

Towards regenerative tourism?

Insights and experiences from Danish Destination Management Organizations

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) in advancing regenerative tourism (RT) in Denmark. Despite its potential, RT remains underdeveloped and difficult to understand, presenting challenges in adoption and implementation. Through an exploratory qualitative analysis of interviews with nine Danish DMOs, we identify three key themes: open and receptiveness to RT principles, significant barriers to operationalization, and the dichotomy between willing and reluctant tourism stakeholders. Findings reveal a general openness to RT among DMOs, tempered by conceptual ambiguity, measurement challenges, and resistance from stakeholders. The study underscores DMOs' potential as critical change agents in fostering RT by bridging academic insights with practical applications. To answer the call for increased regenerative literacy in the field, we advocate the need for an increased collaboration between academia and DMOs to foster actionable blueprints, adaptable key performance indicators and documented (un)successful RT initiatives tailored to local contexts so both DMOs and academia can make tangible shifts towards RT beyond the conceptual. The research also contributes to the discourse on transitioning DMOs from infinite growth-driven entities to stewards of sustainable and regenerative tourism. Future work calls for expanded comparative studies and deeper academia-practitioner collaboration to refine RT's theoretical and practical foundations.

KEYWORDS: regenerative tourism, destination management organizations, challenges, academia-practitioner collaboration, Denmark



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INTRODUCTION

The Nordic tourism market in the past decade has been defined by levels of unprecedented growth (Dragin-Jensen et al., 2024), with authorities and the industry understanding the need for a concerted effort to further promote and develop tourism to match growing demands and expectations from travelers. As a result, many Nordic destinations have reaped the traditional economic boons that tourism brings, e.g., revenue, job creation, and other place-based values. Yet, this growth has also brought forth a recognition that the “forces at play in and around the [travel and tourism] industry have become more evident and contested” (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2021, p.4). Under the long shadows of the climate crisis and the (still) ongoing repercussions of the global COVID-19 pandemic, tourism has taken a hotseat in its contribution to environmental and social degradation (Gössling & Higham, 2021). In particular, traditional (mass) tourism has been pointed out as a “generator of problems due to its brutal and egotistical misuse of people and natural resources with the sole purpose of generating economic benefits” (Corral-Gonzalez et al., 2023, p.41). The paper aims to report on experiences with introducing and implementing regenerative tourism among Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) in Denmark. Despite recent and growing academic and practitioner interest in the concept, examining and understanding such learnings ‘from the ground’ remain relatively unexplored.

While sustainable tourism has long been heralded as the frontrunner to address the growing concerns surrounding the tourism industry, its development agenda is increasingly “criticized for being co-opted to service continual economic growth, driving environmental devastation and social inequalities” (Bellato et al., 2022, p.1). That is, sustainable tourism still operates within economic-based supply-and-demand models of an extractive and degenerative nature, failing to consider that a “significant proportion of the resources that support tourism exist beyond the purpose of serving tourist needs” (Bellato et al., 2022, p. 313). As such, while sustainable tourism contributes to raising awareness and implementing incremental improvements, its economic emphasis and focus on mitigating harm rather than fostering positive change is increasingly viewed as insufficient in addressing deeper, systemic issues that threaten the long-term viability of tourism and the local ecosystems they are inextricably a part of.

Both during and in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, a call for ‘building back better tourism’ intensified, as Cave et al. aptly note – “...old ways of navigating tourism management steered by our heads (i.e. the maps and charts produced by scientific thinking) began to sit uncomfortable with knowledge bubbling up from heart and instinct” (Cave et al., 2022, p.299). This gradual change in social-ecological consciousness is beckoning a transformation in tourism (Dredge, 2022; Pollock, 2022), with the concept of regenerative tourism (RT) gaining popularity in this regard (see Bellato et al. 2022; Cave et al., 2022; Dredge, 2022; Fusté-Forné & Hussain, 2022; Mathisen et al., 2022; Pollock, 2015; Tomassini & Cavagnaro, 2022). In short, regenerative thinking concerns viewing humans and nature as inseparable and interconnected (Mathisen et al., 2022) with the goal to uphold thriving and flourishing living systems (Bellato et al., 2022; Gibbons, 2020; Pollock, 2022). This interconnectedness through regenerative understandings and practices activates keywords such as ‘renewing’, ‘improving’ and ‘healing’, which are all fundamental parts of RT too.

