

Regenerative Tourism and its Importance for Conservation Areas and Regional Nature Parks

Sarah Balet & Nadja Urfer

Keywords: *regenerative tourism, sustainability, natural areas, resilience*

Abstract

Tourism in sensitive natural areas creates both benefits and pressures, prompting growing recognition that traditional sustainability is no longer sufficient. Regenerative tourism has emerged as a transformative paradigm that seeks to restore and enhance socioecological systems through systems thinking, ecological worldviews and community centered practices. This article clarifies the conceptual foundations of regenerative tourism and highlights its relevance for conservation areas and regional nature parks, where ecological fragility and societal expectations converge. Drawing on a collaboration between the Swiss Parks Network and the Institute of Tourism of HES-SO Valais–Wallis, it examines how regenerative principles resonate with the Swiss parks' values and principles. The analysis shows strong alignment but identifies implementation challenges, including limited experience and missing supportive structures. As model regions for sustainable development, the Swiss parks are well positioned to pioneer regenerative tourism and encourage its wider adoption by tourism partners.

Introduction

Tourism in conservation areas and nature parks has long been characterized by a fundamental tension. On the one hand, it can generate economic value for peripheral regions, support local employment and raise public awareness of biodiversity and conservation objectives. On the other hand, tourism increasingly contributes to ecological degradation, resource overuse, social conflict and climate change (Duarte et al. 2024). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Swiss parks experienced a marked increase in visitor numbers (Müller 2022), reinforcing long-standing challenges related to overcrowding, traffic and ecosystem disturbance.

Traditional sustainability-oriented tourism strategies have largely focused on mitigating negative impacts through efficiency measures and visitor management. While such approaches remain necessary, they appear insufficient in the face of accelerating biodiversity loss, climate change and growing social tensions between residents and visitors. Against this backdrop, regenerative tourism has gained prominence as an alternative paradigm that claims to move beyond harm reduction towards actively restoring socioecological systems (Dredge 2022). However, its ability to respond to concrete tourism-related challenges, particularly in vulnerable landscapes, requires critical examination.

This article introduces regenerative tourism, situates it in relation to sustainability-oriented approaches and examines its relevance for conservation areas and nature parks, with a particular focus on the Swiss context. It also assesses both the opportunities and the limits of applying regenerative principles to tourism management in those areas.

What is regenerative tourism?

Regenerative tourism builds on the regenerative theory emerging from fields such as agriculture, urban planning and ecological economics (Bellato et al. 2023). Unlike traditional sustainability approaches that focus primarily on minimizing harm or managing carrying capacity, the regenerative one seeks to produce *net-positive* outcomes for ecological integrity, community wellbeing and socioecological resilience. This approach marks a fundamental conceptual shift: tourism is reframed not as an end in itself but as a mechanism that supports the flourishing of ecosystems and local communities (Bellato et al. 2025). It emphasizes quality over quantity, collaboration rather than competition and reciprocity instead of extractive value creation. It challenges the assumption that continuous growth is inherently desirable and calls for place-based design tailored to local ecological and cultural contexts (Dredge 2022).

Yet, despite its conceptual appeal, regenerative tourism faces considerable challenges. Questions remain regarding how to define system boundaries, how to measure *net-positive* outcomes, and how to address tourism's structural dependence on mobility and resource consumption. The growing popularity of regenerative tourism brings a heightened risk of *greenwashing*. Critics caution that without clearer definitions, regulatory bodies and agreed-upon metrics, regenerative tourism risks becoming a vague umbrella concept, vulnerable to misinterpretation and instrumentalization for marketing purposes (Gilbert-Jones et al. 2024).

Distinguishing genuine regenerative practices therefore requires transparency in intent, process and outcomes. While the concept rejects standardized metrics, the methodology for defining and monitoring impacts should be explicit. Emerging frameworks suggest assessing regenerative impact across interconnected pillars, including ecological outcomes (biodiversity,

climate mitigation); social and cultural integrity; fair economic distribution; visitor engagement and behavior change; compliance and monitoring; innovation; and community wellbeing (Gilbert-Jones et al. 2024). A holistic, systems-based approach, rather than isolated indicators, is essential for avoiding reductionist interpretations of regeneration and capturing a place's specificities and unique challenges.

