



Understanding Regenerative Tourism as a Catalyst for Sustainable Economies: An Analysis of Selected Practices

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Abstract: *The European sustainability agendas and debates present new challenges and opportunities for innovation, particularly in the tourism sector. As countries strive to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050, the tourism industry must align its activities with these goals. Many tourism businesses are undergoing profound changes, embracing digital technologies and redesigning processes to prioritize sustainability. In recent years, the concept of regenerative tourism has emerged, setting even more ambitious goals. Regenerative tourism aims to proactively regenerate communities, cultures, nature, and economic systems. While lacking a stable academic definition, regenerative tourism is already driving the development of innovative tourism experiences that have transformative effects on specific destinations. This paper provides an exploratory analysis of regenerative tourism, including a literature review and an analysis of selected regenerative tourism practices in Portugal. Through qualitative analysis, the study examines the practices adopted by tourism stakeholders and evaluates their economic, social, and environmental benefits. The findings and lessons learned from these cases serve as valuable guidance for other destinations interested in embracing regenerative tourism principles and practices. Ultimately, the study contributes to the advancement of a more resilient and regenerative global tourism industry.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The priorities that are advanced in the European sustainability agendas trigger new challenges and opportunities for innovation for all. For the tourism sector, which represents a substantial part of many European economies, the time is for change. Territories and their local stakeholders are called to align their economic activities with the carbon neutrality goals that are set for 2050.

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Driven by this agenda, many service businesses in the tourism sector are implementing profound changes in their business models and processes, including the adoption of digital technologies to support the green transition and redesign processes driven by sustainability concerns. In many cases, the digital and green agendas go together and strengthen each other. Nevertheless, the ambitious goals that are set call for profound changes in the models of operation and organization of the value production systems involving changes that are social, technological, environmental, economic, and political, and cannot be achieved without the engagement of local communities in a meaningful manner. It is in this context that the term regenerative tourism is being advanced as an alternative value creation model.

Whereas the sustainability paradigm calls for the design of production ecosystems that preserve the resources and close the production-consumption loop, the idea of regeneration sets the goal further to develop businesses whose activities contribute to proactively regenerating communities, cultures, nature, and economic systems. Despite a lack of a stable academic definition for the term regenerative tourism, we are already witnessing the development of a range of innovative tourism service experiences that can be addressed as transformational in the sense that they contribute to increasing the potential of specific tourism destinations to create net positive effects by regenerating social and economic ecosystems.

This study offers an exploratory analysis of the concept and emerging practices of regenerative tourism. The study builds on a preliminary concise literature review to frame the idea of regenerative tourism, discussing it towards the concept of sustainability. The study offers an analysis of selected cases of regenerative tourism practices, in Portugal, providing a characterization and illustration of regenerative initiatives that contribute to increasing the understanding of the concept. Moreover, the paper builds on the qualitative analysis of the practices of regenerative tourism adopted by the actors in the tourism sector to understand its expression at the economic, social and environmental levels. The literature review is resumed in section 2 of the paper, setting the conceptual background that guided the selection of the cases. The details on the methodology and the research steps are included in section 3, followed by a description of the analysis and a discussion of the findings in section 4. The conclusion section is devoted to the discussion of the overall coverage of the paper and concluding remarks. The lessons learned from these cases, and their characterization provide a first building block to advance the conceptual framing of regenerative tourism and offer valuable guidance for other destinations seeking to explore the approach to regenerative tourism principles and practices.

2. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

This section provides a conceptual background on sustainable tourism and regenerative tourism, highlighting their principles, dimensions, and the assessment of their impacts on destination economies and communities. The subsections delve into the fundamental principles and dimensions of sustainable tourism, discuss the evolution towards regenerative tourism as a more holistic approach, and explore the assessment methods for evaluating the impacts of regenerative tourism practices.

2.1. Sustainable Tourism: Principles and dimensions

Sustainable tourism is grounded in a set of fundamental principles and concepts that guide its development and implementation. These principles revolve around responsible resource

management, environmental conservation, and socio-cultural authenticity (Weaver & Lawton, 2022). By incorporating these principles, sustainable tourism seeks to strike a balance between the interests of visitors, host communities, and the environment, ensuring the long-term viability of tourism destinations.