While regenerative principles are not novel (see Dredge, 2022; Pollock, 2022; Bellato & Pollock, 2023), RT is still in its infancy. Much of the academic discourse has focused on numerous conceptual clarifications and frameworks for the tourism industry (Aquino et al., 2024; Atladóttir et al., 2023), supported by (yet) few case studies of application, for instance with small tourism enterprises (e.g., Gerke et al., 2023; Mathisen et al., 2022) or social tourism enterprises (e.g., Hajarrahmah et al., 2024). Despite growing interest in RT, its ability to gain traction has so far been limited due to the prevalent growth focus in the industry (Bellato & Pollock, 2023). This is further amplified by



“high levels of bureaucratization which is particularly pronounced in the corporate sector and large businesses” (Gerke et al., 2023, p. 2220), whose goals are geared towards traditional neo-liberal growth indicators. As a result, the regenerative agenda in tourism, and with that the transformational change inherent in the concept, has been met with hesitation, skepticism and even resistance (Gerke et al., 2023) in the tourism industry and among tourism professionals on several levels.

Perhaps the most exemplifying embodiment of this is the situation among Destination Management Organizations (DMO). Most DMOs today (still) follow blueprints designed for growth while chasing marketable key performance indicators focused on *more is better*: more tourists, more overnight stays, more expenditure per tourist, more market share, etc. (e.g., Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). If, however, tourism truly is to be a force for good and break its growth fixation (Dredge, 2016; Post-Lundgaard & Dragin-Jensen, 2024), DMOs must rethink and change their practices. That is not to say that RT is anti-growth, or degrowth, but rather that economic development of tourism (also necessary for RT to grow and flourish) must not exclusively come at the cost of degrading the environment and its local communities. As Reinhold et al. note, this is “a topic of considerable interest” (2023, p.2) considering the important role of DMOs as local ‘nervous systems’ for tourism development and the accompanying responsibility that follows from that. For this reason, DMOs are an intuitive starting point to assess and thus better understand the value in and work put into transitioning to RT principles, potentially paving the way for local tourism actors and networks to follow (Gretzel, 2021).

This study contributes to tourism research and literature by examining challenges DMOs encounter in understanding and applying regenerative practices, highlighting both conceptual complexities and operational obstacles. Documentation of and reflections on this, we find, are still important research gaps. The study involves an exploratory examination of first-hand reports from nine Danish DMO professionals and their experiences with the concept. Ultimately, the study answers calls for increased regenerative literacy among tourism practitioners (Becken & Coghlan, 2024).

Regenerative thinking

The word ‘regenerate’, originating from biology to describe processes of ‘regrowing’ or ‘restoring’, has also been applied in various social science disciplines, including tourism, to mean ‘renewing’, ‘improving’ or ‘healing’, often in relation to places and systems (Bellato & Pollock, 2023; Dredge, 2022). Regenerative thinking is summarized by Dredge (2022, p. 270):

“The regenerative mindset is underpinned by an ecological or living systems worldview, the goal of which is to create the conditions for all life to renew and restore itself. In this holistic view, humans and nature are not separate categories, but instead, they are connected and intertwined. This view can be traced back to rich historical threads of indigenous wisdom. It also exists in literature exploring the separation between nature and humans that has been propagated by scientific thinking and accelerated under capitalism.”

This mindset builds on a critique of neo-liberal world thinking and capitalistic ideals centered around growth and development, while objectifying nature (Dredge, 2022; Pollock, 2022). Regenerative thinking is partly a reaction to this and partly a ‘medicine’ by (re)introducing more traditional (indigenous) and place-based ways of working with today’s growing environmental and social challenges. As such, regenerative thinking has a certain recognizability among academics and professionals in disciplines and occupations that have long worked with human-nature relations and interactions, and have threads to similar streams of thinking, such as ‘deep ecology’ or a ‘gaia’ worldview (Head, 2016; Naess, 1988).

The quote by Dredge (2022) in combination with a quick examination of research literature on the topic, can be summarized into seven principles that we believe guides regenerative thinking:

Table 1. Seven principles guiding regenerative thinking. Own table, but based on Bellato, Frantzeskaki, & Nygaard, 2022; Bellato & Pollock, 2023; Cave et al., 2022; Dredge, 2022; Fusté-Forné & Hussain, 2022; Gibbons, 2020; Mathisen et al., 2022; Pollock, 2015; Tomassini & Cavagnaro, 2022.

Principle	Description
Indigenous wisdom	A focus on indigenous worldviews and their synergy with and knowledge of the relationship between man and nature
Ecocentrism	Everything in nature has its own value and is thus linked to environmental ethics with its focus on developing nature on nature's own premises
Living systems perspective	Humans are not separate from but an implicit part of nature's systems, recognizing that we are mutually influenced and influence each other
Pluralistic	Utilization and integration of different knowledges aspects, understandings and experiences with the aim of achieving joint results
Holistic	An open and broad approach where all aspects and parts of nature and society are considered and used as a base of living
Diversity	Recognition and acknowledgement of different opinions and values across age, gender and ethnicity but also geography and circumstances
Inclusive	Involvement of local people affected by change with a focus on using their knowledge of local conditions and values, including input to solutions

We view the seven principles as fundamental pillars in a basic philosophy behind a regenerative way of thinking and are, thus, also fundamental elements in our understanding of how to work with RT.

