

A LITERATURE REVIEW OF REGENERATIVE TOURISM: PARADIGM SHIFTS FOR SUSTAINABLE DESTINATION

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Abstract

The global tourism industry faces unprecedented challenges including environmental degradation, cultural commodification, and social inequality (Hall, 2019; Gössling et al., 2020). Regenerative tourism emerges as a transformative evolution beyond conventional sustainable tourism, actively seeking to restore and enhance ecological, social, cultural, and economic systems (Bellato et al., 2022; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022). This study provides a comprehensive analysis of regenerative tourism through systematic literature review covering 2021–2024. Using explanatory qualitative analysis with bibliometric and thematic components, one hundred seventy peer-reviewed articles and grey literature sources were analyzed (Page et al., 2021). Findings reveal regenerative tourism is grounded in systems thinking, stakeholder collaboration, and place-based approaches (Kokkranikal et al., 2023; Mackenzie & Goodnow, 2024). Key implementation dimensions include environmental restoration, social empowerment, economic transformation, and cultural preservation, with environmental and social dimensions showing highest prevalence in current literature (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2023). The analysis shows significant growth in research publications across multiple academic disciplines. While the concept faces definitional and methodological challenges, it offers promising pathways for addressing global crises (Weaver, 2020). The study provides evidence-based recommendations for policy, industry, and academic stakeholders to support implementation and advance research in regenerative tourism practices.

Keywords: Regenerative Tourism, Sustainable Tourism, Systems Thinking, Destination Management, Community Engagement

Introduction

The global tourism industry, contributing approximately 10.4% to global GDP and employing over 330 million people worldwide, faces unprecedented challenges in the 21st century (UNWTO, 2024; Hall & Gössling, 2019). Traditional tourism models, characterized by extractive practices and linear consumption patterns, have contributed to environmental degradation, cultural commodification, and social inequality (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Butler, 2017). These challenges have been exacerbated by COVID-19, climate change impacts, and growing awareness of tourism's negative externalities on host communities and ecosystems (Gössling et al., 2021; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).

Regenerative tourism emerges as a response to these systemic challenges (Pollock, 2019; Bellato et al., 2022), representing a paradigm shift from conventional sustainable tourism approaches. Unlike sustainable tourism, which focuses on minimizing negative impacts and maintaining status quo, regenerative tourism seeks to actively restore and enhance destinations, leaving them in a better state than before (Bellato et al., 2022; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022). This approach embodies a proactive philosophy viewing tourism as a catalyst for positive transformation rather than merely benign economic activity (Mackenzie & Goodnow, 2024; Stone & Nyaupane, 2018).

Previous studies on regenerative tourism have primarily focused on isolated case studies or theoretical discussions, lacking comprehensive synthesis of the rapidly evolving field (Kokkranikal et al., 2023). While sustainable tourism literature is well-established (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Saarinen, 2006), regenerative tourism remains fragmented across multiple disciplines without clear conceptual consensus (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2023). This research addresses the critical gap by providing systematic analysis of emerging regenerative tourism scholarship, synthesizing theoretical foundations, implementation frameworks, and practical applications across diverse contexts. The theoretical foundations draw from systems thinking, ecological economics, and indigenous knowledge systems (Capra, 1996; Berkes, 2007; Costanza et al., 2014). These diverse theoretical influences reflect regenerative tourism's complexity as a concept transcending traditional disciplinary boundaries (Pretty & Ward, 2001; Ostrom, 2009). The approach recognizes that tourism systems are part of larger complex adaptive systems requiring integrated and holistic management approaches (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2004; Russell & Faulkner, 2004).

Core principles include whole systems thinking, recognizing human and natural systems interconnectedness; co-evolution and reciprocity, emphasizing mutual benefits between visitors and host communities; vitality and aliveness, focusing on enhancing ecosystems' and communities' life-force; and continuous learning and adaptation (Bellato et al., 2022; Leiper et al., 2024; Reed et al., 2017). These principles challenge reductionist and extractive models of conventional tourism development, promoting instead holistic and participatory approaches (Blackstock, 2005; Moscardo, 2008).

This study's purpose is to provide comprehensive analysis of current regenerative tourism research, identifying key themes, challenges, and opportunities for future development (Xiao & Smith, 2006). The research addresses: What are theoretical foundations and conceptual frameworks of regenerative tourism? How is regenerative tourism being implemented in practice? What are main challenges and opportunities for regenerative tourism development? What are priority areas for future research and development?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Tourism theory evolution has progressed through distinct paradigmatic shifts, from mass tourism to sustainable tourism, and now toward regenerative tourism (Weaver, 2020; Butler, 1980; Plog, 1974). This literature review examines how regenerative tourism represents fundamental departure from conventional approaches, moving beyond harm reduction to active restoration and enhancement (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022; Pollock, 2019).

