

## **Beyond Sustainability: Regenerative Pathways in Hospitality and Tourism Development in Small-Scale Destinations**

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*This paper examines the transition from sustainable to regenerative tourism development with a focus on hospitality and tourism in small-scale destinations. The study investigates the theoretical foundations of regenerative tourism and evaluates its practical application through the case study of Mineralni Bani, Bulgaria. The research applies a mixed-methods approach combining literature analysis, field observations, surveys among tourists and local residents, and assessment of tourism infrastructure and environmental conditions. The findings demonstrate that regenerative tourism can contribute to ecosystem restoration, community engagement, economic resilience, and enhanced visitor experiences. The study identifies both opportunities and challenges associated with the implementation of regenerative tourism practices in spa and wellness destinations. Particular attention is paid to the role of local communities, environmental management, tourism diversification, and regenerative hospitality practices. The paper concludes that regenerative tourism represents a transformative pathway for future hospitality and tourism development beyond traditional sustainability models and provides practical recommendations for the strategic development of small-scale destinations.*

**Keywords:** *regenerative tourism, hospitality development, spa tourism, wellness tourism, small-scale destinations*

### **Introduction**

Tourism has established itself as one of the most dynamic sectors of the global economy, generating economic growth, employment, and regional development opportunities. However, contemporary tourism is increasingly challenged by climate change, biodiversity loss, excessive resource consumption, and growing social inequalities. Traditional tourism models focused primarily on economic growth are no longer sufficient to address these complex challenges. Although sustainable tourism has contributed significantly to reducing negative environmental impacts, the current global context requires a more transformative approach.

While sustainable tourism seeks to minimize harm, regenerative tourism aims to restore, revitalize, and enhance ecosystems, local communities, and cultural heritage through tourism activities. Regenerative approaches focus on creating net positive impacts by integrating environmental restoration, community participation, local economic resilience, and visitor engagement.

Small-scale destinations are particularly suitable for the implementation of regenerative tourism due to their flexibility, authenticity, lower levels of

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overdevelopment, and stronger interconnections between local communities and natural resources. Such destinations can more easily integrate regenerative practices into tourism planning and management while preserving local identity and ecosystem balance.

This study examines the transition from sustainability toward regenerative development in hospitality and tourism with a specific focus on small-scale destinations. The research explores how regenerative principles can be applied to improve environmental, socio-cultural, and economic outcomes in tourism. The spa destination of Mineralni Bani in Southern Bulgaria is used as an illustrative case study within a broader international context.

The research evaluates the destination's natural resources, tourism infrastructure, environmental impacts, and the attitudes of local residents and visitors toward tourism development. In addition, the study examines the theoretical foundations of regenerative tourism and identifies practical opportunities and limitations for implementing regenerative models in hospitality and tourism.

The objective of this study is to examine the potential for regenerative tourism development in a small-scale spa destination and to evaluate how regenerative principles may contribute to environmental stewardship, community well-being, cultural preservation, and economic resilience. Using Mineralni Bani (Bulgaria) as a case study, the paper explores both opportunities and barriers associated with the implementation of regenerative tourism and hospitality practices.

## Literature Review

The concept of regenerative tourism has attracted increasing academic attention during the last decade. Scholars argue that conventional tourism development models are unable to adequately respond to contemporary environmental and social crises. As a result, tourism researchers increasingly explore alternative approaches that move beyond traditional sustainability frameworks. Tourism is increasingly seen as a positive force for the conservation of cultural heritage, which can be used to create tourist resources, educate the population and influence policies aimed at preserving it (Brandão et al. 2024).

The origins of regenerative thinking can be traced to ecological sciences and regenerative agriculture, where regeneration refers to the capacity of living systems to renew and restore themselves after disturbance. Regenerative principles were later adopted in fields such as architecture, urban planning, economics, and organizational management. In tourism, regenerative thinking emphasises the creation of tourism systems that contribute positively to ecosystems and communities.

(Bellato et al. 2022) define regenerative tourism as a transformative process that integrates environmental restoration, community participation, and systemic thinking. According to the authors, regenerative tourism should not be understood as a specific tourism product but rather as a holistic framework for destination development. Bellato and Pollock (2023) further emphasize that regenerative tourism requires a fundamental change in the relationship between tourism, society, and nature.

Dredge (2022) argues that regenerative tourism involves a shift in values and mindsets. The author highlights that regeneration cannot be achieved solely through technical environmental solutions. Instead, regeneration requires collaborative governance, ethical responsibility, and long-term commitment to community well-being and ecological resilience.

Cave et al. (2022) focus on the economic dimensions of regenerative tourism. Their work emphasizes the importance of diverse local economic practices and the reduction of dependency on extractive tourism models. Regenerative tourism therefore supports circular economies, local entrepreneurship, and socially inclusive development.

The COVID-19 pandemic additionally intensified debates regarding tourism transformation. Papanikos (2022) discusses how tourism-dependent economies experienced significant disruptions during the pandemic period. The crisis revealed the vulnerability of destinations dependent on mass tourism and strengthened arguments for more resilient and diversified tourism systems.

Regenerative tourism is closely connected with the concept of nature-positive tourism. Jones (2024a) explains that tourism should contribute actively to ecosystem restoration rather than simply reducing environmental damage. Nature-positive tourism emphasizes biodiversity conservation, habitat restoration, sustainable land use, and community engagement in environmental management.

Jones (2024b) further explores regenerative tourism practices in the United Kingdom and demonstrates how local communities and tourism enterprises can collaborate to improve destination resilience and sustainability. The author highlights that regenerative tourism often emerges more successfully in smaller destinations where local stakeholders maintain stronger relationships with natural and cultural resources.

Researchers also examine the role of hospitality enterprises in regenerative transformation. Sharma and Tham (2023) identify both opportunities and challenges related to regenerative hospitality. The authors argue that tourism businesses should move beyond green marketing and adopt comprehensive operational changes, including renewable energy systems, waste reduction, local sourcing, and employee engagement.

Fusté-Forné and Hussain (2022) emphasize the importance of community participation and cultural identity in regenerative tourism development. Their case study from New Zealand demonstrates that regeneration depends on local knowledge, indigenous perspectives, and place-based tourism experiences.