The environmental dimension of sustainable tourism focuses on minimizing environmental degradation and preserving natural resources. It encompasses a range of practices aimed at reducing the ecological footprint of tourism activities. These practices include waste management, energy efficiency, water conservation, and biodiversity protection (Gössling et al., 2021). Adopting eco-friendly measures, such as promoting sustainable transportation options, using renewable energy sources, and implementing sustainable infrastructure, can contribute to the preservation of ecosystems and minimize negative environmental impacts.

The social dimension of sustainable tourism places a strong emphasis on community engagement, cultural preservation, and social inclusivity. Sustainable tourism seeks to empower local communities by involving them in decision-making processes and ensuring their active participation in tourism development (Hall & Williams, 2023). By promoting cultural heritage preservation, supporting local entrepreneurship, and fostering social well-being, sustainable tourism aims to create a sense of ownership and equitable distribution of benefits among the host communities.

The economic dimension of sustainable tourism highlights the importance of long-term economic stability and benefits for the host communities. Sustainable tourism practices contribute to economic diversification, employment opportunities, and income generation (Jamal & Camargo, 2022). Supporting local businesses, encouraging sustainable supply chains, and promoting fair trade practices are some strategies employed to enhance the economic resilience of tourism destinations. Sustainable tourism can provide direct economic benefits to communities, improve their livelihoods, and contribute to poverty reduction.

Sustainable tourism plays a pivotal role in achieving long-term economic stability and fostering community well-being. It contributes to economic growth, poverty reduction, and social inclusion (Becken & Hay, 2021). By investing in sustainable tourism development, destinations can create employment opportunities, stimulate entrepreneurship, and enhance local income levels. Additionally, sustainable tourism promotes infrastructure development, access to services, and cultural revitalization, leading to an improved quality of life for local communities (Sharpley & Telfer, 2023).

2.2. Regenerative Tourism: Moving beyond Sustainable Tourism

Despite the advances observed around the world to implement sustainable tourism development and to assure that tourism businesses and destinations meet, as much as possible, the Sustainable Development Goals, new approaches are emerging, in order to make the process more effective. This is the case with regenerative tourism.

Recent studies demonstrate that there is no universal definition of regenerative tourism (Bellato et al., 2022). Notwithstanding, Dredge (2022) argues that regenerative tourism practices result in an investment in local people, places, and nature, supporting the long-term renewal of social and natural environments. In addition, Duxbury et al. (2021) and CBI (2022) believe that

regenerative tourism goes beyond sustainability, as it focuses on tourists leaving the places better than they found them. This helps to move forward the concept of sustainability, grounded on leaving the places as they were found. This approach requires that new economies search for benefits that go beyond financial growth and profit (Duxbury et al., 2021).

It is clear that a more operational and global definition of regenerative tourism is needed, especially to allow the design of both research frameworks and practical measures that can be implemented by public and private organizations. While this concept is still vague, several characteristics and principles can be identified (Bellato et al., 2022).

First, it must be acknowledged that this is not a specific type of tourism, but rather a holistic view and understanding that the future of tourism development includes local communities, the environment, and the commitment of visitors to the preservation and protection of natural, social, and cultural dimensions of the place (Fusté-Forné & Hussain, 2022; Duxbury et al., 2021). Also, regenerative practices demand capacity building and development, integrating all stakeholders in the design and implementation of inclusive and regenerative tourism planning. Bearing this in mind, regenerative tourism activities have the potential to revitalize and regenerate destinations by creating a cycle of positive impacts on local people and their economies, preserving local culture and biodiversity, while destinations and businesses provide authentic, unique, and memorable travel experiences (CBI, 2022). This may form the basis to rethink and rebuild the tourism industry worldwide. As concluded by Bellato et al. (2022, p. 9), “regenerative tourism is a transformational approach that aims to fulfil the potential of tourism places to flourish and create net positive effects through increasing the regenerative capacity of human societies and ecosystems.”