Table 1. Conceptual Framework - Sustainable vs Regenerative Tourism

Dimension	Sustainable Tourism	Regenerative Tourism	Key Literature
Objective	Minimize negative impacts	Actively restore and enhance	Bellato et al. (2022); Higgins-Desbiolles (2022)
Approach	Harm reduction	System transformation	Mackenzie & Goodnow (2024)
Focus	Maintaining status quo	Creating positive change	Kokkranikal et al. (2023)
Timeframe	Present-focused	Future-oriented	Stone & Nyaupane (2018)
System View	Linear/sectoral	Holistic/integrated	Farrell & Twining-Ward (2004)
Community Role	Consulted stakeholder	Central decision-maker	Blackstock (2005); Reed et al. (2017)

Source: Bellato, L., Frantzeskaki, N., & Nygaard, C. A. (2022)

Regenerative tourism is grounded in systems thinking and transformational approaches to destination management (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022; Capra, 1996). This transformation requires fundamental mindset shift, moving from extractive tourism models toward regenerative practices that enhance destination resilience and community well-being (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2023; Folke, 2006; Walker et al., 2004).

Established literature on sustainable tourism provides important context (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Swarbrooke, 2022). Traditional sustainable tourism management focuses on triple bottom line approach, balancing environmental, economic, and social dimensions (Elkington, 1997; World Tourism Organization, 2024). However, COVID-19 revealed limitations of traditional sustainable tourism models (Gössling et al., 2021; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020), creating opportunities for regenerative approaches building greater destination resilience (Cheer, 2020; Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020).

Several critical gaps exist in current regenerative tourism research: lack of consensus on definitional frameworks, limited empirical evidence comparing regenerative and sustainable tourism approaches, underdeveloped standardized measurement frameworks, and insufficient research on scaling from local initiatives to destination-wide implementation (Kokkranikal et al., 2023; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2023).

Research Method

This study employed qualitative research methodology using systematic literature review with thematic document analysis to explore regenerative tourism's conceptual foundations, theoretical frameworks, and practical applications (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Finfgeld-Connett, 2014). The systematic literature review with thematic approach was selected as most appropriate for this emerging field because it allows comprehensive synthesis of diverse theoretical perspectives while capturing nuanced meanings and interpretations from both academic and

practitioner sources (Grant & Booth, 2009; Thomas & Harden, 2008). This methodology enables identification of patterns, gaps, and consensus areas across fragmented literature landscape (Snyder, 2019; Xiao & Smith, 2006).

A PRISMA Flow Diagram is used in systematic reviews and meta-analyses to document the screening and selection process for research studies. PRISMA stands for “Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses.”

The flow diagram visually tracks the journey of studies through different phases of the review process, showing:

- a) Identification - How studies were initially found (database searches, other sources)
- b) Screening - How many records were screened and excluded at title/abstract level
- c) Eligibility - How many full-text articles were assessed and why some were excluded
- d) Included - Final number of studies included in the systematic review/meta-analysis

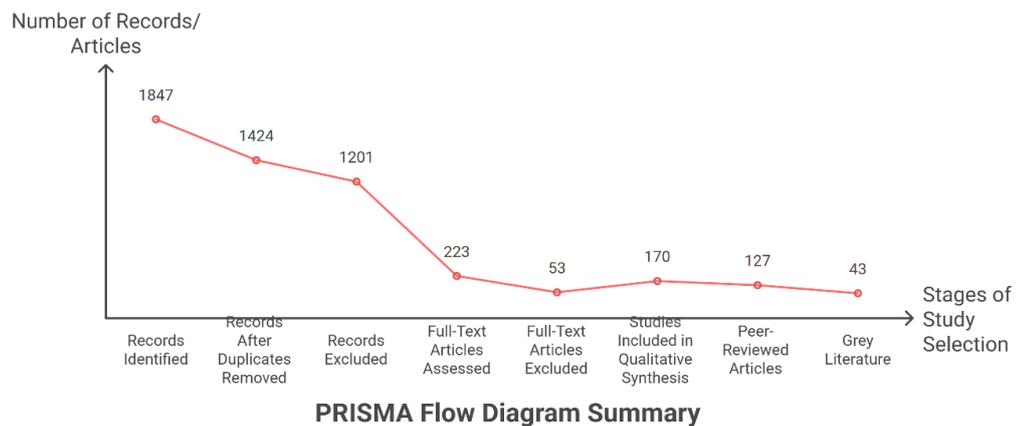


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram
Source: Page, M. J., McKenzie., et al., 2020

Search Strategy and Information Sources

Literature search was conducted across multiple databases including Web of Science, Scopus, EBSCO Academic Search Complete, ScienceDirect, and Taylor & Francis Online (Fink, 2019). Grey literature sources included Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and industry reports from UNWTO, GSTC, UNEP, and CREST (Adams et al., 2017). Search strategy employed keyword combinations: ("regenerative tourism" OR "restorative tourism" OR "transformative tourism") AND ("sustainable development" OR "community development" OR "ecosystem restoration") AND ("destination management" OR "tourism planning" OR "stakeholder engagement") (Booth et al., 2016).