In addition to environmental restoration, regenerative tourism increasingly focuses on social and psychological dimensions of tourism experiences. Wellness tourism, spa tourism, nature-based therapies, and slow tourism have become increasingly popular among tourists seeking authentic and meaningful travel experiences. Such trends create favourable opportunities for small-scale destinations with rich natural and cultural resources. Considering this, according to Buhalis and Investini (2025) the approach to tourism should be tailored to the social-ecological systems essential qualities and complexity level.

The relationship between regenerative tourism and the circular economy has also become an important area of academic discussion. Circular economy principles

support resource efficiency, waste reduction, recycling, and local production systems. In tourism, circular approaches can contribute to reducing environmental impacts while strengthening local economies. Another important issue concerns the measurement of regenerative tourism outcomes. Falatoni, Schaffer, and Dzakpasu (2016) emphasize the importance of tourism indicators and integrated assessment frameworks. Measuring regenerative impacts remains challenging because regeneration involves complex interactions between environmental, social, and economic systems. The literature therefore demonstrates that regenerative tourism represents an interdisciplinary and evolving field. Although the concept continues to develop theoretically, practical implementation remains limited in many destinations. This creates the need for empirical studies examining regenerative opportunities in specific local contexts.

The present study contributes to this emerging literature by examining regenerative tourism potential in Mineralni Bani, Bulgaria. The research additionally contributes to the limited body of academic studies focusing on regenerative tourism development in Eastern Europe and Balkan spa destinations. By integrating theoretical perspectives with empirical evidence from a small-scale destination, the paper expands current discussions regarding regenerative tourism implementation, hospitality transformation, and destination resilience. The research combines theoretical perspectives with empirical analysis of tourism development, visitor attitudes, local perceptions, and environmental opportunities in a small-scale spa destination.

Despite increasing academic interest in regenerative tourism, empirical studies remain concentrated in destinations located in New Zealand, Australia, Western Europe, and North America. Research examining regenerative tourism in Eastern European spa destinations is still limited. Furthermore, while hospitality enterprises are increasingly recognized as important actors in regenerative transformation, relatively few studies investigate the relationship between regenerative tourism and hospitality development in small-scale wellness destinations. Existing literature remains largely conceptual, while destination-level empirical assessments continue to be scarce. This study addresses these gaps by examining the regenerative tourism potential of Mineralni Bani, Bulgaria, and contributes evidence from an underrepresented geographical context.

From Sustainable to Regenerative Tourism: the growing environmental and social pressures associated with tourism development have stimulated the evolution of tourism theories and management models (Jones 2024a; Jones 2024b). Sustainable tourism emerged as a response to the need to balance economic development with environmental protection and social responsibility. However, sustainability often focuses on reducing negative impacts without necessarily improving the conditions of ecosystems and communities.

Regenerative tourism represents an evolutionary step beyond sustainability (Bellato et al. 2022, Bellato and Pollock 2023). It seeks not only to preserve but also to restore natural systems, strengthen local communities, and generate long-term positive impacts. The regenerative approach recognizes the interdependence between ecological, social, cultural, and economic systems. Bellato, Frantzeskaki, and Nygaard (2022) define regenerative tourism as an approach that actively contributes to ecosystem restoration and community well-being. Similarly, Bellato and Pollock

(2023) emphasize that regenerative tourism requires systemic transformation and collaboration among stakeholders.

Regeneration originates from biological systems and refers to the capacity to restore and renew living systems. In tourism, regeneration involves restoring degraded ecosystems, revitalizing local culture and traditions, and creating resilient local economies. The distinction between traditional, sustainable, and regenerative tourism models can be summarized as follows:

**Table 1.** *Comparison between Traditional and sustainable Tourism Models*

Aspect	Traditional Tourism	Sustainable Tourism	Regenerative Tourism
Main goal	Economic growth	Reducing negative impacts	Creating net positive impacts
Approach to nature	Resource exploitation	Resource protection	Ecosystem restoration
Economic model	Linear	More efficient linear model	Circular and restorative
Community role	Passive beneficiary	Stakeholder participation	Active co-creator
Visitor role	Consumer	Responsible tourist	Participant in regeneration

Source: Authors

Regenerative tourism therefore requires a holistic and integrated approach involving local communities, businesses, visitors, researchers, and public institutions (Dredge 2022, Cave et al. 2022). Hospitality enterprises play a critical role in the implementation of regenerative tourism principles (Sharma and Tham 2023). Hotels and tourism businesses are increasingly expected to move beyond resource efficiency toward active contributions to environmental restoration and community development. Regenerative hospitality extends beyond minimizing negative environmental impacts and seeks to create positive environmental, social, cultural, and economic outcomes for destinations and local communities. Key regenerative practices include the adoption of renewable energy systems, circular resource management, water and waste reduction and reuse, support for local food systems and supply chains, biodiversity restoration through green spaces and organic gardens, integration of local culture and traditions into tourism products, biophilic architecture and design, training and engagement of local employees, and the provision of educational activities for guests.

In addition to environmental and economic considerations, regenerative hospitality places strong emphasis on emotional and social well-being. Contemporary tourists increasingly seek authentic experiences, wellness-oriented travel, and meaningful connections with local communities and natural environments. As a result, hospitality enterprises are encouraged to create experiences that foster deeper relationships between visitors, destinations, and local cultures.

The growing influence of digital technologies, social media platforms, and changing consumer preferences has accelerated demand for wellness, spa, and nature-based tourism experiences. These trends create favorable conditions for the

development of regenerative tourism, particularly in destinations characterized by rich natural resources, cultural heritage, and strong community identity.

Small-scale destinations possess several characteristics that support regenerative tourism development. These include preserved natural environments, strong local identity, close relationships between residents and tourism providers, opportunities for personalized tourism experiences, and relatively low levels of mass tourism and overtourism (Fusté-Forné and Hussain 2022). Such characteristics create conditions that facilitate community participation, authentic visitor experiences, and stronger stewardship of local resources.

However, small-scale destinations also face a number of challenges that may hinder regenerative transformation. Common constraints include limited infrastructure, insufficient investment, weak destination management structures, and restricted international visibility. These limitations can reduce competitiveness and constrain the implementation of innovative tourism practices.

