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REGENERATIVE TOURISM & NATURE CONSERVATION TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

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¹<https://www.hes-so.ch/en/hes-so/about-us/international/leading-house-mena>

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BACKGROUND

Sustainable tourism takes responsibility for its impact on societies, economies, and the environment. It considers the needs of visitors and the tourism industry, as well as the environment and host communities. As a result of global warming, overcrowding, and loss of socio-cultural authenticity in host communities, interest in sustainable and ethical tourism practices has increased. In 2022, over 80% of global travelers said that sustainable tourism is essential².

Expanding on the notion of “sustainable tourism”, which seeks to mitigate the adverse effects of tourism on the planet, “regenerative tourism” emerges as a progressive approach. This subtype aims to contribute positively to both the local community and the environment, thereby promoting a mindset that not only neutralizes harm but actively benefits the destination³.

This white paper is an outcome of an international research project supported by Leading House MENA, an initiative by The Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research, and Innovation (SERI). It compiles insights and recommendations from an expert roundtable aimed at exploring the concept of regenerative tourism and its potential to rejuvenate nature, communities, and the dynamics between hosts and guests. The roundtable convened 15 national experts from the private and public sectors, along with civil society. Structured to mirror the meeting presentations and discussions, the paper details the sessions: Dr. Inversini opened with an introduction to regenerative hospitality; Dr. Talhouk discussed the interplay between tourism and nature’s regeneration; Dr. Daou focused on how tourism can revitalize communities, and Dr. Inversini concluded with a session on tourism and host-guest regeneration.

“Regenerative hospitality sees accommodation businesses as the agents of change at the destination level: hotels and other types of accommodations are here conceptualized as building blocks of the destination system that could stimulate a net-positive impact on the wider destination”

–Alessandro Inversini



²<https://www.statista.com/topics/1916/green-tourism/#topicOverview>

³<https://hospitalityinsights.ehl.edu/regenerative-tourism-a-shift-coming>

SESSION ONE: INTRODUCING REGENERATIVE HOSPITALITY

Dr. Inversini started the presentation by outlining the Regenerative Design Principles as shown in the table below⁴:

LIVING SYSTEMS APPROACH	All activities and resources from living systems are used to design the regeneration of local communities and natural environments into a healthy state of self-organization. The aim is to improve the overall system that includes both humans and nature, with a focus on their development and health.
MUTUAL RESPECT	This approach is deeply rooted into an ethic of care for everyone and everything and promotes a wider sense of responsibility towards all.
AGENCY	Every actor in the ecosystem can drive and contribute to regenerative change using their unique assets and abilities; nobody is excluded, allowing everyone to play a role in the regeneration of ecosystems.
EVOLUTION	Regenerative practices are inherently flexible, adapting and evolving in response to changes in ecosystems and available resources.
NETWORK	Regeneration at the community level can only flourish through the collective efforts of stakeholders and local actors. These actors are linked through networks and areas of expertise, all working together to revive both human and natural ecosystems.
LEARNING SYSTEM	Regeneration is a continual learning process for those involved; it ultimately serves as a way to increase awareness through human connections and aims to cultivate a shift towards regenerative thinking within the community.

Dr. Inversini went on to explain that, ultimately, regeneration aims to create a business approach that has a net-positive impact. A net-positive company “improves wellbeing for everyone it impacts and at all scales - every product, every operation, every region and country, and for every stakeholder, including employees, suppliers, communities, customers, and even future generations and the planet itself”.

Dr. Inversini elaborated on the four principles that guide the net-positive approach⁵:

Serve Stakeholders and then Shareholders: businesses should be more focused on the impact they are making on their stakeholders (nature included) at all levels. Shareholders have a great say in modern businesses, however in the net-positive mindset they are in the background, with the human and non-human ecosystem in the foreground. This means that the whole company should be led with a stakeholder perspective rather than with a shareholder perspective.

Take Ownership of All Company Impacts: building a net-positive business also means that the firm as a whole should change the overall mindset thriving towards a regenerative approach for all. This is complex to achieve; however, managers should not be blindfolded and should acknowledge what the company does effectively and what can be improved. Ownership of impacts is therefore vital for positive and less positive sides.

