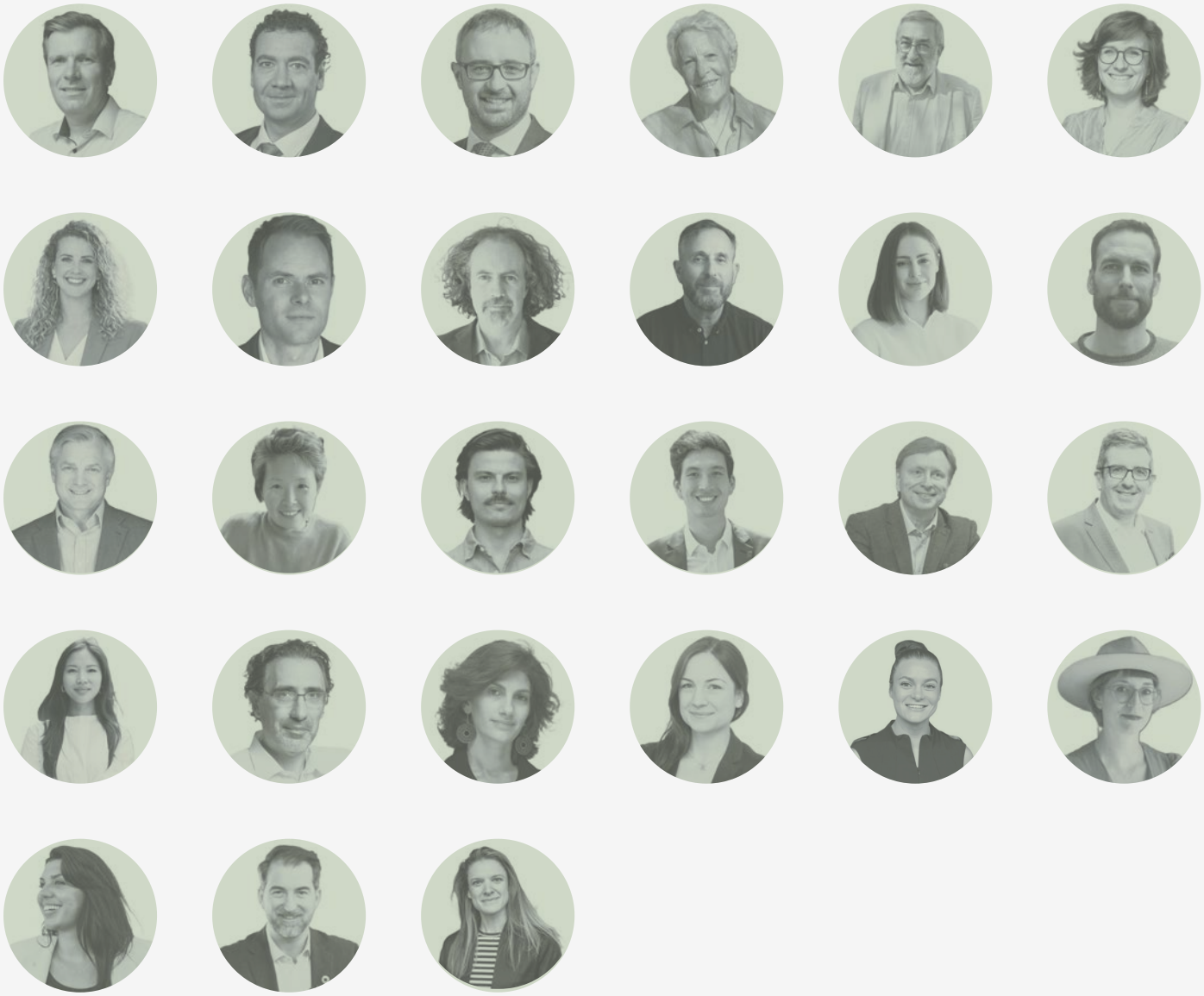
HY826

Sustainability Edition

The Regenerative Question - What Hospitality Must Become



The Hotel Yearbook

Foresight and innovation in the global hotel industry

Green sprouts of hope in the regeneration question

Measurement & impact

Natasha Montesalvo
Director of Research and Policy and Principal Consultant – Destinations, Strategy and Insights, EarthCheck

Starting from her own skepticism, Dr Natasha Montesalvo explores where regenerative tourism is already moving from rhetoric to reality, highlighting destinations and hotels that build regeneration into governance, design, and operations from day one. Through examples like Red Sea Global, Capella Ubud, Maroma and TTNQ's Reforest partnership, she shows that measurable positive impact on ecosystems and communities is possible – but only when strong policy, thoughtful design, and long-term performance tracking replace vague "do good" intentions.