Consequently, the transition toward regenerative tourism requires a coordinated and long-term approach involving strategic planning, stakeholder collaboration, infrastructure development, institutional support, and capacity building among local actors. Successful regenerative transformation depends on the active participation of tourism businesses, local communities, public authorities, and other stakeholders working collectively toward shared environmental, social, cultural, and economic objectives.

## **Methodology**

This study investigates the current state of tourism and hospitality development in the small-scale spa destination of Mineralni Bani, located in Southern Bulgaria. The research examines the interactions between tourism activities, local communities, hospitality enterprises, and the natural environment, with particular emphasis on the regenerative development potential of the destination and opportunities for implementing regenerative tourism practices.

A mixed-methods research design was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive assessment of regenerative tourism opportunities and challenges. The study adopts a regenerative tourism research framework integrating systems thinking, ecosystem assessment, participatory planning, and community-centered evaluation. Unlike conventional tourism studies that primarily assess tourism impacts, the regenerative approach focuses on how tourism can actively contribute to ecosystem restoration, community well-being, cultural revitalization, and economic resilience.

The research was conducted between 2022 and 2024 and follows a case study methodology, which is particularly suitable for examining complex interactions between tourism systems and destination-specific development processes.

Mineralni Bani Municipality was selected as the case study based on several criteria: the presence of unique mineral-water resources and long-established balneological traditions; preserved natural and cultural heritage assets; opportunities for spa, wellness, rural, cultural, and nature-based tourism development; favourable

geographic location and accessibility; limited scientific research on regenerative tourism in the region; and significant potential for sustainable and regenerative transformation.

The destination represents a typical small-scale spa tourism area characterized by strong natural and cultural assets but facing challenges associated with infrastructure modernization, destination management, international visibility, and tourism product diversification. Data collection combined documentary analysis, field observations, surveys, semi-structured interviews, and stakeholder consultations. Primary empirical data were collected from four stakeholder groups: accommodation providers, tourists and visitors, local residents, and representatives of local institutions and community organizations.

A structured questionnaire was administered to visitors staying in accommodation establishments and visiting major tourism attractions within the destination. Convenience sampling was employed due to the absence of a comprehensive visitor database and the exploratory nature of the study. A total of 131 valid tourist questionnaires were collected.

Local residents were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation across different age groups, occupations, and residential areas within the municipality. A total of 111 valid resident questionnaires were obtained. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with accommodation providers, municipal representatives, tourism practitioners, and community stakeholders. These interviews explored perceptions of tourism development, regenerative opportunities, governance challenges, and future development priorities.

Field observations and destination assessments were undertaken to evaluate tourism infrastructure, environmental quality, public spaces, natural resource management practices, accessibility, visitor facilities, and opportunities for regenerative tourism implementation. The survey instruments were developed based on previous tourism sustainability and regenerative tourism studies and adapted to the specific characteristics of spa and wellness destinations.

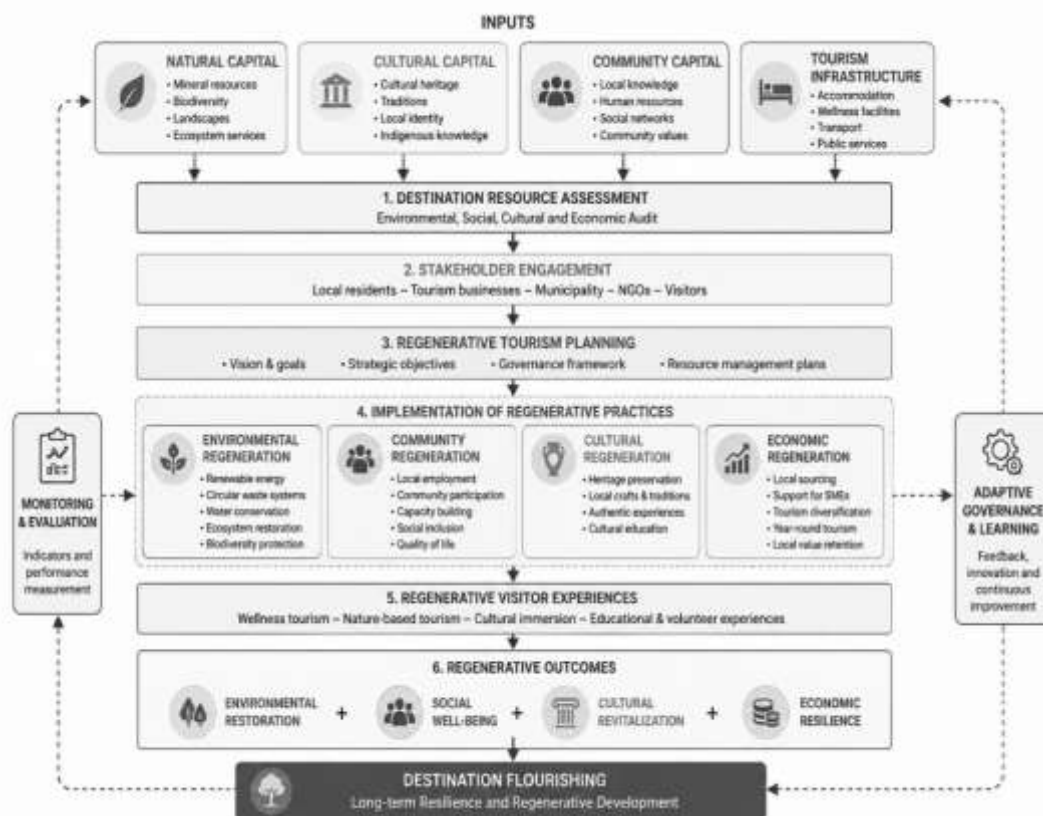
The questionnaires contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions and were organized into five sections: visitor profile and travel characteristics; tourism motivations and behavioural patterns; visitor satisfaction and destination image; environmental perceptions and sustainability attitudes; and regenerative tourism opportunities and future development priorities. Most attitudinal variables were measured using five-point Likert scales ranging from one (“strongly disagree”) to five (“strongly agree”). Prior to implementation, the questionnaires were reviewed by tourism researchers and destination-management experts to ensure content validity. A pilot test involving 20 respondents was conducted to assess question clarity, relevance, and reliability. The study utilized a regenerative tourism assessment framework adapted from contemporary regenerative tourism literature. The framework extends traditional sustainability assessment by evaluating the capacity of tourism to create net-positive environmental, social, cultural, and economic outcomes.

