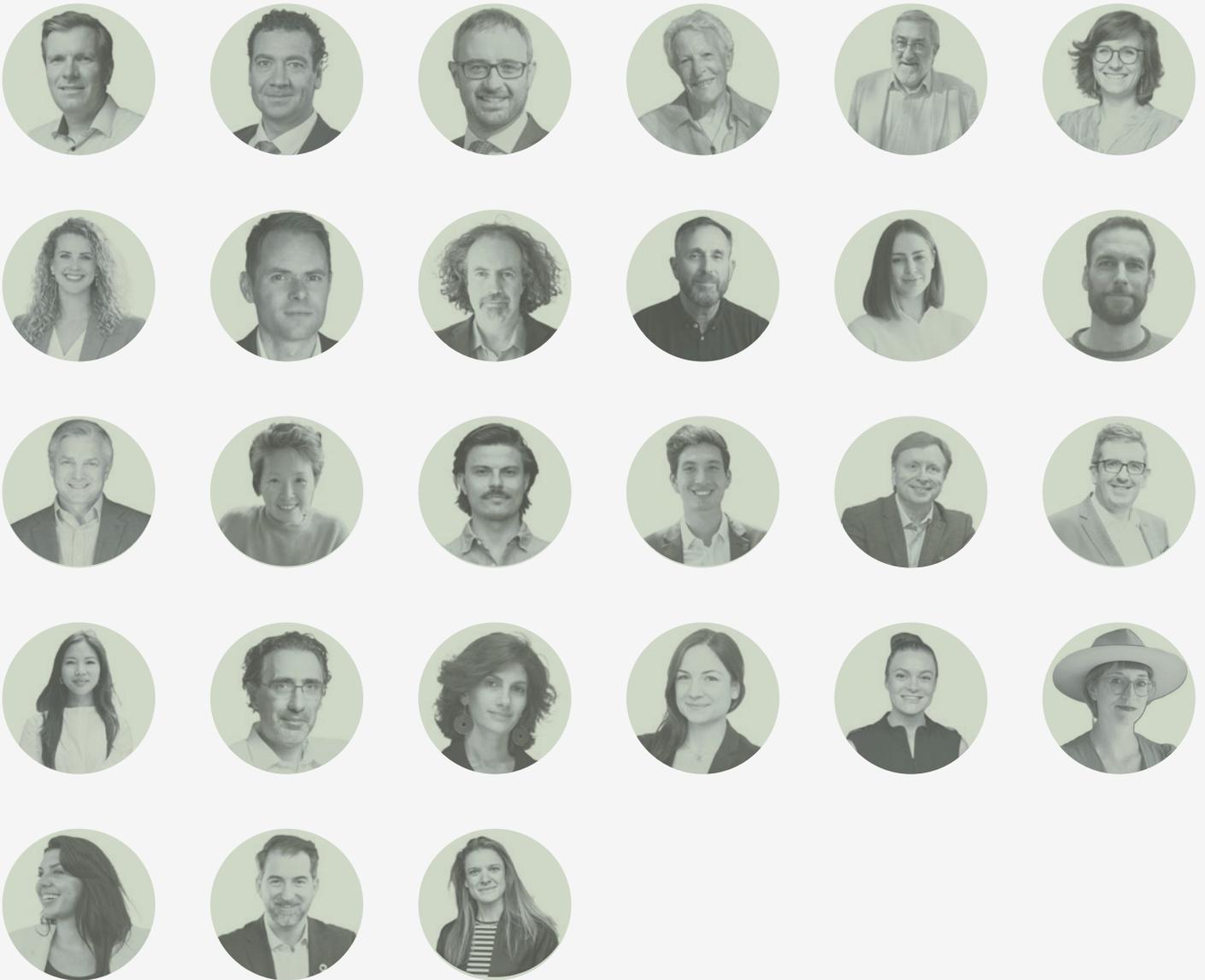


HYB26

Sustainability Edition

The Regenerative Question - What Hospitality Must Become



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What Regeneration Asks of Hospitality

Conservation and communities

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O’Shannon Burns argues that regeneration in hospitality is not a new label for sustainability or a framework to “roll out,” but an emergent, place-based practice grounded in relationships between people, land, culture, and more-than-human life. Drawing on global regenerative futures research, the article outlines four key orientations and challenges hospitality leaders to move from aspirational impact language toward honest accountability and structural change.