Regenerative tourism

It is arguably only in the recent decade that RT has gained scope and content led by key advocates such as Pollock (Bellato & Pollock, 2023; Pollock, 2019), Dredge (Cave et al., 2022; Dredge, 2022) and Bellato (Bellato et al., 2022; Bellato & Pollock, 2023). As a result, conceptualizations of RT are still much explorative in nature (Bellato & Pollock, 2023). Moreover, despite gaining growing attention among tourism professionals (e.g., local DMOs), the linking of tourism and regenerative thinking on a practitioner level is relatively new and there are still very few concrete, tangible examples of successful application and operationalization of the concept.

A key challenge is that a universally accepted definition of RT does not exist, making the concept diffuse and unclear (a recurring problem also with sustainable tourism). To this, the conceptual advocates (e.g., Bellato & Pollock, 2023) argue that such a definition is neither practical, nor desired, as it goes against the plurality and diversity thinking implicit in the concept. Instead, they argue, each understanding, and thus also use, of the concept is contextual and situational, implying that each definition, interpretation and application vary between places and actors. This includes a rough conceptual framework based on local discussions that can help guide such a process.

A popular way to sum up RT is that it concerns 'tourism that positively gives back' to local areas that frame touristic content and the people inhabiting these places. However, this is a simplification of the concept and understanding, especially when taking the above seven principles into consideration. A more accurate description would be that RT is a tourism approach that recognizes and prioritizes as well as nurtures and strengthens local communities and environmental settings that host, frame and form different tourism content. This is not an attempt to create a prescriptive or universal definition but is rather our conceptual take on and understanding of the concept used in the remainder of the paper.

Another reason for conceptual confusion is the way RT resembles existing tourism concepts and



practices, such as conscious, responsible, volunteer or eco/green tourism forms. In particular, the distinction between RT and sustainable tourism has caused confusion. From our own experiences, this confusion is widespread, not only (and often) among researchers, but particularly also among tourism professionals, who use the concepts interchangeably. A good way to shortly provide a few clarifications is to look at Bellato et al. (2022), whose paper includes a helpful table presenting important distinctions between the two tourism understandings. Generally, they both share holistic and inclusive approaches and recognition of diversity aspects. On a more detailed level, however, there are noteworthy differences. For example, it is argued that sustainable tourism thinking is still influenced by infinite growth and a focus on finding universal solutions to both global and local problems, often led in a top-down fashion by politicians and experts (e.g., academic and industry). Focus is on social, environmental and economic dimensions in a systems perspective, but still kept separate with economic interests often overshadowing and boosterism preferred over the other two dimensions. Moreover, man and nature are separated, resulting in, but also explaining, competition and complications between the two. Most importantly perhaps, it is argued that sustainable tourism mainly concerns minimizing impacts—such as doing less harm—while still prioritizing economic gain.

RT, as emphasized above, focuses more on an indigenous and ecological worldview that is place-based and focused on addressing local challenges and realizing potentials. Processes are characteristically bottom—up structured, placing local stakeholders at center stage, with local communities as drivers and agents of change. The key is diversity and sharing of multiple experiences in problem solving through collaborative measures. A living systems approach is fundamental, meaning that focus is on interrelations, not separation, between social, environmental, economic and other important dimensions. Most importantly, perhaps, is that the approach views humans and nature as interconnected, co-evolving together and thus also dependent on each other, with the purpose to establish capacity to obtain net positive impacts and effects in local areas and for local people. From this view, it may be more correct to say that the concept of sustainable tourism is complementary in the pursuit of regenerative tourism.

(Regenerative) tourism trends in Denmark

Tourism in Denmark, like in many other countries, has experienced rapid growth in the past decades and especially the years after the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, VisitDenmark (2024) has reported that 2023 was another record year for international travellers. Parallel with this, some destinations have begun debates on overtourism, with growing attention given to tourism's increasing pressure on social, cultural and environmental qualities, especially locally. Current talk about and efforts to introduce RT activities in Denmark can be interpreted partly as a reaction to this development.

There is currently no prime or overall model of how to work with or apply RT in Denmark. Instead, several areas and destinations are working with RT activities in different ways. Focus is typically on introducing regenerative content into existing experiences, or to introduce new activities specifically with a regenerative focus. The activities are often marketed by local DMOs and tourism businesses with an interest in increasing local-tourist interactions as well as more grounded and authentic experiences. Still, RT development is new in Denmark and there are many tourism stakeholders, not least many DMOs, that find the concept challenging to understand and practice.