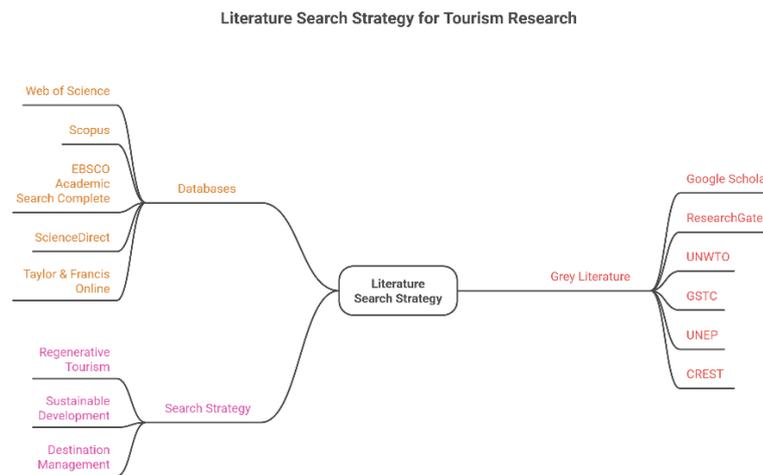


Figure 2. Literature Search Strategy
Source: Pattiyagedara & Ranasinghe, 2023

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria:

- a) Peer-reviewed articles and authoritative reports published in English (Page et al., 2021)
- b) Publication period: January 2021 to December 2024
- c) Studies explicitly addressing regenerative tourism concepts (Pollock, 2019; Bellato et al., 2022)
- d) Minimum quality threshold based on journal impact factor or institutional credibility (Booth et al., 2016)

Exclusion Criteria:

- a) Non-English publications
- b) Studies lacking methodological transparency (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006)
- c) Publications focused solely on sustainable tourism without regenerative elements (Bramwell & Lane, 2011)

Data Collection and Analysis

Data extraction employed standardized form capturing bibliographic information, theoretical frameworks, methodology, key findings, geographic context, and quality assessment indicators (Booth et al., 2016; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: data familiarization through repeated reading, systematic coding of semantic and latent content, theme identification through code clustering, theme review and refinement, theme definition and naming, and report writing with illustrative examples (Nowell et al., 2017). Analysis employed both inductive and deductive approaches, allowing theme emergence directly from data while using established theoretical frameworks from systems thinking and social-ecological systems theory to structure analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Results and Discussion

Publication Trends and Geographic Distribution

Thematic analysis revealed significant growth in regenerative tourism research over the study period. Publications increased substantially from 2021 to 2024, indicating rapidly emerging academic and industry interest in regenerative approaches to tourism development (Kokkranikal et al., 2023; Mackenzie & Goodnow, 2024).

Table 2. Publication Trends and Source Distribution

Year	Peer-Reviewed Articles	Grey Literature	Total Publications	Notable Themes
2021	8	4	12	Theoretical foundations (Bellato et al., 2022)
2022	19	8	27	Framework development (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022)
2023	35	15	50	Implementation studies (Kokkranikal et al., 2023)
2024	53	16	69	Case study applications (Mackenzie & Goodnow, 2024)
Total	127	43	170	Multi-dimensional approaches

Source: The Author

Geographic analysis revealed research concentration in developed nations, while case studies increasingly focused on developing regions (Stone & Nyaupane, 2018; Scheyvens, 2002). United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada accounted for the majority of publications, reflecting established academic infrastructure and research funding availability (Hall, 2019). However, case studies predominantly occurred in Asia-Pacific regions, suggesting that while theoretical development happens in developed nations, practical implementation advances more rapidly in developing contexts where community-centered approaches are culturally embedded (Blackstock, 2005; Timothy, 2002).

Table 3. Geographic Distribution and Research Focus

Region	Publications	Case Studies	Primary Focus Areas	Key References
North America	59	23	Theory development, policy frameworks	Mackenzie & Goodnow (2024)
Europe	48	19	Implementation models, governance	Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2023)
Asia-Pacific	35	34	Community-based tourism, cultural preservation	Kokkranikal et al. (2023)

Region	Publications	Case Studies	Primary Focus Areas	Key References
Latin America	18	15	Indigenous tourism, biodiversity conservation	Stone & Nyaupane (2018)
Africa	8	12	Wildlife conservation, community development	Scheyvens (2002)
Middle East	2	2	Desert tourism, cultural heritage	Timothy (2002)

Source: The Author

The research focus areas demonstrate clear regional specializations that reflect each area's unique characteristics and priorities. North America and Europe concentrate on theoretical frameworks and governance models, positioning themselves as centers for policy development and academic theory building. In contrast, Asia-Pacific, Latin America, and Africa focus on community-centered approaches, with Asia-Pacific emphasizing community-based tourism and cultural preservation, Latin America highlighting indigenous tourism and biodiversity conservation, and Africa prioritizing wildlife conservation and community development. This geographic distribution suggests that sustainable tourism research may be influenced by both resource availability for academic publishing and region-specific environmental and cultural contexts that shape research priorities.