Embrace Partnerships and Work with Your Critics: networking with non-aligned partners is essential for the process of continuous learning. Partnerships are also crucial as regenerative entrepreneurs and managers should thrive for systemic impact. Building a network of like-minded people and working with critics is therefore necessary.

Change Systems with Net-Positive Advocacy: advocacy and public engagement are critical to change a system - such as the one of travel and tourism - that has been built in an extractive way since its inception. It is only by showing the inner and outer benefit of regeneration and net-positive approaches that the movement can grow, and the mind-shift can be radical.

⁴Reed, B. (2007). Shifting from ‘sustainability’ to regeneration. *Building Research & Information*, 35(6), 674-680.

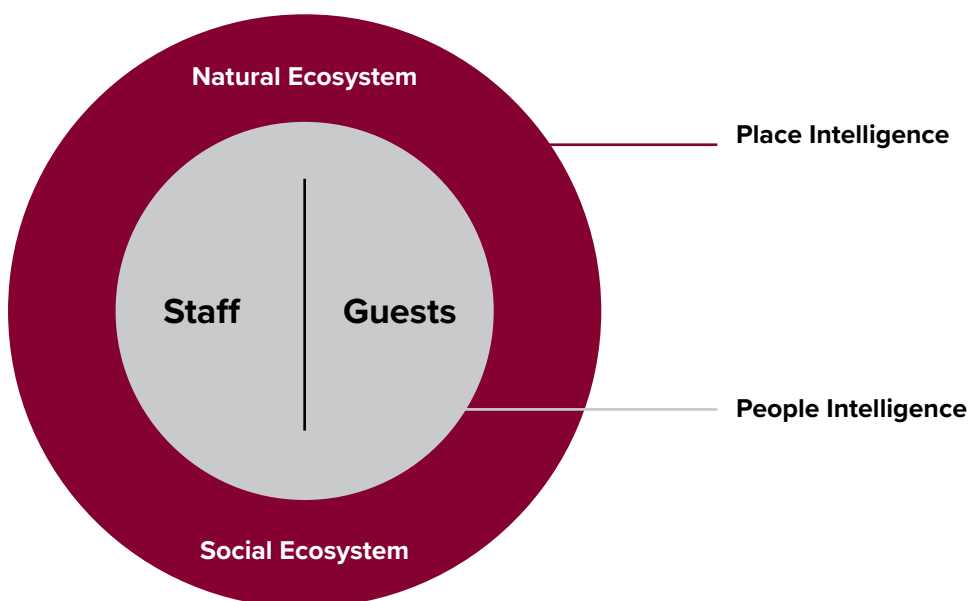
⁵<https://hbr.org/2021/09/the-net-positive-manifesto>

Dr. Inversini then proceeded by putting forward a definition of Regenerative Hospitality as follows: “Regenerative Hospitality sees accommodation businesses as the agents of change at the destination level: hotels and other types of accommodations are here conceptualized as building blocks of the destination system that could stimulate a net-positive impact on the wider destination”.

He then mentioned two concepts, the regenerative mind-shift, and the ecosystem approach, that are essential to better understand regenerative hospitality⁶. Regarding the concept of regenerative mindset, Dr. Inversini clarified that the hospitality industry requires a shift in mentality rather than following a strict checklist. He pointed that it is not about “sustainability on steroids” but rather a wider responsibility mindset in which hospitality managers acknowledge the importance of social and natural ecosystems to build meaningful businesses and transformative experiences. He indicated that to avoid potential “greenwashing”, there is a need to measure progress using “mechanisms of control” instead of “standards”. With respect to the ecosystem approach, Dr. Inversini explained that the regenerative concept should start from the bottom-up, beginning with hotels. He gave an example of how small businesses led by entrepreneurs with a mindset evolving towards regeneration are the leading example for hotel chains to follow. Regenerative hotels will then be able to promote both “place intelligence” and “people intelligence”.

Place Intelligence is the outer hospitality layer with the natural and social ecosystem. In this layer, hospitality businesses engage with a net-positive orientation both towards natural ecosystem (i.e. regenerative farming and agriculture etc.) and towards the social fabric ecosystem (i.e. inclusivity, marginalized people support etc.).

