

**Committee on Tourism and Sustainability
23rd Meeting**

Regenerative Tourism

Discussion Paper

This discussion paper was prepared by the Secretariat of UN Tourism at the request of the Chair of the Committee on Tourism and Sustainability, Costa Rica. It was presented at the 22nd Meeting of the Committee on Tourism and Sustainability and examines the origins and current uses of the concept of regeneration, situates the term within scientific, cultural and institutional contexts and supports Members' deliberations on how it may complement existing sustainable tourism frameworks.

Following its presentation, feedback has been received from Members, including Portugal and Costa Rica, which will inform further refinement of the document.

UN Tourism continues to invite feedback on this discussion paper. The inputs received will help shape the Organization's future position on regenerative tourism.

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Executive Summary

Tourism is a major global economic and social force with the potential to advance conservation, social inclusion and development. Sustainability remains the cornerstone of tourism policy and practice. *Regenerative tourism*, which focuses on actively restoring ecosystems, cultures and communities is increasingly present in sector discourse. This paper situates the concept of regeneration within existing knowledge and institutions, highlights opportunities and risks and emphasizes that regeneration complements, not replaces sustainable tourism, serving as a deepening of its established principles. It also identifies possible elements for a shared understanding of regenerative tourism and considerations for further work on the topic within UN Tourism.

Tourism Global Significance and Policy Relevance

Tourism is among the world's largest and most dynamic sectors. With 1.4 billion international tourist arrivals in 2024, tourism generated a record USD 2.0 trillion in export revenues - accounting for 6% of global exports and 23% of global trade in services.¹ There are an estimated 270 million jobs worldwide directly related to tourism² making the sector one of the world's top job creators, especially for women and youth.

For decades, tourism has been a priority sector for development initiatives due to its very special characteristics which include stimulating economic growth and diversification, employment opportunities, infrastructure development, connectivity and foreign exchange earnings. Beyond direct economic impacts, tourism can produce multiplier effects across societies: it can support cultural preservation, finance conservation, create incentives for biodiversity and ecosystem protection, and broaden social inclusion when benefits reach host communities equitably.

These potential benefits are not automatic. Tourism's contribution to sustainable development depends on how it is planned, governed and managed. Poorly planned growth

¹ World Tourism Organization (2025), *World Tourism Barometer*, volume 23, issue 2, May 2025, UN Tourism, Madrid, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18111/wtobarometereng>.

² International Labour Organization – ILOSTAT (2024), '[Tracking the rebound in tourism employment](https://ilostat ilo.org)', ILO, Geneva, available at: <https://ilostat ilo.org>

can degrade environments, erode cultural heritage and exacerbate social inequalities. By contrast, well-governed tourism integrated with local priorities can contribute to resilient economies and healthy ecosystems.

Beyond environmental and economic outcomes, tourism's long-term viability also depends on its perceived legitimacy among host communities. Policies that strengthen participation, distribute benefits fairly and measurably improve local quality of life can help build trust, reduce conflict and support the stewardship of natural and cultural assets. In this context, tourism is uniquely positioned to contribute to recovery, renewal and positive transformation, given its close links to communities, cultures, ecosystems and local economies.

The Enduring Principles of Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism is a value-driven approach that balances three interdependent dimensions: environmental, socio-cultural and economic. UN Tourism recommends that sustainable tourism should³:

1. Use environmental resources responsibly, maintain essential ecological processes and conserve natural heritage and biodiversity;
2. Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, protect built and living heritage and foster inter-cultural understanding and tolerance; and
3. Promote viable, long-term economic activity that delivers fairly distributed socio-economic benefits, including stable employment, income opportunities, social services and contribution to poverty alleviation.

These principles apply to all forms of tourism and all destination types. Sustainability is not a fixed target but a continuous process that requires inclusive governance, broad stakeholder participation, political leadership and ongoing monitoring. Monitoring should also consider distributional outcomes community well-being and ecosystem health.

