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Regenerative Hospitality: what it is, what it is not, what it might be.

Aiming for Net Positive

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Synopsis

Alessandro Inversini's article explores a new paradigm in the hospitality sector that transcends traditional sustainability. It emphasizes a systemic approach to regeneration, focusing on ecological and social renewal. The article outlines two key concepts: the Regenerative Mindshift, advocating for an inner transformation among hospitality professionals, and an Ecosystem Approach, balancing environmental impact and transformative host-guest relationships. Inversini argues against treating regenerative hospitality as just another sustainability standard, suggesting instead a comprehensive business model aimed at achieving a net-positive impact.

In the past couple of years, I had the opportunity and the pleasure to carry out research on the 'Regenerative Hospitality' topic. I came across this field almost by chance during an informal discussion with a colleague. A few months later, I saw it 'happen' during a research field work in Rural Lebanon. The research trip and the connected field work was about something else, but at that very time, I had the clear perception of what regeneration was and how much the field of hospitality could contribute to it. A kind of 'Aha! Moment' which enlightened the way further. In fact, once at home, I started to do research on the topic, and found it fascinating and often misinterpreted.

A few weeks later, together with some likeminded colleagues, we started to do research projects to meet hoteliers, to exchange with academics and experts from all around the world; we harvested online content, reviews and images connected with regenerative organizations; we sent out surveys to accommodation and restaurants owners...all of that with the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the issues at stake.

After all this work, I feel that we are at the beginning of our regenerative journey; nonetheless, by piecing together all these different data points, we came up with a rounded initial understanding of the concept - and that's what this contribution will be about.

However, before deep diving into regenerative hospitality, there is one last important premise to make: as a research team, we acknowledge the growing amount of research and practical cases about regenerative tourism, with a very relevant critical angle connected with human geography topics such as decolonization and indigenous studies. However, we consciously decided to focus our attention on 'regenerative hospitality businesses' because we deeply think that hotel firms of all sizes and types can be the catalyst and the building blocks for ecosystems regenerative transformation. This, of course, is intertwined with the discourse at a destination level, but looks more towards the business side of regeneration, that is to say: regeneration as a viable business model for hospitality organizations.

WHAT IS REGENERATIVE HOSPITALITY

Regenerative Hospitality sees accommodation businesses as the agents of change at the destination level: hotels and other types of accommodation are here conceptualized as building blocks of the destination system that could stimulate a net-positive impact on the wider destination. The regenerative approach is by definition a systemic approach, and it has been

rising to prominence in recent years. Following the literature in the field, it stems from an ecological and living systems worldview where the goal is to promote the conditions for all life to renew and restore fostering a net-positive mentality. Two concepts are essential to generate a better understanding of regenerative hospitality:

- **The Regenerative Mindshift:** regeneration does not happen by chance, but it happens by design. It is first an inner awareness of the hospitality entrepreneur moved by a deep connection with nature and with the community. This was clear in all the conversations we had with regenerative leaders: regeneration calls for a deep and inner mindshift of the hospitality professionals. This is strongly tied with the local nature and the local community which together will eventually create innovative hospitality experiences for guests that are – in all the cases we analysed – financially viable for the organisations.
- **An Ecosystem Approach:** regenerative hospitality has an outward dimension and an inward dimension: the outer dimension looks into natural and social ecosystems, that is to say, hotels are organizations which operate in the local environment and can regenerate both the nature and the local communities with their day-to-day business. The inward dimension looks at transformative effects of the host-guest relationship happening during the service encounter at the property. In fact, regeneration means to have a net-positive impact on (i) the local place and its natural and social aspects (we call this **Place Intelligence**) and on the people, exemplified by the transformative host-guest relationship (we call this **People Intelligence**).