People Intelligence is the inner hospitality layer with the relational and experiential ecosystems. The net-positive orientation towards the place has also an impact on the inner layer which is the one promoting host-guest relationships with the co-creation of authentic -and often transformative- experiences involving both the nature and the community.



Source: <https://hospitalityinsights.ehl.edu/regenerative-hospitality-paradigm-shift>

⁶Inversini, A., Saul, L., Balet, S., & Schegg, R. (2023). The rise of regenerative hospitality. *Journal of Tourism Futures*.

SESSION TWO: TOURISM AND NATURE REGENERATION

In her presentation Dr. Talhouk discussed the concept of regenerative tourism, emphasizing the need for a shift from a net-zero to a net-positive paradigm with respect to tourism's impact on nature. She explained that regenerative tourism should go beyond seeking to minimize impact and instead it should aim to positively contribute to the health, resilience, and quality of natural attractions. Dr. Talhouk elaborated that ecological restoration does not guarantee positive evolution of natural systems as ecosystem health may decline if not protected. She then pointed to the fact that regeneration considers subsequent engagement to allow ecosystems to continue to evolve positively after restoration⁷.

Dr. Talhouk then explained how regenerative tourism involves aligning human activities with the evolution of ecosystems by contributing to an evolving rather than a devolving environment. She pointed for the need to complement the conservation efforts of nature reserves by harmonizing with and supporting the regenerative capacity of "local nature".

In her presentation Dr. Talhouk suggested that regenerative tourism can have a net-positive impact by adopting sustainable practices, taking ethical decisions, and fostering a sense of place. She elaborated these points by giving examples to illustrate how regenerative tourism can contribute to nature regeneration through spatial and operational interventions.

Dr. Talhouk then proceeded by explaining that tourists connect differently with nature and hence have different expectations during their visits. She listed the different types of tourists, namely biocentric, eco-centric, hedonic, and instrumental tourists, and described the expectations and interests of each⁸. Additionally, Dr. Talhouk emphasized the importance of creating a positive sense of place through storytelling and driving an attachment to the local nature. She suggested that a positive experience can encourage tourists to be committed to or supportive of conservation efforts.

Furthermore, her presentation tackled healing aspects of nature which may be implemented through various activities. Dr. Talhouk explained that these activities may not directly contribute to nature conservation, but they will have a positive impact on tourist wellbeing which in turn may lead to a positive sense of place and hence commitment to its conservation.

Dr. Talhouk concluded her presentation by indicating that the success of regenerative tourism should be evaluated through visual indicators that can be readily and routinely measured. She gave examples of such indicators including the presence of organic matter layers, aquifer fill-up, insect diversity, bird sightings or sounds, natural increase of green space, quiet spaces, absence of light pollution, and improved air quality.



Source: <https://berytech.org/cezar-projects-promoting-sustainable-and-responsible-tourism-in-the-shouf/>

⁷<https://regenesishgroup.com/regeneration-vs-restoration>
<https://oceanliteracy.unesco.org/ecosystem-restoration-regeneration-rewilding/>

⁸Zhang, G., Higham, J., & Albrecht, J. N. (2023). Ecological restoration and visitor experiences: insights informed by environmental philosophy. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 31(5), 1252-1270.

KEY DISCUSSION TAKEAWAYS

DEVELOPING AND ENFORCING LAWS AND REGULATIONS: participants focused on the importance of developing new laws and enforcing existing ones to conserve and develop natural areas. They indicated that the laws should equally target local communities, tourists, as well as nature guides and eco-tour operators. Attendees pointed out that there are no laws to regulate the profession of nature guides and eco-tour operators. They also indicated that there are hundreds of tour organizers in Lebanon, but very few of them are registered with the government.

ENGAGING GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES: regarding nature regeneration, participants indicated that the different government ministries should play a role as well, especially when coordinating with municipalities regarding the percentage of construction on lands and land use management methods.

