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Academic essays

Researching regenerative tourism: call for participatory, inclusive and reflective fieldwork

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Abstract

This essay explores how qualitative fieldwork in regenerative tourism research can be approached to foster more impactful and ethical scholarship. Arguing that regenerative tourism research must itself be transformative and align with regenerative thinking, the essay identifies three key principles for fieldwork: participatory, relational, and reflective. Participatory fieldwork fosters co-creation and empowers local communities, while relational approaches decentre the human and acknowledge the agency of more-than-human actors. Reflective practice, in turn, highlights the importance of researcher positionality, emotional labour, and the political nature of the field. As the provided examples demonstrate, these principles are already evident in emerging empirical studies that examine tourism through the lens of regenerative tourism.

Keywords: regenerative tourism, fieldwork, qualitative research, tourism geography

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Introduction

The concept of regenerative tourism presents a shift from traditional sustainable approaches, which remain inadequate in addressing the current environmental and social impacts of tourism (Dwyer 2018; Kadri et al. 2023). Regenerative tourism frames tourism activities as *"interventions that develop the capacities of places, communities and their guests to operate in harmony with interconnected social-ecological systems"* (Bellato et al. 2025: 246). Operationalising these transformation processes requires *"a deep engagement with the practical aspects of how to bring about change"* (Lupini et al. 2024: 2) and calls for impact-led action research and engaged scholarship have already been made (Bellato et al. 2023; Bertella 2022; Lupini et al. 2024). From a regenerative viewpoint, it can be argued that research itself should be regenerative, generating benefits for the socio-ecological environments with which it engages. This perspective invites reflection on the nature of fieldwork and the responsibilities of a researcher for the field.

Fieldwork in geography is defined by the complex relationship between the researcher and what is considered as a field (Hyndman 2011; Katz 1996; Sharp & Dowler 2011). The researcher has the power to define what the field is in each research and holds power to impact it (Greenhough 2006; Hyndman 2001; Katz 1996). Following Sharp and Dowler (2011: 156), field is approached in this paper as a *"product of field practices rather than a pre-existing place"*. Consequently, field is situated and dynamic, constantly being redefined and contested in space-time (Greenhough 2006). In tourism research, particularly within the context of sustainability and regenerative approaches, the notion of the field is deeply intertwined with ethical considerations and the dynamics between researchers and communities. The aim of this essay is to argue that qualitative fieldwork for regenerative tourism research needs to be participatory, relationally aware and reflexive. Examples of operationalising these principles can be found from recent studies that examine tourism through the lens of regenerative approaches.

Envisioning regenerative fieldwork

While sustainable tourism tends to be steered by efficiency within the limits of current capitalistic rules (Fletcher 2011; Torkington et al. 2020), regenerative tourism seeks to enhance the wellbeing of ecosystems and human societies based on the place-specific patterns (Becken & Kaur 2022; Bellato et al. 2023). By considering humans not as above but active part of nature, regenerative thinking encourages us to co-create within more-than-human networks, acknowledging also non-human agency (Omma 2024). Tourism is considered as a living system, characterised by dynamic and complex relationships within the broader living socio-ecological systems (Bellato et al. 2023; Buckton et al. 2023). Therefore, *"embracing a regenerative approach is not about tourism in isolation from this wider, embedded and holistic objective"*, but rather *"about building a regenerative society"* (Gerke et al. 2023: 15). Noticing the entanglements of social and ecological are crucial for restoring wellbeing of both the planet and our societies (Du Plessis & Brandon 2015). If tourism is studied as an interconnected and complex living system, research must evolve beyond mechanistic scientific practices and epistemologies that perceive the world as a collection of predictable parts (Du Plessis 2008).

While regenerative tourism offers an inspiring foundation for rethinking tourism sustainability, several questions can be raised of its development. Lapointe (2025) and

Taveras-Dalmau et al. (2025) warn that regenerative approaches risk repeating the superficiality of sustainability, and regenerative tourism ends up regenerating tourism (see Fletcher 2011). For instance, since regenerative tourism seeks to create positive impacts namely at a destination scale, such place-based benefits may be insignificant if the global climate emissions produced by travel are not addressed (Saarinen & Hall 2025). In addition, the complexity of regenerative tourism itself has led to a conceptual ambiguity in research and practice. Bellato and Pollock (2025: 563) note that some lines of research have tried to *"integrate regenerative approaches into linear models"*, which *"tend to diminish advancements in the approach"*. Over-simplification and commercialisation of the concept endanger the meaningful paradigm shift (Bellato & Pollock 2025; Mathisen et al. 2022; Taveras-Dalmau et al. 2025).