The assessment incorporated four dimensions. The ecological regeneration dimension included biodiversity conservation, ecosystem quality, water-resource management, renewable energy adoption, waste reduction practices, and ecosystem restoration opportunities. The community regeneration dimension examined community participation in tourism planning, local employment opportunities, stakeholder engagement, social

cohesion, and community well-being. The cultural regeneration dimension focused on the preservation of cultural heritage, maintenance of local traditions, destination authenticity, and support for local crafts and cultural activities.

The economic regeneration dimension assessed local sourcing practices, support for local entrepreneurship, tourism diversification, year-round tourism development, and the retention of tourism revenues within the local economy. The indicators were assessed through survey responses, stakeholder interviews, field observations, and documentary evidence. To support the assessment and interpretation of findings, a Regenerative Tourism Development Model for Small-Scale Destinations was developed (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** *Regenerative Tourism Development Model for Small-Scale Destinations*



Source: Developed by the authors, based on regenerative tourism literature and empirical findings.

The model conceptualizes tourism as a catalyst for regeneration through interactions among natural and cultural capital, community stewardship, regenerative tourism experiences, and regenerative hospitality practices. These interactions generate environmental restoration, social well-being, cultural revitalization, and economic resilience, ultimately contributing to destination flourishing and long-term sustainability.

The model consists of six interconnected stages: Destination Resource Assessment, Stakeholder Engagement, Regenerative Tourism Planning, Implementation of Regenerative Practices, Regenerative Visitor Experiences, and Regenerative Outcomes and Destination Flourishing. Continuous monitoring, stakeholder collaboration, adaptive governance, and organizational learning function as feedback mechanisms

supporting long-term regenerative transformation. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequency distributions, percentages, means, and cross-tabulations. Qualitative data obtained from interviews, field observations, and open-ended survey responses were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Themes were identified through iterative coding and categorized according to the four regenerative dimensions of the assessment framework.

The analysis focused on identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the destination, regenerative tourism potential, relationships between tourism and community well-being, environmental and socio-cultural impacts, and opportunities and barriers to regenerative transformation. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enabled triangulation of results and enhanced the reliability and validity of the study.

To improve the credibility of the findings, methodological triangulation was employed by combining surveys, interviews, field observations, and documentary analysis. The preliminary findings were presented to local stakeholders, including residents, tourism businesses, municipal representatives, and tourism experts. Feedback obtained during these consultations was incorporated into the final interpretation of results. This participatory validation process ensured that the findings accurately reflected local realities and strengthened the practical relevance of the recommendations for regenerative tourism development in Mineralni Bani. By adopting a regenerative research framework, the study moves beyond traditional assessments of tourism impacts and evaluates how tourism can actively contribute to ecosystem renewal, community development, cultural revitalization, economic resilience, and long-term destination well-being.

## **Results and Discussion**

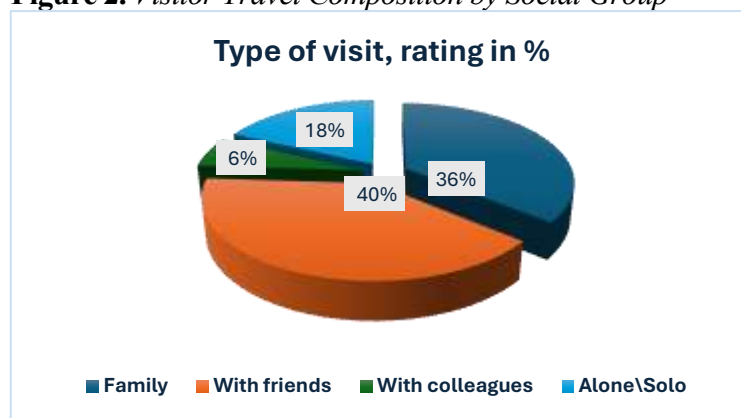
Mineralni Bani possesses valuable natural resources that create significant potential for regenerative tourism development. The destination is particularly known for its mineral springs, which have been used since Roman times for healing and therapeutic purposes. The mineral water is hyperthermal and characterized by a unique chemical composition with proven therapeutic properties, making the destination an important center for balneological treatment, rehabilitation, and wellness tourism.

In addition to its mineral-water resources, the area benefits from preserved natural landscapes, favorable climatic conditions, rich biodiversity, forest ecosystems, archaeological sites, and cultural heritage attractions. The destination also offers opportunities for rural tourism and nature-based experiences, which further enhance its attractiveness and support the implementation of regenerative tourism principles.

These natural and cultural assets provide a strong foundation for developing tourism models that contribute not only to economic growth but also to environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and community well-being. However, the regenerative use of mineral resources requires careful planning and management to prevent overexploitation and environmental degradation. Consequently, sustainable water management, ecosystem protection, and biodiversity conservation must become central components of future tourism development strategies.

The destination also has considerable opportunities to diversify its tourism offer by combining spa and wellness tourism with cultural tourism, rural tourism, wine tourism, eco-tourism, and nature-based therapeutic experiences. Such diversification can enrich visitor experiences, reduce tourism seasonality, attract new market segments, and strengthen the resilience of the local economy. The current tourism development of Mineralni Bani is primarily based on its mineral-water resources and established spa tourism traditions. The destination has developed a tourism profile centered on health, wellness, and rehabilitation services, which continues to attract visitors seeking therapeutic and recreational experiences. At the same time, the presence of natural and cultural attractions creates opportunities for expanding tourism activities beyond traditional spa tourism and supports the transition toward a more diversified and regenerative tourism model.