Across hospitality and tourism, the language of regeneration is spreading quickly. Hotels, destinations, and travel brands are exploring what it might mean to move beyond sustainability—seeking ways to restore ecosystems, deepen community benefit, and create travel experiences that give back more than they take.

Academic research, including [work by Loretta Bellato and Anna Pollock](#), has cautioned against reducing regenerative tourism to a framework, certification, or performance model, instead emphasizing it as an emergent, place-based process grounded in living systems. In parallel, practitioner communities are experimenting with how regenerative thinking might be integrated into tourism models in context rather than standardized.

Yet regeneration is being interpreted in sharply different ways. Some regard it as little more than sustainability reframed in new language, while others seek to translate it into familiar industry tools including metrics, standards, and certification systems designed to demonstrate progress. Both responses attempt to make regeneration legible within existing sustainability paradigms, even as they risk narrowing its meaning.

This persistence of simplified interpretations raises a more fundamental question for hospitality: if regeneration is not simply sustainability renamed, nor a program to implement, what does regeneration actually ask of the sector?

In 2024, I joined nine multidisciplinary researchers in [a global inquiry into regenerative futures commissioned by Unearthodox](#). Rather than defining regeneration, we gathered lived experiences, tensions, and place-based practices that reveal it as relational, more-than-human, and deeply contextual. From this work, four orienting ideas emerged that illuminate how hospitality leaders might more authentically engage with regeneration.

REGENERATION IS NOT SOMETHING TO BE DESIGNED INTO HOSPITALITY SYSTEMS, IT IS SOMETHING THAT MAY OR MAY NOT BE ALLOWED TO EMERGE

In the regenerative futures work, we deliberately avoided defining regeneration through academic or business models, and instead oriented inquiry toward communities, lifeways, and everyday practices where regenerative principles are already being lived. From this perspective, regeneration is not something hospitality can engineer or install. It emerges when relationships between people, place, culture, and more-than-human life are healthy, reciprocal, and allowed to unfold over time.

Hospitality’s role, then, is not to “do” regeneration, but to understand whether its practices are supporting or undermining the conditions that allow regeneration to exist. In Peru’s [Parque de la Papa](#), regenerative practice began not with the design of visitor experiences but with long-term investment in biocultural governance, Indigenous knowledge, and collective community process. Only from this foundation did distinctive hospitality offerings emerge, including a culinary experience rooted in traditional foodways and women’s entrepreneurship. These experiences are designed to support Indigenous knowledge systems, community leadership models, and food systems, demonstrating how tourism and hospitality can grow out of living culture rather than attempt to manufacture it.

REGENERATION CANNOT BE LED BY A SINGLE WORLDVIEW, NOR BY A SMALL GROUP OF DESIGNATED LEADERS

The concept of the pluriverse, rooted in decolonial and Indigenous scholarship, challenges the assumption that knowledge must converge into one coherent model, often shaped by Western institutions. Across the research, regeneration consistently appeared not as a single pathway or model, but as many coexisting practices shaped by place, culture, history, and more-than-human relationships.

Hospitality operates in daily proximity to communities and living systems that are themselves experts in survival, adaptation, and care. A pluriversal approach shifts attention and authority toward those closest to place—listening not for universal solutions, but for locally grounded knowledge and community visions of regenerative futures that hospitality may be called to support.

As those in hospitality seek to be regenerative practitioners, it is important to value this place-based knowledge and intentionally widen the circle of voices shaping regenerative tourism and hospitality, especially those whose knowledge comes from lived experience, community stewardship, and non-Western worldviews.

REGENERATION IS PRACTICED

Regeneration does not primarily reveal itself through outcomes, frameworks, or stated commitments. It is practiced. Across the research, regenerative capacity showed up in everyday lifeways and rituals—how people move through place, set limits, share responsibility, and sustain relationships over time. These practices are quiet, relational, and deeply place-based, and they lose meaning when abstracted into models or scaled as “best practice.”