ENHANCING TOURISTS' CULTURE: participants proposed several actions to modify tourists attitudes and behaviors including: offering awareness trainings, rewarding people who adopt regenerative practices, explaining how entrance fees to nature reserves are used to conserve nature, encouraging schools and universities to spread the culture of supporting local initiatives and complying with local directives, ensuring that awareness raising is done by professionals and experts, and spreading awareness at all levels, including the parliament, as it is the place where legislation occurs.

INCENTIVIZING LOCAL COMMUNITIES: participants discussed the importance of remunerating and compensating local communities that actively contribute to maintaining and regenerating local nature. They indicated that community support should also be given to encourage the conservation and regeneration of local cultures and traditional knowledge. In fact, if local communities are missing this pillar, transformational touristic experiences cannot be created.

CREATING A COALITION BETWEEN PROFESSIONALS: participants agreed that professionals in the sector should work collaboratively and support one another. This will help them in promoting and enhancing their services by building innovative experiences.

“Regenerative tourism involves aligning human activities with the evolution of ecosystems by contributing to an evolving rather than a devolving environment. There is a need to complement conservation efforts of nature reserves by harmonizing with and supporting the regenerative capacity of ‘local nature’.”

–Salma Talhouk

SESSION THREE: TOURISM AND COMMUNITY REGENERATION

During his session, Dr. Daou presented the different business models available and the ones that are mostly used, starting with the business model canvas, then introducing alternative business models that are increasingly being adopted. He indicated that such alternative business models expand the traditional business model canvas by having a sustainability-oriented focus. He then gave examples such as the Social Enterprise Business Model Canvas, the Triple Layered Model Canvas, and the Ecocanvas, which is mainly used for business models adopting a circular economy perspective.

Despite their importance, Dr. Daou stressed on the shortcomings of each of those alternative business models as the regenerative approach not only seeks to minimize negative impacts but also to actively contribute to the regeneration of the environment, community, and heritage. This led him to introduce the Regenerative Business Model⁹ that is at the intersection of sustainability, circular economy, and regeneration. This business model is integrative of all key stakeholders and considers the different forms of capital, including natural, cultural, social, financial, and human capital. Moreover, Dr. Daou explained that at the core of this business model is the idea of justice and fairness for all, including nature and animal rights. He concluded by emphasizing the significance of planetary health and societal wellbeing which are considered essential elements that must be at the core of the business model.

KEY DISCUSSION TAKEAWAYS

ADOPTING A SUITABLE BUSINESS MODEL: participants focused on the importance for hospitality businesses to choose a suitable business model, then develop a business plan for their investments, as many of these start as small-scale family-run initiatives.

GETTING OUT OF “SILOS MENTALITY”: an important approach for local small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to thrive is to relate them to larger-scale successful local businesses so they become part of the momentum, and not work in silos. The established links can therefore help in exchanging knowledge and consequently finding practical solutions to shared challenges.

ROLE OF DESTINATION MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATIONS (DMOS): participants highlighted the significant role of well-established DMOs in supporting small businesses. In Lebanon, some DMOs are already established but need more time to gain strength and become capable of influencing and offering advice.

CAPACITY BUILDING OF BUSINESSES: capacity building through targeted and well-tailored small grants is essential to move businesses forward.

DIVERSIFICATION OF TOURISM ACTIVITIES: regarding economic viability, tourism businesses should consider activity diversification to attract types of clients that otherwise would not come and to increase the time they spend at the destination. Participants mentioned that applying the “learn, serve, and immerse” concept could be a successful example, where tourists come to learn about the landscape, then serve the destination through planting trees or cleaning the seashore, and finally have an immersive part where they interact with the local community, talk to them, do activities with them, and share their history. The business model in that case should minimize potential conflicts within the community while also facilitating the process to regenerate this community and not develop it as a “commodity”. The latter is the main difference between traditional business models that aim to maximize profits and viability, versus non-traditional ones that consider the maximum capacity without negatively impacting the community.

OPTIMIZING SITE CAPACITY: participants mentioned a frequent dilemma: having a lot of people in the nature reserve is not favorable, but small numbers mean an increase in the price of the service which can negatively impact the viability of the tourism business, especially if it targets the domestic market (as opposed to the international market). Here comes the notion of market segmentation: a niche with high prices could mean “quality” and “value” for many people. Attendees indicated that if this is coupled with a great Unique Selling Proposition (USP) it can immensely boost the economic viability of the business.