³ World Tourism Organization (n.d.), '[Sustainable development](https://untourism.int/sustainable-development)', UN Tourism, Madrid, available at: <https://untourism.int/sustainable-development>

Evolving Concepts and Approaches in Sustainable Tourism

Within the overall framework of sustainability tourism, a range of concepts, approaches and forms of tourism have influenced tourism practice and policy over time:

- **Ecotourism** emphasizes nature-based forms of tourism linked with conservation and traditional cultures, often involving education and interpretation, minimizing environmental and cultural impacts, while supporting local communities through sustainable local income and jobs.⁴
- **Nature positive** refers to tourism that not only minimises environmental harm but also actively invests in nature restoration in tourist destinations. It includes rigorous monitoring and reporting on environmental harm, and efforts to prevent it.⁵
- **Net positive** is an approach that means doing more good than bad. It goes beyond 'doing less harm' and urges businesses to have a positive impact on the world. The concept advocates a holistic approach, positioning core business activity at the heart of actions towards sustainable practice and encourages acknowledgement and prioritization of impacts that are linked to business profitability, risk and opportunity.⁶
- **Responsible Tourism** seeks to minimize social, economic and environmental impacts while enhancing benefits for local people and host communities, including inclusion, accessibility and diversity. It contributes to conserving natural and cultural heritage, fosters respect between tourists and hosts, and promotes inclusive access and pride at the local level.⁷
- **Resilient Tourism** has traditionally been associated with managing risks from natural disasters and economic shocks. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, resilience has emerged as a central theme in tourism policy - emphasising not only recovery, but also the sector's ability to adapt, transform and thrive in the face of future challenges.⁸

All these concepts evolved in response to trends which drove global and regional discussions, including poverty alleviation, climate change and other developmental challenges. Nevertheless, they remain grounded in the principles of sustainability.

⁴ World Tourism Organization (n.d.), 'Ecotourism and Protected areas', UN Tourism, Madrid, available at: <https://untourism.int/sustainable-development/ecotourism-and-protected-areas>

⁵ World Tourism Organization; World Travel and Tourism Council and Sustainable Hospitality Alliance (2024), *Nature Positive – Travel & Tourism in Action*, UN Tourism, Madrid, p.6, available at: <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/10.18111/9789284425020>

⁶ United Nations – Department of Economic and Social Affairs (n.d.), 'Net Positive in Water and Carbon by 2040, UN DESA, New York, available at: <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/net-positive-water-and-carbon-2040>

⁷ International Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations (2002), *Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism, Cape Town*, Responsible Tourism Partnership, available at: <https://responsibletourismpartnership.org>

⁸ Foreseen: World Tourism Organization (2025), *Action Plan for Enhanced Resilience for Inclusive, Sustainable Tourism Development*, UN Tourism, Madrid

Understanding Regenerative Tourism

In recent years, the term “regenerative tourism” has gained increasing visibility in tourism policy and practice. It is generally used to describe approaches that seek not only to reduce the negative impacts of tourism, but also to restore and improve destinations’ ecosystems, cultures and communities. In practice, however, its meaning and institutional adoptions vary.

The notion of regeneration is not new. Biologically, it describes the ability of living systems to heal and renew themselves, as seen in tissues, ecosystems and species. Across philosophical, cultural and linguistic traditions, regeneration has also been associated with renewal, Restoration, continuity and transformation. As reflected in Annex II, three common and recurrent themes appear in these different manifestations: cycles, healing and improvement.

In tourism, this broader meaning of regeneration suggests moving beyond reducing harm to actively enabling places and communities to heal, renew and thrive, while recognizing the interdependence between ecosystems, communities, cultures and local economies.

The concept of regeneration emerged particularly in the wake of climate-related natural disasters in tourism destinations. There was a realization that mis-managed and unsustainable tourism practices had deteriorated or impacted natural environments to such a degree as to make them vulnerable to natural disasters (for example, the destruction of mangrove forests and coastal erosion). There was a call for tourism to not focus solely on minimizing negative impacts of tourism but regenerate through the enhancement of positive impacts.

How Is Regeneration Addressed within the United Nations System and Selected Other Institutions?

This section provides a selective overview of how regeneration and related concepts are reflected across selected institutions and policy processes and highlights implications for conceptual clarity and policy coherence in tourism.

