



EARTHCHECK  
RESEARCH  
INSTITUTE

# Regenerative travel

DISCUSSION PAPER  
JUNE 2023



# Foreword

**The concept of regenerative tourism is an idea that continues to gain momentum among local communities, the tourism sector and global tourism leaders (see [WTTC](#) & [UNWTO](#)).**

It is also part of a wider set of discussions occurring across various productive sectors: agriculture, forestry, transportation, fashion and the like. EarthCheck is aware of these numerous conversations and wanted to provide our members and friends with a summary, offer clarity around our thinking and to seek your input into any actions we might take.

So at its essence what is regeneration? Does it add to our decades of endeavour in attempting to enable more sustainable pathways in production and consumption across the tourism sector? Importantly, what does it mean for EarthCheck businesses within our core protocol of “measure to manage”, are there key indicators for business and destinations that need to be added to the suite of measures we already undertake?

This discussion paper sets out EarthCheck’s initial consideration of regenerative tourism.

It notes the existing platform of sustainability measures we have had in place across the past three decades – but it does ask the question is our approach broad enough to meet current societal expectations. Additional indicators in the protection and enhancement of biodiversity and for social and cultural resourcing and engagement have emerged as important considerations.

Following feedback from our partners and readers, and discussion at the EarthCheck Inner Circle Conference (August 28 - 29, Brisbane) we will consider further our platform of indicators as we collectively strive to provide the best of platforms and indicators to manage tourism for society’s goals.



Professor Emeritus David G Simmons. CNZM , PhD

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "David G Simmons". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline.

*Chair: EarthCheck Research Institute*

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*The EarthCheck Research Institute would like to extend thanks to Griffith Institute for Tourism and especially Rubi Cury for her contribution to the development of this discussion paper.*



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# Origins of regenerative tourism

## The concept of 'regenerative tourism' has its origins in multiple sources.

There are links to Indigenous knowledge and science, a frustration with sustainability as a buzzword (Becken and Coghlan 2022)<sup>1</sup>, for some a failed dream, and for others the realisation that with the failure to establish adequate pathways to sustainability humans have already overstepped several planetary boundaries (Rockström et al.; 2009<sup>2</sup>, Meyer and Newman, 2021<sup>3</sup>) whilst others simply see it as an effort for rejuvenation or renewal<sup>12</sup>.

In the built environment regenerative principles have been popular within design and architecture where a focus on regenerative outcomes has been embedded for decades. Within the tourism sector there is emerging evidence in hotel design where positive actions include, passive and water-sensitive designs and biomimicry. Simple steps include capturing and reusing rainwater, net biodiversity gains, permeable driveways and surfacing, thermal siting and design and the reuse of core building materials. Such designs add gains to the environment and improve climate resilience.

In keeping with this, the EarthCheck Building, Planning and Design Standard was first introduced in 2007. The Standard has 10 key performance areas which includes a requirement for net biodiversity gains through site remediation, habitat creation or biodiversity offsetting.

As an example, the Datai Langkawi Resort, located in the heart of pristine 10 million year old Malaysian rainforest, has taken on the responsibility of not only conserving the natural resources and community in which it operates, but strengthening the fragile resources. Through EarthCheck certification staff are working to reduce the carbon footprint, achieve net zero waste and regenerating the natural systems and engaging guests and visitors on the journey. They also work to educate local community youth on sustainability and conservation, ensuring that the skills and knowledge are passed generation to generation<sup>4,5</sup>.

Among the broad and growing discussions about 'regenerative economies'<sup>6</sup> which focus on the need for 'businesses to work for people and the planet' a number of sectors are embracing regenerative practices. These include agriculture<sup>7,8</sup>, Forestry<sup>9,6</sup>, transportation<sup>10</sup>, fashion<sup>11</sup>, and the like.