Considering these critiques and the recent interest towards regenerative tourism both among tourism operators and scholars, further discussion is needed on how research can enhance its transformational impact. Bellato et al. (2023) initiated the debate by calling for a transformational, decolonial, transdisciplinary tourism research paradigm to keep up with the evolution of regenerative tourism. They emphasised the need for stronger collaboration between scholars and practitioners, as well as inclusion of Indigenous and marginalised knowledges (Bellato et al. 2023). In a similar vein, Lupini et al. (2024) identified methodological requirements for co-designing sustainable transformations in tourism. These include (1) co-creating actionable knowledge, (2) establishing safe spaces, (3) challenging power structures and managing emerging tensions, (4) shaping systemic synergies and (5) blurring the lines around the stakeholder roles (Lupini et al. 2024).

Regenerative tourism has already been studied both conceptually and empirically. While not all research involve fieldwork, in this paper, I focus particularly on the researcher's relationship with the field. More empirical studies are needed to translate regenerative tourism into practical regenerative actions (Bellato et al. 2024). However, as noted earlier, studies must avoid the linear and mechanistic traditions of research in order to enact the promises of paradigm change (Bellato & Pollock 2025). Therefore, drawing on literature from various branches of social science, I propose three principles for conducting qualitative regenerative tourism fieldwork. According to these principles, fieldwork should be participatory, relational, and reflective (Figure 1). These guiding principles assist in aligning fieldwork with the complex and dynamic nature of regenerative thinking. In the following section, I will explore each of these principles in greater depth and provide examples from empirical qualitative research on regenerative tourism.

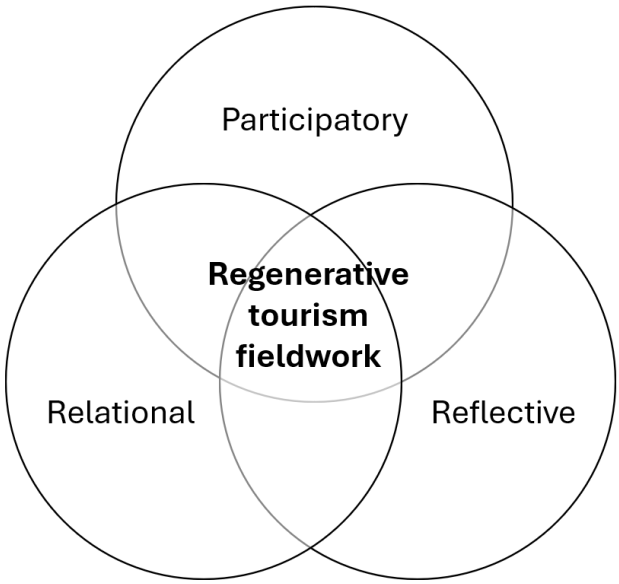

Figure 1. Principles for regenerative tourism fieldwork.

Examining fieldwork in regenerative tourism research

Participatory

Tourism research is fundamentally a collaborative process that enacts reality (Ren et al. 2017). Therefore, by ensuring collaborative knowledge production in fieldwork, research contributes to the construction of realities that are respectful of the place-specific settings (Bellato et al. 2023; Higgins-Desbiolles & Bigby 2023). Particularly in the shift towards regenerative approaches, all stakeholders need to work together in reciprocal partnerships (Bellato et al. 2022; Ridanpää 2025). Researchers can support these partnerships through participatory and co-creative approaches. Co-creation and co-design of regenerative tourism futures empower local communities to act as change agents (Bellato & Cheer 2021; Paddison & Hall 2024). By involving diverse group of voices in research, including marginalised and potentially vulnerable groups (Lewis et al. 2023), the field opens up possibilities for fostering more inclusive narratives and enhancing agency within tourism development (Sharp & Dowler 2011). Participatory approaches allow participants to become active partners in the research process (Goebel et al. 2019), challenging neopositivist dichotomies between the research object and subject (England 1994). However, participatory approaches involve multifaceted interactions that require careful mediation (Liburd et al. 2022; Partanen et al. 2023).