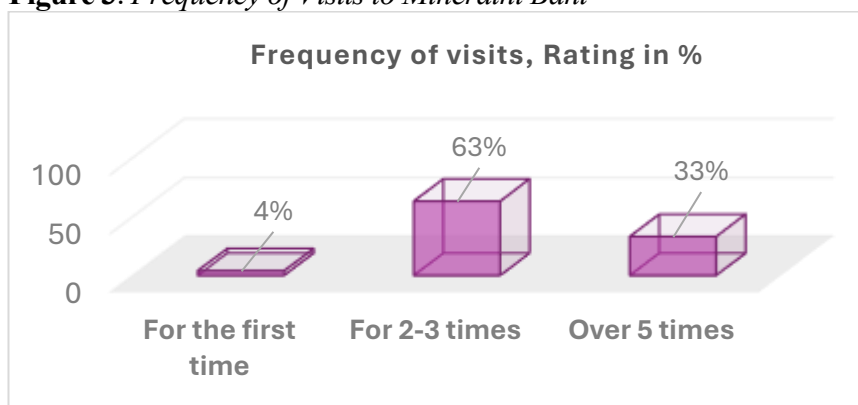
**Figure 2.** Visitor Travel Composition by Social Group



Source: Author's research (2022–2024).

64% of the respondents are over 30 years old, while people under 25 account for 8.34% of the total. The resort is visited least frequently by individuals over 70 years old and those under 24, likely due to preferences for other tourist destinations that offer specialized forms of tourism tailored to their age-specific needs. A total of 36% of the surveyed tourists visit the resort with their families, while the largest proportion visit the destination with friends (Figure 2). Additionally, 58% of visitors come for balneological treatment.

It can be concluded that the resort village is preferred primarily as a place for balneological treatment, after-treatment and rehabilitation. 4% of the visitors have as their purpose of visiting getting acquainted with the archaeological sites in the region. 2% are tourists who spend the night in hotels and go on a hike to the local natural landmark - Mount Aida. In recent years, the trend of weekend tourism has been confirmed, with visitors predominantly from the city of Haskovo, the city closest to the studied destination, which is also a regional center - 68% of the total number of weekend tourists. These are mainly families with small children, as well as groups of friends of 2-4 people. The results indicate that the destination is primarily preferred for social and family-oriented tourism experiences. The relatively high percentage of family visitors supports the development of wellness, recreation, and family-focused tourism products.

**Figure 3.** *Frequency of Visits to Mineralni Bani*

Source: Author's research data (2022–2024).

From the results of the survey conducted, we can summarize that the tourist flow is concentrated mainly on weekends, with the guests being mostly Bulgarian citizens over the age of 30, who arrive with their families from the nearby cities of Haskovo, Dimitrovgrad and Kardzhali. Half of them visit the spa centers of the hotel accommodation base in the Mineralni Bani destination accompanied by their children, which emphasizes the need to create family-oriented services and facilities, which is also consistent with the results of a survey conducted by the Mineralni Bani municipality itself. Providing an opportunity for the development of a higher quality and specialized tourist product is determined by the fact that among the tourists there is a significant share of individuals with their own business or in management positions, who have a higher standard of living and are inclined to spend more on quality services. The data in Figure 3 shows that 33% of the surveyed visitors stay in the resort from 5 to 8 times. These are mainly people from the age groups of 50–65 years. They are regular or “loyal” customers (visitors). 43% of them come to the resort with their family. People who visit the resort for the first time are 4% of the total number of visitors. The fact that over the past four years there have been 2–3% new visitors visiting the resort village for the first time annually testifies to the fact that the resort is popular and there is a constant interest in it.

In Bulgaria, there is a trend of shortening the average time spent on rest and vacations, while the number of trips and vacations per calendar year is increasing. Nearly half of the visitors to the resort village of Mineralni Bani stay there for seven days, which is the amount paid by the National Health Insurance Fund, which confirms the specialization of the resort village, namely: balneotherapy and SPA procedures. The high percentage of repeat visitors demonstrates strong customer loyalty and confirms the attractiveness of the destination for health and wellness tourism.

**Table 2.** Relationship between Length of Stay and purpose of Visit

Purpose of Visit	1 Day	2–3 Days	7 Days	10–15 Days	16–20 Days
Rest and recreation	–	2.0%	56.5%	35.1%	6.4%
Balneotherapy and SPA	–	–	49.5%	40.5%	10.0%
Weekend tourism	31.1%	68.9%	–	–	–
Sports activities	18.4%	75.1%	6.5%	–	–
Local culture visits	35.0%	62.5%	2.5%	–	–
Archaeological tourism	38.1%	58.5%	3.4%	–	–
Special events	43.5%	52.5%	4.0%	–	–

Source: Authors

From the data in Table 2, the main motive for visiting the Mineralni Bani resort is balneotherapy and SPA procedures. More than half of the visitors for SPA procedures and balneotherapy (56.5%) stay in the destination for seven days. They come with the medical direction, for health reasons. These are mainly people aged 35-50-65 years. For a one-day stay in the resort, visitors from the age group up to 24 years and from the age group 25-40 years predominate. They are mainly for weekend tourism and sports. Visits to specialized events within one or two-three days are mainly carried out by visitors from the younger age groups. The municipality organizes festivals and days of mineral water, vineyards and wine, sports events and thus attracts visitors to the resort village. Balneotherapy is the main motive and reason for choosing the resort village as a destination for rest, relaxation and medical procedures. All other visits to the resort village are for secondary reasons and reasons. 33% of respondents reported that they visit the resort regularly, annually, and do not need advertising or assistance from a travel agency.

