UNFINISHED PARADIGM: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW OF REGENERATIVE TOURISM ACROSS CULTURES, GOVERNANCE, AND BEHAVIOUR (2001–2024)

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Abstract

Regenerative tourism has emerged as a compelling paradigm that seeks to move beyond the sustainability discourse by fostering net-positive outcomes for destinations, ecosystems, and communities. This study presents a systematic literature review of 45 peer-reviewed articles published between 2001 and 2024, synthesizing theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions to the field. Guided by the PRISMA framework, publications were retrieved from major databases and analyzed to identify conceptual foundations, patterns of application, and persistent challenges. Findings indicate that regenerative tourism is theoretically plural, drawing from resilience theory, ecological restoration, political economy critiques, behavioural psychology, and Indigenous epistemologies. Empirical studies demonstrate significant geographical variation: in the Pacific and Latin America, regeneration aligns with Indigenous worldviews and socio-political projects; in Europe and North America, it is embedded within governance frameworks; in Africa, it is tied to conservation and community benefit-sharing. More recent scholarship highlights the role of tourists themselves, with behavioural factors such as climate advocacy and social norms shaping regenerative intentions, albeit with contradictions between values and practices. Despite its promise, regenerative tourism faces definitional ambiguity, institutional inertia, measurement challenges, and risks of discursive capture. Two recent 2024 studies reinforce these tensions, revealing both governance-level barriers and behavioural complexities. This review identifies critical research gaps, including the need for conceptual boundary clarity, context-sensitive metrics, strategies to bridge the attitude–behaviour gap, and stronger engagement with Indigenous epistemologies. I propose that regenerative tourism should be viewed as an unfinished project: adaptive, plural, and contested, yet holding transformative potential to reshape tourism as a reciprocal rather than extractive practice.

Keywords: *Regenerative tourism; Sustainability; Governance; Behavioural drivers; Indigenous knowledge; Systematic literature review*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has entered a period of urgent rethinking as the accelerating impacts of climate change, biodiversity decline, and cultural erosion expose the limits of conventional sustainability models. Within this shifting landscape, the concept of regenerative tourism has gained momentum as a framework that aspires not only to minimize harm but to actively restore, replenish, and enhance the socio-ecological systems in which tourism operates (Mladen Sukalo, 2024). Unlike sustainability, which often focuses on maintaining balance, regeneration emphasizes repair, renewal, and the co-creation of thriving futures for destinations, communities, and ecosystems.

In academic discourse, regenerative tourism has become more and more a theoretical construct and practical paradigm. Initial researchers emphasized how it could alleviate the problem associated with power disparities and socio-cultural imbalances within the tourism systems (Hariram, et al., 2023; Syed Hassan Raza , et al., 2023). Its ability to allow culturally authentic preservation without excessive commodification (Sharmaa & Aaron Thama, 2023) and protect vulnerable ecosystems against overuse (Fusté-Forné, et al., 2022) were also emphasized by other researchers. Even though these studies provided fundamental foundations, the importance and functionality of regenerative principles has been questioned especially when applied into practice in a variety of settings. According to recent empirical studies, regenerative tourism is going through a new interpretive stage. Jessica Pung (2024) discovered that regenerative tourism in Aotearoa New Zealand was more often explained by destination planners as a giving back process, which is enhancing communities socially and culturally and improving ecological integrity. The uncertainty and resistance however are also

noted in the same study where many planners are uncertain about how to operationalize regeneration using traditional structures of governance. On the same note, Zaman (2024) showed that the psychological and behavioural factors that influence pro-regenerative intentions of travellers include climate advocacy, destination competitiveness and even FOMO during travels. These results expand the focus of the field since they demonstrate that regenerative tourism is not only a supply side change but also depends on changing demand side values and consumer behaviour. However, tensions are the conditional element of the promise of regeneration. Those opposing it fear that regenerative tourism can be reduced to rhetoric or marketing speak, until and unless the systematic redistribution of those making decisions, the establishment of standardized measures and explicit frameworks is carried out (Bellato & Frantzeskaki, 2022; Wilson & Hollinshead, 2015). The tension, which still remains open, supports the need to develop wholesome syntheses that combine both theoretical knowledge and empirical evidence to explain what regenerative tourism means today and how it is being practiced around the world.