Methods & Materials

DMO professionals were selected as the target group, because they represent a broad range of tourist stakeholders within a destination. Furthermore, as central tourism coordinators, they have a unique, comprehensive perspective on the challenges and opportunities faced by various tour-

ism actors 'on the ground' (Gretzel, 2021). This positions them as critical agents in introducing and facilitating sustainable and regenerative transformation within the industry.

An explorative approach

A combination of an explorative approach and qualitative thematic analysis work was used to study and understand how DMOs navigate the complexities of understanding, developing and implementing regenerative practices in their work.

An explorative approach was chosen because it excels in exploration of a knowledge field in a flexible, open-ended manner, encouraging the discovery of new and unexpected insights. Furthermore, the flexibility of the approach makes it well-suited for capturing commonalities or patterns in data (Sarstedt & Mooi, 2019). Another reason is that an explorative approach can provide insights in areas that are poorly understood (Sarstedt & Mooi, 2019). This is currently the situation with RT, as the concept, including practices and principles to support it, is open to interpretation among both researchers and tourism professionals. The explorative approach thus gave insights into DMO professionals' interpretation and application of the concept based on real-world settings and experiences. Furthermore, it allowed for the identification of challenges in conceptual interpretations that might not be detected through more rigid, hypothesis-driven approaches.

Thematic analysis was used to complement the explorative approach as it also emphasizes data interpretation and flexibility (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Furthermore, thematic analysis allows working inductively with data material, drawing themes directly from the data sources rather than imposing predefined categories (Walters, 2016). In this study, this worked well for identifying and analyzing themes and patterns in a structured yet flexible way across qualitative data sources (Braun & Clarke, 2014; Walters, 2016). The outcome was a rich description as well as organization of the data, leading to a deeper understanding and interpretation of the experiences shared by the DMO professionals.

Interviews

All sixteen tourism organizations within the Association of Danish Destinations were invited to participate in the study through a standardized e-mail invitation, ensuring an unbiased selection process. Ultimately, nine tourism managers and destination directors (hereafter called respondents), who hold key positions in their respective DMOs, accepted the invitation, resulting in a participation rate of over 50% (see Appendix A: overview of respondents).

To gain insights from the respondents, semi-structured interviews were used to explore and collect thematic and detailed data from respondents, but in a both structured and open way following explorative principles (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The semi-structured interviews (N = 9) were all conducted in March 2023, either online or in person. Respondent anonymity was used.

For the interviews, an interview guide was used consisting of 11 pre-designed questions, allowing for consistency in discussion of answers across the interviews (see Appendix B). Inspiration for questions came from relevant literature (e.g., Bellato et al., 2022; Cave et al., 2022; Fusté-Forné & Hussain, 2022;) and were organized after four dimensions: organizational structure, values, collaboration, and regenerative developments. During the interviews, other dimensions also emerged based on the respondents' experiences with and perceptions of RT. These were revealed when follow-up questions were asked or when respondents shared perspectives requiring further elaboration. This dialogic nature of the interviews facilitated co-construction of knowledge between researcher and respondent.

It should be noted that there was a mixed level of understanding regarding the concept of regenerative tourism among the respondents. Therefore, before the interview started, a conceptual



understanding or discussion was offered. In doing so, we acknowledge a small risk of influencing the respondents with our understanding of RT. To reduce this risk, respondents were sent the interview guide in advance, giving them the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the concept prior to the interview.

The interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached (Glinka & Hensel, 2012). The duration of the interviews varied, reflecting the depth of engagement from the respondents. The shortest interview lasted 12 minutes, providing more concise responses, while the longest extended to one hour, indicating a more in-depth discussion. Interviews were hereafter transcribed in full.

Finally, interview results were synthesized using the thematic analysis approach. By scrutinizing interview transcripts for significant statements and patterns and using an open coding strategy (Creswell & Creswell, 2022), labels to key reflections among the interviewees, such as “challenges in implementation” or “community involvement” were identified. After this, codes were grouped into larger and more operational categories. The result was three final analytical themes, which were reviewed and refined a second time. Quotes under each theme were collected and included to illustrate and support the analysis of each theme.

Results

The interview process gave new and detailed insights, resulting in a more nuanced understanding of how the respondents work with RT as a concept and in practice. Specifically, the results reveal both differences and commonalities in opinions among the 9 respondents (labelled as R1 – R9) concerning challenges and advantages of working with RT. Based on the thematic analysis work, the following three themes are explored in more detail:

- Theme 1: Interest in and openness to regenerative tourism
- Theme 2: Challenges with regenerative tourism in practice
- Theme 3: Willing and reluctant stakeholders in regenerative tourism

Next, each theme, and several subthemes, are described in turn, emphasizing insights of academic and managerial relevance.