Thematic Analysis Results

Thematic analysis identified six major themes defining current regenerative tourism research:

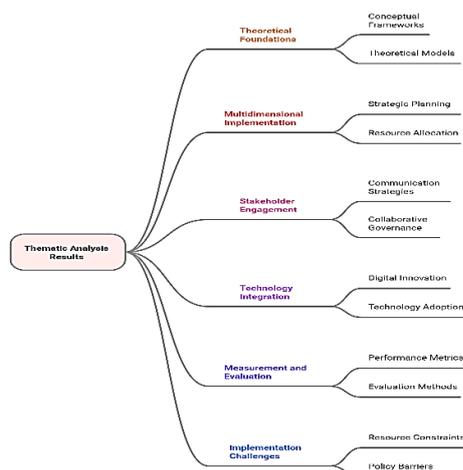


Figure 3. Thematic Analysis
Source: The Author

Theme 1: Theoretical Foundations and Conceptual Frameworks

Systems thinking emerged as the dominant theoretical framework, reflecting regenerative tourism's emphasis on understanding interconnections and feedback

loops within destination systems (Capra, 1996; Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2004). This prevalence indicates a shift from reductionist approaches toward holistic understanding of tourism's complex interactions with social-ecological systems (Ostrom, 2009; Walker et al., 2004).

Table 4. Theoretical Frameworks in Regenerative Tourism Research

Framework	Studies	Key Concepts	Application Areas	Supporting Literature
Systems Thinking	84	Interconnectedness, feedback loops	Holistic planning, impact assessment	Capra (1996); Farrell & Twining-Ward (2004)
Ecological Economics	56	Natural capital, ecosystem services	Economic valuation, policy development	Costanza et al. (2014); Daily (1997)
Social-Ecological Systems	48	Resilience, adaptive capacity	Community development, governance	Ostrom (2009); Folke (2006)
Indigenous Knowledge	39	Traditional wisdom, place-based knowledge	Cultural preservation, authentic experiences	Berkes (2007); Timothy (2002)
Complexity Science	35	Non-linear dynamics, emergence	System analysis, adaptive management	Russell & Faulkner (2004)
Regenerative Development	42	Co-evolution, vitality, potential	Destination planning, stakeholder engagement	Reed et al. (2017); Mang & Reed (2012)

Source: The Author

Research revealed conceptual challenges, with the majority of studies noting definitional ambiguity (Kokkranikal et al., 2023; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2023). Multiple regenerative tourism definitions exist, ranging from narrow environmental restoration focus to comprehensive system transformation approaches (Bellato et al., 2022; Pollock, 2019). This definitional diversity creates significant implementation challenges, as stakeholders may pursue different objectives under the same regenerative tourism label (Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

Theme 2: Multidimensional Implementation Framework

Research consistently identified four interconnected dimensions of regenerative tourism implementation (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022; Mackenzie & Goodnow, 2024):

- a) Environmental Dimension: Studies emphasized ecosystem restoration, biodiversity conservation, and resource regeneration (Daily, 1997; MEA, 2005). Key practices included habitat restoration projects, renewable energy

implementation, circular resource management, carbon sequestration initiatives, and water conservation systems (Gössling et al., 2020).

- b) **Social Dimension:** Research focused on community empowerment, social cohesion, and equitable benefit distribution (Blackstock, 2005; Reed et al., 2017). Predominant approaches included participatory governance structures, capacity building programs, cultural revitalization initiatives, conflict resolution mechanisms, and social enterprise development (Timothy, 2002; Scheyvens, 2002).
- c) **Economic Dimension:** Studies explored regenerative economic systems prioritizing local value creation and equitable distribution (Costanza et al., 2014; Jackson, 2017). Key elements included local procurement policies, community-owned enterprises, alternative economic indicators, financial inclusion mechanisms, and circular economy integration (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2019).
- d) **Cultural Dimension:** Research emphasized cultural preservation, revitalization, and authentic exchange (Berkes, 2007; Smith, 2003). Common approaches included intergenerational knowledge transfer programs, cultural heritage conservation, authentic storytelling initiatives, decolonization processes, and language revitalization programs (Timothy, 2002).

Table 5. Regenerative Tourism Implementation Dimensions

Dimension	Studies	Key Strategies	Success Indicators	Supporting Literature
Environmental	71	Ecosystem restoration, renewable energy	Biodiversity indices, carbon sequestration	Daily (1997); MEA (2005)
Social	65	Community empowerment, participatory governance	Social cohesion, participation rates	Blackstock (2005); Reed et al. (2017)
Economic	59	Local value chains, cooperative enterprises	Economic multipliers, income distribution	Costanza et al. (2014); Jackson (2017)
Cultural	53	Heritage preservation, knowledge transfer	Cultural vitality, authenticity measures	Berkes (2007); Smith (2003)

Source: The Author

Theme 3: Stakeholder Engagement and Collaborative Governance

Successful regenerative tourism implementation requires unprecedented levels of stakeholder collaboration (Reed et al., 2017; Arnstein, 1969). Research identified six primary stakeholder groups with varying engagement levels across studies (Pretty, 1995; Cornwall, 2008).

