Regenerative Tourism in the UK

By Peter Jones[*]

Some commentators suggest that regenerative tourism offers an opportunity to address many of the environmental, social, cultural, and economic challenges currently facing the tourism industry. While the UK is a one of the world's most popular tourism destinations, regenerative tourism in the UK has received little attention in the academic tourism literature. This short paper looks to offer some simple exploratory illustrations of regenerative tourism initiatives in the UK. The paper includes a description of the origins and characteristics of regenerative tourism, a short literature review, four cameo case studies of regenerative tourism initiatives drawn from various parts of the UK, and some reflective conclusions.

Introduction

Sustainability continues to be an imperative for the tourism industry. TUI (2024), the world's largest tourism company, for example, claimed that it was working *'to actively shape a more sustainable future for tourism'*, while Booking Holdings (2024), the world's leading provider of online travel services, emphasised *'we are committed to sustainability efforts that will further our mission, including initiatives to promote sustainable tourism, act as responsible environmental stewards and further decarbonize the travel industry.'* However, in reporting on the *'IMPACT Sustainability Travel and Tourism'* conference in Victoria, British Columbia, in January 2024, Ball (2024), writing under the GreenBiz banner, suggested that *'sustainable tourism'* was giving way to *'regenerative tourism.'* That said, sustainable tourism and regenerative tourism have been described as *'different stages on the same continuum'* (The Tourism Collective 2023), in that while sustainability has been concerned to reduce the negative environmental and social impacts of tourism, regenerative tourism is actively focused on the improvement and enhancement of natural, cultural and social environments.

New Zealand is often cited one of the countries where regenerative tourism initiatives have taken root, and some of these initiatives have attracted attention in the academic tourism literature (e.g., Fuste-Forne and Hussain 2022, Becken and Kaur 2021, Matunga et al. 2020). The UK is one of the world's most popular tourism destination – and was recently listed in 6th place out of 60 nations by Visit Britain (2023) – but regenerative tourism in the UK has received little attention in the academic tourism literature and this represents a gap in that literature. At the same time, Bellato et al. (2022) claimed there had been little clarity and agreement

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on the *'transformative potential of regenerative tourism or its applications to practice.'* This short paper looks to offer some simple exploratory illustrations of the application of regenerative tourism within the UK and as such to contribute to helping to fill the gap in the literature. The paper includes a description of the origins and characteristics of regenerative tourism, a short literature review, four cameo case studies of regenerative tourism initiatives drawn from various parts of the UK, and some reflective conclusions.

The Origins and Characteristics of Regenerative Tourism

In outlining the development of the *'regenerative paradigm'*, Bellato and Pollock (2023) argued that regenerative thinking was underpinned by an ecological perspective that views *'life forms as living systems'*, which are subject to nature's longstanding *'laws and principles'*, and as such stands in marked contrast to *'the prevailing paradigm based on viewing life through a mechanistic, materialistic lens that derives understanding from seeing objects as separate from one another.'* Much of the initial thinking in this genre was applied in regenerative agriculture, which White (2020) described as *'a suite of practices that restores and maintains soil health and fertility, supports biodiversity, protects watersheds, and improves ecological and economic resilience.'*

Bellato and Pollock (2023) traced the origins of the ideas underpinning regenerative tourism back to the 1970s, but claimed that the application of regenerative concepts in the business community only emerged in the 1990's. Interest in regenerative tourism is rooted in widespread concerns about the world's growing environmental crisis, and more specifically in tourism's contribution to that crisis, and the focus is on how tourism might be able to contribute to environmental improvement. At the same time, explanations of the recent growth in interest in regenerative tourism have also been linked to the vulnerabilities and uncertainties in the industry caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and which Duxbury et al. (2021) claimed reinforced the need to think about new approaches to tourism.

There is little general consensus about the definition of regenerative tourism and Bellato and Pollock (2023) argued that *'there is a minimal shared understanding of the core elements of a regenerative approach'*, not least because *'very few communities, associations or companies have invested the time and money needed to understand its systems-changing implications or catalyse its true potential.'* That said, a variety of definitions of regenerative tourism can be identified. Earthcheck (2023), a benchmarking and certification consultancy, defined regenerative tourism as *'a process where tourism sector stakeholders, collectively, exert care and guardianship (through decision-making and practices) for the improvement and enhancement of natural, human and human-made elements when moving to, visiting, living or operating in, a destination.*