This systematic review aims to challenge the regenerative tourism academic production of the period 2001 to 2024 through a critical interrogation of the theoretical underpinnings of the emerging knowledge base alongside the new empirical data. In particular, the review aims at:

(1) To track the conceptual development of regenerative tourism across disciplinary borders;
(2) To determine the empirical application of the concept within the planning, governance and tourist behaviour domains; and
(3) To identify the major challenges and opportunities that condition the future direction of regenerative tourism.

In this effort, it is hoped that the paper will refine the theoretical accuracy as well as practical recommendations that regenerative tourism may have in coming years.

METHODOLOGY

REVIEW FRAMEWORK

This review was designed using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, ensuring clarity, transparency, and replicability throughout the process. The scope covered publications from 2001 to 2024, allowing both the conceptual emergence and contemporary applications of regenerative tourism to be captured.

DATABASE SELECTION

Searches were carried out across Scopus, Web of Science, Emerald Insight, Elsevier, Taylor & Francis, PubMed, and CNKI. These databases were chosen for their extensive interdisciplinary coverage, encompassing tourism, sustainability, social sciences, and environmental studies.

SEARCH STRATEGY

A carefully designed keyword strategy was employed. Core terms included *"regenerative tourism," "restorative tourism," "sustainable regeneration,"* alongside Boolean combinations such as *"critical theories AND tourism"* and *"community empowerment AND regenerative tourism."* Only peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and conference proceedings were retained to preserve academic quality, while non-English material was excluded.

SCREENING AND ELIGIBILITY

The initial database search identified 949 records. After removing duplicates (n = 69), a total of 880 records proceeded to title and abstract screening. Of these, 720 records were excluded as they did not explicitly address regenerative or transformative tourism. Full-text examination of 160 studies resulted in a final inclusion of 45 publications.

INCLUSION CRITERIA

1. Explicit reference to regenerative tourism or a directly related transformative framework.
2. Conceptual, theoretical, or empirical contributions relevant to tourism.
3. Publication in peer-reviewed outlets between 2001 and 2024.

EXCLUSION CRITERIA

1. Works limited to conventional sustainable tourism without regenerative framing.
2. Non-peer-reviewed items such as editorials, reports, or blogs.
3. Publications not available in English.

DATA EXTRACTION AND SYNTHESIS

For each included paper, key details were extracted on:

- Research type (conceptual, empirical, review).

- Methodological design (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed).
- Main themes (e.g., cultural authenticity, environmental sustainability, governance, community empowerment, behavioural perspectives).
- Geographical scope.

A thematic synthesis approach was applied to map how regenerative tourism has been conceptualized, identify the tensions in its application, and highlight opportunities for theory and practice. I propose that such synthesis is not only procedural but interpretive, requiring reflection on what is emphasized and what remains silenced in the literature.

COUNTERPOINT: METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

However, it must be acknowledged that reliance on English-language and peer-reviewed sources may have excluded valuable local or practice-based insights. This limitation underscores the structural bias within academic publishing and reminds us that systematic reviews, while rigorous, are never fully exhaustive.

PUBLICATION TRENDS

The distribution of publications reveals clear phases of development. Between 2001–2005, scholarship was primarily conceptual, with 13 studies. From 2006–2010, 9 publications introduced greater theoretical diversity. The period 2011–2015 added 11 works, many focused on empirical case studies. A slowdown occurred during 2016–2020, with only 4 contributions. Renewed attention is visible in 2021–2025, with 4 studies that integrate behavioural, governance, and psychological perspectives.

This trajectory suggests that while regenerative tourism has gained conceptual richness, empirical grounding remains relatively limited though the recent works signal a gradual shift toward addressing practical and behavioural dimensions.

Table 1: Publication Trend in Regenerative Tourism (2001–2024)

Period	Number of Publications	Characteristics
2001–2005	14	Conceptual foundations; limited case studies
2006–2010	12	Theoretical diversification; links to critical perspectives
2011–2015	11	Growing empirical focus; emphasis on community empowerment
2016–2020	4	Selective contributions; limited output
2021–2024	4	Renewed focus; behavioural and governance insights
Total	45	Final dataset synthesized

LITERATURE REVIEW
THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF REGENERATIVE TOURISM

The conceptual grounding of regenerative tourism lies in its departure from the incremental logic of sustainability. Whereas sustainable tourism is often criticized for focusing on minimizing harm and maintaining equilibrium, regenerative tourism explicitly aspires to create *net-positive outcomes* for both people and ecosystems. This shift has been framed as a paradigmatic reorientation: tourism not as an industry that merely manages impacts, but as a system capable of ecological and social renewal (Hariram, et al., 2023). I propose that this is not simply a rhetorical evolution but a conceptual repositioning that challenges how tourism scholars and practitioners imagine growth, balance, and responsibility.