Theme 1: Interest in and openness to regenerative tourism

Openness to a regenerative shift

All nine respondents were receptive of the RT paradigm, albeit cautiously. Also, the manner of how it should be framed and organized differed amongst the respondents. Several respondents considered it important to become a flagbearer for a regenerative shift, as aptly noted by R2: *“I will [support regenerative development], if we don’t do it then I don’t actually know who the drivers for it will be”*. This was corroborated by R4, who deemed that *“it is our responsibility and task to see to that we create a framework that makes it easy for them [tourism businesses] to implement it [RT]”*.

While acknowledging the importance of shifting to regenerative principles, R7 emphasized instead their role as a facilitator, as opposed to claiming some form of ownership of the transition:

“Our task is primarily to facilitate. Create networks, create coherence, and of course also bring in knowledge and experience from other places (...) our primary task is to facilitate and inspire and lead the way. It is our businesses, our municipalities and our locals who ultimately have their hands on the stove”.

R6 propounded a combination of actively leading the regenerative shift whilst also functioning as an influencer to political decision makers: *“(...) we can [support regenerative development] by both informing about it and inspiring to do it. And then we have the opportunity to lead some*



projects where we can act and help with political influence". R6 further spurred support for the regenerative shift, calling for larger levels of change, stating that "(...) it does not help that it is only isolated in one place, we should ideally try to adopt this way of thinking everywhere, so that we are not only talking about certifications, but more about a holistic approach to tourism development".

Lastly, R5 called for being open, yet humble to the regenerative shift, claiming that "(...) if we think we all have the answers to everything, then it's a bit naive. But if we're open and willing to share our information, I actually think, overall, we'll get a better product and that is what Danish Destinations [association of Danish DMOs] contribute to".

The value and potential of a locally place-based regenerative mindset

Respondents were intrigued by the place-bound context and specifics that the RT paradigm offers. R4 admired the regenerative principles in that "(...) [new ways of viewing sustainability] have really just turned the bucket on its head and said what if it was nature that set the agenda before man?". R7 noted the value of gauging tourism from a local ecosystem perspective, in that "(...) the more local ownership we have in the destination, the larger part of the value creation will stay in the area", yet also lamented challenges this brings: "(...) they [the European market] increasingly demand sustainable, local, place-bound unique experiences, and we simply don't have enough of them". R7's strategy was also a testament towards this approach, as "(...) we have an overarching strategy called 'Business in balance with nature' (...) it is at the heart of everything we undertake, all activities, all efforts both internally and externally". R6 strongly advocated the value of shifting towards a place-based regenerative mindset, as "(...) regenerative development in tourism is looking around and does not necessarily have a goal of more tourism but sees tourism as a tool to solve a place-based problem".

On the opposite side of the same coin, R8 noted that the local place-based mindset also emphasizes a focus on the right type of guests to attract to spur a regenerative mindset that honors the value tourism can bring beyond economic values: "(...) what is particularly interesting is that we attract the right, value-creating guests - not just an economic income, but a guest who adds something of value to the area".

Theme 2: Challenges with regenerative tourism in practice

Lack of consensus: What is regenerative tourism really?

While most respondents were open to regenerative thinking, there were also ample concerns about how to understand RT and 'convert' the concept to their tourism practices.

A first and important concern was the lack of a definable consensus about what RT is. R1 concluded it was a difficult concept to conceptualize, as "RT development is a somewhat difficult quantity. Just as sustainability can be a difficult quantity", further adding that "...it can have 100 different nuances. So, when you work with RT you can do it without knowing it or you can think you do it without doing it right".

A perennial headache for the respondents was how to separate it from sustainable tourism. R9 elaborated: "(...) can you build [RT] on it or do you have to throw out all the old stuff and start over? (...) we have spent time finding out about sustainability and what we can and cannot do (...) I'm still a bit hesitant and I'm still trying to figure out how exactly we define it". This signified that R9 preferred to take a route placing RT under the sustainable tourism umbrella: "(...) it doesn't matter whether you call it sustainability or RT, as long as we can help push the right development, because we might just confuse businesses". The lack of a universal definition also revealed the danger in respondents oversimplifying the intent and purposes of RT: "so, if the guest cycles around and also clean up after themselves and at the same time throws some flower seeds, is that then what you mean (by RT)?" (R8).



How to measure regenerative tourism?