Participatory and co-creative approaches have been incorporated in diverse ways within research related to regenerative tourism. A commonly used data collection strategy has been ethnography, employing various methods such as interviews (Scheyvens & Kaire Gataulu 2025), observation (Hall et al. 2025; Lazic & Della Lucia 2024; Omma 2024), and participatory video and photography (Le Minh & An 2025). Workshops, in particular, have been utilised to bring multiple participants together

for shared discussions and collective visioning (Becken & Kaur 2022; Bellato et al. 2024; King et al. 2025; Nieuwland 2024; Spalazzi & Mariotti 2024). Some cases allow a longer co-creation period. For instance, the findings by Cave et al. (2022) are based on multi-week conversations between course participants. The regenerative tourism research demonstrates that research participants can be involved from the earliest stages, including the design of the methodology (Bellato et al. 2024; Nieuwland 2024; Scheyvens & Kaira Gataulu 2025), thereby extending the spatio-temporal dimensions of the field. Another way to deepen participant involvement is by inviting study participants to comment or co-author the academic text (Cave et al. 2022; Gerke et al. 2023; Mathisen et al. 2022). Participatory research can raise important questions about the ownership of ideas. As Scheyvens & Kaira Gataulu (2025) note, when study participants are involved in co-creative research in a positive light, it may be worth questioning traditions of anonymity that can belittle participants' contribution in knowledge production.

Regenerative tourism has been considered as a tool and intervention for thriving places (Bellato et al. 2025). While both practical and theoretical knowledge about regenerative tourism are still evolving, there is an urgent need for rapid action to challenge extractive forms of tourism. Thus, it is logical for scholars to encounter in participatory action research to support place-based regenerative action. For instance, Bellato et al. (2024) applied action research to guide a project dedicated to designing a healthy river. In addition, some fieldwork with enterprises has involved researchers sharing their knowledge to support the development of regenerative practices (Mathisen et al. 2022; Ridanpää 2025). However, participatory principle has to involve abandonment of hierarchical expert roles and openness to place-based realities (Höckert 2015; Ooi 2023). In addition, as some of the examples above demonstrate, dismantling the strict roles of research subjects and objects require deeper human connections. Accordingly, the boundaries between "the research", "the field" and everyday life get blurred (Katz 1996; Hyndman 2001). While fieldwork based on participation can be reciprocal and valuable for the overall process, it may not always produce knowledge relevant for academic research (see Hyndman 2001).

Relational

Regenerative thinking is inherently grounded in relational views of living systems thinking and ecological worldview (Du Plessis & Brandon 2015). A relational perspective decentres the human for more holistic human-nature connectedness and encourages humans to practice care (West et al. 2020). Adopting a relational view of the field and fieldwork allows to approach "a field site as something that is actively constructed, contested, and negotiated both by researchers and by human and nonhuman inhabitants" (Rantala et al. 2025, p. 1). West et al. (2020) argue that relational approach to empirical fieldwork broadens the representation of complexity and inextricability of humans and nature. For example, incorporating more-than-human and multispecies methods can help uncover the non-human agency within the field (Ye et al. 2025).

Regenerative tourism research has recognised the agency of non-human stakeholders, such as rivers (Bellato et al. 2024) and places (Ridanpää 2025). Notably, Omma (2024) applied multispecies ethnography which included distinguishing the animal stakeholders from the setting and examining their relationship with the human stakeholders. This allowed to dismantle *"the power dynamics between humans and non-humans"*

in research design (Omma 2024: 4). Such approaches to fieldwork help to produce knowledge that counteracts contemporary anthropocentric tourism models. However, although questioning Human/Society dualism is often central to the theoretical framing of many regenerative tourism studies, this view is not always clearly reflected in the methodological choices (Forte & Mariotti 2025; Lazic & Della Lucia 2024; Mathisen et al. 2022). This suggests that relationally aware approaches can influence the fieldwork in the background, affecting the choices and thinking of the researcher.