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1. Becken S, Coghlan (2022, November), Knowledge alone won't 'fix it': building regenerative literacy, Journal of Sustainable Tourism, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09669582.2022.2150860>
  2. Rockström, J., Steffen, W., Noone, K., Persson, Å., Chapin III, F. S., Lambin, E. F., ... & Nykvist, B. (2009). A safe operating space for humanity. Nature, 461(7263), 472.
  3. Meyer K, Newman P, (2021), Planetary Accounting - Quantifying How to Live Within Planetary Limits at Different Scales of Human Activity, Springer Singapore. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1443-2>
  4. <https://www.regenerativetravel.com/resorts/the-datai-langkawi/>
  5. <https://earthcheck.org/news/the-datai-langkawi-takes-leadership-position-in-ecotourism/>
  6. <https://www.smithschool.ox.ac.uk/research/regenerative-economy>
  7. <https://regenerationinternational.org/>
  8. Giller K E, Hijbeek R, Andersson j, Sumberg J, (2021) 'Regenerative Agriculture: An agronomic perspective' Outlook on Agriculture 2021, Vol. 50(1) 13–25
  9. <http://www.thrivingearthfarm.com/forest-development>
  10. <https://regeneration.org/nexus/urban-mobility>
  11. <https://www.fashionrevolution.org/what-is-regenerative-fashion/>
  12. CBI - <https://www.cbi.eu/market-information/tourism/regenerative-tourism>

This groundswell of interest has in turn catalysed the regenerative movement in tourism (e.g. Pollock, 2019<sup>13</sup>; Reed, 2007<sup>14</sup>) which in parallel emphasises the need to restore and support the health of ecological (and societal) systems.

Tourism is generally seen as a 'luxury' purchase or service and is known for its high carbon intensity (Becken and Simmons, 2003<sup>15</sup>; Becken, 2015<sup>16</sup>; Gossling, 2013<sup>17</sup>). Equally, Major and Clarke (2021)<sup>18</sup> argue that the visitor economy has the potential to be a catalyst across industries, being in the unique position of connection to so many other sectors. A regenerative lens that acknowledges tourism as part of many nested systems, that cross traditional "industry" boundaries and link people and places, could foster potential for unprecedented collaboration and much-needed systems-level change (p 198).

Within the above discussion, a number of tensions are already apparent.

- Is regeneration an attempt to reframe (the failed ideal of) sustainability?

- Does regeneration call for a new business and consumer philosophy?
- In what ways might measures of 'value' and engagement with local people need to change?

What remains clear is that there is a call for action from a number of stakeholder groups – be they communities and their leaders, environmentalists, business and economic leaders (including all levels of Government).

Faced with a groundswell of ideas and models the WEF<sup>19</sup> acknowledge that to avoid 'corporate schizophrenia' there is a need to align a business's 'inner' and 'outer' goals – that is 'how' things are done – to match what businesses are attempting to provide – and in so doing ensure internal and external ecosystems are moving in the same direction (Roper 2022)<sup>20</sup>.

This echoes the EarthCheck philosophy of what is good for business is good for the planet.

13. Pollock A (2019), 'Regenerative Tourism: the Natural Maturation of Sustainability' retrieved from <https://medium.com/activate-the-future/regenerative-tourism-the-natural-maturation-of-sustainability-26e6507d0fcb>
14. Reed, Bill(2007)'Shifting from 'sustainability' to regeneration', Building Research & Information,35:6,674 — 680
15. Becken S, Simmons D, Frampton C. (2003) ,Energy use associated with different travel choices', Tourism Management, 24, 3 267 – 277. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177\(02\)00066-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177(02)00066-3) .
16. Becken, S. (2015). Tourism and oil: Preparing for the challenge (Vol. 1). Channel View Publications
17. Gossling S, (2013) 'National emissions from tourism: An overlooked policy challenge?', Energy Policy, 59, : 433-442, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2013.03.058>.

18. Major, J., & Clarke, D. (2022). Regenerative tourism in Aotearoa New Zealand–A new paradigm for the VUCA world. Journal of Tourism Futures, 8(2), 194-199.
19. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/01/regenerative-capitalism-industry-explainer/>
20. K Roper (2022) " what is regenerative capitalism and why is it important?" retrieved from World Economic Forum: [https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/01/regenerative-capitalism-industry-explainer/?trk=public\\_post\\_main-feed-card\\_feed-article-content](https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/01/regenerative-capitalism-industry-explainer/?trk=public_post_main-feed-card_feed-article-content)



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Regenerative principles echo  
the EarthCheck philosophy of  
what is **good for business** is  
**good for the planet.**

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# The first step - seeing regeneration as a 'step beyond' sustainability

**Among the threads of debate and commentary lies an important consideration of how sustainability and regenerative tourism might align.**

There are clear similarities borne from a common concern about the earth's carrying capacity and tourism's role in human wellbeing, satisfaction and development.