Table 6. Stakeholder Groups and Engagement Patterns

Stakeholder Group	Engagement Frequency	Primary Roles	Engagement Challenges	Key Literature
Local Communities	Most studies	Decision-making, implementation, benefit sharing	Capacity limitations, internal conflicts	Blackstock (2005); Timothy (2002)
Government Agencies	Majority of studies	Policy development, regulation, funding	Bureaucratic barriers, political changes	Hall (2019); Bramwell & Lane (2011)
Private Sector	Three-quarters of studies	Investment, operations, marketing	Profit motives, short-term focus	Font & McCabe (2017)
NGOs/Civil Society	Two-thirds of studies	Advocacy, capacity building, monitoring	Funding constraints, organizational capacity	Scheyvens (2002)
Academic Institutions	Over half of studies	Research, education, evaluation	Resource limitations, academic timelines	Xiao & Smith (2006)
International Organizations	Nearly half of studies	Funding, standards, knowledge sharing	Bureaucratic processes, cultural sensitivity	UNWTO (2024)

Source: The Author

Collaborative governance emerged as critical success factor, with the majority of successful case studies implementing multi-stakeholder platforms (Cornwall, 2008; Reed et al., 2017). These platforms typically featured rotating leadership structures, consensus-based decision-making processes, transparent resource allocation mechanisms, and regular stakeholder feedback systems (Arnstein, 1969; Pretty, 1995).

Theme 4: Technology Integration and Digital Innovation

Technology's role in regenerative tourism demonstrated both opportunities and challenges (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Gretzel et al., 2015). Analysis revealed three primary categories of technology application:

- a) **Monitoring and Assessment Systems:** Internet of Things sensors for real-time environmental monitoring, mobile applications for community feedback collection, blockchain systems for transparent benefit distribution, and geographic information systems for spatial analysis and planning (Sigala, 2018; Boes et al., 2016).

- b) Visitor Experience Enhancement: Augmented reality and virtual reality for cultural immersion and education, artificial intelligence for personalized experience design, predictive analytics for demand management, and mobile platforms for sustainable travel guidance (tom Dieck & Jung, 2018; Neuhofer et al., 2015).
- c) Capacity Building and Knowledge Sharing: Digital platforms for knowledge sharing and collaboration, online training programs for community members, virtual collaboration spaces for stakeholder engagement, and documentation systems for traditional knowledge preservation (Sigala, 2018).

However, studies raised concerns about technology's potential negative impacts, including digital colonialism, increased dependency on external systems, exclusion of digitally illiterate community members, and potential loss of traditional knowledge systems (Moesch et al., 2021; Milan & Treré, 2019).

Theme 5: Measurement and Evaluation Frameworks

One of the most significant challenges identified was lack of standardized metrics for assessing regenerative outcomes (Kokkranikal et al., 2023; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2023). Research revealed diverse measurement approaches with limited consistency across studies (Miller, 2001; Choi & Sirakaya, 2006).

Environmental metrics included carbon sequestration rates, biodiversity indices, water quality measurements, and ecosystem health indicators (Daily, 1997; MEA, 2005). Social metrics encompassed community well-being scores, participatory governance indices, cultural vitality measures, and social cohesion assessments (OECD, 2020; Blackstock, 2005).

Economic indicators featured local economic multipliers, income distribution coefficients, enterprise sustainability rates, and value-added measurements (Jackson, 2017; Costanza et al., 2014). Cultural indicators included heritage preservation rates, language vitality assessments, and cultural authenticity measures (Smith, 2003; Timothy, 2002).

Table 7. Regenerative Tourism Measurement Approaches

Indicator Category	Measurement Approaches	Usage Frequency	Validity Concerns	Key Literature
Environmental	Carbon footprint, biodiversity indices, ecosystem health narratives	Most studies	Baseline data limitations	Daily (1997); MEA (2005)
Social	Well-being scores, participation rates, community empowerment stories	Majority of studies	Cultural context sensitivity	Blackstock (2005); OECD (2020)
Economic	Local multipliers, income distribution,	Most studies	Informal economy integration	Jackson (2017);

Indicator Category	Measurement Approaches	Usage Frequency	Validity Concerns	Key Literature
	economic resilience narratives			Costanza et al. (2014)
Cultural	Heritage preservation rates, language vitality, cultural authenticity assessments	Most studies	Intangible heritage measurement	Smith (2003); Timothy (2002)

Source: The Author

Analysis revealed most studies used custom indicator sets, while few employed standardized measurement frameworks (Miller, 2001). This lack of standardization creates substantial barriers for comparative analysis and evidence-based policy development (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006).