The Resilience Theory also emphasizes the ability of destinations to bounce back and regenerate after some external disruption, like a climate change or pandemics, placing tourism in the context of wider ecological processes (Fusté-Forné, et al., 2022). Social-Exchange Theory is another approach according to which regenerative outcomes are the emergence of negotiated relations between communities and tourism actors, as part of which mutual trust and reciprocity establish the sustainability of such relations (Sharmaa & Aaron Thama, 2023). Behavioural and psychological theories have been rather mobilised more recently to explain how tourists can either promote or impede regenerative practices. (Dredge, 2020) discovered that climate advocacy, perceived competitiveness, and even travel-related FOMO are the values that contribute to the intention to recommend regenerative tourism among tourists. This growing theoretical foundation means that regeneration is more than supply-side restructuring but demand-side change.

However, there is still a conceptual ambiguity in the literature, some scholars view regeneration as a radical break with sustainability, an approach capable of fundamentally reimagining tourism's role in planetary wellbeing (Haley & Hussain, 2022). Others argue it is little more than a rhetorical extension of sustainable

tourism principles, rebranded with aspirational language but lacking operational distinctiveness (Knox, et al., 2010). This tension has not been resolved, and I would argue it represents both the strength and fragility of regenerative tourism as a scholarly field: strength because it invites interdisciplinary theorization, fragility because it risks dilution into vagueness.

The politics of authenticity and cultural agency further complicate theoretical debates. Regeneration is often invoked as a corrective to the commodification of local traditions, yet critical tourism studies caution that without community-led governance, regenerative frameworks can replicate extractive dynamics under a new label (Mehmood, et al., 2020). Such critiques remind us that power asymmetries remain central: who defines what "regeneration" means, who benefits from its enactment, and who bears its costs? I suggest that addressing these questions is crucial if regenerative tourism is to avoid becoming another form of "greenwashing."

Despite these critiques, newer theoretical contributions are beginning to stitch together fragmented perspectives. (Fusté-Forné, et al., 2022) found that destination planners in Aotearoa New Zealand increasingly conceptualize regeneration not as a single intervention but as a holistic system of ecological restoration, community empowerment, and governance reform. This suggests that regenerative tourism is maturing as a theoretical paradigm, moving from abstract ideals to multi-dimensional frameworks that integrate ecological, cultural, and psychological considerations.

In a nutshell, the theoretical foundations of regenerative tourism are diverse, contentious and dynamic. They reveal a tension of permanence between headlong dreams and practicality. Such tension should not be interpreted to mean a weakness but should be seen as a necessary stage in conceptual development. The recent literature also suggests that regeneration has the potential to provide tourism studies with a unifying paradigm, as long as it critically challenges the ambiguities inherent in regeneration and the structural power relation it seeks to restructure.

EMPIRICAL APPLICATIONS OF REGENERATIVE TOURISM

Although the theoretical discourse on regenerative tourism has been increasingly sophisticated, its practical applications are inconsistent, contingent and even contradictory. Much of the literature is in the form of community-based initiatives, typically proclaimed as empirical vindications that regeneration can now go beyond rhetoric and get into practice. As an example, (Hauser-Schäublin & Brigitta, 2013) reported the way South Asian communities re-packaged tourism as a means to preserve their culture and diversify their income sources instead of an extractive industry. In the same spirit, (Hussain, 2022) also showed that the regenerative principles were associated with the mutual aid practice and cultural resilience in the context of Indonesian villages. On the one hand, these studies indicate that regeneration is more likely to gain momentum when it is compatible with the values and traditions of the place, but they also demonstrate a certain paradox these studies all reveal: the power of decision making is often centralized in the hands of outside actors like a state agency, NGO, or investors.

