

Regenerative tourism futures: a case study of Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

Purpose – This case study urges the future of visitor economy to rely on regenerative tourism to make tourism systems resilience in the long run.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on published research and industry reports to discuss the future visitor economy and its impact on all dimensions of well-being focused on the case of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Findings – Results show that post-pandemic tourism transformation must protect and promote local identities, and enhance and enrich visitor experiences with a focus on cultural and natural heritage.

Originality/value – The recovery of tourism must not implement regenerative tourism as a new specific type of tourism but as a holistic understanding of tourism futures that encompasses communities and the environment, and where visitors are committed to preserve and protect our natural and socio-cultural environment.

Keywords Aotearoa New Zealand, Regenerative tourism, Tourism transformation, Visitor economy

Paper type Viewpoint

Should we look back to move forward?

The planet has suffered the unsustainable consequences of tourism growth during the last decades (Benjamin *et al.*, 2020; Gössling and Higham, 2021; Hussain *et al.*, 2021). Both domestic and international tourism relied on transport which heavily contributed to issues like climate change (Dessens *et al.*, 2014; Scott *et al.*, 2012; Živoder *et al.*, 2015). While the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has brought limited tourism (Fusté-Forné and Michael, 2021), the international tourist arrivals in 2020 reached 400 m (UNWTO, 2022). The post-COVID tourism recovery suggests a regenerative tourism paradigm with a focus on conscious travel (Hussain, 2021) which leads to an effective transformation of the way we think, plan and do tourism (Ateljevic, 2020; Cheer, 2020; Sheldon, 2020). The impact of COVID-19 offers the opportunity to reset tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). The new holistic approach embraces the implementation of the regenerative tourism model (Hussain and Haley, 2022) which acknowledges the complexity of tourism systems. In the framework of regenerative tourism, this research discusses that tourism transformation must involve all stakeholders in the creation of long-term social, cultural, environmental and economic well-being with a specific focus on the case of New Zealand. This will drive towards future tourism experiences that put the well-being of destination communities at the centre of tourism management and marketing because “people” must lead the future of visitor economy.

A case of regenerative tourism in Aotearoa New Zealand

The physical isolation and remoteness of New Zealand attracts people from places where it is difficult to escape the pressure of population and offers them a less dense destination. Both domestic and international tourism have contributed to nation’s prosperity and has potential to

Received 26 January 2022
Revised 17 April 2022
Accepted 24 April 2022

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enrich all aspects of lives and livelihood of the people of New Zealand ([Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, 2019](#); [Tourism Futures Taskforce, 2020](#)). The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the New Zealand tourism system which relied heavily on international tourists ([Fountain, 2021](#)). Concerns about such dependency were raised in the past, however, it was the COVID-19 that showed us the severity of New Zealand's dependency on international tourists ([Hussain and Fusté-Forné, 2021](#)). This shows that the tourism models, before COVID-19, were neither resilient nor sustainable ([Reis, 2020](#); [Sheldon, 2021](#)). More resilient tourism should rely on alternate tourism systems beyond capitalist practices, such as the regenerative economy because the traditional tourism models are not sustainable for the future. As [Fountain \(2021\)](#) also explains, the change to regenerative tourism should be based on three aspects: equity, sustainability and well-being.

New Zealand has focused on a balance between tourism and the well-being of its natural resources and local communities ([Glusac, 2020](#)), where tourism businesses must lead the way to the achievement of New Zealand's regenerative tourism goals ([Waby, 2021](#)). The importance of the stakeholders' engagement in destination planning and development was acknowledged by the parliamentary commission report in 2019 which include government agencies, territorial authorities, iwi (a Māori tribe), hapū (Māori sub tribes) and commercial interest such as regional tourism organisations. The key aspect acknowledged in the report was that Ngāti Tūwharetoa (an example of iwi) sees themselves as guardians of Maunga Tongariro not as the owners. Therefore, "visitor behaviour is shaped to fit the maunga rather than the maunga being shaped to fit the visitors" ([Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, 2019](#)). The recommendations of the report came as the time of the birth of COVID-19, which is why the report did not largely contribute towards stakeholder engagement for destination planning and product development yet.