Traditional views of tourism 'growth' (and contribution), historically framed in terms of numbers', brings with it problems of environmental stress, congestion, and resentment from residents. Concurrently, a host of external factors – be they biosecurity (including the rapid spread of disease vectors such as COVID-19); weather volatility and climate-change, natural hazards (fires, floods) that result in infrastructure damage; or food or water shortages; financial and economic stress; growing political instability; and rapid changes in public values can all cause rapid changes in demand. In response to these trends, Pollock (2017<sup>21</sup>) has called for a focus on a more 'conscious' form of travel<sup>22</sup>, across the whole tourism system. Such concerns emphasising a desire to see a qualitative lens on travel and travellers,

which echoes the common call for 'value over volume' in tourism planning and development.

This, in turn, raises the vexed question of which values, and how to measure them, are appropriate for today's world and for tourism's role within it (Becken and Simmons<sup>23</sup>). For some, this search includes a consideration of new environmental frameworks such as the role of ecosystem services in tourism systems and more broadly valuing the numerous contributions of ecosystem services to human production, consumption, and wellbeing (Simmons, 2013<sup>24</sup>; Peuyo-Ros, 2018<sup>25</sup>).

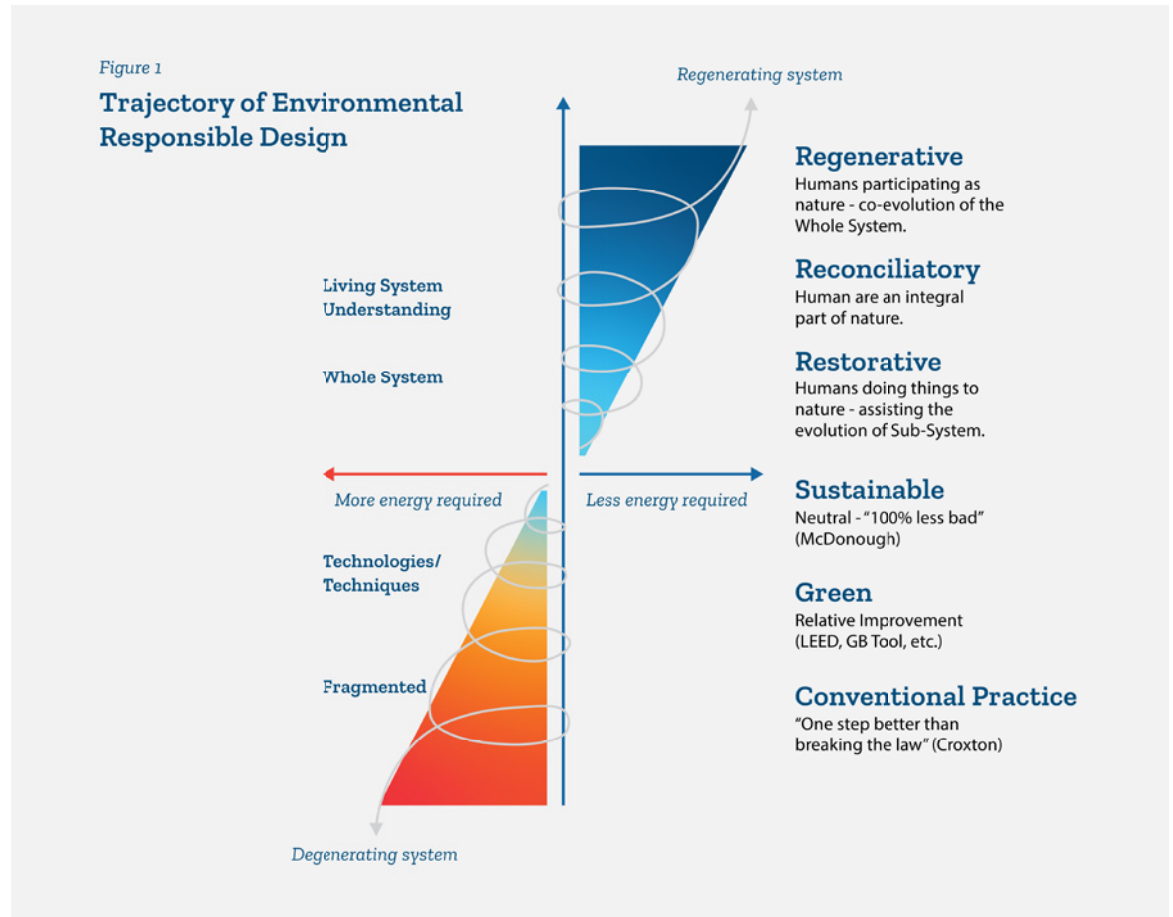
Pollock (2019, p2)<sup>26</sup> summarises this tension clearly when she identifies the need to frame and deliver *"hospitality (tourism) services at a scale and in a manner that delivers positive net benefit to all participants (commercial and non-commercial, hosts and guests)"*. Pollock's earlier work (2017)<sup>27</sup> went further raising the proposition that tourism (and other aspects of human endeavour) have the potential to become an agent of positive transformation that can contribute to a better quality of life for all. This is especially the case when face-to-face communication and interpretation are part of the visitor experience. The implication here is for both a higher-skilled and more engaged workforces.