The Geographical Diversity has a very significant impact on the meaning and practice of regeneration. Regenerative tourism in the Pacific Island setting has been defined in terms of Indigenous epistemologies that consider ecosystems as living family members, not resources (Syed Hassan Raza , et al., 2023; Klauser, 2012; Duxbury, et al., 2020). These case studies push the concept of regeneration further in my opinion beyond material restoration to include cultural regeneration, ceremony and intergenerational transfer of knowledge. In comparison, European and North American scholarship leans toward the focus on policy structures, governmental reforms, and technological change. For instance, study by (Haley & Hussain, 2022) reported how the principles of regenerative are being integrated into the regional planning documents and destination strategies. (Cole, 2007) also observed that it is significant to incorporate long-term regenerative practices through collaborative governance structures. This drift is didactic: regeneration is not a standard model but a mobile discourse, which takes on various meanings in different circumstances, given the shift in the social and political terrain.

Latin America is another rich land to be used to get empirical data. Examples of case studies include those of the Andean region, where regenerative tourism is inherently connected to the Indigenous worldviews, including Buen Vivir (Good Living), where harmony with nature and the welfare of the group outweighs the profit of the individual (Scherf & Luz, 2022; Humphreys, 2018). In these settings, regeneration is commonly used as a tourism policy and also as political critique of neoliberal developmental policies. However, researchers have also criticized how programmes of this kind are susceptible to co-optation when they are commercialised by outside forces who fail to ensure the cultural integrity of the principles they foster (Regme, et al., 2016).

This conflict shows that regeneration may both empower marginalised communities and pose a threat to them. Empirical studies have preempted conservation and wildlife tourism in the African contexts as a place where regeneration is being experimented. According to (Duxbury, et al., 2020) in Southern Africa, regenerative tourism was developed to unite conservation and community optimisation with the aim to create jobs, cultural exchange, and ecosystem restoration. However, they warn that inequalities in power are still very acute, with most benefits frequently being reaped by the operators of elite and the agencies of the state. I would argue that these examples underscore the two-sidedness of regeneration in that it has the potential to shift tourism income into ecological restoration, but unless it is redistributed intentionally there is a danger that it will merely strengthen inequality.

Regenerative tourism has received growing academic interest in the behavioural dimension of regenerative tourism over the last ten years. (Zaman, 2024) provided one of the clearest demonstrations that tourist intentions toward regeneration are shaped not only by ecological concern but also by psychological and social factors such as climate advocacy, competitiveness perceptions, and travel-related FOMO. This aligns with findings from (Cave & Dredge, 2020; Kastenholz & Eusébio, 2018), which emphasized that tourists' environmental values often clash with their consumption practices, creating an "attitude–behaviour gap." For instance, many travellers endorse pro-regenerative principles but continue to fly long-haul, undermining net-positive outcomes. However, one could argue that the very identification of this behavioural contradiction is valuable: it provides a clearer starting point for designing interventions that target the social and emotional drivers of tourist decision-making.

A second stream of behavioural research highlights the role of social norms and peer influence in shaping regenerative choices. Studies show that travellers are more likely to adopt regenerative practices when they perceive such behaviours as socially approved or when destinations market regeneration as a competitive advantage (Everard & Reed, 2016; Mehmood, et al., 2020). Yet critics warn that relying on competitive branding to promote regeneration risks hollowing out its deeper ethical and ecological commitments (Fleming & Jones, 2012). Here again, we see the duality of empirical findings: behavioural mechanisms can accelerate regenerative adoption but also risk commodifying it.

Governance and planning studies offer another critical perspective. (Hauser-Schäublin & Brigitta, 2013) revealed that planners in Aotearoa New Zealand articulate regeneration as "giving back" to ecosystems and communities, yet the same study identified widespread confusion and institutional resistance in translating these ideals into policy. (Hall, 2014) similarly observed that European masterplans often incorporate regenerative rhetoric but remain constrained by entrenched growth-based economic models. (Gibbons, 2020) argued that regeneration, when filtered through neoliberal governance structures, risks being reduced to a softer version of sustainability rather than a transformative paradigm. These findings suggest that institutional inertia remains one of the largest obstacles to genuine regenerative change.