A critical role of the modern DMO is to collect data to understand and report how a destination is faring according to a predetermined set of key performance indicators, including important sustainability indicators. In this regard, respondents expressed a wariness of a RT approach in relation to tracking progress, as noted by R1:

"(...) what does it mean to give more than you take or to make a positive impression instead of just breaking even? To do that, you have to go in and measure what the footprint was when you started and how many are actually measuring the regenerative measures. You don't really do that yet" (R1).

The combination of a lack of a clear definition and measurement indicators also brought forth hesitation from R4, who worried that *"(...) it's a bit like greenwashing and greenhushing. When do we dare to say that something is regenerative? None of us have really jumped on it yet"*. R1 further emphasized this by highlighting the need for a 'RT barometer' as a natural extension of their *"(...) sustainability barometer - a survey we do every year, where we can measure how the companies work with sustainability on various parameters"*.

The discussions of how to measure (and thereby document) RT impacts also sparked interest in highlighting current issues with sustainability measurements and certifications among respondents. R6 noted that *"(...) when you talk about it [sustainability certifications] with hotels, they get a dull look in the eyes"*. This was corroborated by R3, who provided the example of the cost of a certification: *"(...) a [Green Key] certification can be expensive. Can we expect that a small bed and breakfast with Kirstine at age 72, must be forced to give 30,000 DKK (ca. 4000 EUR) for a certification and spend a lot of time on paperwork, which she may not be capable of?"*.

R4 concluded that entry barriers for introducing and working with RT in Denmark today are significant, emphasizing that RT is both conceptually and practically ambiguous and complex to navigate. As a result, *"(...) we are some who talk about RT, but out in the wider industry there is no resonance yet"*.

Theme 3: Willing and reluctant stakeholders in regenerative tourism

Most of the respondents saw themselves as a natural link between introducing RT locally and up-take of the concept and practice among collaborating tourism actors, highlighting that *"we can't do very much without the [tourism] businesses"* (R9) and that *"we [tourism stakeholders] can't live without each other"* (R8). Yet, the respondents also clarified that a significant task is bridging the gap between willing and reluctant tourism actors, as aptly noted by R2: *"(...) when something comes from above [the DMOs], it also has to sort of pull together from below. Otherwise, it doesn't make sense"*.

Collaborating with willing stakeholders

Several respondents highlighted the importance of collaborating with willing local actors, serving as a pedestal for further regenerative anchoring and championing inspirational cases to sway reluctant stakeholders. R2 was a proponent of this tactic, claiming that *"those who want to cooperate are the most important to cooperate with (...) they took a chance and threw themselves into it and saw the cool result"*. R2 further advocated the necessity of demonstrating successes on a tourism practitioner level, claiming that *"we are the connecting link and try to get people in and then make a tiny success and then get it spread over time. Because if we come up with big arm movements and good thoughts, people say it's fine, I have my own everyday life to take care of. But if you can make a tiny business case on it, it begins to be interesting"*.

R5 noted that DMOs should directly aid tourism actors wanting to develop regenerative practic-



es, stating that *“(...) when people make products that meet the criteria that are set for, among other things, regenerative (development), well, then we want to help it further on its way in becoming a tourism product”*. This was emphasized as particularly prevalent for smaller tourism enterprises, as R2 noted:

“(...) I think that RT is carried by the small or the one-person businesses and it is them that we must support, because if they are good at doing RT, then it is not a given that they are trained economists or marketing experts or something, and we have to take care of that together with our business center and stand shoulder to shoulder so that we get them off to a good start”.

The respondents also noted the importance of collaborating with the local municipalities – a critical tourism stakeholder as *“they are the gatekeepers of access and permits and sit and decide a great many things”* (R6). R8 further commented on the need for collaboration regarding financing a regenerative shift in tourism, as municipalities have access to relevant EU funds. An obstacle, however, for the respondents is that *“there must be a co-financing of 60%, which means we have to put the municipality together with the business board to say, “we have this area, we would like this and that...” (...)* I can put people around the table. I [the DMO] am the link”.

Finally, collaboration not only with local communities, but also with local citizens was emphasized as necessary for making a shift towards RT. This was something the respondents found easier if there already exist close ties between the DMO and local residents, as exemplified by R9 and R7:

“We can support these local communities and create some strong communities that also benefit from tourism (...) We have a very close link with the local population, and it makes a huge difference that we feel their support” (R9)

“Fortunately, we are the destination with the most satisfied local population in the country (...) tourism is a condition of life here” (R7)

Responding to reluctant stakeholders

While most respondents were quick to highlight open and willing local tourism actors regarding intake of RT, hesitation and reluctance among other local tourism actors were also mentioned. R2 noted that most reluctant tourism businesses often are so as they are in a constant state of ‘operation’, meaning that they often neither have the time nor the resources to consider other business strategies, regardless of the prospect of potential gains:

“(...) in our profession, many are in perpetual operation, we are busy, so when you have to set aside time for something, there has to be a gain, it has very much been an economic gain that has been focused on, but I also think that the human gain has started to take up more space, also in relation to the climate” (R2)

R3 painted a more perturbing picture among local tourism actors showing a lack of interest in regenerative thinking, as well as a lack of resources among tourism actors, casting doubt on RT as a desired strategy and outcome:

“I don’t see much demand from the tourism businesses to become greener or that they were interested in it at all. There are maybe 1/5 who have it on the agenda. They know they have to get started, and it is something they should do, and it will be a requirement in the future, but there are also many who do not really think it is relevant to them.” (R3)

R6 expanded on this, emphasizing that while some DMOs might be willing to instigate a regenerative shift, it did not necessarily mean that critical stakeholders, such as the municipality, are at the same stage: *“(...) the municipalities are also quite different in how far they are, and that is also a challenge. If you are well advanced and work a lot with sustainability and someone has only just started with it properly, then there is a reconciliation of expectations”* (R6).

To this R1 further highlighted that the variability in willingness and capacity across municipalities complicates efforts to unify stakeholders under a common regenerative vision: *“We try to involve as many people as we can, but it’s sometimes difficult when you have 10 municipalities and*



some are more inclined to collaborate than others.” This uneven engagement poses a structural hurdle, forcing DMOs to adapt their strategies based on varying levels of municipal interest, support and resource availability.

Concerning getting local tourism actors onboard through focusing on more than just economic gains, R6 noted that if the regenerative shift is to gain momentum, measurements and indicators of ‘success’ need to change:

“There are some goals such as number of overnight stays, which I don’t think says very much. For us, it’s about stakeholders working with experience and attractions and not so much about accommodation, and that becomes the challenge, because we talk a lot about what we want, but we still measure kind of old-fashioned things that don’t say anything about anything” (R6)

Finally, R2 provides a pragmatic framework for managing the many highlighted challenges, emphasizing the value of prioritizing willing stakeholders while gradually engaging others:

“Those who want to collaborate are the most important to collaborate with (...) when you focus your energy there, then you get good energy. And there is the middle group where half of them start saying “oh, but we’ve always said that was a good idea”, and then they are involved and when they are involved, then you get the last part of the group involved. And when it starts to become the norm, then those with the no-cap on also come along.”

This layered approach suggests that success with proactive stakeholders can create a ripple effect, inspiring the hesitant middle group to join and eventually normalizing regenerative practices. However, R2 also acknowledges the reality that some stakeholders may never fully engage: *“There are always some who never come along, and we can’t change that.”*

The situation reveals a key tension in the efforts made by the DMOs: balancing inclusivity with pragmatism. While inclusivity is vital for systemic change, overextending resources to reluctant or disinterested stakeholders ultimately risks diluting the impact of regenerative initiatives. Instead, DMOs appear to achieve the greatest progress by leveraging the enthusiasm and innovations of the most willing stakeholders, allowing their successes to set benchmarks that may gradually shift norms towards more regenerative measures and decisions within local tourism networks.

Discussion & Conclusions

Openness and hesitation

The results show mixed opinions about the concept of RT among the respondents. Some DMOs are open and receptive to the idea and practice and see the need for a switch to and integration of RT in their work. In particular, the DMOs praise the place-based and ecosystem-based approach inherent in the concept as those are factors they know well and work with already. Other DMOs are more reluctant, mainly due to conceptual unclarity and lack of definition, which produces feelings of uncertainty and hesitation that also extend to collaborating tourism actors. A particular problem in this regard is that the DMOs have neither definite answers nor guidelines to follow when introducing RT. The findings underscore that while DMOs play a pivotal role in driving RT, their own efforts and ability to foster collaboration among stakeholders in this work are not without challenges, causing local processes with, and uptake of, RT to be slow.

The situation highlights a larger problem and an elephant in the room, namely that of regenerative thinking/practices versus the reality DMOs are confronted with. The impression from the respondents is that there still exists a large gap between conceptual content and discussion, especially in academia, and how this is translated into real settings by DMOs – where it cannot be overlooked that many practitioners start and run a tourism business to earn a profit and make a living. As emphasized by several respondents, the concept feels intuitively correct and follows principles that they recognize and wish to adhere to. Yet, at the same time, they also experience RT as a complex concept and process that requires a fundamental shift in their tourism strategic thinking

and approach. This raises two important questions: are the DMOs ready to make such a large shift? And what is the role of the DMO in this?

