

Regenerative Tourism: A Recipe to Move Beyond Sustainable Food Systems



Food has many values, and our food choices shape who we are. As we quest for sustainable food systems, the circular economy approach fuels the rise of regenerative tourism as a key player in promoting holistic, circular food systems that not only minimize negative impacts but also benefit both ecosystems and communities.

“We are what we eat”?

Neither Brillat-Savarin’s original version – “Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es.” [Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are], nor Feuerbach’s version – “Der Mensch ist, was er isst” [Man is what he eats], can be taken literally (that would be rather messy). They were stating that the food one eats has a bearing on one’s state of mind and health. Taking this idea a step further and assuming a multidisciplinary perspective, we propose that food has many values (biological, social, and anthropological values), and addresses not only physiological needs but also safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (as according to Maslow). Throughout history, food has been a master sculptor: what, when, where, why, and how our ancestors ate has shaped who we are today, from our DNA to our physical appearance and social fabric. Even nowadays, eating is the only activity that fuels our body and our Instagram feed at the same time! We are and will be a product of our food choices.



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Sustainable Food Systems: A Delicate Balance Between Humankind and Nature

These choices have never been easy. We now sit at the table of our own making: since the Industrial Revolution, we've grown apart from our food systems and become clueless eaters, trading the rich biological and cultural diversity of our food for the comfort and convenience of mass production and accessibility. Building sustainable food systems has become urgent to ensure environmental preservation, social equity, and economic viability. Beyond the practices that optimize resource use and minimize environmental impacts, circular economy represents a paradigm shift in the path to sustainability. It adopts a holistic and multidimensional view of production and consumption, promoting the continuous reuse of all resources and ecosystem regeneration by closing loops along circular food chains, from field to feed.



Can Tourism Be Part of a Regenerative Solution?

Underpinned by circular economy principles, circular food systems thrive by seizing every opportunity to circulate biological and technical materials: sourcing food grown regeneratively and locally where appropriate, designing and marketing better food products with minimal waste and pollution, and making the most of food using bioeconomy to promote the regeneration of ecosystems. (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, Cities and circular economy for food, 2019). Adding to such a vision, tourism, as a people and knowledge-based activity, highlights the relevance of circulating not only tangible but also intangible resources such as food knowledge and cultural heritage, calling for a socially and culturally restorative circular economy (Barford, A. & Ahmad, S., 2021).



Regenerative Tourism: A New Approach to Building a Better Future

By adopting this broader concept of the circular economy, (food) tourism has the potential to go beyond sustainability and become an agent of regeneration. The Slow Food movement and, more recently, the Slow Food Travel model serve as prime examples of this approach.

The focus is on training for a multidisciplinary and holistic mindset that allows to rethink tourism activities to fulfil all stakeholder's comprehensive food needs. Coopetition and ecodesign take center stage in building net benefit models for favouring local communities that wish to see their biological and cultural heritage enhanced and preserved and allow tourists to discover the origins and varieties of local foods and cultures, thereby strengthening the local economy.

The vision is to create a future where tourism not only minimizes its negative impact but also actively contributes to the revitalization of food systems, ecosystems, and communities, truly "leaving the place behind better than before" and moving forward beyond sustainable tourism. (Zaman, U., Aktan, M., Agrusa, J., & Khwaja, M. G. ,2023).

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