Tourism pressures in sensitive areas: moving from efficiency to resilience

The relationship between tourism and nature is inherently ambivalent. Pristine landscapes constitute the primary *capital* of nature-based tourism, serving as a region's unique selling proposition. At the same time, their growing popularity generates significant ecological pressure: high visitor numbers contribute to soil erosion, wildlife disturbance, vegetation loss and waste accumulation, particularly when tourists move off marked trails or engage in unregulated activities (Felber 2020). Infrastructure development, traffic congestion and reliance on private vehicles further increase environmental stress and carbon emissions. Social and economic impacts are equally significant yet often less visible. Excessive tourism may intensify conflicts between visitors and residents, for example when recreational activities interfere with agricultural practices or when new tourism infrastructure conflicts with conservation objectives (Felber 2020). Cultural commodification and the unequal distribution of benefits can undermine local cohesion, while strong dependence on tourism increases regional vulnerability to external shocks, as illustrated during the COVID19 pandemic (IUCN 2025).

In many conservation areas and nature parks, including Swiss parks, sustainable tourism has promoted practices focused on impact reduction, visitor management and efficiency (IUCN 2025). However, these approaches frequently remain rooted in an industrial worldview that separates humans from nature and prioritizes optimization over transformation (Dredge 2022). By seeking to manage impacts rather than interrogate tourism's role within socioecological systems, such models may alleviate immediate pressures while leaving underlying causes of environmental degradation and social tensions unresolved. This limitation is particularly problematic given that many conservation areas face a significant ecological debt resulting from historical land-use practices, long-term biodiversity decline and cumulative visitor pressures (IUCN 2025).

The potential of regenerative tourism for sensitive areas

Regenerative tourism proposes addressing current challenges by shifting from minimizing damage to actively restoring ecological and social systems. It could help mobilize tourism actors, revenues and visitor en-

gagement towards restoration efforts such as habitat regeneration, rewilding, invasive species management or carbon positive infrastructure (Duarte et al. 2024). For instance, tourists in Seychelles, accompanied by scientists, transplant corals while scuba diving. They transition from a contemplative activity to a concrete commitment to coral reef restoration (Maczko 2025). In Amsterdam, the company Plastic Whale combines canal tours with waste cleanup (MacEacheran 2020). Visitors are considered as participants who contribute to the health of the places they visit, rather than passive consumers. Beyond ecological benefits, regenerative tourism could strengthen social resilience by embedding local communities as costewards of protected areas. Participatory governance and community-led initiatives reinforce cultural knowledge, social cohesion and shared responsibility for conservation outcomes (Bellato et al. 2025).

For tourism plausibly to deliver *net-positive* outcomes, a fundamental shift in intent and governance is required. Regeneration demands a move from defensive impact management to proactive place-based design, grounded in local knowledge and collaborative decision-making. This includes identifying which resources must be protected or restored, which activities are compatible with ecosystem capacities and which forms of tourism may need to be limited or avoided (Bellato et al. 2023).

Key conditions include treating destinations as living systems; fostering reciprocal relationships between visitors, communities and ecosystems; and building regenerative capacity through restoration, learning and adaptive management (Bellato et al. 2023). Crucially, regeneration cannot be imposed through expert-led solutions alone; it depends on bottom-up processes and the empowerment of local actors (Dredge 2022). Without such conditions, claims of *net-positive* tourism risk remaining merely aspirational.

Interest from the Swiss Parks Network

Swiss parks position themselves as model regions for sustainable development and explicitly acknowledge both the opportunities and the pressures associated with tourism. Their Tourism Vision 2030 aims to ensure that tourism generates positive outcomes for residents, visitors and regional economies while preserving and enhancing natural and cultural landscapes (Swiss Parks Network n.d. b). An analysis conducted in December 2024 with HES-SO Valais-Wallis demonstrates strong alignment between regenerative principles and the parks' values, particularly regarding systemic thinking, inclusiveness and place-based approaches (HES-SO Valais-Wallis 2025). Those findings were discussed with the parks' tourism managers and representatives of regional tourism organizations, confirming strong alignment between regenerative principles and the parks' seven core values (Swiss Parks Network n.d. a).

At the same time, significant implementation barriers persist. These include limited practical experience with regenerative models, a lack of supportive policy frameworks and the absence of demonstrable outcomes that could convince tourism partners to engage more deeply. To counteract this, the Regional Nature Park PfynFinges has launched a pilot project in collaboration with HES-SO Valais-Wallis to develop a regenerative tourism offer. According to Sophie Michaud, Head of Sustainability, Products and Tourism, “*this project enables us to engage in dialogue with our partners in the tourism industry on sustainability issues and strengthen our co-operation. It stimulates our creativity and allows us to break new ground.*” Such initiatives represent important testing grounds for strengthening the concept, as well as highlighting its shortcomings.