To be honest, when I first started exploring regenerative tourism, I was a non-believer. How, in a system that traditionally champions visitor numbers and growth over all else, can we promote outcomes that leave the world better than we found it?

EarthCheck's White Paper defines regenerative tourism as a step beyond sustainability - *a process where the tourism sector stakeholders, collectively, exert care and guardianship (through decision-making and practices) for the improvement and enhancement of natural, human and human-made [built] elements when moving to, visiting, living or operating in a destination. In so doing, it would allow the above elements to exceed their current survivability conditions.*

Again, this raises the question, if we are yet to master sustainable action – do no harm – how is it that we can lead to a position of more good?

Despite the scepticism, there are pockets of hope where tourism acts as a force for good, and regenerative outcomes are evident.

GOVERNANCE

Where we are seeing meaningful regenerative outcomes, vision and ambition are rooted in the structures and systems that govern the destination. For example, Red Sea Global, Saudi Arabia, has embedded regenerative principles across all facets of planning, development and operation. From coral restoration and mangrove planting to youth empowerment and low-impact resorts, the mandate was set from the outset and guided every decision and action since. The outcomes: a social impact of more than 120,000 jobs, a 40% Saudi workforce target, significant protected conservation areas, and more than 1 million mangroves planted to restore coastal ecosystems. Here, regeneration matters and impact is measured.

At a business level, for those starting a new enterprise, it can mean embedding regenerative processes from design, ensuring no biodiversity loss, and utilising passive design strategies, including the purposeful use of building orientation and layout to promote natural ventilation, shading, and insulation. A great example is Capella Ubud, Indonesia. During this project build, the surrounding forest was untouched; no trees cut down, and landscape unaltered. An array of organic Indigenous vegetables, spices, and herbs were planted and utilised by chefs. Green and food waste is turned into compost to replenish garden soil and reduce the property's ecological footprint. The camp was decorated with refurbished vintage and antique furniture and art, telling stories of tradesmen and artists from the 1800s.

It's not just new builds that can embed these principles; the redevelopment of Maroma, A Belmond Hotel, is a beautiful example. Situated in Mexico's Riviera Maya, the team worked with local artisans to honour heritage. Through the redevelopment process the property's original design and architecture, including its white stucco buildings which are aligned with Sacred Geometry of Mayan masonry, were preserved and revitalised. The design is made more sustainable by incorporating energy-efficient fixtures and appliances. All materials used internally are eco-friendly and high quality. These projects, new and old, demonstrate a commitment to regeneration can lead to powerful outcomes.

YOU CAN'T MANAGE WHAT YOU DON'T MEASURE

Where regeneration is a step beyond sustainability it is important to understand performance to shape outcomes that leave businesses and destinations better off. We need more than thoughts and prayers. Measurement of outcomes maintains focus and provides fertile ground for refinement and innovative ideas.

Ultimately, regeneration is a long-term process, measurement is not a set-and-forget and we will not understand the true regenerative nature of action for several years. Without measurement over time, regenerative claims risk becoming greenwash. A sustainable foundation, combined with intentional efforts to reverse damage and build positive capacity, is essential if regenerative tourism is to deliver its promise.

We see this in practice with Tourism Tropical North Queensland's (TTNQ) partnership with Reforest. The primary focus is to use tourism to protect the endangered Mabi Forest, to restore habitat for threatened species. TTNQ encourages events and members to use the Reforest program to incorporate regenerative actions into their experiences. They host annual planting days for industry to get hands-on experience and see the impact on the ground. To date, the partnership has seen 18 TTNQ members plant over 5,600 trees.

WHAT'S NEXT

So, what does the future of regeneration look like? Ideally, it is part of a system that promotes positive impact across communities, economies, and environments above traditional growth and demand led approaches. Regeneration can flourish where business practices, and destination policies and plans champion measured, managed approaches to tourism that prioritise the needs of locals, embrace tourism as a force for good, and where visitors contribute positively to the aspirations of place, leaving them measurably better than we found them.

“Show me only chemical-free, bed bug-safe hotels.”

What becomes searchable becomes bookable.

valpas