasize the need to reconfigure tourism economies to move beyond extractive paradigms and support regenerative value creation.

### **Emerging Contributions to Regenerative Tourism Thinking**

A number of scholars have contributed to regenerative tourism thinking in ways that intersect and extend beyond the dominant thematic streams. For instance, Becken and Kaur (2021) introduce a tourism value framework informed by Te Ao Māori principles, thereby integrating Indigenous value systems into regenerative tourism conceptualizations. Similarly, Dredge (2022) advances discussions on pathways for transitioning tourism toward more regenerative orientations. Increasingly, Indigenous researchers and community leaders are also adopting regenerative principles to reconcile tourism development with their cultural ontologies and practices (Matunga et al., 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2025).

Despite its growing visibility, regeneration remains a complex and challenging concept to operationalize. Advocates contend that strict definitions, standardized indicators, predetermined outcomes, and narrowly framed metrics—particularly those focused on financial returns—are incompatible with the regenerative paradigm, as they risk reducing dynamic living processes to mechanistic targets (Paddison & Hall, 2024). This conceptual ambiguity has created space for varied interpretations, some of which oversimplify the intent of regeneration. Marketing and communications narratives have frequently distilled regenerative tourism into simplified slogans such as “leaving a place better than you found it,” “giving back more than you take,” or achieving “net-positive” outcomes (Bhatt & Dani, 2024). While rhetorically appealing, such reductions have influenced portions of academic discourse, leading to superficial representations that overlook the deeper philosophical and systemic foundations required to fully understand regeneration (Mattei & Maci, 2025).

### **The Contemporary Status of Regenerative Tourism Practices**

Regenerative tourism has been more well-known among travellers worldwide in recent years, largely through social media and popular narratives that appeal to a growing collective desire for innovative and hopeful solutions to tourism’s challenges (Ravichandran, 2023). However, this momentum risks losing traction due to insufficient engagement with the deeper paradigm shift that regeneration demands. There remains limited consensus regarding the fundamental principles that constitute a genuinely regenerative approach. Only a small number of destinations, organizations, and businesses have committed the necessary resources to fully comprehend its system-wide implications or activate its transformative potential (Bhatt & Dani, 2024; Ravichandran, 2023).

The prevailing worldview—characterized by fragmentation, separation, and polarized thinking—continues to reinforce patterns of disconnection from place, nature, and community. As a result, the adoption of regenerative tourism has often remained superficial, lacking the depth required to catalyse meaningful socio-ecological transformation. The following section identifies three dominant patterns currently inhibiting the necessary paradigm shift within tourism systems.

### **From Linear Reductionism to Living Systems Thinking in Tourism**

Traditional Western scientific approaches frequently rely on reductionist logics that fragment complexity into isolated components, resulting in specialization, competition, and disconnection within systems analysis (Alhitmi et al., 2024). This tendency is evident within

emerging regenerative tourism research, where some scholars have attempted to categorize or position regeneration merely as an extension of sustainable tourism. Others have employed linear methodologies that oversimplify the dynamic and relational nature of regeneration by focusing predominantly on consumers as the primary agents of change rather than recognizing tourism as part of a broader living system. Efforts that emphasize measurable “net-positive” outcomes similarly risk constraining regenerative approaches to quantifiable actions, thereby overlooking the rich diversity and unpredictability inherent to living systems. To counter these limitations, scholars have argued for the integration of Indigenous and other place-derived knowledge systems, which offer holistic understandings of the interconnectedness of socio-ecological relationships within tourism (Becken & Coghlan, 2022). Viewing tourism as a complex adaptive system (CAS) enables the exploration of co-evolutionary processes and relational dynamics across human and non-human communities (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2004). However, this systems lens is still often applied through a mechanistic worldview that reduces destinations to economic production spaces (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2025). Advancing regenerative tourism scholarship therefore requires conceptualizing places as living systems and synthesizing CAS perspectives with living systems thinking to better understand the regenerative potential of tourism activities (F Du Plessis, 2009; Pollock, 2019).

### **From Extraction to Enrichment Revitalizing Places and People**

The generally accepted industrial paradigm views people as administrators and exploiters of natural processes for financial benefit, considering them as distinct from nature. This has resulted in extractive dynamics between tourism and the destinations it occupies, where economic expansion is prioritised over ecological and community wellbeing. Within tourism scholarship, emphasis has traditionally been placed on the financial growth and market success of the sector. Emerging regenerative tourism literature and practitioner-led initiatives sometimes reproduce these same assumptions, reinforcing the notion that tourism can pursue perpetual growth as a competitive industry—an idea rooted in the industrial worldview (Bellato et al., 2022). Even when alternative economic approaches attempt to reduce harm, such efforts often remain incremental, modifying existing systems rather than fundamentally challenging the dominance of tourism economies or the extractive capitalist logic underpinning them.