In March 2020, New Zealand closed its borders for international tourism to stop the spread of COVID-19. This decision kept the COVID-19 out of the country, but it has had devastating impacts on destinations which heavily relied on international tourists ([RNZ, 2021](#); [Stuff, 2021](#)). Meanwhile the Minister of Tourism setup an independent tourism task force following a change from international travel to domestic tourism. The taskforce suggested that the future of New Zealand tourism must be regenerative and resilient with a focus on social, cultural, environmental and economic wellbeing. The key elements highlighted included the production of a genuine tourism product, unique life-changing experience, community engagement, opportunities to grow regeneratively, enrich value of Te Ao Māori, improve natural ecosystems and generate durable financial returns. The strategic tourism lines posted by the New Zealand Government calls for regenerative tourism which focuses on the partnership between industry, workers and government ([New Zealand Government, 2021](#)).

During this time, various public and private agencies focused their research on meaning, essence and ways to develop regenerative tourism products and models. Regenerative initiatives such as "Project Regenerative Tourism" of Sustainability and Resilience Institute (SRI) of New Zealand, New Zealand Awaits, and The Seventh Generation Tours promote regenerative tourism research and experience for the visitor's to engage with the debate of regenerative tourism. The outcome of the "Project Regenerative Tourism" resulted in the development of a "Regenerative Tourism Model". The model suggests the incorporation of all elements of social-ecological system into a system which is self-organising and embraces uncertainty and change in response of global shocks and trends. The model has also developed the indicators of regenerative tourism to measure the degree to which a tourism product of service is regenerative and sustainable. In addition, New Zealand Awaits encourages and shares conversation on the positive impact of travel experiences and learn about how regenerative tourism looks like in New Zealand through their podcast GOOD Awaits. The Seventh Generation Tours is a regenerative tourism enterprise which promotes the principles of Tūrangawaewae: know who you are, where you belong; Kaitiakitanga: protect that which you love; and Manaakitanga: share stories that enhance, so that you leave better. The tour "shares stories that regenerate, not only the listener, but the storyteller, the community and the place from which they come. The Sharing of important oral stories keeps them alive and passes

them along, from one generation to the next as we are their guardians, and we must tell them well” ([The Seventh Generation, 2022](#)).

At destination levels, [Tourism Bay of Plenty \(2022\)](#) develops tourism in harmony with place under the destination development plan Te Hā Tāpoi (The Love of Tourism) where harmony between visitation and place is a source of tourism value. Another example is the destination management plan for the district of Queenstown Lakes which shows a vision where tourism must put people and places at its centre to promote a viable and regenerative tourism future. In this sense, the plan aims to “create outcomes that enrich the district across all four well beings (social, cultural, environmental and economic) and enable a thriving future” ([Destination Queenstown, 2022](#)).

Previous studies revealed the leading role of New Zealand in a structural change that leads to a regenerative tourism future (see, for example, [Major and Clarke, 2021](#)). Tourism stakeholders must commit “to decarbonisation and biodiversity conservation to drastically reduce the biophysical footprint of tourism” ([Higham et al., 2021](#), p. 7). In this sense, the Tourism Futures Taskforce Interim Report ([Tourism Futures Taskforce, 2020](#)) anticipates the future of New Zealand tourism from a Te Ao Māori perspective to provide sustainable future scenarios driven by the following statement:

| | |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|
| Mauri Tangata | For the Enrichment of People |
| Mauri Tuakiri | For the Enlivenment of Identity |
| Mauri Ohanga | For the Prosperity of the Economy |
| Mauri Ao | For the Health of the Planet |
| Mauri Ora | For the well-being of all |

This understanding shows that the regenerative tourism paradigm does not only operate under a focus on economic well-being, but it also encapsulates environmental, cultural and social well-being. As previous research stated (see [Becken and Kaur, 2021](#); [Carr, 2020](#)), Tiaki Promise aligns with the understanding of regenerative travel practices. Tiaki means to care for people and places and urges each individual “to act as a guardian, protecting and preserving our home” ([Tourism New Zealand, 2021](#)). Tiaki Promise is a code based on the commitment by people to care for New Zealand, for now, and, especially, for future generations, which many New Zealand businesses also support.