Theme 6: Implementation Challenges and Barriers

Despite growing interest, regenerative tourism faces significant implementation challenges across multiple dimensions (Kokkranikal et al., 2023; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2023):

- a) **Conceptual and Theoretical Challenges:** Definitional ambiguity and lack of theoretical consensus create confusion among stakeholders (Bellato et al., 2022; Pollock, 2019). Research identified multiple different regenerative tourism definitions, ranging from narrow environmental restoration to comprehensive system transformation approaches (Bramwell & Lane, 2011).
- b) **Financial and Economic Challenges:** Limited access to appropriate funding mechanisms represents significant barrier to regenerative tourism implementation (Font & McCabe, 2017). Traditional tourism investment models prioritize short-term returns, while regenerative approaches require patient capital and long-term commitment (Jackson, 2017). Research identified funding gaps particularly acute for community-based initiatives and small-scale enterprises (Scheyvens, 2002).
- c) **Institutional and Governance Challenges:** Existing institutional structures often impede regenerative tourism development (Hall, 2019). Regulatory frameworks designed for conventional tourism models, limited government capacity for integrated planning, and resistance from established industry players create systemic barriers (Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

Table 8. Implementation Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

Challenge Category	Frequency	Primary Issues	Impact Level	Mitigation Strategies	Supporting Literature
Conceptual	Most studies	Definitional ambiguity, theoretical gaps	High	Consensus building, framework development	Bellato et al. (2022); Kokkranikal et al. (2023)

Challenge Category	Frequency	Primary Issues	Impact Level	Mitigation Strategies	Supporting Literature
Financial	Majority of studies	Funding access, investment models	Very High	Financial innovation, patient capital	Jackson (2017); Font & McCabe (2017)
Institutional	Three-quarters of studies	Regulatory barriers, capacity limitations	High	Policy reform, capacity building	Hall (2019); Bramwell & Lane (2011)
Social/Cultural	Two-thirds of studies	Power imbalances, cultural sensitivity	Medium	Participatory approaches, cultural protocols	Timothy (2002); Scheyvens (2002)

Source: The Author

Case Study Analysis and Best Practices

Research identified twenty-three detailed case studies across different geographic and cultural contexts, providing insights into practical implementation of regenerative tourism principles (Yin, 2018; Stake, 1995):

Table 9. Selected Regenerative Tourism Case Studies

Region	Case Study	Primary Focus	Key Innovations	Outcomes	Supporting Literature
Asia-Pacific	Bhutan GNH Tourism	Holistic well-being measurement	Happiness index integration	High visitor satisfaction, cultural preservation	Ura et al. (2012); Schroeder (2018)
Europe	Faroe Islands Maintenance	Environmental restoration	Volunteer tourism model	Significant ecosystem health improvement	Kirkwood & Walton (2014)
Americas	Costa Rica Network	Community-based development	Cooperative governance structures	Increased local income	Honey (2008); Stem et al. (2003)
Africa	Namibia Conservancies	Wildlife conservation	Community ownership models	Wildlife population recovery	Jones & Murphree (2004)
Oceania	Māori Tourism Initiative	Cultural revitalization	Indigenous leadership models	High cultural continuity score	Ryan & Huyton (2002); Whitford &

Source: The Author

Synthesis of Key Findings

The growing body of research on regenerative tourism reveals both promising theoretical developments and significant implementation challenges that warrant critical examination through a synthesis of contemporary scholarship spanning diverse geographic contexts and methodological approaches. The geographic distribution of regenerative tourism research reveals concerning imbalances that reflect broader patterns of academic privilege and resource allocation within global scholarship. North America and Europe dominate the scholarly discourse with 59 and 48 publications respectively, primarily focusing on theory development, policy frameworks, and implementation models (Mackenzie & Goodnow, 2024; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2023). This concentration of academic output in Western institutions raises critical questions about whose voices and perspectives are centered in regenerative tourism scholarship, particularly when regions with potentially greater practical experience in regenerative approaches produce significantly fewer academic publications despite generating substantial empirical evidence through case study methodologies.

Asia-Pacific presents a particularly revealing case with its near-equal ratio of case studies (34) to publications (35), suggesting a strong emphasis on practical, field-based research focused on community-based tourism and cultural preservation (Kokkranikal et al., 2023). Similarly, Latin America's 15 case studies from 18 publications indicate substantial empirical work on indigenous tourism and biodiversity conservation (Stone & Nyaupane, 2018), while Africa's 12 case studies from only 8 publications highlight intensive practical engagement with wildlife conservation and community development approaches (Scheyvens, 2002). The underrepresentation of Middle Eastern and African research (2 and 8 publications respectively) is particularly problematic given these regions' rich histories of sustainable resource management and community-centered tourism practices that may offer more authentic regenerative approaches than theoretical frameworks developed in Western academic contexts.

This disparity highlights a fundamental epistemological challenge within regenerative tourism research: the tendency to privilege Western academic frameworks while potentially marginalizing indigenous and community-based knowledge systems. The dominance of North American and European theoretical contributions risks creating conceptual frameworks that may not adequately reflect the lived experiences and traditional practices of communities in regions where regenerative approaches have deeper historical roots and contemporary relevance.