Within the United Nations (UN) system, the concept of regeneration appears across several sectors, with a strong focus on agriculture. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) refers to regenerative agriculture as holistic farming systems that improve water and air quality, enhance ecosystem biodiversity, produce nutrient-dense food and sequester carbon. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) notes that agroecology, nature-positive solutions and regenerative agriculture are complementary, but warns that an emphasis on soil health and carbon can sideline other important food-systems dimensions such as agrobiodiversity,

natural resource management, climate adaptation and resilience and socioeconomic considerations such as equity, justice and access.⁹

Many UN initiatives advance principles consistent with regeneration even when they do not use the term explicitly. The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021-30 sets ten guiding principles to maximize gains for biodiversity, ecosystems and human well-being. Flagship projects for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) link restoration with sustainable blue economy transitions, combining site-level action, enabling policy and peer learning. Recent SIDS-related policy processes also highlight the importance of linking tourism recovery with sustainable, regenerative and restorative approaches for communities, cultures and ecosystems.¹⁰

Some regional and multilateral bodies have incorporated regenerative ideas into policy. At its 2022 Ministerial Summit, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), adopted seven core principles for regenerative tourism¹¹: respect for local custodians, traditions, and cultures; sustainable and responsible travel and tourism; knowledge exchange and open dialogue; inclusive workforce development and occupational standards; use of innovative technologies to improve economic, social, cultural and environmental well-being; public-private partnerships to encourage tourism investment in the APEC region; and strengthening the resiliency of tourism to prepare for future shocks. These principles also point to the importance of building regenerative tourism approaches with and for local communities, rather than treating communities only as beneficiaries of externally designed initiatives.

Views on the term's clarity and operational utility differ across institutions. The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), cautions that regenerative tourism seems to stem from a desire for more inspirational terminology rather than substantive change. It also further states that the term is fraught with ambiguity and lacks a coherent operational framework for businesses seeking to adopt regenerative practices and recommends that the principles of sustainable tourism should be maintained.¹²

At the same time, the growing popularity of the term raises risks of inconsistent use and 'regeneration-washing'. Any future policy approach would benefit from safeguards such as clear definitions, baseline requirements aligned with sustainable tourism principles, transparent reporting, independent verification where feasible, and demonstrated net gains

⁹ World Wildlife Fund (2023), *The Role of Regenerative Agriculture to Drive Food Systems Transformation*, WWF, Gland, p. 5, available at: [6iwb49n7w_WWF_Perspectives_Paper_Regen_Ag_231204.pdf](https://www.wwf.org.uk/publications/perspectives/paper-regen-ag-231204.pdf)

¹⁰ SIDS Coalition for Nature (n.d.), 'SIDS Ecosystem Restoration Flagship', SIDS Coalition for Nature, available at: <https://sidscoalitionfornature.org/sids-ecosystem-restoration-flagship>

¹¹ Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (2022), 'Policy Recommendations for Tourism of the Future: Regenerative Tourism', APEC, Singapore, available at: <https://www.apec.org/meeting-papers/sectoral-ministerial-meetings/tourism/11th-apec-tourism-ministerial-meeting/policy-recommendations-for-tourism-f-the-future-regenerative-tourism>

¹² Global Sustainable Tourism Council (n.d.), *The Difference Between Regenerative Tourism and Sustainable Tourism*, GSTC, available at: <https://www.gstc.org/regenerative-tourism/>

for nature and host communities. This also points to the importance of due diligence and of monitoring both positive and negative impacts, so that regenerative tourism is assessed not only by intentions, but by demonstrable outcomes for destinations, communities and ecosystems.

Separately, the World Economic Forum (WEF) emphasizes behavioural change, among both travelers and hosts, as essential for any transition from sustainable to regenerative tourism. The Forum frames regenerative tourism as a possible evolution of sustainable tourism whose mainstreaming depends on altering how people and industry act toward local communities and the environment.¹³

Regionally, the European Union is preparing a new Sustainable Tourism Strategy (2026). As part of this, the European Economic and Social Committee has urged that this strategy include explicit regeneration objectives, arguing that regenerative tourism should go beyond sustainability to actively restoring and strengthening natural, social and economic capital.¹⁴

Conclusions

Advancing sustainable tourism requires actions that uphold its core principles: minimizing harm to the environment, promoting development that is inclusive, participatory and measurable, empowering communities to ensure equitable benefits and resilience and adopting holistic, multi-sector approaches with strong safeguards. Sustainable tourism focuses on maintaining balance, ensuring that tourism activities do not cause degradation of ecosystems, communities or livelihoods.

Building on these principles, regenerative tourism should be understood as complementary to sustainability, not as a replacement for it. It strengthens the restorative dimension of sustainable tourism by focusing on the renewal and enhancement of ecosystems, cultural assets, communities and livelihoods. In practical terms, this may include restoring ecosystems, reinvesting tourism benefits in local economies, strengthening local value chains and empowering communities to act as stewards of destination development.