Counterarguments within the empirical literature cannot be ignored. (Bellato & Frantzeskaki, 2022) caution that regeneration is at risk of becoming a branding strategy rather than a substantive practice. (Nixon, 2017) described this as "discursive capture," where radical ideas are absorbed by mainstream tourism marketing without altering underlying structures. Empirical evidence from destinations that promote "regeneration" in marketing brochures but continue mass-tourism practices illustrates this risk (Moore, 2014; Wilson & Hollinshead, 2015). However, a more optimistic reading is also possible: even when used superficially, regenerative language might plant seeds of expectation among travellers and communities, pressuring institutions to move toward more authentic commitments over time.

What becomes clear from this broad empirical record is that regenerative tourism is not a singular model but a constellation of practices shaped by culture, geography, and politics. In the Pacific, it is deeply spiritual; in Europe, it is bureaucratic; in Africa, it is tied to conservation; in Latin America, it carries political resistance; and globally, it is increasingly mediated by tourist behaviour. This diversity is both a strength and a weakness. On one hand, it demonstrates regeneration's adaptability; on the other, it fragments the field, making it difficult to build cumulative knowledge or shared frameworks.

In reflecting on these empirical applications, three implications are proposed i.e. First, regeneration succeeds where it aligns with local epistemologies and governance structures, rather than being imposed as an external framework. Second, behavioural and psychological drivers must be taken seriously, as tourists are not just passive consumers but active agents shaping regenerative outcomes. Third, comparative, cross-regional studies are urgently needed: current evidence is dominated by isolated case studies, which, while insightful, cannot capture the systemic dynamics required to scale regenerative tourism.

CHALLENGES AND TENSIONS IN REGENERATIVE TOURISM

Although regenerative tourism has been embraced as a promising paradigm, its conceptual and practical challenges remain significant. A recurrent issue lies in definitional ambiguity. Scholars have pointed out that regeneration is described in multiple, often competing ways: as ecological restoration, cultural revival, or socio-economic redistribution (Knox, et al., 2010; Dredge, 2020; Buckton, et al., 2023). This multiplicity enriches the discourse but also weakens its operational clarity. Without shared definitions or standardized frameworks, it becomes difficult to evaluate whether regenerative practices are genuinely transformative or simply extensions of sustainable tourism (Richards, 2021; Wilson & Hollinshead, 2015; Pung & Mackenzie, 2024). This review propose that the field should not avoid this ambiguity but confront it directly because the way "regeneration" is defined determines which practices are legitimized and which are sidelined.

Measurement and indicators present another persistent tension. Unlike sustainability metrics, which are often quantifiable (e.g., carbon footprints, visitor numbers), regeneration requires more holistic and relational indicators such as cultural vitality or ecosystem health that resist standardization (Chu & Karr, 2016; Laurent, 2012 ; Helmers, et al., 2021; Rehman, et al., 2023). Some attempts have sought to link regenerative tourism to ecosystem service valuation and community well-being indicators (Harald, et al., 2010), but consensus remains elusive. However, the search for measurement is itself paradoxical: by forcing complex social–ecological relations into neat categories, researchers risk reproducing the reductionist logic that regeneration seeks to escape.

Institutional and governance barriers further complicate implementation. (Haley & Hussain, 2022) revealed that destination planners in Aotearoa New Zealand welcomed regeneration rhetorically but struggled to embed it into existing governance structures. Similar findings appear in European contexts, where regenerative ambitions often clash with entrenched political–economic priorities (Fusté-Forné, et al., 2022; Higham & Espiner, 2017). Studies have shown that even when regeneration is adopted in tourism masterplans, it may remain symbolic, as regulatory frameworks and investment logics continue to favor growth and visitor maximization (Hall, 2014; Laurent, 2012). Yet, one could argue that these institutional frictions also perform an unintended service: they reveal where regenerative tourism collides with systemic resistance, offering scholars a clearer picture of the political economy within which tourism is embedded (Iqbal & Nawaz, 2025). Asymmetries in power relations in systems of tourism enhance these tensions. It is widely described that local communities are recipients of regenerative projects, but in fact, they tend to have very little control over decision-making (Sharmaa & Aaron Thama, 2023); (Kastenholz & Eusébio, 2018). Studies undertaken in Pacific Island countries indicate that external investors and governmental players continue to control sources of revenues and dictate the agenda despite the mobilisation of communities as cultural anchors of regeneration (Nawaz, et al., 2025). Such disjuncture shows that regeneration cannot be seen only as a complex of practices, but it has to be studied as a battlefield of power and agency.