The efforts in this field emphasize the restructuring of relationships among individuals within the community and the environment at large; ultimately, regenerative hospitality caters also for the transformation of the host-guest relations. All of this, with the overarching goal of sustaining the renewal of social and ecological systems. In fact, the regenerative development approach within the travel sector encourages innovative solutions by blending tourism practices with local communities and natural ecosystems, ultimately promoting the welfare of both people and the planet developing the actual capacity of the place of at the people therein.

WHAT REGENERATIVE HOSPITALITY IS NOT

There is a growing fatigue across industries and especially in the hospitality field when it comes to embracing sustainability standards. This is largely because current methods and approaches are struggling to address the increasing harmful impacts of human and business activities on society and the environment. Nevertheless, it is crucial to emphasize that regenerative hospitality should not be viewed as a new sustainability standard, or as some people we have encountered during our research like to put it: "**Regeneration is not Sustainability on Steroids**". Regenerative professionals do not intend to introduce new regenerative metrics or propose specific measurements or scales. There are no checklists to adhere to; there are no standards whatsoever. And above all, none of the regenerative hospitality leaders we have met is thinking to do any of those things. Consequently, regenerative hospitality should not be considered as a replacement for

sustainability, and it is unwise to perceive it in such a manner. It is rather a paradigm shift: if the objective of the hospitality industry is to reach net-zero impact, regenerative properties are looking for an active contribution towards the local natural ecosystem, the local social ecosystem and the inner relationship between host and guest. This is the paradigm shift: from net-zero impact to net-positive impact. Consciously. By design.

Further developments of the field will eventually bring about best practices and measurement techniques: to date, however, we are observing a bottom-up movement of mindful people wanting to really make an impact.

WHAT REGENERATIVE HOSPITALITY MIGHT BE

The common trait of the people we met during our studies and of the properties we analysed during our research sits in the concept of responsibility: regenerative hospitality is not (only) about sustainability, but it is more about a wider responsibility towards the reality and the ecosystems within. With this responsible approach, regenerative leaders are able to foster a real and long-lasting mindshift to create viable businesses leveraging an ecosystem approach on place intelligence and people intelligence. Regeneration can *de facto* become a new business orientation: not a 'nice to have' nor a 'checklist' but a financially viable, strategically designed and purposefully built business orientation which aims at delivering net-positive impact for all.

But what is important is that regeneration is not only for small sized, newly built hotels: it should rather be seen as a viable business model based on ecosystems responsibility for all properties of any type and size. This would be possible by working on three main aspects:

(i) the Regenerative Mindshift: this is an inner awareness of the role of each business as a net-positive contributor to social and natural ecosystems as well as towards the relationship with individual customers.

(ii) The Place Intelligence: the place around the hospitality business is complex and multifaced. It is a mixture of social and natural environment; any business should acknowledge the existence of these ecosystems and strive for a purposeful net positive approach towards them. No matter where the hotel is located, those ecosystems exist and can have a significant impact on a responsible business orientation.

(iii) The People Intelligence: this is the richness of hospitality, and it is represented by the service encounter and the possibility of co-creating experiences with the guests. People intelligence caters to the inner hospitality ecosystem that is the relational one between host and guests and their social engagement towards the creation of meaningful and hopefully transformative experiences.

Of course, as this is a 'reality-based' approach to business, depending on the latitudes, on the history and on the social fabrics of the communities, this business orientation should consider indigenous livelihood, decolonization issues and/or the genius loci - that is to say the set of socio-cultural, architectural, language and customary features that characterise a place and an environment.

Further readings

- Inversini, A., Saul, L., Balet, S., & Schegg, R. (2023). The rise of regenerative hospitality. *Journal of Tourism Futures*.
- Bellato, L., Frantzeskaki, N., tebrakunna country and, Lee, E., Cheer, J. M., & Peters, A. (2023). Transformative epistemologies for regenerative tourism: towards a decolonial paradigm in science and practice?. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 1-21.
- Polman, P., & Winston, A. (2021). Net positive: How courageous companies thrive by giving more than they take. Harvard Business Press.

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