The United Nations (cit in Martin-Rios & Laurent, 2021), propose seven principles that can be followed in order to design and implement regenerative tourism framework and mindset: (i) an holistic understanding of tourism, acknowledging that every stakeholder is related and interdependent, which demands for knowing the quality of the interactions in the global tourism ecosystem; (ii) foster collaboration between stakeholders through the creation of solid networks; (iii) diversify the sources of income so that communities are less dependent on tourism, as well as diversify between distinct market segments (leisure, business, domestic, international – this will create more resilient destinations; (iv) develop inclusive an equitable tourism involving local communities and businesses, e.g.: supporting homeless or refugees; (v) offer tourism experiences that are authentic, immersive, and meaningful, showcasing local culture, gastronomy, traditions, landmarks and wildlife in a responsible manner (honoring the sense of place); (vi) manage natural resources and biodiversity responsibly, protecting landscape and wildlife; (vii) protection of cultural heritage, indigenous people and ethnic groups.

To these fundamental principles, Ho (2020), adds that regenerative tourism should be aspirational, that is, focusing on actualizing the potential of all people, individually and collectively, and the need for continual evolution, since regeneration is not an isolated event, it evolves continuously and demands for continual adaptation.

In a more operational approach, the organization Future of Tourism (2023), defends the use of sustainability standards, advises tourism destinations to choose quality over quantity to enhance the visitors' experience while maintaining the character of the territory and benefiting local people, and strongly advocates for natural environment protection, by mitigating climate impacts, assure the transition to circular economy, and contain tourism's land use.

Finally, [Becken and Kaur \(2021\)](#) advert that regenerative tourism businesses and practices should adopt environmental certification, assure that tourism fosters the restoration of ecosystems, that products used in tourism are sourced locally whenever possible, that tourism businesses are locally owned and/or operated and that employees are mostly locals, and the business are included in a cooperation network.

3. METHODOLOGY

This is an exploratory study, carried out within the Erasmus+ project “Enforce – Enhancing resilience of tourism sector through training & development of regenerative tourism experiences” (Project N°. 2022-1-LU01-KA220-VET-000089887), of which the University of Aveiro is one of the partner institutions. The project aims to develop the skills of entrepreneurs in the tourism sector by developing regenerative tourism experiences through the integration of storytelling.

Under this scope, the purpose of this work is to identify good practices in sustainable tourism in Portugal and to analyze them according to the principles and dimensions found in the literature. To this end, a qualitative approach was adopted. A non-probability (non-random) sample was defined, using the snowball sampling method, with two strategies. Tourism experts were asked to provide suggestions, and online searches were conducted on tourism promotion portals, specialised publications, and other resources such as online magazines, newspaper articles, or travel blog posts on regenerative experiences. The cases identified were selected and assessed under the light of regenerative tourism principles found in the literature review, to validate if they were indeed regenerative experiences. It was also sought that the selected practices were diverse, corresponding to a variety of tourism subsectors. A total of 19 practices were selected and classified into 5 categories - rural tourism, natural locations, creative and cultural centres, walking and hiking routes and farming (see section 4). The analysis of the results also considered the geographical distribution of the selected experiences and the impact/benefits that each of them can have on the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of the territories.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The preliminary characterization and analysis of the selected cases of regenerative tourism led to the development of a classification including 5 categories - rural tourism, natural locations, creative and cultural centres, walking and hiking routes and farming (Table 1). Among these, rural tourism initiatives were the most abundant (a total of 12 out of 19 cases had characteristics of rural tourism, while farming, creative and cultural centres and walking and hiking routes were the less represented. Whereas rural tourism initiatives are often the results of small entrepreneurial initiatives, creative and cultural centres and hiking routes can be more demanding to implement for requiring the involvement of local stakeholders as well as the investment in physical infrastructure in the natural landscape that needs to comply with national regulations.

Table 1. Classification of regenerative tourism cases

Category	Definition
Rural Tourism	Rural tourism is travel to natural places that aren't urbanised, often rely on agriculture and have small populations, such as villages and cottages, homestays, farms, and ranches or eco-lodges.
Natural Locations	Natural location means the location and elevation of those channels, swales, and other conveyance systems not made by man.