Building on the core principles of sustainable tourism, regenerative tourism strengthens facets of sustainability focusing on the restoration and enhancement of ecosystems, cultural assets

¹³ World Economic Forum (2023), *'The future of tourism is sustainable and regenerative'*, WEF, Geneva, available at: www.weforum.org

¹⁴ *Tourism in the EU: sustainability as a driver for long-term competitiveness*, EESC, available at: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2025/2014/oj>

and communities through tourism, leaving destinations, livelihoods and natural systems enhanced and better than before.

Members may wish to consider whether further work is needed to develop shared terminology, principles and illustrative indicators that support consistent application across destinations and stakeholders.

Annex I: Selected Tourism Case Studies on Regenerative Tourism

All case studies are drawn from the World Tourism Organization/World Travel and Tourism Council/Sustainable Hospitality Alliance publication *Nature Positive Travel and Tourism in Action*¹⁵, except for the Costa Rica case study, which comes from the Costa Rican Tourism Board (ICT).

Defining dependencies on nature (Aruba, Netherlands)

Undeveloped green space in Aruba is scarce. For tourist spots, in particular, greenfield sites are in high demand for new hotels and other construction. But land use is also the greatest driver of biodiversity loss on the island. With this in mind, Bucuti and Tara Beach Resort, the Caribbean's first certified carbon neutral hotel, took action. In October 2022, in honour of its 35th anniversary, the resort revealed it was forever protecting – and currently reforesting – a 12-hectare tract of land nestled in the heart of Noord, one of the island's busiest cities. Managed by The Bucuti and Tara Nature Preservation Foundation, the nature reserve is a classic Aruban ecosystem, hosting some 280 bird species including Wara Wara, Shocos and Prikichis. The park is being reforested with indigenous flora, trails are being added and wildlife is beginning to thrive. The reserve has attracted volunteers including Aruba's government officials, community members, resort staff, and even resort guests. As of August 2023, 273 trees have been planted, with an ultimate goal to plant at least 15,000 – saving an estimated 375 tonnes of CO₂ every year.

Regenerating the Dry Forest: MICE Industry with Lasting Impact (Costa Rica)

The MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions) industry is traditionally associated with significant carbon emissions – from international flights to energy-intensive events and generation of waste. Costa Rica identified an opportunity to align this high-value economic sector with its national sustainability objectives by creating a mechanism for effective, place-based carbon offsetting: the MICE Forest. Established in 2016, the MICE Forest is located in Guanacaste, a region that receives the least rainfall in Costa Rica, making it particularly vulnerable to extended dry seasons and drought conditions. It is also the top destination in the country for incentive travel and corporate events. Through the Payment for Environmental Services (PES) program of the National Forest Financing Fund (FONAFIFO), in partnership with the Costa Rica Tourism Institute (ICT), funds from event carbon-offset

¹⁵ *Nature Positive – Travel & Tourism in Action*:

<https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/10.18111/9789284425020>

contributions are used to maintain a conservation sanctuary of 659 hectares containing more than 33,259 native trees. The sanctuary is focused not on tree planting, but by enabling native species to regenerate naturally. In addition, local residents are trained and employed to manage and provide interpretation services at the site. This program ensures that business tourism does not simply pass through the country but takes root, leaving a positive, permanent, and shared legacy for the planet.

Build nature positive partnerships - a commitment to preserve and regenerate coral reefs (Maldives)

Working together, in partnership, is a resource-efficient and effective way to support the delivery and achievement of collective objectives. In 2001, the Four Seasons Resort in the Maldives partnered with a local marine consultancy, Reefscapers, to protect and regrow the local coral reef. Today, the partnership is one of the world's largest artificial reef restoration projects. The partnership uses an innovative technique of tying coral fragments onto 'coral frames' made by a local co-operative of eight employees. For more than two decades, guests have been invited to plant their own reef and watch it grow at MarineSavers.com. Thanks in part to the donations of Four Seasons guest sponsors, more than 8,500 transplanted reef structures now subsist in the waters around the two Maldivian Resort islands of Kuda Huraa and Landaa Giraavaru. In 2022, the project's first-of-its-kind artificial intelligence (AI) research was recognised in a science journal with the aim of inspiring scientists in numerous fields to take on similar cross-disciplinary challenges. The process has even become self-sustaining, with propagated frames now undergoing natural reproduction. To date the team has settled five species more than eight times and hopes to create a simple methodology that can be used across the country to repopulate areas of damaged reef, increase diversity, and help colonies adapt to changing environmental conditions.