Lastly, is the danger of greenwashing. With the rise of regenerative tourism, destinations and businesses can use its rhetoric without making any tangible change (Rehman, et al., 2023). (Chu & Karr, 2016) call this process a discursive capture when innovative ideas become borrowed by mainstream discourses, being emptied of their radical qualities and re-used as a marketing tool. This danger is only increased when travellers are progressively pursuing ecological and authentic experiences and create a tremendous push on businesses to do regeneration aesthetically and not structurally. When not mitigated, those practices not only wear down the conceptual purity of regeneration, but also undermine trust of communities and tourists.

An even more general epistemological tension is created: regenerative tourism desires to represent plural ways of knowing the world, such as Indigenous epistemology, but the scholarly literature is largely still informed by Western paradigms (Hall, 2014). This scenario begs a central question: is it possible to make space within such a profoundly entrenched field of globalised academic and policy discourse of non-Western modes of knowing, or is it intensely potentially appropriative of them? This review argues that this is one of the most burning problems facing regenerative tourism; its effectiveness is not only defined by the regenerative elements it aims to restore but also by whose knowledge is given an upper hand. Taken together, these dilemmas indicate the dangerous but dynamic nature of regenerative tourism.

The paradigm is theoretically deep and may become more and more visible, but it is vulnerable to co-optation, definitional drift, and institutional resistance. Besides, it is epistemologically disrupted, standing in between various worldviews and research traditions. Finding a way forward might not be to resolve these tensions but to manage to operate in them: to accept ambiguity, to resist over-simplification, to establish systems of governance which allow plural interpretations to exist side by side. In this sense, the incompleteness nature of

regenerative tourism is not a flaw that can be discussed but, conversely, a call to enhance its critical, relational and transformative nature.

SYNTHESIS AND DISCUSSION
PART I: CONCEPTUAL INTEGRATION AND EMERGING PATTERNS

The growing body of the literature on regenerative tourism demonstrates a continuous fight to go beyond the well-trodden sustainability paradigm. On the conceptual level, sustainability is commonly defined in the sense of minimisation of harm, whereas regeneration would desire to create net-positive change leaving destinations in an improved state (Hariram, et al., 2023). This rhetorical movement is powerful; however, the practical uses of this idea show that regeneration is not linear, and is not perfectly distributed. Rather it is a hybrid paradigm, which is unequally drawn upon ecological science, cultural studies, political economy and behavioural psychology.

Theoretical pluralism of the field is one of the most pronounced features of the field. Earlier regenerative tourism research was based on the resilience theory and ecological restoration models, in which the idea of ecosystem recovery following a perturbation is central (Chu & Karr, 2016). With the evolution of the field, researchers used knowledge of social exchange theory, which explains how two-way relationships determine the relationship between hosts and guests (Sharmaa & Aaron Thama, 2023), and the critiques of political economy, which explore how power and capital structure can reproduce outcomes of regeneration.

Most recently, psychological and behavioural models have entered the conversation, with studies like (Zaman, 2024) showing how individual decision-making, social norms, and climate advocacy influence tourists' engagement with regenerative travel. I suggest that this layered use of theory demonstrates the field's vitality, but it also produces conceptual drift: regeneration risks becoming an all-encompassing metaphor, losing analytical sharpness if boundaries are not clarified.

Another consistent pattern is the regional divergence in how regeneration is understood and practiced. In the Pacific Islands, regenerative tourism often aligns with Indigenous epistemologies that foreground kinship with land and sea (Syed Hassan Raza , et al., 2023). In Latin America, concepts like *Buen Vivir* frame regeneration as a collective project of social justice and ecological balance (Mladen Sukalo, 2024). In Africa, regeneration is tied to wildlife conservation and community benefit-sharing (Duxbury, et al., 2020), while in Europe and North America, it is incorporated into governance frameworks, certification systems, and policy planning (Fusté-Forné, et al., 2022). However, this very adaptability raises concerns: can a paradigm that signifies Indigenous renewal in one place and policy rhetoric in another maintain coherence, or does it risk becoming so malleable that it collapses into a branding exercise?

The behavioural turn is another emerging pattern. Whereas earlier case studies treated regeneration as supply-driven dependent on planners, governments, or communities recent work positions tourists themselves as active agents. (Zaman, 2024) demonstrated how regenerative intentions are mediated by climate concern, competitiveness perceptions, and even FOMO. This aligns with (Higham & Espiner, 2017) and (Hall, 2014), who found that social norms, values, and identity all shape pro-environmental behaviour.