Creative and Cultural Centers	Creative and cultural centres are multifunctional interdisciplinary cultural institutions that provide access to culture and a wide variety of cultural services, where you are given the opportunity to create, so these are places that tend to stimulate the imagination.
Walking and Hiking Routes	A Walking and/or Hiking Route are predefined path through rural areas that people traverse.
Farming	Farming is the act or process of working the ground, planting seeds, growing edible plants, and raising animals, amongst others.

Source: Own research

4.1. Characterization of Selected Practices

The regenerative tourism cases identified had a storytelling associated with the tourist experience. For example, the “Terramay” rural tourism initiative embeds the visitor in a story resorting to short texts intertwined with images, arranged dynamically, that talk about the animals, the soil, the activities carried out on the site, the spaces that make up the environment and, above all, respect for nature. It promotes the culture of regeneration by inviting the community to get involved and participate, as it offers guided tours of the farm, events, courses, and workshops. A detailed characterization of the selected practices is offered in Table 2.

Table 2. Classification and characterization of selected regenerative tourism cases

Case Studies	Description	Category
A Walk for Diversity (1)	This walking tour has contributed to changing the image of the Mouraria location, helping dynamizing the region, and showing its true richness, marked by a "multifaceted cultural history". The experience is led by the migrants themselves, who share their personal stories.	Walking and Hiking Routes
Schist Villages (2)	Besides the amazing landscapes the villas have to offer, they also offer you some labs and arts and crafts courses you can take. This is an environmentally sustainable tourism practice and dynamizes the place because it attracts new people to visit.	Natural Locations/ Creative and Cultural Centers
BioRia (3)	It's natural routes allow its visitors to enjoy landscapes, and by engaging in volunteering activities it also helps regenerate the natural diversity of the regions.	Natural Locations
Biovilla (4)	Quoting the mission of Biovilla, they aim to "reach total regeneration of our ecological, social and economic landscape". To do so they have their own farm, that is regenerating the soils of the region. They want to make sure no one suffers from the absence of food and help regenerate the ecosystems.	Farming
“Casas do Juízo” Rural Tourism Houses (5)	The accommodation is in the centre of a small village integrated into the Great Portuguese Historical Villages Route, and its importance for the vitality of the village. The possibility of interacting with the local community, getting to know the history of the village, its traditions and gastronomy and participating in agricultural activities is also present in the story.	Rural Tourism
Cordeira - Home for Creativity (6)	This lodge is a cultural project, that led to the reconstruction of part of the village of Cordeira, that promotes a relationship between nature, arts and a "free and authentic" way of life, highlighting several aspects, from the arts and crafts school to the preservation of the local ecosystem.	Rural Tourism/ Creative and Cultural Centres
“Chão do Rio” – Village Tourism Houses (7)	The accommodation offers several activities that allow guests to experience the simplicity of farm life, use the natural swimming pool, or get to know the natural heritage of the region. Some of the activities are developed in partnership with other local businesses so that the connection with the community is a reality.	Rural Tourism
“Do Água Boa” - Rural Tourism House (8)	Surrounded by natural landscapes this is a place to relax and have fun, since it offers multiple experiences to tourists, becoming a place of social and economic regeneration to the region.	Rural Tourism
Eco Lodge Cabreira Nature Retreat (9)	The "Cabreira" lodge is surrounded by nature and was built with exclusively sustainable materials, with the aim of minimizing environmental impacts. Cabreira is more than just an accommodation, it is a place where guests can disconnect from the hustle and bustle of the city and reconnect with nature.	Rural Tourism

