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Regenerative tourism: the future the tourism industry and our planet needs

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Abstract

Executive Summary

Until the last half of the decade, sustainability was thought to be the only way forward to improve our climate crisis. Unfortunately, the lack of a definitive definition for sustainable tourism has led to greenwashing throughout the industry. This industry gap has been a fault to our biosphere and native communities whose cultures have been commodified. A paradigm shift needs to happen in tourism that values these communities and the surrounding wildlife if this industry is to continue without destroying our planet amid a climate crisis. Regenerative tourism is a relatively new concept that has reparative practices for small communities and the natural environment. Though it may be slower to bring in economic benefits, it will conserve the natural environment and preserve the culture of Earth's global citizens by reinvesting in them.

An Overview of Sustainable Tourism

Since the second half of the 20th century, scholars have increasingly classified tourism as an extractive industry. Three areas of concern emerged: economic, social, and environmental. Academic mentions of sustainable tourism showed up in the 90s, at first to harsh critique from touristic leaders who saw the industry as an endless pool of market potential and sustainable tourism as a drought in its future (Bâc, 2012). The industry continues to maintain this mentality, with a few companies acting on tourism's effect on these areas of concern. How can the tourism companies reconcile with this fact and introduce new practices that might start to remedy these issues? Regenerative tourism could be the answer.

The Need for a Paradigm Shift

Nature is often a large motivation for people to travel, and step outside their comfort zones while traveling. However, not much is considered on how much the animals we interact

with during eco-tourism activities must step outside of their natural behaviors to participate. For most tour operators, there is no regulation on what they can and cannot do to make sure these interactions occur to keep their guests happy. In a study conducted on strategies utilized in eco-tourism and if there were standards across most operations, “[t]he results indicated that... [s]tandards need to be set and then strategies assigned to maintain standards for preservation and economic well-being.” (Masberg, Morales, 2008). Regenerative practices are a potential solution to the lack of standards; strict regulations will have to be put in place to ensure the operators that adopt these suggestions and are committed to providing services that do not harm the environment and improve the overall condition of the surrounding nature or contribute to scientific research. However, when proposing the strict regulations these companies will have to undergo, it is questionable how many operations will be willing to transition.

Regenerative Tourism: The Future of the Industry

Based on the aforementioned examples, it is clear that sustainable tourism, though its intentions are good, does not have enough strict guidelines to maintain consistency of its principles throughout all areas where it is implemented. Enter, regenerative tourism. This is currently an emerging term in the industry, but it is gaining traction fast and becoming known as sustainable tourism’s successor. A simple definition of the term came from Jonathon Day, an associate professor focused on sustainable tourism at Purdue University, who stated in the New York Times, “Sustainable tourism is sort of a low bar. At the end of the day, it’s just not making a mess of the place. Regenerative tourism says, let’s make it better for future generations” (Glusac, 2020). Regenerative Tourism furthers the catchphrase of “leaving no trace” from sustainable tourism to the economic and cultural benefit of host communities and to conservation benefits in the surrounding natural environments of these communities. Regenerative tourism’s

exact principles are still in discussion among scholars, but it can be generally agreed that on a fundamental level, it should involve conservation and respect towards the natural environment, host community involvement in every aspect of a tourism product, and the constant re-evaluation of both of these aspects so that the tourism product continues to be of equal or more significant benefit to the destination or peoples it is featuring than those that are profiting from it (or ideally, these are one and the same).

Covid-19 has created a devastating economic blow to the tourism industry, but there is a silver lining. There has been an increased awareness in travelers to participate in more sustainable tourism practices and a call for transparency for the companies they choose to purchase from.

“[I]n a tourism context, we have witnessed alarming negative externalities of tourism. Responses have differed based on individuals, communities, and organizations level of consciousness...the question remains whether post-covid concerns be put pushed and the unsustainable paths of traditional tourism restored as soon as the pandemic is under control”. This pattern of travelers choosing to make conscious travel choices even pre-pandemic shows why now might be the best time to implement regenerative tourism practices across the industry, helping both the planet and the industry recover simultaneously. On this matter, Asif Hussain states that “[t]he significant challenge for regenerative tourism is going to be destination management and marketing, and tourism product development, which will intervene in the natural tourism recovery processes” (Hussain, 2021).

Case Study of Business Development Application and Recommendations

To enter the realm of regenerative tourism, a tourism business would undergo several processes, even if they are just beginning. For example, for my own company, Our Vintage

Earth, which is a regenerative tour company that is slated to launch in 2022, the first step I turned to was qualitative research. Through seven 1:1 interviews and one focus group with DMO representatives, DMCs, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Specialists, Sustainable Tourism Experts, Journalists, and several Founders & CEOs, and potential clients within and outside the industry, I have determined not only that regenerative tourism is not only the actionable path the industry needs to take in order to prevent further exploitation, but it will also be a great way to intertwine industries and bring people together while furthering climate research. Some overarching themes that arose from this research were the absence of authentic, community-based experiences that tourists want, and destinations need, which feeds into another theme of co-learning among tourism leaders, and the need to share and learn from other leaders in the industry during these unprecedented post-COVID times. Lastly, everyone agrees that technology can be a useful way to educate future visitors and create support around the new regenerative and sustainable market pushes is to access people social media, particularly through channels younger audiences are tapping into like TikTok; they are utilizing these social media tools like search engines.

The secondary step we are taking is aligning ourselves with ground operators and suppliers that share our mission forming a network of companies and organizations united to make positive change and are willing to act now. Thirdly, reflective of our research we are ensuring all our marketing and excursions rely heavily on education, as the best way to ensure that the industry makes this shift is to teach clients and the general public about why this version of traveling is necessary, and how it can be beneficial to them as well. These three aspects as well as pursuing the basics of sustainability such as becoming climate neutral and only using sustainable materials can help begin a framework for businesses aiming to be regenerative.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this is for the good of our industry and the world as a whole, but it will be up to DMOs, the UNWTO, and other governing forces of our industry to create guidelines, but we can also look to those in other industries and indigenous communities, as well as the emerging leaders in this niche within our field to lead the charge.

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