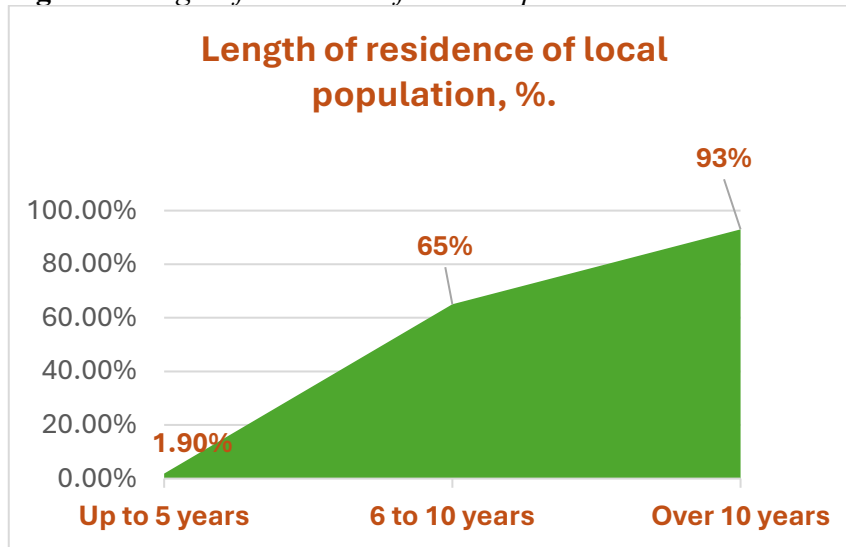
Despite these positive trends, the tourism sector in Mineralni Bani has not yet realized its full potential. There is a lack of a comprehensive development strategy that integrates all aspects of regenerative development – ecological, social and economic. Another direction that can contribute to the sustainable development of the hotel industry and tourism in the resort village is the mitigation of seasonal use of the resort and the services offered therein. This requires strengthening the advertising of the resort and, of course, increasing the quality of service to tourists. The infrastructure needs modernization and expansion, which will create conditions for balancing tourist flows throughout the year, and to avoid congestion during weekends and the summer season. Balneological and wellness tourism generates the longest stays in the destination, while cultural and event-related tourism are primarily associated with short-term visits. This demonstrates the importance of spa tourism as the core tourism product.

The destination has a well-established accommodation base that includes hotels, family-run hotels, guesthouses, and private accommodation facilities. Tourism demand is concentrated primarily on balneological treatment, spa and wellness services, weekend tourism, and family-oriented travel. The survey results indicate that most

visitors are Bulgarian citizens, predominantly over the age of 30. Most tourists travel with family members or friends, and a considerable proportion of visitors return to the destination regularly, demonstrating a high level of visitor loyalty. Balneological treatment and SPA procedures represent the main motivation for travel, with many visitors staying for approximately seven days as part of health treatment programs supported by the National Health Insurance Fund. The findings also reveal several positive trends, including the growth of weekend tourism, increasing family-oriented travel, rising demand for wellness experiences, and a strong pattern of repeat visitation. These trends indicate the continuing attractiveness of Mineralni Bani as a health and wellness destination.

Despite these positive developments, several limitations continue to affect the competitiveness of the destination. These include underdeveloped infrastructure, insufficient diversification of tourism products, limited integration of cultural attractions into tourism packages, weak destination management structures, inadequate international marketing efforts, and the absence of an integrated regenerative tourism strategy. Collectively, these challenges reduce visitor engagement, limit opportunities to extend the average length of stay, and constrain the overall economic potential of the destination. The analysis of visitor and resident attitudes reveals generally positive perceptions of tourism development in Mineralni Bani. Visitors value the destination's natural environment, mineral-water resources, peaceful atmosphere, and opportunities for health and wellness activities. At the same time, residents recognize tourism as an important source of employment, income generation, and community development. However, both groups acknowledge the need for improvements in infrastructure, destination management, and the diversification of tourism products to strengthen the long-term competitiveness and regenerative potential of the destination.

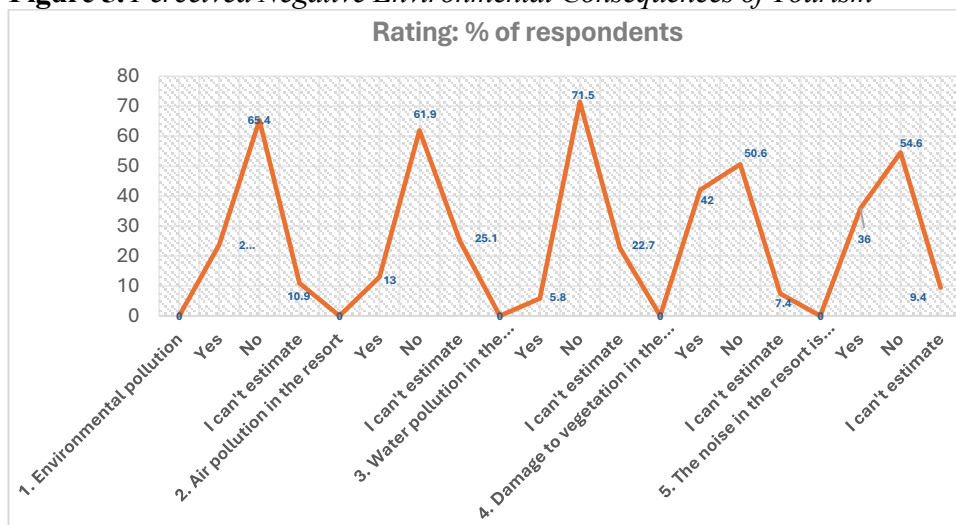
The majority of the respondents from the local population of the Mineralni Bani destination (92.6%) have lived there for more than ten years, and only a very small part has settled in the resort village for five years. More than half (65%) have lived in the surveyed destination for 6 to 10 years. The distribution of respondents by gender is as follows: men 56.4% and women 43.6%. According to the age of the respondents, due to the aging age structure of the population in the municipality, it is as follows: 52% are from the age group 45 – 65 years; 38.5% are from the age group 24 – 44 years; persons under 24 years old are 9.5%. Of the employees surveyed, about 40% work in the hospitality and tourism industry. Of these, 32.4% work in the hospitality and tourism industry as their main activity, 5.5% as an additional job, and 8.4% of those working in the hospitality and tourism industry as seasonal employment.

**Figure 4.** Length of Residence of Local Population

Source: Author's research based on the survey data

According to the surveyed residents, the development of the hotel industry and tourism in Mineralni Bani has, above all, a positive effect on the lives of people (local population) in the destination. Their incomes increase, which makes it possible to more easily overcome crises of a different nature, unemployment, the depopulation of the settlement is stopped, and for individuals - the standard of living increases. About 76% of the respondents believe that with the development of the hotel industry and tourism in the resort village, new jobs are created, and their regenerative development contributes to raising the cultural level of the local population. The historical and archaeological landmarks in the region are preserved, which is important for the future development of tourism and the resort village itself. Regeneration, however, is in fact an ancient way of understanding and living in the world, rooted in deep connections to place and underpinned by indigenous knowledge that has been preserved and fiercely protected by indigenous people despite the colonization and industrialization of their lands and peoples (Major and Clarke, 2021).