⁹Konietzko, J., Das, A., & Bocken, N. (2023). Towards regenerative business models: A necessary shift? *Sustainable Production and Consumption*, 38, 372-388.

SESSION FOUR: THE LANDSCAPE OF REGENERATIVE HOSPITALITY IN LEBANON

In this last session, Dr. Inversini explained that the current research project included a field visit in June 2023 to rural hospitality places in two biosphere reserves in Lebanon, Jabal Moussa and Al Shouf. He indicated that this part is dedicated to sharing preliminary findings resulting from desk research, quantitative inquiry, and qualitative fieldwork.

The desk research analyzed the reviews of all accommodations and restaurants in the selected areas. A total of 5,121 reviews were analyzed from Tripadvisor.com and Airbnb.com. Results showed that hospitality and restaurant establishments in the areas are leveraging heritage, culture, and nature. Traditions in terms of food and excursions are dominating the scene on social media. There was general positivity in the reviews with no criticality highlighted.

The quantitative “exploratory” survey completed by 47 service providers in the selected areas showed a lack of engagement with sustainability certifications, but a positive mindset regarding the wider hospitality sector engaging in regenerative practices (i.e. an interest in natural and social ecosystems).

The qualitative fieldwork which occurred from June 12 to June 16, 2023, resulted in nineteen interviews with organizations operating in the accommodation and the food and beverage fields. The semi-structured interviews revealed the characteristics of the Lebanese rural and regenerative hospitality businesses, which are summarized as follows:

Connection with Nature: hospitality managers expressed a clear attachment to nature, which was the most mentioned topic in the interviews. This connection was evident and strong, and it was also reflected in the real-life experiences shared by the interviewees.

Inclusivity at the Core: a very strong bond with the local socio-cultural landscape was observed. The managers were in most of the cases active members of the local community who seek to foster inclusivity (for disabled and/or marginalized people) and to support people’s development and professional growth by encouraging them to be part of their entrepreneurial journey.

Long Lasting Relationships: networks and relationships were noticed to be at the core of the Lebanese regenerative hospitality. Clusters of people interested in common challenges (i.e. nature or community issues) are naturally emerging in a bottom-up manner which also fosters the sharing of good practices among the industry.

Blossoming Experiences: the above points resulted in newly created and crafted experiences which leverage both the community and nature. This approach to human and non-human ecosystems is de facto fostering creativity in new businesses that wish to maintain a meaningful relationship with the natural environment and to support community regeneration.

“The ‘Regenerative Business Model’ is at the intersection of sustainability, circular economy, and regeneration. This business model is integrative of all key stakeholders and considers the different forms of capital, including natural, cultural, social, financial, and human capital.”

–Alain Daou



Source: <https://guesthouseslebanon.com/guesthouses/details/streeh-guesthouse>

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants in the roundtable highlighted the need to enhance the visibility of the sustainable tourism sector in general, and the emerging regenerative tourism sector in particular in Lebanon. They pointed out the need to minimize the vast knowledge gap between different stakeholders. This can be achieved by exchanging expertise and complementing expert knowledge with lessons learnt from local community experiences. Also, creating linkages between stakeholders at all levels is critical to building trust across the sector.

Moving forward, participants mentioned the following steps that are vital for improving the current state of the sector:



Redirect donors' vision to the focused and long-term needs of private initiatives.

To do so, the priorities of sustainable tourism actors and stakeholders must be aligned to have a common and strong position.



Update laws and regulations to incorporate recent knowledge and strategies related to the regenerative tourism approach.



Introduce special permits for eco-tour operators and eco-guides from the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Environment.

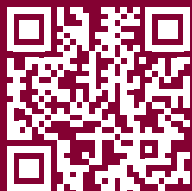


Increase the number of stakeholders in the regenerative tourism sector by ensuring more inclusivity and involving youth and people with disabilities in this momentum.



Develop learning opportunities in regenerative tourism through tailored workshops/diplomas/certificates at universities.

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