Tourism Insights (2023) argued that *'regenerative tourism embodies a holistic approach that transcends the confines of traditional tourism'*, that *'it nurtures collaborations and partnerships among all stakeholders, fostering*

diversity within local economies to mitigate overdependence on tourism for survival', that *'an inclusive decision-making space empowers local populations to contribute to both community well-being and environmental stewardship'*, and that *'travellers are encouraged to participate in projects that revitalize local communities and nurture the environment, fostering a deeper connection with the destination.*

On the academic side, Dredge (2022) suggests that regenerative tourism *'seeks to ensure travel and tourism reinvest in people, places and nature and that it supports the long-term renewal and flourishing of our social-ecological systems.'* Luong et al. (2023) defined regenerative tourism as a *'responsible and proactive approach to tourism that prioritizes sustainability and seeks to restore tourism resources while promoting the well-being and harmony of local communities. This is achieved through activities that focus on resources restoration, carbon-offsetting, and energy-saving, while fostering harmonized communities and promoting sustainable practices.'* For Suarez-Rojas et al. (2023) *'regenerative tourism is a novel concept that, in departing from the traditional ideas of sustainability, goes beyond the sustainable development paradigm in order to transform the social-ecological systems where tourism takes place'*, and *'it relies on social awareness building and the co-creation of meaningful tourism experiences, promotes local involvement and genuine community benefits, as well as a restorative relationship with nature in all dimensions and at all scales.'*

Discussions about regenerative tourism are often bound up with its relationship with sustainable tourism. For some commentators the two represent distinct paths, each offering a unique vision of the future. Here, sustainable tourism, looks to restrict and manage the tourism industry's negative, environmental, social and economic impacts, and it looks to reconcile the often competing, interests of the industry, tourists, the environment, and host communities, and to encourage and facilitate more responsible, and ideally, more sustainable, patterns of consumption. Regenerative tourism is seen to be more concerned not only with a commitment to mitigate the damaging and exploitative impacts of tourism, but also to make a positive contribution to the revitalisation of local ecosystems, cultures, communities and economies. More generally, *'regenerative tourism is not meant to be a one- size-fits-all phenomenon'*, rather *'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'* (Sharma and Tham 2023).

Literature Review

In looking to undertake a review of the current academic literature, it is important to recognise that regenerative tourism is essentially a new field, and that clearly defined research agendas have yet to be formed. Corral-Gonzalez et al. (2023), for example, claimed that although regenerative tourism represented *'a beacon of hope',* to tackle tourism problems, its multidisciplinary nature and fragmentation had hindered the identification of major thematic areas for

researchers. That said, four research themes, namely, the opportunities and challenges of regenerative tourism; mindset shifts; focus areas; and theoretical approaches; can be identified within the existing literature.

Sharma and Tham (2023) looked to examine the opportunities and challenges of regenerative tourism. Here, the opportunities are centred on renewal to the natural and human environment, and on fostering resilience and peoples' sense of identity, on contributing to placemaking and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, and on creating new learning and leadership within the industry. A number of the challenges identified are associated with facilitating the growth of the circular economy, the need to facilitate the upcycling of resource utilisation, which will in turn reinforce the shift of tourism from being purely consumptive to taking on board how visitors can co-create transformative outcomes that favour tourism destinations and their communities. More generally Bellato and Pollock (2023) listed three factors *'stalling'* the shift to regenerative tourism, namely a reductionist mindset, which leads to fragmentation and competition, the dominant industrial paradigm which separates humans from nature, and the limited attention paid to how paradigm shift could occur in tourism.

Dredge (2022) emphasised the importance of the mindset shift needed to transition to a regenerative approach to tourism. She argued that the regenerative mindset was underpinned by an ecological view of the world, and that basically regenerative tourism seeks to ensure that tourism is concerned to reinvest in people, places and nature, and to support the long-term renewal of socio-economic systems. That said, Dredge (2022) further argued that making the required leap to a regenerative mindset in tourism was difficult, because of the industry's attachment to scientific thinking and strategic management. More specifically, Dredge (2022) claimed that regenerative tourism was a *'capacity building journey, not an outcome, a plan or a single output'*, and that *'shifting individual understanding and mindsets provides the most powerful lever for change.'*

The literature on focus areas, embraced both specific geographical locations and thematic elements. On the geographic side, Fuste-Forne and Hussain (2022) provided a case study of regenerative tourism in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Here the authors argued that regenerative tourism should not be implemented as a new type of tourism, but as a holistic understanding of tourism futures that includes communities and the environment, where tourists are committed to preserve and protect both the natural and the socio-cultural environment. The findings revealed that regenerative tourism must protect and promote local identities, and enhance and enrich visitor experiences, with a focus on both cultural and natural heritage. Mathisen et al. (2022) undertook co-created case study research with the owners of a small value driven tourism company in Arctic Norway. The findings revealed that the values of the company's owners constituted the *'soul creating regenerative activities',* based on the reciprocity of soil and society, that the authors affirmed that *'soil, soul, and society'* were at the core of developing regenerative tourism activities, and that this is challenging for small ecologically driven companies within a capital centric system.