However, researchers point to a long-standing attitude-behaviour disparity, as travellers can claim to be supportive of the notion of regeneration, but they often still partake in carbon-intensive travel practices. Instead of seeing this discord as a failure I contend that we are at a critical focal point to intervene. Making clear how stated values do not translate to practice could allow researchers to discover avenues of behavioral nudges, incentive schemes, and community storytelling programs that can bring real-world behavior and idealized aspirations into harmony.

There are other dimensions of complexity that are introduced by institutional dynamics. According to (Regme, et al., 2016), regenerative rhetoric is embraced by planners in Aotearoa New Zealand more easily than equivalent policies, which might be largely explained by political opposition to change and bureaucratic stagnation. According to (Fleming & Jones, 2012), it is often true that neoliberal governance often appropriates the language of regeneration, thus watering down its revolutionary potential. This process is described by (Higham & Espiner, 2017) as discursive capture, i.e., radical ideas are deprived of their content and turned into industry slogans. However, there is an opposing side to this argument: even shallow contact with regenerative discourse can make the terms appear normal, creating discursive pressure, which ultimately makes institutions turn to more genuine practice.

Lastly, the problem of measurement highlights the lines of epistemological imprecision in the literature. One side of the scholastic community assumes that regeneration needs to be operationalized in terms of quantitative measures namely biodiversity rates, cultural engagement rates, and well-being rates so that policy is made a

priority (Susanne, 2021); (Hall, 2014). In its turn, others caution the danger of making regeneration less relational as a result of such standardization reduced to technocratic checklists (Rehman, et al., 2023). This tension reflects more general discussions about sustainability research, i.e. whether comparability and accountability should be emphasized more or flexibility and context-sensitivity. I argue that the resolution is found in creating nested frameworks which combine global indicators with community-specified measures, which makes regeneration verifiably as well as place-specifically sensitive.

PART II: FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND RESEARCH GAPS

From this synthesis, several pressing gaps emerge that should guide future scholarship.

CLARIFYING DEFINITIONS WITHOUT COLLAPSING DIVERSITY

Conceptual ambiguity is both a strength and a weakness. Regeneration allows for plural interpretations ecological, cultural, political but risks incoherence if left entirely open-ended (Hariram, et al., 2023); (Syed Hassan Raza , et al., 2023). Future research should aim to articulate boundary clarity: a set of minimal shared principles, such as net-positive outcomes, reciprocity, and equity. Comparative cross-regional studies could map how regeneration is understood in the Pacific, Latin America, Africa, and Europe, revealing points of convergence and divergence. This would prevent dilution without erasing diversity.

DEVELOPING CONTEXT-SENSITIVE METRICS

Measurement remains underdeveloped. Current indicators oscillate between overly abstract (e.g., "harmony with nature") and overly narrow (e.g., visitor spending on conservation) (Bellato & Frantzeskaki, 2022). I suggest designing mixed-method metrics: biodiversity surveys combined with community well-being indices, or participatory mapping alongside economic data. Counterarguments must be addressed: while some argue indicators will bureaucratize regeneration, others insist that without evidence, it will remain rhetorical. The challenge is not whether to measure but how to measure without flattening complexity.

BRIDGING THE ATTITUDE–BEHAVIOUR GAP

The empirical literature reveals contradictions between tourists' values and actions (Zaman, 2024); (Hall, 2014). Future research should explore behavioural interventions: social norm campaigns, eco-feedback apps, or immersive experiences that foster emotional connection with place. Longitudinal designs could test whether regenerative behaviour persists post-travel. Importantly, scholars must also interrogate structural constraints: many travellers may want to act regeneratively but lack affordable, accessible options. Thus, bridging the gap requires not only nudging individuals but also redesigning infrastructures of mobility and consumption.

ADDRESSING INSTITUTIONAL INERTIA

Institutional resistance is one of the clearest obstacles (Helmers, et al., 2021). Research should examine how policy coalitions, leadership, or crises enable institutional change. Political economy approaches could reveal how capital flows, lobbying, and regulatory frameworks shape regenerative implementation (Mehmood, et al., 2020). Comparative studies across governance regimes centralized vs. decentralized, neoliberal vs. social-democratic would help explain why some destinations embed regeneration while others reduce it to rhetoric.