A weakness in the development of the destination is the attraction of foreign tourists. Therefore, it is necessary to expand advertising, modernize the infrastructure and improve the quality of service in hotels and tourist facilities. The hotel and tourist product offered in the resort is mainly aimed at consumers with an average level of solvency. Attracting more affluent tourists requires an increase in the quality of the hotel product, as well as the diversity of additional attractions. For example: due to the significant number of weekend tourists, it is necessary to increase the number of parking spaces, their organization and accurate marking. Most respondents have lived in the destination for more than ten years, indicating strong local attachment and community identity.

**Figure 5.** Perceived Negative Environmental Consequences of Tourism

Source: Author's research based on the survey data.

Mild climatic conditions with clean air and normal humidity, proximity to the large regional city and the availability of good transport connections are a solid prerequisite for the resort village of Mineralni Bani to be attractive for living and tourism.

Figure 5 shows the attitude of the local population regarding the negative impact of tourism on the environment in the study destination. The indicators studied were environmental pollution, air pollution, water pollution, damage to vegetation and increased noise in the destination. The majority of respondents gave a positive assessment - from 50.6% to 71.5% for the individual indicators. They believe that tourism has not had a major negative impact and the Mineralni Bani destination has a relatively clean, preserved and natural environment. The respondents point out as negative consequences of the development of tourism in the resort village, mainly the pollution of the streets, parks and public places. The condition of the common spaces in the resort also negatively affects its image. For it to have its future as a sustainable tourist destination, it is necessary to build regenerative vision and leadership that must be embedded in the destination's development and management strategy, with management adopting a long-term perspective and investing genuine commitment to regenerative values. Most respondents believe that tourism has not yet caused severe environmental degradation. However, concerns related to vegetation damage and noise indicate the need for better destination management and regenerative planning.

The findings of the study confirm that regenerative tourism represents an important opportunity for the future development of small-scale destinations. The case of Mineralni Bani demonstrates that destinations with valuable natural resources, cultural heritage, and established wellness traditions possess strong potential for regenerative transformation. One of the key observations concerns the relationship between tourism and local identity. The empirical findings indicate that residents generally perceive tourism positively and associate it with employment opportunities, regional development, and improved quality of life. Such attitudes are essential for regenerative tourism because community participation represents one of the core principles of regenerative development. At the same time, the study identifies several

structural limitations that constrain the destination's development potential. Infrastructure deficiencies, limited diversification of tourism products, and insufficient strategic coordination reduce the overall competitiveness of the destination. These findings correspond with broader international discussions emphasizing that regenerative tourism requires integrated governance and long-term planning.

The strong role of spa and wellness tourism in Mineralni Bani also creates important opportunities for regenerative hospitality development. Wellness-oriented tourism is increasingly associated with nature-based experiences, slow tourism, and holistic well-being. Visitors seeking health improvement and relaxation are generally more receptive to environmentally responsible and community-oriented tourism products. The research additionally demonstrates the importance of preserving ecosystem quality in spa destinations. Mineral resources constitute the core tourism asset of Mineralni Bani, and their long-term sustainability depends on responsible environmental management. Regenerative tourism therefore requires balancing tourism growth with ecosystem conservation and restoration. Another important issue concerns the diversification of tourism experiences. Although balneological tourism remains the dominant tourism product, the destination possesses additional opportunities related to rural tourism, gastronomy, wine tourism, eco-tourism, and cultural heritage experiences. Diversification can strengthen destination resilience by reducing dependence on a single tourism segment and extending visitor stays.

The study also highlights the growing significance of regenerative hospitality practices. Hotels and accommodation providers increasingly face expectations to implement environmentally responsible operations. Renewable energy systems, energy-efficient technologies, water-saving infrastructure, local food sourcing, and circular waste management are becoming central components of modern hospitality management.

Furthermore, regenerative hospitality extends beyond environmental performance and includes social dimensions such as employee well-being, local employment, cultural authenticity, and community engagement. Tourism enterprises that collaborate with local producers, artists, farmers, and cultural organizations can contribute significantly to local economic resilience.

The results also reveal the importance of educational and participatory tourism experiences. Visitors increasingly seek authentic interactions with local communities and natural environments. Regenerative tourism therefore benefits from tourism products that encourage learning, participation, and emotional connection with destinations.

The findings correspond with international regenerative tourism literature emphasizing the need for systemic transformation rather than isolated environmental initiatives. Regeneration requires cooperation between public institutions, tourism businesses, academic organizations, and local communities. An additional implication concerns destination branding and marketing. Small-scale destinations often struggle with limited international visibility. Regenerative tourism can provide a distinctive branding framework emphasizing authenticity, environmental responsibility, wellness, and community-centered experiences.

The study also contributes to discussions regarding post-pandemic tourism recovery. The COVID-19 crisis demonstrated the vulnerability of mass tourism systems and increased tourist demand for safer, healthier, and less crowded

destinations. Small-scale destinations such as Mineralni Bani may therefore benefit from changing tourism preferences favoring wellness, nature, and sustainability.

Financial support mechanisms also play an important role in regenerative transformation. European Union programs related to renewable energy, sustainable regional development, innovation, and the circular economy can provide funding opportunities for tourism infrastructure modernization and ecosystem restoration projects. However, the transition toward regenerative tourism also involves several challenges. High investment costs, insufficient managerial expertise, and limited institutional capacity may slow implementation processes. Measuring regenerative outcomes additionally remains difficult because regeneration involves complex ecological and social processes that cannot easily be quantified. Despite these limitations, the research suggests that regenerative tourism offers significant long-term advantages for small-scale destinations. By integrating environmental restoration, local participation, cultural preservation, and economic resilience, regenerative tourism can support more balanced and adaptive forms of tourism development.

The case of Mineralni Bani illustrates that regenerative tourism should not be viewed merely as a theoretical concept but as a practical framework capable of guiding destination planning and hospitality management in the future. The study also highlights the importance of integrating regenerative principles into regional tourism policies and destination management strategies. Local governments and tourism organizations should encourage stronger cooperation between accommodation providers, cultural institutions, environmental organizations, and educational institutions. Such collaboration can support integrated tourism products and strengthen destination identity.