More thematically, Suarez-Rojas et al. (2023) recognised that the tourism

activity of whale watching, which attracts large numbers of tourists, is causing increasing damage to the natural environment. Here the authors looked to build a new integrative framework for research actions developed on the concept of regenerative tourism, with the aim of providing a more balanced evaluation of environmentally and socially responsible whale watching tourism. Alvarez (2024) argued that the regenerative management of coastal tourism destinations can transform them into carbon sinks and help to bring about the landscape scale restoration of blue carbon ecosystems, such as marshes, mangroves and seagrass meadows.

While much of the research on regenerative tourism has an empirical focus, some limited attempts have been made to explore theoretical perspectives. Bellato et al. (2022), for example, looked to leverage theory and practice to develop a conceptual framework, which consisted of five design dimensions. The design dimensions were a regenerative mindset; the inherent potential in the place and the community; the capability of tourism living systems to catalyse transformations and to adopt healing processes; establishing what will guide tourism stakeholders to develop a reciprocal relationship with nature and contribute to flourishing places and communities; and understanding how tourism stakeholders will contribute resources and implement tasks to enable regeneration within, and beyond, tourism systems.

Method of Enquiry

The paper employs a simple multiple case study approach and offers four cameo case studies to illustrate the characteristics of a range of regenerative tourism initiatives in the UK. Rowley (2002) that argued *'case studies have often been viewed as a useful tool for the preliminary exploratory stage of a research project'*, and a case study approach has been used previously in examining regenerative tourism in the resort town of Yulara in Northern territories, Australia (Owen 2007). The material for the cameo case studies was generated by an Internet search, conducted in April 2024, using the single search term regenerative tourism initiatives in the UK. The four initiatives, used to develop the cameo case studies, used the term regenerative tourism to describe themselves, and thus there was an element of self-selection in the information collection process.

In developing the cameo case studies, the author developed a narrative account of each of the regenerative initiatives, and on a number of occasions quotes verbatim from the websites in order to lend authenticity to the narrative. The material used in the case studies is in the public domain and the author took the view that it was unnecessary to seek formal approval to use it. The author is well aware of the limitations of the cameo case studies, not least in that the initiatives were effectively self-chosen and in that the cameo case studies did not employ primary empirical material gathered from the leaders/managers of the chosen regenerative initiatives, but relied exclusively on Internet sources. However, the author believes this to be a valid approach to a topic that has, to date, received little or no attention in the academic literature.

Cameo Case Studies of Regenerative Tourism Initiatives in the UK

A total of four regenerative tourism initiatives, namely Broughton Sanctuary, Cynefin Regenerative Tourism, Discover Cullen, and Tourism Regeneration in North East England, within the UK, were identified for the cameo case studies. The four initiatives vary in their characteristics, they include well established and more aspirational ventures, and they are in different parts of the UK, and as such they provide a range of illustrations of regenerative tourism.

Broughton Sanctuary (2024), near Skipton in North Yorkshire, which offers a range of visitor accommodation, describes itself as *'a shining example of regenerative tourism'*, and claims to be *'a place where heritage, nature and modern wellness coexist in harmony'*, and to offer *'authentic and immersive retreats that go beyond traditional tourism experiences.'* Broughton Sanctuary emphasised that its commitment to regenerative tourism was rooted in three elements, nature recovery and conservation, sustainable agriculture, and community engagement and empowerment.

In addressing its commitment to nature recovery and conservation, for example, Broughton Sanctuary (2024) claimed that its 1,200 hectares of woodlands, meadows and farmland *'provides an ideal canvas for rewilding projects'*, that its *'dedication to biodiversity restoration includes planting native species, managing habitats for wildlife and even reintroducing species that had previously disappeared from the area'*, and that *'these efforts not only benefit the local ecosystem but also offer visitors the opportunity to reconnect with nature and witness the positive effects of regenerative practices.'* Community engagement is also seen as a key element in the regenerative tourism approach at Broughton Sanctuary. Partnerships have been established to support local businesses, and Broughton Business Park has over 50 companies and employs over 600 people.

The Cynefin Regenerative Tourism initiative at Galwad y Mor on the Saint David's peninsula in South Wales claims to have been established some 40 years ago. Here, there is accommodation for over 60 visitors, and the focus is on attracting and hosting visitors *'who want to make a difference to our community and volunteer within the wealth of local environmentally sustainable organisations who work ethically to protect our community and environment'* (Galwad y Mor 2024). This initiative includes Car and Mor, a community owned business, and Eco Dewi, a community group looking to contribute to tackling the climate emergency and the biodiversity crisis, and to weave community, nature, well-being and business together.