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21. Pollock A (2017) Sustainability is Out and Transformation is In – Beware! Retrieved from <http://www.conscious.travel/category/conscious-travel/>
  22. See for example the long-standing Conscious Travel platform <http://www.conscious.travel/> and writings of Anna Pollock
  23. Becken, S. and Simmons, D. 2008. Using the concept of yield to assess the sustainability of different tourist types. *Ecological Economics* 67: 420-429.
  24. Simmons D G (2013) 'Tourism and Ecosystem Services in New Zealand' Chapter 25 (pp 343 –

348) IN Dymond JR ed Ecosystem Services in New Zealand – conditions and trends, Manaaki Whenua Press, (LandCareResearch CRI), Lincoln, New Zealand available at. [http://www.mwpress.co.nz/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/77051/2\\_5\\_Simmons.pdf](http://www.mwpress.co.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/77051/2_5_Simmons.pdf)

25. Peuyo-Ros J (2018) The Role of Tourism in the Ecosystem Services Framework, *Land* 2018, 7(3), 111; <https://doi.org/10.3390/land7030111>
26. Refer footnote 9
27. Refer footnote 17

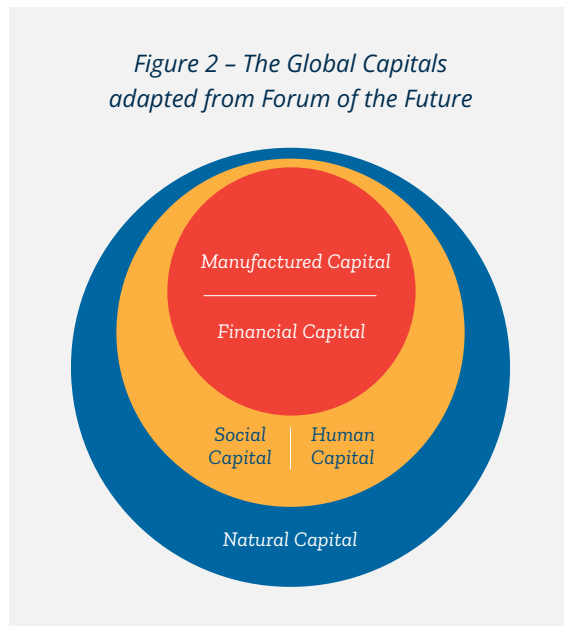
In summary a broader lens is being placed on sustainability, to include restoration and regeneration. At a simple level it is useful to conceptualise regenerative tourism is part of a continuum of endeavours to make ‘better tourism’. This continuum is well set out in the writings of Reed (2007) <sup>28</sup> below (Fig 1).



28. Reed (2007), Shifting from 'sustainability' to regeneration, BUILDING RESEARCH & INFORMATION (2007) 35(6), 674–680. As UN-WECD (nd) noted in its introduction Towards Sustainable Development, "development involves a progressive transformation of economy and society" <sup>29</sup>. It is no surprise therefore that the current set of environmental pressures and crises call for reflection on governance -- importantly in continuing to find the balance in the inevitable tensions between market and government influence in the political economy (see Simmons, 2017<sup>30</sup>; Dredge, 2021<sup>31</sup>).
29. <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-02.htm> ; <http://www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm>
30. Simmons, D. G. (2017). Neoliberal politics and the fate of tourism. In R. Butler, & W. Suintikul (Eds.), Tourism and political change (2nd ed., pp. 9-24). Oxford, UK: Goodfellow Publishers. <https://dx.doi.org/10.23912/9781910158814-3443>
31. Dredge D, (2021) Regenerative Tourism vs Sustainable Tourism? (retrieved from LinkedIn 9th Feb 2023: <https://www.thetourismcolab.com.au/post/regenerative-tourism-vs-sustainable-tourism>



Dredge in particular argues for a significant change in mindset ...*“to evolve the way we think, value and relate to the world around us”* (p4), (with concomitant links to appropriate Indigenous knowledge) which echoes Pollock’s (2017) call for new ways of thinking and frameworks ‘whereby tourism can *“become a force for good, for regeneration”*’ (p3). Arguably, the new way of thinking reverts back to tourism’s origins, before the mass packages whereby tourism was undertaken as a pathway for enlightenment.