Conclusion and future directions

Regenerative tourism proposes a shift toward an ecological worldview in which destinations are understood as complex socioecological systems. Rather than asking how tourism can be made *less harmful*, regenerative approaches question whether, where and under what conditions tourism should occur at all. From a regenerative perspective, resilience implies not only preserving existing conditions, but also actively restoring degraded ecosystems and rebuilding ecological functions, while strengthening local capacities to adapt to future shocks. Regeneration does not replace sustainability but extends it along a spectrum from efficiency to resilience and renewal.

Regenerative tourism offers a promising yet demanding pathway for conservation areas and regional nature parks seeking to respond to mounting ecological and social pressures. However, its successful application depends on the robustness of the concept. It implies the necessity to define tourism’s role in natural areas, to engage critically with both the potential and the limitations of the regenerative concept and to develop adequate metrics to measure outcomes towards resilient socioecological systems.

Looking ahead, the Swiss Parks Network intends to advance the development of the currently missing foundations necessary for practical implementation by working closely with academic partners and park managers to test new approaches within natural contexts. The resulting insights will be shared with the wider industry and are intended to contribute to a form of tourism development that is fit for future generations. *Should you have any interest in further investigating this topic by either participating in the task force on regenerative tourism in parks or collaborating in future research, please do not hesitate to contact us.*

References

- Bellato, L., N. Frantzeskaki, & C.A. Nygaard 2023. Regenerative tourism: a conceptual framework leveraging theory and practice. *Tourism Geographies* 25(4): 1026–1046.
- Bellato, L. & A. Pollock 2025. Regenerative tourism: a state-of-the-art review. *Tourism Geographies* 27(3–4): 558–567.
- Dredge, D. 2022. Regenerative tourism: Transforming mindsets, systems and practices. *Journal of tourism futures* 8(3): 269–281.
- Duarte, C. M., R. Cousins, M. A. Ficociello, I. D. Williams & A. Khowala 2024. Advancing global climate and biodiversity goals through regenerative tourism. *Sustainability* 16(20): 9133.
- Fabler, A. 2020. *Naturschutz und Tourismus in der UNESCO Biosphäre Entlebuch*. Universität Freiburg, Schweiz.
- Gilbert-Jones, R. & Skift Team 2024. *Regenerative tourism: Feedback report*. Skift Research.
- HES-SO Valais-Wallis (2025). Analyse der Tourismusvision 2030 der Schweizer Pärke aus einem regenerativen Blickwinkel. Swiss Parks Network. Available at: <https://www.parks.swiss/de/aktuelles/aktuelles-aus-den-paerken/schweizer-paerke-auf-dem-weg-zu-einem-regenerativen-tourismusmodell-342?highlighting=regenerative> (accessed 27/04/2026)
- IUCN 2025. *Strengthening sustainable tourism’s role in biodiversity conservation and community resilience*. IUCN. Gland, Switzerland.
- MacEacheran, M. 2020. *The unusual tour cleaning Amsterdam’s canals*. BBC. Available at: The unusual tour cleaning Amsterdam’s canals (accessed: 07/04/2026).
- Maczko, E. 2025. Coral reefs and tourism, a controversial relationship with a promising future. Forbes. Available at: Coral Reefs And Tourism, A Controversial Relationship With A Promising Future (accessed: 07/04/2026).
- Müller, T. 2022. *Massnahmen der Pärke während Covid-19* [Unpublished internal document]. 3. Schweizer Landschaftskongress.
- Swiss Parks Network n.d. a. *The values of Swiss Parks: the valuable commitment of the Swiss parks*. Available at: <https://www.parks.swiss/en/commitment/our-values> (accessed: 27/04/2026).
- SwissParksNetwork n.d. b. *Tourismusvision der Schweizer Pärke 2030*. Available at: <https://www.parks.swiss/de/ueber-das-netzwerk/organisation?highlighting=2030> (accessed: 27/04/2026).

Authors

Sarah Balet – corresponding author

Adjointe scientifique, Institut Tourisme, HES-SO Valais-Wallis. E-mail: sarah.balet@hevs.ch

Nadja Urfer

Project Manager Tourism, Swiss Parks Network, E-mail: n.urfer@parks.swiss