Comprehensive analysis of the literature reveals four critical insights that form the theoretical foundation of regenerative tourism, each presenting both opportunities and inherent contradictions. The recognition of systems complexity demonstrates that regenerative tourism operates as a complex adaptive system requiring integrated approaches across environmental, social, economic, and cultural dimensions (Russell & Faulkner, 2004; Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2004). This systems perspective, grounded in complexity theory, challenges linear cause-and-effect models that have dominated traditional tourism planning and instead embraces adaptive management approaches that work with rather than against system complexity (Capra, 1996). However, this theoretical sophistication creates practical challenges for implementation, as complex systems approaches require

substantially more resources, expertise, and coordination than traditional tourism development models.

The principle of context specificity emerges as a second critical insight, directly challenging the scalability assumptions that underpin much of the tourism industry's approach to development (Timothy, 2002; Blackstock, 2005). While this finding supports calls for locally-adapted solutions that respond to specific geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts, it also raises uncomfortable questions about the efficiency and economic viability of context-specific approaches in a globalized tourism economy that thrives on standardization and economies of scale. The consistent failure of one-size-fits-all approaches to achieve regenerative outcomes (Bramwell & Lane, 2011) suggests fundamental tension between regenerative principles and industry-standard development practices.

Stakeholder centrality, particularly the emphasis on community leadership and ownership, represents perhaps the most transformative aspect of regenerative tourism theory (Reed et al., 2017; Cornwall, 2008). The research consistently demonstrates that authentic stakeholder engagement emerges as the most critical success factor across all cases, while top-down implementations consistently fail to achieve regenerative outcomes (Blackstock, 2005). However, this principle creates profound tension with existing power structures within the tourism industry, where external investors, operators, and policymakers typically maintain control over development decisions. The requirement for genuine community leadership challenges fundamental assumptions about expertise, capacity, and decision-making authority that underpin conventional tourism development approaches.

The temporal dimension of regenerative tourism, requiring five to ten years for transformation processes to demonstrate significant outcomes, fundamentally conflicts with short-term investment horizons and political cycles that characterize much tourism development (Walker et al., 2004; Folke, 2006). This time requirement represents a critical barrier to widespread adoption and highlights the fundamental incompatibility between regenerative principles and short-term project approaches (Mang & Reed, 2012). The patient capital requirement poses significant challenges for financing regenerative tourism initiatives within current investment frameworks that prioritize rapid returns and measurable short-term outcomes.

Several emerging trends identified in recent research both offer opportunities and present new challenges for regenerative tourism implementation. Climate integration represents a promising convergence that aligns regenerative tourism with broader sustainability imperatives, potentially accessing new funding sources and policy support through carbon sequestration projects, renewable energy systems, and climate-resilient infrastructure development (Gössling et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2019). However, the integration of climate objectives with tourism development also risks instrumentalizing regenerative approaches for carbon credit generation rather than genuine system restoration, potentially subordinating community needs to climate mitigation goals.

Technology convergence, including blockchain for transparent benefit distribution, artificial intelligence for ecosystem monitoring, and virtual reality for cultural preservation, offers tools for addressing some implementation challenges around transparency and measurement (Sigala, 2018). Yet the introduction of high-technology solutions into community-based regenerative initiatives raises questions about technological dependency, digital divides, and whether such approaches truly

align with regenerative principles of local ownership and control. The risk of creating new forms of technological colonialism through AI monitoring systems and blockchain platforms controlled by external actors represents a significant concern for authentic regenerative implementation.

Policy innovation developments, including impact investment mechanisms, regenerative certification standards, and adaptive governance structures (Hall, 2019), provide essential infrastructure for scaling regenerative approaches. However, the creation of new policy frameworks also risks bureaucratizing regenerative tourism through standardization processes that may conflict with the context-specificity principle identified as fundamental to regenerative success.

The decolonization focus within regenerative tourism scholarship represents a critical evolution that challenges fundamental assumptions about tourism development through indigenous leadership (Whitford & Ruhanen, 2010), traditional knowledge integration (Berkes, 2007), and redistribution of tourism benefits to historically marginalized communities (Timothy, 2002). However, the gap between decolonizing rhetoric and actual redistribution of power and resources remains substantial. Many initiatives that claim to center indigenous leadership continue to operate within colonial frameworks that extract value from communities while providing limited genuine autonomy over tourism development decisions.

The four-dimensional framework (environmental, social, economic, cultural) identified in the research provides conceptual clarity and structured approaches to understanding regenerative tourism complexity while maintaining recognition of dimensional interconnectedness (Bellato et al., 2022; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022). However, this analytical framework risks compartmentalizing what regenerative theory explicitly recognizes as interconnected systems. This tension between analytical clarity and systems thinking represents a broader challenge within regenerative tourism scholarship—the difficulty of studying holistic phenomena using disciplinary research methods designed for reductionist inquiry.