National tourism industry transformation plan (New Zealand)

New Zealand has declared a commitment to rebuild a more regenerative tourism system. Its Industry Transformation Plan (ITP) for tourism is part of this goal. The ITP is a government initiative in consultation with researchers and independent advisors. The first phase of the Tourism ITP– "Better Work" – is focused on enabling decent work for the tourism industry. To make any transformational shifts in the tourism system, we must look at the foundation of the system: people. Investment in those who work in tourism is fundamental to achieve other transformational shifts. The second phase of the Tourism ITP is focused on the "Environment" and tourism. The three pillars of focus include:

1. Integrating climate change;

2. Transforming Aotearoa New Zealand's visitor economy to a low carbon emissions industry; and
3. Restoring biodiversity and eco-systems through tourism.

Ensuring the sector protects and restores the environment is important because Aotearoa New Zealand's natural environment is central to the country's attraction as a destination.

Annex II: Linguistic and Cultural Perspectives on “Regeneration”

Category	Subcategory	Description
Etymology and early uses	Latin origin	regenerare → re- (again) + generare (to produce, create, beget) Original sense: to be born again, restore to a better state
	Medieval/ Christian theology	regeneratio referred to spiritual rebirth (baptism, conversion)
	Early modern Europe	Idiomatic use for moral renewal (a regenerate man) and political rebirth (regeneration of the nation).
Biological and medical contexts	Biology (18th century onwards)	Introduced in France (Réaumur, 1712) describing limb regrowth in crayfish/starfish; expanded later to human tissue healing
	Medicine	Regenerative medicine = therapies aiming not only to repair but to restore full function (stem cells, organ regeneration, tissue engineering)
	Ayurveda	Ancient holistic medical system emphasizing balance of energies (<i>doshas</i>) and activating the body’s natural regenerative powers through diet, herbs, yoga and lifestyle

Philosophical and religious nuances	Western philosophy	Stoicism/Neoplatonism: cycles of renewal and eternal return. Modern (Whitehead, Deleuze): regeneration as creative becoming
	Christianity	Regeneration as spiritual rebirth (born again)
	Islam	tajdīd = renewal of faith, cyclical revival
	Judaism	hiṭḥadshut = renewal, regeneration for spiritual/national revival
	Hinduism/Buddhism	punarjanma = rebirth; pratisaṃskāra = renewal, re-formation
	Indigenous cosmologies	Regeneration tied to reciprocity, ancestors and land cycles
Cross-linguistic idioms	Europe	French: régénération (theology, politics) German: Regeneration (theology, Romantic philosophy, biology). Spanish: regeneración (Regeneracionismo) Italian: rigenerazione (alchemy, nation-building)
	South Asia	punarjanma (rebirth), pratisaṃskāra (renewal) Idiomatically regeneration = spiritual progression
	East Asia	Chinese: 再生 (zàishēng) Japanese: 再生 (saisei) Korean: 재생 (jaesaeng) Tied to balance and cyclic return

	Middle East	Hebrew: hithadshut (renewal) Arabic: tajdīd (renewal, revival)
	Africa	Swahili: kuzaliwa upya (rebirth) Akan: sankofa (cultural regeneration) Bantu: rainfall, fertility, community healing idioms
	Indigenous Americas	Nahuatl: olin (cosmic cycles) Māori: whakaora (heal, bring back to life; linked to land and ancestry)
Astrological and esoteric dimensions	Astrology	Linked to Pluto (death/rebirth) and Scorpio (transformation)
	Alchemy	solve et coagula (dissolve and re-form) as regenerative transformation
	New Age idioms	Regenerative energy, regenerative vibrations
Modern Applications	Agriculture	Regenerative farming = soil restoration, biodiversity, carbon sequestration
	Architecture/ design	Regenerative design = systems that heal and self-renew
	Business	Regenerative leadership, regenerative economies
	Systems theory	Regeneration as a property of adaptive systems, the ability to reorganize and renew after disruption

Universal Idiomatic Patterns	Cycles	Renewal through return (seasons, reincarnation, cosmic cycles)
	Healing/ revival	Restoration after damage (health, spirit, land)
	Improvement/ reform	Surpassing the past (moral, political, cultural rebirth)