There is an explicit recognition that regenerative tourism is *'no quick fix'*, that *'solutions take time and are place specific'*, and that *'it only works by asking and empowering the local community'* (Galwad y Mor 2024). The initiative embraces what it describes as *'voluntourism'*, which involves individual and group volunteering designed to support both the local community and environment, and as such to contribute to regenerative tourism, which is seen as the *'mutual exchange of well-being of people and place'* (Galwad y Mor 2024).

Discover Cullen, a volunteer led community tourism organisation established

in the mid-1990s, is a regenerative tourism initiative, centred on the small seaside town of Cullen on the Murray Firth in the North East of Scotland. The focus is on promoting tourism, local businesses and a range of activities, and community groups, businesses and individuals to enhance the local area, for example, by supporting the creation of new walking trails and interpretation facilities, and safeguarding its heritage. The initiative claims to have developed a *'collaborative, inclusive approach that has created an enterprise that is truly embedded in its community and thus has sustainable tourism development. It inspires and fosters ideas, carefully balancing tourism and community needs'* (Scottish Community Tourism 2024).

Four elements, namely community, nature, place and visitor are identified as being central to the Discover Cullen approach. In addressing community, for example, the importance of leading by example is emphasised thus inspiring other groups to take on a range of spin-off projects, such as local festivals, as is the active collaboration and partnership working between local organisations and more informal groups. In focusing on nature, the emphasis has been on encouraging and promoting local excursions, on the provision of trail maps to encourage walking activities, and on regular beach cleaning events and the provision of seagull proof bins.

Looking more to the future, Destination North East England (2023), a UK government funded regional tourism pilot, claims that its *'Regenerative Tourism'* initiative is *'committed to working with industry to make tourism work for both people and the planet',* and that regenerative tourism *'ensures that tourism is sustainable, driving value for local people and places as well as the tourist.'* Here, the focus is to be on the co-creation of a *'Regenerative Tourism Framework'*, and on aligning this activity across seven local authorities in the region. Within the framework, a task force, drawn from residents, local decision makers and industry, will look to co-create sustainable and circular strategies and mindsets to focus on destinations and communities.

More generally, the initiative is seen as an opportunity to raise the profile and unlock the potential of the North East region's visitor economy, which is the fourth largest employer in the region, and it is hoped that the additional support that will be available to existing businesses through the initiative will help to create the business case for further investment in the region's visitor economy. As such, the aim is for the region to act as a potential blueprint for other regions of England, to *'help shape the future landscape of tourism organisations.'*

Reflective Conclusions

The four cameo case studies provide some illustrations of regenerative tourism initiatives in the UK, but three brief sets of reflective conclusions merit attention. Firstly, there are issues about the scale of regenerative tourism within the UK, and here there are two dimensions. On the one hand, very few tourism initiatives explicitly publicly identify themselves as regenerative on the Internet. This suggests that the scale of regenerative tourism is, as yet, very limited, and that

the assertion by Bellato et al. (2022) that there is little or no interest in applying the concept, would certainly seem to resonate within the UK. On the other hand, the three established regenerative tourism initiatives, are all essentially small-scale ventures in rural areas, and this might be seen to call into question the efficacy of developing large scale regenerative tourism initiatives.

Secondly, and more generally, there are issues in, and around, the relationship between regenerative tourism and sustainable development. On the one hand, regenerative tourism's commitment, for example, to protect and enhance nature and to support and work co-creatively with local communities, is consistent with sustainable development. However, regenerative initiatives and venues cannot be considered in isolation, and visitors may generate carbon dioxide emissions on their journeys to these venues, or the venues themselves, may not always be able to source local produce. At the same time, if regenerative tourism is to make a significant contribution to sustainable development, then it will need to be developed on a large scale.

Thirdly, and more radically, there is the argument that genuinely regenerative tourism is dependent on a shift to a new global economic model, centred on abandoning economic growth and on prioritising nature and the natural and social welfare of the planet. At the present time, the prospects of such a vision of the future seems unlikely to commend itself to the mainstream tourism industry, the wider corporate world, or to governments. Cave et al. (2022), for example, argued that *'the challenge is that seven decades of growth have thwarted any appetite to imagine new and alternative economic models in tourism.'* By way of a concluding summary, it is surely premature to suggest that regenerative tourism offers a transformative solution to the current environmental, social, cultural, and economic challenges posed by tourism.

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