

Regenerative tourism in Aotearoa New Zealand – A new paradigm for the VUCA world

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Abstract

Purpose – *The paper provides a summary of the findings from GOOD Awaits – The Regenerative Tourism New Zealand (NZ) Podcast and envisions a regenerative future for tourism in Aotearoa.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This paper is based on the findings from the GOOD Awaits Podcast, a series of interviews with pioneers and practitioners of regenerative tourism. The podcast was created as a platform for the collective discovery of a new way forward for tourism in the wake of COVID-19, and the series provides a detailed summary of the regenerative tourism movement in NZ.*

Findings – *Through these interviews, a vision for a regenerative visitor economy in Aotearoa emerged. This new model is rooted in indigenous knowledge and living systems theory. It is a paradigm shift that allows us to see tourism as a living ecosystem and requires innovative economic models, such as social entrepreneurship, systems level changes to the way tourism operates and is governed, local tourism solutions with community thriving as the primary aim and much more collaboration both within tourism and across sectors.*

Originality/value – *Regenerative tourism is an emerging model and one that is rapidly gaining traction in NZ and globally. The GOOD Awaits podcast is a unique, thoughtful and practical demonstration of what this model could look like in Aotearoa. It demonstrates the potential and feasibility of regenerative tourism practice, and the response has shown the desire for these conversations at a national and international scale. This paper is an accessible summary of the podcast's first season and has value for anyone interested in the regenerative tourism movement in Aotearoa.*

Keywords *Climate change, Tourism, Sustainable tourism, Regeneration, Tourism industry, Regenerative tourism*

Paper type *Viewpoint*

The only way we're going to survive and thrive on planet Earth is if we start to live in harmony with nature, live according to her limits [. . .] and the only way we can do that is as communities and in places.

Anna Pollock [1]

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There is no longer any reasonable doubt of the drastic changes humankind must make in order to continue living in any desirable way on this planet. The Sixth Assessment Report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published this year reinforces the “unequivocal” human impact, and the “widespread and rapid”, “unprecedented” and, in some instances, “irreversible” changes that are occurring and will continue to occur as a result of our greenhouse gas emissions [2]. Radical and courageous change is needed now. Tourism, along with every other sector, must take responsibility for the impact it has on humankind's ability to continue to survive and thrive on this planet.

As conflict continues to shape much of the world, increasingly dire reports of the climate crisis emerge and COVID-19 persists, we must adapt in the fast changing context of what has been termed the “VUCA” world. VUCA is an acronym for volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity,

describing the unpredictable world we live in. Rapid change, increasingly complex and interconnected factors and a lack of clarity about how these factors are shaped and changed are creating an environment that is much more difficult to interpret and analyse. In this new context, the paradigms and mindsets that dominated tourism prior to COVID-19 can no longer help us. A new paradigm is needed, and a regenerative tourism model based in indigenous wisdom and living systems theory is the greatest hope tourism has for navigating the uncertain future and contributing to thriving communities.

The GOOD Awaits podcast was an enquiry into what regenerative tourism would look like in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), in conversation with pioneers and practitioners within our tourism ecosystem. Season 1 of the GOOD Awaits podcast was completed in August 2021, with ten interviews and one “harvest” or summary episode. Interviewees were selected because of their active involvement in regenerative tourism and practice as an operator or thought leader. GOOD Awaits actively seeks diverse guests and we are committed to prioritising the voices of indigenous people, women LGBTQIA+, youth and other minorities wherever possible. Season 1’s ten episodes featured nine women, including three indigenous tour operators.

| <i>Episode</i> | <i>Guest</i> |
|---|--|
| 1. What is regenerative tourism? | Anna Pollock <i>Founder of Conscious Travel; thought leader and change catalyst in regenerative tourism</i> |
| 2. Courageous leadership and The DNA of place | Kristin Dunne <i>Former CEO of Tourism Bay of Plenty; Director of Destination Strategy–Miles Partnership</i> |
| 3. “Change a town through tourism” | Nadine Toe Toe <i>Co-Director of Kohutapu Lodge and Tribal Tours</i> |
| 4. Thrivability and living systems thinking | Michelle Holliday <i>Author of “Age of Thrivability”; international thought leader in living systems principles</i> |
| 5. Designing tourism for change | Trent Yeo <i>Executive Director of Ziptrek EcoTours</i> |
| 6. Fostering connection to people and place | Sarni Hart <i>Director of Coromandel Adventures</i> |
| 7. Nurturing global citizens | Eliza Raymond <i>Co-Founder and Director of Operations at GOOD Travel</i> |
| 8. Thriving in collaboration | Porina McLeod <i>Owner of Mauao Adventures</i> |
| 9. “Educate, enable, inspire” | Mandy Bell <i>Co-Owner of Criffel Station; Chairperson and Programme Director of WAI Wanaka</i> |
| 10. Purpose, passion and community | Lee-Anne Jago <i>Owner of Waka Abel Tasman</i> |

Throughout these interviews with thought leaders and operators on their regenerative journey, a vision for a regenerative visitor economy emerged. This article seeks to summarise this vision and to share some examples of what a regenerative model for tourism could look like in practice.