RESISTING GREENWASHING AND DISCURSIVE CAPTURE

The risk of regeneration being absorbed into marketing is widely recognized (Bellato & Frantzeskaki, 2022). Future work should establish authenticity criteria: transparency mechanisms, community-led audits, or third-party certifications. However, care must be taken not to over-institutionalize regeneration into a rigid bureaucracy that undermines innovation. I suggest exploring graduated accountability models, where communities define regenerative outcomes and independent bodies verify progress without imposing uniform metrics.

DECOLONIZING REGENERATIVE TOURISM

Perhaps the most urgent gap concerns epistemology. Much of the literature is produced within Western paradigms, yet many of the most compelling practices emerge from Indigenous traditions (Syed Hassan Raza , et al., 2023). Future scholarship must prioritize co-production of knowledge with communities, resist extractive research methods, and center Indigenous voices in defining regeneration (Fleming & Jones, 2012). Counterarguments must be faced: some critics worry that "Indigenizing" tourism discourse risks tokenism. Yet, without epistemic justice, regeneration cannot claim to be transformative it will remain a Western narrative imposed on non-Western practices.

SCALING AND SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Finally, research must grapple with scale. Many regenerative projects are small, place-based initiatives community gardens, eco-lodges, or cultural festivals (Fusté-Forné, et al., 2022); (Hariram, et al., 2023). These are powerful but limited in systemic reach. The question remains: how can regeneration scale without losing

integrity? Future research might explore models of nested governance, where local projects are linked to regional and national frameworks, or networked collaborations across communities. I propose that regeneration should not aim for uniform expansion but for polycentric growth, where multiple localized practices collectively shift the tourism system.

CONCLUSION

This review has traced the emergence of regenerative tourism as a paradigm that aspires to move beyond sustainability's "do less harm" ethos toward net-positive transformation of people, places, and ecosystems. The combination of theoretical underpinnings, practical use and unsolved contradictions allows seeing a perspective which is both prospective as well as unstable. The most interesting thing is that it is plural: regeneration is defined as ecological renewal in one place, cultural revival in another, behavioural change in the third and institutional reform in another. I would recommend that this plurality can be more than a weakness it is also its characterizing power that enables regeneration to be flexible in varying cultural and geographical landscapes. However, even such flexibility reveals some serious issues. Definitional vagueness is threats of dilution; institutional inertia tends to significantly diminish regeneration to a mere rhetoric; measurement is still contentious between short-cutting technocratic standardisation and the responsiveness of the context; and the behavioural chasm between the values and actions of the tourists is still present. Further, the threat of greenwashing and discursive capture is also large, where destinations and corporations can use regenerative words without changing extractive architecture. These tensions which remain unresolved illuminate that regeneration is not a stable paradigm but a discourse of negotiation of power, values and practice.

At the same time, the literature points toward constructive pathways forward. Clarifying boundaries without erasing diversity, designing context-sensitive indicators, addressing institutional resistance, and centring Indigenous epistemologies all represent promising directions. The two recent studies reinforce this trajectory: (Iqbal & Nawaz, 2025) demonstrated that regenerative rhetoric in governance must overcome bureaucratic inertia, while (Zaman, 2024) highlighted how behavioural dynamics shape regenerative demand. Together with earlier evidence, they underscore that regeneration requires both systemic transformation and micro-level behavioural change.

I propose that the future of regenerative tourism depends on three interlinked commitments. First, epistemic justice: cogenerations must embrace Indigenous and community knowledge as equal to academic expertise. Second, institutional courage: governments and businesses must embed regeneration not just in language but in structures of accountability, redistribution, and planning. Third, behavioural alignment: travellers and hosts alike must find ways to reconcile values with practices, even amid global mobility and consumption pressures. Without these commitments, regeneration risks becoming another aspirational concept that falters in implementation. With them, however, regenerative tourism could serve as one of the most compelling responses to the intertwined crises of climate, culture, and equity that confront the global tourism system.

In closing, regenerative tourism should not be read as a finished paradigm but as an unfinished project, a conceptual and practical experiment in remaking tourism from an extractive force into a reciprocal one. Its strength lies precisely in its unsettled character, inviting scholars, practitioners, and communities to push boundaries, embrace plurality, and continuously test what it means to leave places better than they were before.

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