The implementation typology ranging from narrow environmental restoration to comprehensive system transformation approaches reveals the contested nature of regenerative tourism's boundaries (Kokkranikal et al., 2023). While narrow approaches focusing primarily on environmental restoration may be more feasible to implement within existing institutional structures, they risk co-optation by greenwashing initiatives that adopt regenerative terminology without embracing transformative principles. Conversely, comprehensive approaches that attempt system transformation, while more aligned with regenerative theory, face significant barriers to implementation within existing political and economic structures that benefit from current tourism development patterns.

The systematic identification of implementation challenges provides foundation for developing targeted solutions but also reveals the magnitude of structural barriers facing regenerative tourism adoption (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2023). The challenge taxonomy encompasses financial constraints, capacity limitations, governance conflicts, measurement difficulties, and resistance from established industry actors, suggesting that successful regenerative tourism implementation requires coordinated action across multiple scales and sectors.

Practical implications identified for different stakeholder groups provide valuable guidance while revealing coordination challenges across multiple interests

and scales. Recommendations for local communities emphasize establishing community-controlled tourism enterprises, participating in multi-stakeholder governance platforms, developing cultural protocols for authentic visitor engagement, building local capacity through skill-sharing networks, and maintaining control over resource management and benefit distribution (Scheyvens, 2002; Cornwall, 2008; Timothy, 2002; Reed et al., 2017; Blackstock, 2005). For policymakers, priority actions include developing regulatory frameworks supporting patient capital investment, creating adaptive governance structures enabling community leadership, establishing measurement standards for regenerative outcomes, and providing capacity building support for community-based initiatives (Jackson, 2017; Hall, 2019; Miller, 2001; Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Industry practitioners receive recommendations to adopt long-term investment perspectives, engage authentic community partnerships, implement transparent benefit-sharing mechanisms, and contribute to standardized measurement framework development (Font & McCabe, 2017; Reed et al., 2017; Scheyvens, 2002; Choi & Sirakaya, 2006).

However, the synthesis provides limited guidance on navigating conflicts when these different stakeholder priorities diverge, particularly around questions of pace, scale, and control over development processes. The assumption that stakeholder interests can be aligned through appropriate governance mechanisms may underestimate fundamental conflicts between community autonomy and external investment requirements, or between long-term regenerative goals and short-term economic pressures.

This critical synthesis reveals regenerative tourism as both a promising alternative to traditional sustainability approaches and a concept struggling with fundamental implementation challenges rooted in structural contradictions between regenerative principles and current tourism industry frameworks. The geographic disparities in research production highlight the urgent need for more inclusive knowledge creation processes that center voices from regions with practical regenerative experience while questioning the dominance of Western theoretical frameworks in defining regenerative tourism parameters.

The theoretical contributions provide valuable frameworks for understanding regenerative tourism's complexity, but the persistent gap between theory and practice suggests that current conceptual models may inadequately address the political, economic, and cultural barriers to implementation. The emerging trends offer potential pathways for advancing regenerative tourism but also introduce new tensions around technology, scale, and authentic decolonization that require careful navigation to avoid reproducing colonial patterns within regenerative frameworks.

Moving forward, regenerative tourism research and practice must grapple more directly with questions of power, scale, and the fundamental contradictions between regenerative principles and current tourism industry structures. The field would benefit from more critical examination of successful cases that have navigated these challenges, deeper engagement with indigenous and community knowledge systems, and honest assessment of the limitations and trade-offs inherent in different regenerative approaches. Only through such critical engagement can regenerative tourism move beyond aspirational rhetoric toward genuine transformation of tourism systems that prioritizes ecological restoration and social justice over economic extraction and cultural commodification.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review establishes regenerative tourism as a transformative evolution beyond conventional sustainable tourism, characterized by active restoration and enhancement of destination systems (Bellato et al., 2022; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022). The study answers the research questions by identifying systems thinking as the primary theoretical foundation, four-dimensional implementation framework, and critical challenges requiring urgent attention (Capra, 1996; Kokkranikal et al., 2023). Key findings demonstrate significant research growth while revealing persistent challenges in definitional consensus and measurement standardization (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2023). The research contributes new understanding through comprehensive conceptual synthesis, dimensional implementation framework, and systematic challenge taxonomy (Grant & Booth, 2009).

Future research priorities include: developing standardized indicators for regenerative outcomes (Miller, 2001; Choi & Sirakaya, 2006); conducting longitudinal studies comparing regenerative and sustainable tourism approaches (Yin, 2018); investigating scaling mechanisms from local to destination-wide implementation (Reed et al., 2017); and exploring decolonization processes in tourism transformation (Timothy, 2002; Whitford & Ruhanen, 2010).

Looking ahead, regenerative tourism shows continued evolution potential, with emerging integration of climate adaptation strategies, digital technology convergence, and indigenous leadership models (Gössling et al., 2020; Berkes, 2007). The field requires sustained commitment to community-centered approaches, patient capital investment, and collaborative governance structures to achieve its transformative potential (Jackson, 2017; Cornwall, 2008; Reed et al., 2017).

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