These authors argue the need for a systematic view of tourism as one of among many human generated actions, that require a broader set of ‘values’ by which to measure tourism and other human endeavours. Clear links can be drawn to a consideration of tourism within the five ‘sustainability capitals’ which underpin the UN Sustainable

Development Goals (fig 2)<sup>32</sup>. A number of authors now refer to a set of four capital stocks: natural, human, social and financial, while other authors take an even more granular approach by including specific reference to cultural and built capitals. Regardless of the number or specificity of various capitals, understanding the relationships between each of these is now recognised as the cornerstone of wellbeing and a pathway to global sustainability goals.

Importantly, these capitals are not equal: natural capital pre-empts all others. Financial and economic capitals are contingent on natural capital, but also on the human and cultural capitals at play. These are important considerations when examining tourism and prioritising decisions that prioritise, protect and enhance (Simmons, 2020)<sup>33</sup>.

To Dredge<sup>34</sup> regenerative tourism is both a mindset change and paradigm shift “that accelerates the pursuit of sustainable tourism and the SDGs” (2021: p4). More recently Becken and Coghlan (2022)<sup>35</sup> present the case for the development of ‘regenerative literacy’ with a need to connect emotionally and to turn knowledge, and attitudes into actions as one pathway forward. This reminds us that attitudinal and behavioural change need to happen not just in the workplace, but in our homes and across all facets of our lives.

Corresponding we would argue that for many in the pragmatic business world starting with actions can also lead to the building of knowledge and questioning of attitudes.

32. See for example : <https://www.conservation.org/>


33. Simmons D G (2020), ‘Navigating the Future- finding new compass bearings’, Ch 1 pp 15-28. Introduction IN 100% Pure Future – New Zealand Tourism Renewed, S Bennett Ed. BWB Texts, New Zealand, Wellington

34. Refer to footnote 26.

35. Refer footnote 1.



*Regenerative tourism is both a **mindset change** and **paradigm shift** that **accelerates** the pursuit of **sustainable tourism** and the **UN Sustainable Development Goals**.*

 Emirates One&Only Wolgan Valley, Australia


# Towards a definition

As a trusted advisor and partner to the global tourism industry, EarthCheck has examined its programmes and facilitated/conducted workshops with the Griffith Institute for Tourism (located at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia) in an effort to provide the best understandings, advice and support to its partners.

Based on our research and discussions we propose that:

**Regenerative tourism is a process where the tourism sector stakeholders, collectively, exert care and guardianship<sup>36</sup> (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.**

In Radju's (2020)<sup>37</sup> terms, regenerative tourism would mean improving the performance and impact of tourism within and beyond a sustainability framework.

 One&Only Palmilla, Mexico

36. Inspired by the Indigenous New Zealand Maori word Kaitiaki (guardianship).

37. Radjou N. Forbes 24 Oct 2020 'Beyond sustainability - the regenerative business', <https://www.forbes.com/sites/naviradjou/2020/10/24/beyond-sustainability-the-regenerative-business/?sh=63d6522b1ab3>

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# The call to action

## At EarthCheck, we constantly get asked “How can we implement regenerative tourism?”.

Notwithstanding some academics indicating a move to regenerative tourism requiring “sustained reflection”<sup>38</sup> the world is hastening to adopt regenerative tourism with a vigour unseen since the early days of the sustainability movement. There are think tanks<sup>39</sup> (Co-Lab), courses<sup>40</sup> roundtable’s (University of Oxford), travel<sup>41</sup>, regional regenerative tourism strategies<sup>42</sup>, hotels<sup>43</sup>, retreats<sup>44</sup> and such like as various tourism stakeholders scramble to understand these new concepts, and respond to the set of deepening disasters that beset the world – but many don’t have the fundamentals of sustainability in place to drive strategic action and change.

### OUR KEY FINDINGS INCLUDE:

#### **Regenerative tourism represents both a challenge and an opportunity.**

It represents a further evolution of professional business practices in a similar fashion as Occupational Health and Safety has moved over the years from a consideration to a cornerstone of business practice.