At the same time, the research surfaced a real tension. Regeneration unfolds in ways that performance frameworks often struggle to capture. In my own experience, data and analysis can be powerful tools for seeing more clearly by helping us understand patterns, relationships and the real impact of decisions over time. It can support learning and accountability, but it cannot substitute for relationship or fully capture whether or not regenerative capacity is strengthening.

For hospitality, this lens reframes the role of metrics. The question is not whether to measure, but what measurement is in service of. Regenerative practice asks hotels and destinations to treat metrics as feedback while attending equally to relational, cultural, and ecological signals that remain largely invisible to quantitative measurement. These subtler signals—trust, reciprocity, ecological vitality, community consent—are essential to regenerative practice.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the [Mauriora Systems Framework \(MSF\)](#) offers a concrete expression of pluriversality within tourism and hospitality governance. Developed in the 1990s by Māori planning scholar Hirini Mutunga to evaluate social, cultural, spiritual, and environmental impacts, the framework centers concepts such as kaitiaki (guardianship), taonga (valued relationships and resources), tikanga (right practice), and mauri (life force) as the basis for decision-making. Applied to tourism planning, the MSF shifts the sector beyond consultation or cultural inclusion toward integrating Māori worldview into the fundamental systems that guide development, management, and long-term strategy. In doing so, it demonstrates how regenerative hospitality requires holding multiple knowledge systems in relationship rather than collapsing them into a single universal logic.

CONFRONTING PERSISTENT HARMFUL ACTIONS

In many efforts to advance regeneration, attention naturally centers on restoration, renewal, and positive impact. But when the underlying harms shaping relationships between tourism, land, and communities remain unexplored, the conditions required for regeneration cannot emerge. The regenerative futures research took this inquiry around “persistent harmful actions” as a deliberate mandate, engaging directly with the structural, historical, and normalized forms of harm that continue to shape relationships between land, communities, and economic systems. This process was demanding and uncomfortable, requiring us to slow down, question assumptions, and remain with uncertainty rather than rush toward solutions. Yet it also revealed that confronting persistent harm may be among the most consequential aspects of regenerative practice, because regeneration cannot take hold where underlying patterns of extraction continue unchecked.

For hospitality, this lens shifts the conversation from aspiration to accountability asking not only how positive impact might be created, but how the sector must reckon with its own history and present-day role in harm. Tourism has, in many contexts, been intertwined with the displacement of communities in the creation of protected areas, the erosion of coastal ecosystems for large-scale development, and the commodification of local cultures and livelihoods. Regenerative practice therefore requires more than improvement or mitigation, but instead for the explicit recognition of these histories and a willingness to transform or relinquish the arrangements that continue to reproduce them.

Although many safari operators and hospitality companies emphasize their investments in conservation across the African continent, the industry’s dominant narratives often render local communities invisible, or minimize their knowledge, stewardship, and historical relationship to land. Many reporters have noted how tourism companies focused solely or primarily on pristine nature exclude living cultures and contemporary realities, narrowing what is recognized as worthy of protection or care—[an argument explored powerfully by Lebewit Lily Girma](#). At the same time, [research by my Unearthodox co-author Wangūi wa Kamonji](#) documented how conservation models have removed Indigenous and pastoralist communities from ancestral lands while positioning tourism as a primary beneficiary of those landscapes. Together, these examples reveal a pattern of persistent harms—including displacement from ancestral lands, the erasure or marginalization of local knowledge and culture, and the concentration of power and benefit outside the communities most connected to place—in which tourism has played a material role. Supporting regenerative tourism therefore requires openly acknowledging these realities and committing to programs and practices that not only prevent further harm but work to repair relationships and transform the systems through which damage has occurred.

For hospitality leaders, this is both a challenge and an opening: a call to listen more closely to place, confront harm more directly, and allow new forms of practice to emerge over time. Regeneration asks less for new strategies than for a deeper honesty about the relationships that sustain hospitality itself and whether the sector is willing to transform the relationships on which it depends.



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