Matinha Estate (10)	Matinha Estate offers experiences that go from wellness sessions to horse riding or tours through the Vincentian Route, among a lot of other options, that help connect with the natural and cultural heritage of the region.	Rural Tourism
“Vale Do Rio” Rural Hotel (11)	This eco-hotel, located in the district of Aveiro, uses renewable energies for its activity and offers beautiful landscape views to all its customers.	Rural Tourism
Islet of Vila Franca do Campo (12)	Located in front of the village of Vila Franca do Campo, about 1 km from the coast, this place is the result of the crater of an old, submerged volcano, considered one of the main tourist attractions of the island of São Miguel.	Natural Locations
Onor River (17)	Considered one of the wonders of Portugal, visiting Rio de Onor offers you the chance to enjoy the landscape of the area and to talk to the population around it. Besides the river, the region has multiple other choices of places to visit.	Natural Locations
Sintra Natural Park - The Moorish Castle (13)	Being the pinnacle of Romanticism in Portugal, the paths of the National Palace of Pena offer a chance to revisit the life of Portuguese old royalty, while enjoying the most important Cultural Landscape of Sintra.	Natural Locations
Portugal A2Z1 Route (14)	By taking a cycling or biking tour you will be able to get to know new and more rural places around the Portuguese territory. The Portugal A2Z storytelling focuses on unique destinations and enriching cultural experiences. It highlights the landscapes and places of Portugal as unique and enchanting, and around this narrative develops the differentials of a personalized experience with experienced professionals, away from the tourist crowds.	Walking and Hiking Routes
Vale da Lama Farm (15)	One of the most important actions of Quinta da Lama is their farm, which is helping regenerate soils, growing food, and therefore helping all the nature and community around them. This makes it environmentally and socially regenerative. Quinta da Lama attracts people from various places, which helps to dynamize the economy of the region.	Rural Tourism
Alecrim Nature Reserve (16)	All accommodations are surrounded by local fauna that is carefully preserved and taken care of. The presence of guests supports the conservation of local flora and fauna. Besides this, Alecrim Nature Reserve offers multiple options for visitors to relax. One of the restaurants, ‘Foggo’ offers local products on the grill, in a large camping tent by the lake.	Rural Tourism
Six Senses Douro Valley (18)	This company offers the chance to spend a few days surrounded by beautiful natural landscapes, while enjoying relaxing experiences, and has reinforced environmental and social responsibilities, emphasizing its concern with the impact on the community, and that is working on the regeneration of the community forest.	Rural Tourism
Terramay (19)	The story of Terramay begins on the banks of the Alqueva, between the Alentejo hills and the Spanish Estremadura. After countless journeys through southern Portugal, on 15 November 2018, the 562-hectare property was acquired by Thomas Sterchi and the Brito family, who created the project with the aim of promoting the importance of soil health, food awareness and the fight against desertification, producing food in a sustainable way and with respect for nature.	Rural Tourism

Source: Own research

4.2. Overview of the Territorial Distribution of Selected Regenerative Tourism Cases

In what concerns the territorial distribution of the selected practices, it can be highlighted that the majority (31.6%) are in the Centre of Portugal. This is a large NUT II and tourism region including 100 municipalities and a large diversity of tourism experiences, mostly based on nature and rural tourism. Alentejo represents 21.1% of the cases. This region is the one with less tourism overcrowding and heavily relies on nature to develop its offer. It is, thus, one of the places where regenerative tourism may have a higher potential. The Lisbon Area, the North of Portugal and the Algarve are the most relevant tourist areas in Portugal, both in terms of number of guests, overnights, and tourism income. However, they are not the most representative in terms of regenerative experiences, which may be explained by the type of tourism that is promoted: in

the first two cases, relying on urban/city tourism, in the latter, characterised by ‘sun, sea, sand’ mass tourism. The Azores, despite only representing 5.3% is considered the most authentic and nature-based tourism region in Portugal, offering an excellent stage for the implementation of regenerative tourism practices. There is also a network (Schist Villages) distributed by the country. This is very relevant, considering that the establishment of networks and partnerships are one of the fundamental principles of regenerative tourism. As a general conclusion, it can be observed that the large majority of the cases are located less than one hour and a half, by road, from the Portuguese airports (Porto, Lisbon, and Faro). This leads us to acknowledge that these experiences are directed at international tourists arriving at national airports and are grounded on international tourism operations.