Both academia and the industry show that there is a strong need to move from an extractive tourism system to a regenerative tourism system that “is rooted in indigenous knowledge and living systems theory” ([Major and Clarke, 2021](#), p. 1). This is in line with recent research that reveals that “indigenous people, cultures, wisdom and values play an important role in defining a regenerative path for tourism” ([Sheldon, 2021](#), p. 6). Following what Sheldon states regarding the post-pandemic tourism in the Hawaiian Islands, which is based on native Hawaiian values, this is similarly applied to a New Zealand context from a Māori perspective as observed above and again in [Table 1](#).

Table 1 Māori values for regenerative travel

| <i>Value</i> | <i>Definition</i> |
|----------------|--|
| Manaakitanga | Respecting and caring for others and ourselves |
| Rangatiratanga | Upholding the mana of the people in all we do, empowering ourselves and those around us and leading by example |
| Tikanga | Upholding our customs, cultural practices and doing what is right |
| Kaitiakitanga | Protecting and enhancing our natural world and our resources |
| Tohungatanga | Supporting and growing our whānau to enable them to be their best |
| Whanaungatanga | Maintaining and nurturing positive relationships |

Source(s): [Te Runanga o Ngai Tahu, 2016](#)

According to [Matunga et al. \(2020\)](#), “while Māori have always been involved in tourism, there is a concerted movement by many Māori towards engagement with tourism as a means of reconnecting with cultural traditions, protecting natural resources and providing employment for whanau” (p. 295). They affirm that a balance between the development of tourism and the environmental impact is required to inform regenerative tourism that puts the relationship between people and places at the core centre of sustainable living and travelling ([Živoder et al., 2015](#)). [Table 1](#) shows Māori values that inform “cultural, social, environmental and economic performance” ([Te Runanga o Ngai Tahu, 2016](#), p. 5) as a source for a regenerative development of tourism. These values are embedded in the initiatives explained above and the practical examples show how these values are translated into visitor experiences which drive the future regenerative tourism.

The future of a regenerative tourism

This research understands regenerative tourism from the perspective of a future visitor economy which contributes to all the dimensions of well-being focused on the case study of New Zealand. Tourism futures are anticipated to focus on *local* rather than *global* and, even when people travel far, they will travel slow. “We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalised greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature” (Renee Taylor cited by [Meyer, 2020](#)). In this sense, regenerative tourism must rely on models that surpass the notion of capitalism ([Mura and Wijesinghe, 2021](#)), and the regenerative economy is a driver of regenerative tourism. [Sheldon \(2021\)](#) states that regenerative tourism, as it is also developed in New Zealand, “represents a comprehensive and mature approach to designing the future of tourism” (p. 6) which is based on a change in travelers’ minds ([Hussain, 2021](#)) that build respectful ties to the planet.

New Zealand has just started the plan to reopen the borders for the first time in two years in March 2022. While it would be premature to state the learning lessons at this stage since the impact of the comeback of international tourism is still uncertain, this research shows the path towards a regenerative tourism. Indigenous communities, who have lived in the landscape for centuries, show resilience and adaptability. Their learning outcome was based on a long story of knowledge sharing which created livelihood-based resources and guardianship, expressed in the regenerative tourism model. According to [Haley \(2021, p. 6\)](#), “if we look to natural systems and indigenous ways of knowing, we can see that a resilient system has a strong vitality or lifeforce (mauri), it is healthy and humans that live in that system are healthy. When we know where we are from and build strong connections to place (turangawaewae), we are able to share this knowledge with others (manaakitanga), and developing a strong sense of guardianship (kaitiakitanga) for this place and culture, making decisions that will sustain it for many generations into the future” (2021, p. 6).

Tourism operates depending on what tourism stakeholders value ([Pollock, 2012](#)). The indigenous values should be pivotal to tourism management and marketing in destinations at both local and regional scales. The assumption of these values by the different stakeholders in tourism systems will lead to an effective regeneration of travel experiences in the next decades ([Fusté-Forné, 2021](#)). We as researchers also play a part in the regenerative theory and practice of tourism futures. A regenerative tourism paradigm does not only drive a future visitor economy but also implements a new holistic understanding of the tourism system which embraces people, places and practices.

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