Future tourism strategies should additionally prioritize the development of smart and resilient tourism infrastructure. Investments in renewable energy systems, digital technologies, sustainable transportation, water management, and waste reduction can significantly improve destination competitiveness and environmental performance. Another important recommendation concerns the development of educational and interpretative tourism programs. Visitors increasingly seek authentic and meaningful experiences connected with local traditions, nature, gastronomy, and cultural heritage. Regenerative tourism therefore benefits from tourism products that combine recreation with learning and participation.

The findings further demonstrate that wellness and spa tourism can serve as strategic foundations for regenerative destination development. Mineralni Bani possesses favorable conditions for integrating health tourism, nature-based therapies, and wellness-oriented experiences into broader regenerative tourism strategies. Finally, the research confirms that regenerative tourism represents a long-term development process rather than a short-term marketing trend. Successful regenerative transformation requires strategic vision, institutional support, community participation, and continuous adaptation to environmental and social changes.

The figures and graphics included in this section are adapted from the original empirical report and reorganized in accordance with the revised conceptual framework focused on regenerative tourism development in small-scale destinations. According to the conceptual model, the findings illustrate the interconnected relationship between natural resources, tourism activities, local participation, and regenerative outcomes. The results demonstrate that tourism development in Mineralni

Bani is strongly influenced by the interaction between environmental assets, local stakeholders, and tourism businesses, creating favorable conditions for regenerative tourism implementation. The attitudes of local residents toward tourism development are generally positive. Most respondents believe that tourism contributes to employment creation, income generation, improved quality of life, preservation of local heritage, and the reduction of depopulation. These findings suggest that the local community perceives tourism as an important mechanism for socio-economic development and community resilience.

At the same time, local residents report several concerns associated with tourism growth, including pollution of public spaces, insufficient maintenance of common areas, increasing noise levels during peak periods, and infrastructure deficiencies. Despite these concerns, the majority of respondents consider the destination to maintain a relatively preserved and natural environment. The findings indicate that local communities recognize tourism as an important development opportunity but also expect better planning, infrastructure investment, and environmental management.

Visitors similarly value the natural environment, mineral resources, authenticity of the destination, peaceful atmosphere, and opportunities for health and wellness. These attributes represent the destination's principal tourism assets and contribute significantly to visitor satisfaction and loyalty. The study confirms that the close relationship between local communities, tourism providers, and natural resources creates favourable conditions for regenerative tourism implementation. The research demonstrates that Mineralni Bani has strong potential to adopt regenerative tourism models. Environmental opportunities include the implementation of renewable energy systems, energy-efficient tourism infrastructure, circular waste and water management practices, restoration of green areas and biodiversity, biophilic hotel design, and ecosystem conservation. These initiatives can contribute to environmental restoration while simultaneously improving the sustainability of tourism operations.

Socio-cultural opportunities include the preservation of local traditions and crafts, greater involvement of local producers and suppliers, educational and volunteer tourism activities, cultural interpretation and heritage tourism, and stronger community participation in destination management. Such measures can enhance cultural preservation and strengthen local identity while enriching visitors' experiences. Economic opportunities include diversification of tourism products, year-round tourism development, support for local entrepreneurship, development of local supply chains, and increased destination competitiveness. These actions can strengthen local economic resilience and reduce dependence on seasonal tourism demand.

The study also identifies opportunities for financial support through European funding programs related to renewable energy, circular economy initiatives, tourism innovation, energy efficiency, and sustainable regional development. Such programs can support the implementation of regenerative technologies and infrastructure improvements that contribute to long-term destination sustainability. Despite its considerable potential, the transition toward regenerative tourism involves several important challenges. These include high initial investment requirements, limited managerial capacity, insufficient strategic coordination, a lack of specialized tourism organizations, weak stakeholder collaboration, the need for professional training, and difficulties in measuring regenerative impacts. These barriers may slow the

implementation of regenerative initiatives and require coordinated efforts among stakeholders.

The findings indicate that regenerative tourism requires a long-term vision and an integrated management approach. Success depends on the active participation of local authorities, tourism businesses, residents, researchers, and visitors. Therefore, regeneration should not be viewed merely as an environmental initiative but as a systemic transformation of tourism development models capable of simultaneously supporting environmental restoration, community well-being, cultural preservation, and economic resilience (Dredge 2022, Bellato and Pollock 2023).

## **Conclusions**

This study examined opportunities for regenerative tourism development in Mineralni Bani, Bulgaria, a small-scale spa destination characterized by valuable mineral-water resources, cultural heritage assets, and established wellness traditions. The findings suggest that the destination possesses favorable conditions for the implementation of regenerative tourism principles due to its strong natural-resource base, community attachment, and growing demand for wellness-oriented experiences.

The research identified several strengths, including high visitor loyalty, positive resident attitudes toward tourism, significant opportunities for tourism diversification, and the presence of resources that support nature-based and wellness tourism. At the same time, infrastructure deficiencies, limited international visibility, insufficient strategic coordination, and restricted tourism diversification continue to constrain destination competitiveness.

The study indicates that regenerative tourism may contribute to environmental stewardship, community well-being, cultural preservation, and economic resilience when supported by integrated planning and stakeholder collaboration. Hospitality enterprises have a particularly important role through the adoption of renewable energy systems, circular economy practices, local sourcing, and community-oriented tourism experiences.

From a theoretical perspective, the research contributes empirical evidence from an underrepresented Eastern European context and demonstrates how regenerative tourism principles may be applied in small-scale spa destinations. From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the need for a comprehensive regenerative tourism strategy, infrastructure modernization, destination branding, and stronger partnerships among public institutions, tourism businesses, local communities, and educational organizations.

Future research should focus on comparative studies of regenerative tourism implementation across spa destinations and on the development of measurable indicators capable of evaluating long-term regenerative outcomes. Overall, regenerative tourism should be viewed not merely as an environmental initiative but as a holistic framework for destination transformation that seeks to create positive outcomes for ecosystems, communities, visitors, and local economies.

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