The role of DMOs

The latter question varied greatly according to the respondents – ranging from leading the change, to facilitators and as sources of inspiration for local tourism actors. Herein lies an oxymoronic dilemma: RT calls for a deeply engaged bottom-up approach (Dredge, 2022), yet the need for a collective push in regenerative literacy (Becken & Coghlan, 2024) and reduction in distortions of the concept (Bellato & Pollock, 2023), is critical to ensure the uptake of RT and its transformative capabilities. This is also in alignment with Mazzucato's (2011) reasoning that the 'ground work' and foundations should be fostered by an overarching (governmental) entity, while the implementation should be done from a bottom-up approach. One may argue that the need for a collective/unified vision, strategy, 'common language' and understanding of RT is perhaps best held by a DMO – who has a geographical and administrative representation of a contextual space and are uniquely positioned to maintain oversight. However, if the challenges that DMOs currently face remain, as described in the results, this key role and function is also challenged. The situation accentuates the importance of understandable and manageable blueprints or guidelines that DMOs can follow to understand the concept and what it entails to make the shift towards regenerative tourism practices.

On a larger level, and with the present and future role of DMOs in mind, perhaps such a shift is what is needed to avoid the 'path to redundancy' many DMOs are on, as described and critiqued by some researchers (e.g., Dredge, 2016). If so, it undoubtedly calls for rethinking and restructuring of the DMO role and responsibilities. Newer constellations such as 'Destination Stewardship Councils' (DSC) can here be an inspiration. Destination Stewardship is fundamentally an evolvement of the DMO role and an "approach that balances and meets the needs of a destination and its communities and operates with legitimacy and consent under a participatory governance model" (Imbsen et al., 2021). DSCs differ from DMOs with regards to their organizational structuring, KPIs and definitions of success, place making and collective responsibility (Post-Lundgaard & Dragin-Jensen, 2024). It is therefore better geared to adopt a living systems thinking approach important and prioritized in RT due its full private-public-community collaboration (Imbsen et al., 2021). While most of the actual changes towards RT will undoubtedly happen 'on the ground' by local tourism actors, we nevertheless see a key role for DMOs (DSCs) in introducing RT in the local contexts where they operate. To accomplish this, we argue that DMOs (DSCs) must act to expand on their existing role and work towards being an integral change agent (Karakaya & Lundberg, 2020) and intermediary between tourism actors, municipalities, local communities and citizens, tourists and other industries in the pursue of RT.

Academia and DMOs

To better prepare DMOs to take on an active role in shifting to RT, including internal anchoring of the concept, we emphasize that a stronger linking of academic discussions of RT and the reality at the DMO level must receive a larger focus than now. Specifically, if current academic discussions on RT (and they still tend to dominate the current status of RT) are to reach DMOs and other tourism professionals, ways must be found to make academic debates more digestible, with a focus on minimizing complications when making a shift to RT. This is important not only to close the gap between the academic and practitioner levels, but also to ensure that discussion about and work with RT becomes a two-way learning process. This point emphasizes a critique of the current academia-practitioner collaboration level on RT which, until now, has been shaped by academic input containing (very few) reflections on practical application aspects.



A starting point is for academics to make a larger effort to listen to and discuss more with DMOs and tourism practitioners, and to better understand their problems, wants and needs when introducing RT. We therefore see an (acute) need for increased dialogue and collaboration with the aim to eventually make RT operationalizable in a way that is both academically sound and workable for DMOs and tourism practitioners in their day-to-day activities. For that purpose, more testing and knowledge about (un)successful applications of RT is needed with an outcome being concrete experiences with and evaluations of regenerative initiatives based on academic and practitioner collaboration. This includes formulation of meaningful and measurable regenerative KPI's, as well as guides and blueprints with general principles on how to initiate and integrate RT at a local DMO level. Herin lies an important future research task.

Limitations and future research

There are important limitations in the study presented in this article. For example, the study builds on a relatively small sample. To better qualify the results and findings, a larger sample would be needed. This requires involvement of more DMOs to get a more detailed understanding of the themes (and maybe identification of new ones) presented in this article. Furthermore, efforts should be made to include DMO representatives with a larger geographic spread, including DMO insights from other countries, making comparative studies possible, thus considering cultural and contextual differences. It is also important to examine discussions about RT at more levels than the DMO level. Examples include the national level, and particular national tourism organizations, and the very local level, such as small tourism actors and businesses. Again, the DMO in their intermediate role is well positioned in seeking and extracting experience from these levels and synthesizing these into usable strategies and knowledge helping both themselves and academia to better understand implementations and operationalizations of RT. For that reason, it is important that we continue to study, document and discuss challenges and opportunities concerning the evolvement of RT thinking and practice.

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