Reflective

The field is always filtered through the positionality, emotions, and power relations of the fieldworker (Caretta & Jokinen 2017; England 1994; Hope 2009; Hyndman 2001; Katz 1996). As such, the researcher inevitably becomes part of the field. In addition, *"the field is always politically situated, contextualized, and defined and that its social, political, and spatial boundaries shift with changing circumstances or in different political contexts"* (Nast 1994: 60). Reflection is therefore a critical component of all fieldwork (England 1994). However, conducting regenerative tourism research may raise specific questions before, during, and after fieldwork. For instance: How is the field selected, particularly when the research aims to serve as a positive intervention? What is the ecological footprint of travelling to and working in the field? Who does the fieldworker engage with, and how is the knowledge about regenerating places co-constructed? And how is fieldwork written down without oversimplifying the regenerative processes for the purposes of academic text?

Though reflection occurs, the researcher's reflections are not always included in the academic text. Nonetheless, some regenerative tourism studies do acknowledge positionality, for example by expressing the authors' desire to contribute to positive change (Becken & Kaur 2022) or by describing their relationship to the case (Gerke et al. 2023; Lemarié & Bellato 2025). Studies involving Indigenous people tend to include more reflection, for instance, by describing decolonising methodologies (Le Minh & An 2025; Scheyvens & Kaira Gataulu 2025), or mentioning involvement of indigenous people or knowledge (Becken & Kaur 2022; Bellato et al. 2024; Lemarié & Bellato 2025; Omma 2024). For instance, Le Minh and An (2025: 8) applied Critical Place Inquiry approach, which *"serves as a lens to scrutinize assumptions about places and their constructions, paying close attention to indigenous theories and ontologies regarding land and place, as well as the relationship of qualitative research to the ongoing processes of settler colonization"*. Posing critical questions during fieldwork and other phases of research counter the normalisation of harmful trajectories (Le Minh & An 2025).

It has been emphasized that regenerative approaches involve a mindset shift and inner transformation (Taveras-Dalmau 2024). Therefore, deep immersion with regenerative principles and practice through research work can be transformative for the researcher themselves (see England 1994). Although regenerative tourism offers an inspiring perspective for sustainability transformation research, it can be exhausting work given the constraints of neoliberal, growth-oriented tourism industry and academia. Thus, taking care of the fieldworker becomes an essential part of conducting reciprocal research.

Conclusions

This essay has reflected how the field can be approached in regenerative tourism research for more impactful and ethical research. Crucially, I argue that research of regenerative tourism must itself be transformative, contributing to holistic sustainability of societies. To ensure the credibility of regenerative tourism and the promises of paradigm change, fieldwork in qualitative regenerative tourism research need to align with regenerative thinking. Based on these needs, the essay identified three principles that tourism scholars should consider when conducting regenerative fieldwork: participatory, relational and reflective. These principles are already visible in some of the published empirical studies that examine the topic of interest through the lens of regenerative tourism. The principles support research that is guided by care towards human and non-human participants in the field and beyond. Wright and Daley (2026: 44) bring up how *"approaching research as relationship-making, not just knowledge-making, opens research up to the much bigger, vital, and important task of responding with responsibility to the multiple crises wrought by ongoing colonization and extractive capitalism"*. The aim of principles is not to harness regenerative tourism research for promotion of regenerative *tourism* but rather build regenerative societies that support capacities of the Earth with the help of research.

The introduced principles provide a start for guiding regenerative tourism research to a direction that has impact beyond the academia. However, the three principles may not be exhaustive and are open for development in the future. Regenerative research is a dynamic and emergent process in itself (van der Berg 2025), which is why the principles guiding it may get reformulated over time. In addition to tourism, regenerative thinking has gained traction in various fields such as agriculture, design, business, and development (Buckton et al. 2023). Therefore, examining fieldwork ethics in the related disciplines could enrich the discourse within tourism research.

Although the discussion has focused on qualitative research, the principles can be followed in quantitative fieldwork as well. This may be even critical to avoid producing reductionistic data that fails to capture the holistic nature of regenerative thinking (Bellato & Pollock 2025). Furthermore, while the essay has centred on research, the principles can be highlighted also in education of tourism geography and other tourism research fields. Embedding them in teaching practices can help guide future fieldworkers towards conducting regenerative research. It also encourages students to critically engage with the concept of the field, not just as a site of inquiry, but as a space of mutual learning and transformation.

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