#### **Regenerative tourism can be considered a step beyond sustainable tourism.**

While sustainability pivots on the notion of a sustainable harvest from human, social and nature’s capitals regenerative endeavours speak to the need to give back to these capitals to create a net gain.

Our experience is that many of our partners and EarthCheck members already step beyond basic benchmarks. A full consideration of regenerative practices requires increased attention be paid to local societal and environmental outcomes.

For those not yet on the journey, we would argue that the basics of sustainability are required to be in place in order to create meaningful regenerative outcomes.

#### **Acting within a regenerative framework calls into question a business purpose, point of difference, and broader consideration of tourism with living systems and the planets capabilities.**

#### **Regenerative tourism needs to be seen as much more than a ‘niche’ product – it is a process that brings benefits to businesses, communities and the natural environment.**

Businesses and destinations need to focus on regenerative opportunities beyond and including their guests.

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38. Dr D Dredge. The tourism Co-lab, 28th Jan 2023 (posted on LinkedIn)

39. <https://www.thetourismcolab.com.au/>

40. <https://www.thetourismcolab.com.au/online-courses/>; <https://www.theregenlab.com/webinars/>; <https://citydestinationsalliance.eu/initiatives/regenerative-tourism-gds-academy/>;

41. <https://www.regenerativetravel.com/>

42. [https://earthcheck.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Queenstown\\_Lakes\\_Regenerative\\_Tourism\\_Plan\\_33b42536-edd1-4086-acc5-708207e134f8.pdf](https://earthcheck.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Queenstown_Lakes_Regenerative_Tourism_Plan_33b42536-edd1-4086-acc5-708207e134f8.pdf)


43. <https://www.regenerativetravel.com/resorts/>

44. <https://www.regenerativetravel.com/retreats/>



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**Regenerative tourism** represents both a **challenge** and an **opportunity**. It represents a **further evolution** of professional business practices.

 Couples Negril, Jamaica

# Next steps

In support of the continued evolution and professionalisation of the global tourism sector, and the existing narrative surrounding regenerative benefits of tourism, EarthCheck have recognised the need to understand regenerative tourism and its alignment with our understandings of sustainable tourism support its clients with metrics that demonstrate how they are operating in a regenerative fashion.

Based on EarthCheck's criteria, the following mapping was conducted noting that for those who are improving and delivering outcomes that are better than the previous year's results regenerative outcomes can be seen.

The table below highlights the indicators to look for, the regenerative principles and the outcomes that demonstrate regenerative behaviour:

EarthCheck Indicators	Regenerative Travel Principles	Example Outcomes
Energy consumption	Resource efficiency and circularity	Increase in renewable energy generation
Greenhouse gas emissions	Climate change mitigation and adaptation	Emissions net-positive (e.g. reducing emissions as far as possible and off-setting the remainder through credible schemes)
Water consumption	Water stewardship and restoration	More efficient use of water
Waste generation and management	Waste reduction, upcycling, and recycling	Removal of waste from landfill
Biodiversity conservation	Ecosystem restoration and enhancement	Net positive increase in ecosystem rehabilitation with native species.
Sustainable procurement practices	Local and ethical sourcing	Sustainable community sourcing of majority of supply
Social and cultural engagement	Community empowerment and cultural preservation	Proactively working with local groups to enhance cultural preservation (e.g. signage in local language, purchasing of traditional handicraft etc.)
Economic performance	Equitable distribution of economic benefits	More than 75% of benefits remain in local area
Accessibility and inclusivity	Inclusive tourism for diverse populations	Provision of support and infrastructure to make accessible to all
Health and safety management	Well-being of tourists, staff, and communities	Community satisfaction & active engagement with tourism
Education and capacity building	Knowledge sharing, training, and local capacity	Contribution to knowledge building and training among local community

In addition, we will work with a team to review our existing Standards to refine the language to better meet the evolving concepts and look at where further indicators for destinations are required such as regional dispersal of visitors and business turnover. If you have questions, thoughts, or additional contributions you wish to make to the discussion

please contact the EarthCheck Research Institute secretariat Dr Natasha Montesalvo ([natasha.montesalvo@earthcheck.org](mailto:natasha.montesalvo@earthcheck.org)).

Following this discussion paper, and further review by our working group, we are planning to report back at the EarthCheck Inner Circle Forum on 28 August 2023 in Brisbane.



Emirates One&Only Wolgan Valley, Australia



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