A regenerative paradigm advocates reorienting tourism around the health of place and community, aiming to re-establish reciprocal relationships between humans and the natural world. In this reframing, economies are understood as life-supporting flows rather than the primary objective of development. Growth becomes a relational concept, reflecting how interconnected systems strengthen their capacities to thrive collectively, generating mutual benefits and co-evolution. The traditional five capitals model of sustainable development has been revamped by regenerative practitioners into a more dynamic design framework that prioritises ecological and community well-being (Du Plessis, 2012). Revised definitions align each capital with living systems principles, shifting attention from resource control for human benefit toward enhancing the whole system’s resilience and vitality.

Therefore, regenerative tourism promotes research into how tourism, as a component of a larger living and social-ecological system, may actively contribute to enhancing the well-being and capacity for regeneration of the places and communities it affects. Initiatives must therefore contribute positively to the wider interconnected systems of which tourism is only one component.

## **From Centralized Knowledge to Co-Creating Plural Place-Rooted Ways of Knowing Being and Doing**

Tourism scholarship has predominantly been shaped by Western scientific and mechanistic epistemologies. To date, only a limited number of researchers have examined regenerative tourism in its full conceptual breadth, and even fewer have aligned their interpretations with the underlying principles of the regenerative paradigm (Duarte et al., 2024; Iddawala & Lee, 2025). As a result, the existing literature often presents ambiguous and diluted representations of regenerative tourism. Key concepts are selectively extracted and re-adapted to fit within established tourism science frameworks, rather than prompting a deeper reconsideration of tourism's foundational assumptions. Thus, the critical issue of how paradigm shifts might occur within tourism remains insufficiently explored. In addition, Western knowledge traditions continue to be prioritised, while alternative ontologies, epistemologies, and practices are marginalised. These limited conceptualisations frequently rely on abstract theoretical discourse, treat regeneration as merely another tourism typology, and reinforce the dominance of Western academic authority in defining tourism knowledge.

Adopting a regenerative paradigm requires embracing plural, place-sourced knowledge systems, co-produced collaboratively with diverse tourism actors. Scholars are encouraged to work alongside communities, practitioners, Indigenous knowledge holders, and other stakeholders to co-develop methodologies that reflect relational and place-responsive understandings. In this approach, researching regenerative tourism becomes a participatory process aimed at strengthening social-ecological systems and supporting transitions toward regenerative futures. Shifting from the stance of a detached expert to that of an engaged, experiential learner creates space for shared knowledge creation. Moreover, grounding research in the principles and lineage of regeneration assists scholars in selecting theoretical and methodological tools that can enable rigorous, context-specific framework development—ensuring that regenerative tourism is investigated as an evolving practice deeply connected to place.

### **Pathways for Future Research**

A significant shift is currently underway across global governance institutions. In recent discourse, senior representatives of major international organisations, including the World Trade Organization, the World Economic Forum, and the United Nations, have formally acknowledged the emergence of a global “polycrisis,” signalling a critical imperative for comprehensive and systemic transformation across social, economic, and environmental domains (Gössling & Scott, 2025). In this context, regenerative thinking is increasingly positioned as a critical response, offering the depth and adaptability required to address interconnected global challenges. Importantly, this transformation extends beyond any single sector and necessitates collective engagement across diverse stakeholders—human and non-human, local and international, public and private.

To enable regenerative tourism scholarship to meaningfully contribute to such transformative change, supportive conditions must be cultivated. Emerging frameworks for assessing tourism success are prioritising wellbeing, healing, and positive contributions to socio-ecological systems (McCool & Mandic, 2025). Moreover, a growing emphasis on transdisciplinary research underscores the value of co-producing knowledge with practitioners, Indigenous communities, and local knowledge holders actively engaged in regenerative initiatives. Foundational competencies in systems thinking, worldview analysis, and ecological literacy are essential, as is developing strong collaborative capacities.

However, realising these aspirations requires sustained investment in specialised training and empirically grounded research to strengthen the field's theoretical and practical foundations. Indigenous and decolonial scholars are increasingly highlighting reciprocity, relationality, and ethical responsibility as core dimensions of tourism (Calvin et al., 2024). Alternative epistemologies rooted in non-Western paradigms are gaining traction, enriching conceptualisations of tourism through novel theoretical perspectives and disciplinary influences not traditionally employed in the field. As a result, tourism geographers are uniquely positioned to safeguard the conceptual integrity of regenerative tourism by maintaining its connection to ecological worldviews and aligning inquiry with plural, place-based knowledge systems.

Substantial gaps remain in understanding how tourism practices grounded in regenerative paradigms can be collaboratively designed and implemented. Future advancements will rely on continued engagement with fields outside of tourism, reflecting the paradigm's inherent shift away from tourism-centric thinking toward the enhancement of the health and flourishing of wider complex systems in which tourism plays a contributory role.

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