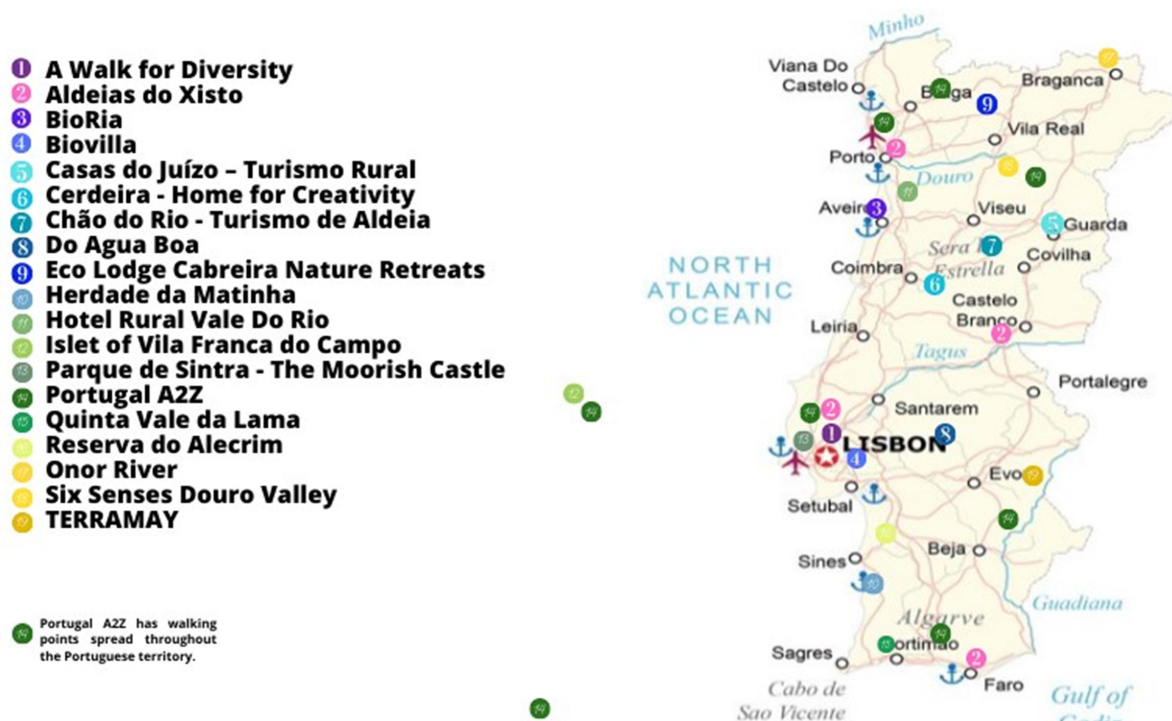


Figure 1. Territorial distribution of selected regenerative tourism practices in Portugal

Source: Own research

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This paper allows us to conclude that there is little research and empirical evidence on regenerative tourism, which leads to the inexistence of a consensual definition of the concept. However, some principles and characteristics can be identified in the few existing papers that can provide the grounds for the design of a regenerative tourism conceptual framework. What is acknowledged is that this type of practice, when correctly implemented, fosters the tourism industry to go beyond sustainability (leaving places as we found them) and improve tourism destinations, local communities, and the environment.

The conducted exploratory analysis of the 19 cases selected based on the principles and characteristics found in the existing body of knowledge brought important findings. The first is that most of these businesses are located close to the main Portuguese airports, which leads us to conclude that they are strongly based on international operations and foreign tourists. We were also able to associate a higher number of best practices with regions characterized by

their natural settings and by the authenticity of the offered experiences. This way, both natural ecosystems and local cultures will be preserved and disseminated, setting the grounds for new tourism business models to emerge, increasing the quality of life of locals, environmental regeneration, combat desertification, improvement of public spaces, and development of infrastructures and accessibilities, among others. The implemented practices should create or develop better conditions at social, cultural, economic, and environmental levels in order to be regenerative. In order to promote this, future research should create a solid framework based on both theory and robust empirical studies, so that practical guidelines can be designed and implemented by tourism businesses and destinations in important dimensions of regenerative tourism.

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