

## **Cultivating Change: Exploring the Positive Impacts of Regenerative Tourism on Local Food Systems**

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**Objectives** | Recent studies demonstrate that there is no universal definition of regenerative tourism (Bellato et al., 2023). Notwithstanding, some approaches argue that regenerative tourism goes beyond sustainability, as it focuses on tourists leaving the places better than they found them (Duxbury et al., 2020). Related activities have the potential to revitalise and regenerate destinations by creating a cycle of positive impacts on local people and their economies, regenerating local culture and biodiversity, through authentic, unique, and memorable travel experiences (CBI, 2022). It is 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) and supporting the long-term renewal of social and natural environments (Dredge, 2022). Despite the absence of an academic definition for the term “regenerative tourism”, there are innovative tourism experiences that can be addressed as transformational as they create net positive effects by regenerating cultural, natural, social or economic ecosystems. Food, and food tourism play a crucial role, as every destination has unique gastronomic traditions that offer meaningful experiences with local culture. In this context, regenerative gastronomic tourism practices can create the opportunity to bring small local food producers into the tourism ecosystem, by creating new, more sustainable business models. The objectives of this study are: i) to develop a conceptual framework for the study of Regenerative Tourism practices, providing a solid methodological approach; ii) to conduct an exploratory analysis of the concept of Regenerative Tourism and emerging practices, particularly within food producers and the tourism ecosystem through relevant case studies illustrating regenerative initiatives, providing valuable guidance for destinations seeking to adopt Regenerative Food Tourism principles and practices; iii) to empower local food producers and to bring them into the tourism ecosystem through regenerative food-based tourism experiences contributing to a more resilient and regenerative global tourism industry.

**Methodology** | This exploratory study adopts a qualitative method based on the following steps: i) A conceptual framework was developed according to the main features and drivers of regenerative tourism, providing a rigorous basis for the selection of relevant case studies of Regenerative Tourism involving local food producers; ii) Subsequently, an in-depth interview guide was designed. Interviews were conducted in person or online and complemented with direct observation and documental analysis, when possible; iii) Subjects were selected based on criteria predefined according to the literature review. Twenty-three case studies located in the Mediterranean region were analysed.

**Main results and contributions** | The results allowed us to conclude that farms, food stores and food producers are the most active actors in developing regenerative gastronomic tourism experiences. In this context, the most significant practices are classified as economic regeneration, followed by social, environmental, and cultural regeneration. Economic practices are mostly related to regenerating a traditional economic activity through tourism, supporting local economic development. The social dimension is focused on the connection between visitors and locals, raising awareness about the importance of regeneration, and the well-being of the community and visitors. Environmental practices are based on promoting sustainable choices by tourism firms and visitors, especially concerning the use of local organic products. Finally, the cultural dimension's most relevant outcome is cultural and traditional heritage regeneration.

**Limitations** | This study has some shortcomings despite its contributions. First, only 23 SMEs in the Mediterranean region were included in the sample, impacting how broadly the results can be applied to other areas or bigger businesses. Furthermore, the study mostly used qualitative data, which may not fully convey the intricacy of the regeneration practices and their effects even though they are detailed. Additionally, the study's concentration on food-related tourism may have limited the findings' generalizability to other areas of the travel and tourism business.

**Conclusions** | Most of the regenerative tourism practices analysed presented regenerative benefits in the four dimensions analysed, which supports the holistic view of the regenerative tourism concept present in the literature. Social and economic regenerative benefits stand out in cases related to traditional products and arts, such as the salt pans and the bread festival, and are mostly boosted by the involvement of local communities (jobs, entrepreneurship) and the establishment of networks with tourism stakeholders (social dimension as the basis for economic benefits). Environmental regenerative benefits stand out in initiatives related to agriculture, farming, or eco-tourism businesses. Farm-to-table experiences, regenerative agriculture supplying tourism businesses and the use of local and organic products are the most effective practices. SME food producers are brought into the tourism ecosystem mostly by the development of co-creative experiences and

through accommodation. However, there is a reduced number of tourism destinations and businesses effectively implementing regenerative tourism practices.

Additional studies regarding the concept in a more operational and implementation-based approach are needed, to support tourism destinations and businesses to transition to this innovative framework.

## References

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