The roots of regeneration

Regeneration is not by any means a new concept. It has been popularised recently in tourism as more people have become dissatisfied with sustainability as the way forward. Regenerative agriculture has been an emerging field in Aotearoa for at least a decade, and some of the leading regenerative thinkers have been writing and working in this space for two or three decades before that. Anna Pollock sent out a call to arms for a paradigm shift in 1995, inviting us to view the tourism sector as a living system.

We cannot hope to change the planet and improve both the quality of our natural or cultural environments unless we first start at home—within the tourism sector itself. Unless we can alter the way we view the world; unless we experience our own “paradigm shift” or have our own “change of heart” [3].

Bill Reed wrote about the urgent need for a shift from sustainability to regenerative thinking in 2007:

This way of working can deliver not only more holistic and effective projects, but also a higher level of satisfaction. We experience ourselves as part of a larger whole and adjust our needs, aspirations and values. We are increasingly able to play a meaningful role, one that evolves us at the same time that it evolves the living communities we are an integral part of. Inevitably this results in a deep sense of caring, appreciation, connectedness for all who choose to engage in a regenerative level of work [4].

Regeneration, however, is in fact an ancient way of understanding and living in the world, rooted in deep connections to place and underpinned by indigenous knowledge that has been preserved and fiercely protected by indigenous people despite the colonisation and industrialisation of their lands and peoples. In our interview with Nadine ToeToe, owner-operator of Kohutapu Lodge, she spoke to the parallels between long-held Te Ao Māori (The Māori world view) principles and those of regeneration:

We never knew what we were doing was regenerative tourism. We were just doing what was naturally inside of us. It's not an uncommon concept for Māori, and I find it really interesting that a lot of the regenerative tourism strategies that are being discussed now are essentially Te Ao Māori and our old ways, which are fast becoming the new ways [5].

So regeneration is a re-elevating, a remembering, of this ancient knowledge. It is the understanding that, despite what mechanistic and capitalist models of individualism have taught us, we are not disconnected from each other and our planet. We are all interconnected and a part of nested living ecosystems. Regeneration is also an acknowledgement that sustaining, simply surviving, is not enough. The purpose of life cannot only be to survive, but to thrive and flourish: to become fully alive and to support and nurture the thriving of the nested living ecosystems we are a part of. Regeneration asks us to rediscover what it means for people, organisations, communities and our places to thrive.

The new paradigm

Tourism currently exists within a model focused on growth, economic value and transactional relationships between visitors and hosts. This model is rooted in the “machine story”, an industrial paradigm that tells us we are individual cogs in a machine, part of a conveyor belt production line pumping out experiences as the product [6]. This story that we have been telling ourselves disregards the underlying purpose, value and meaning of the visitor economy, and a new paradigm is needed to reconnect tourism with these practices.

The new regenerative paradigm is one grounded in living systems theory. Michelle Holliday's universal design principles for life resonate for tourism as much as anywhere [7]. These four principles are divergent parts, relationships and structures, the emergent whole and life. All living systems have individual parts that are diverse and separate from each other, and these divergent parts are interconnected through supportive relationships, networks and structures that allow life to flow throughout. From this connected and interdependent collection of parts emerges a new whole, with new characteristics and capabilities, that is so much greater than just the sum of its parts. Finally, this whole living system is powered by a force beyond what we can see, by mauri, the life force [8]. Acknowledging the presence of life is essential to us learning to shift our thinking from the machine story to a living systems lens of understanding our role and place in the world.

This practice to see ourselves, our businesses and our communities as living ecosystems necessarily fosters deeper connections to place. In businesses working in a regenerative model, a deep connection to place and community is at the heart of the way they operate. Fostering connection to a place builds a desire to protect that place for future generations.

Asking the right questions

Leadership in a regenerative model no longer comes in the form of those who claim to have all the answers or necessarily from those in positions of power, but in the form of those willing to ask the difficult questions. Questions posed by regenerative thought leaders are often attempts to draw out a deeper connection to or understanding of the essence of a place:

What do we wish for our place?

What do we sense our place wants to become?

Who is this place?

What does our community need and how can tourism help to serve that vision? [9]

Regenerative practice requires leadership that is both courageous and vulnerable enough to facilitate these discussions without knowing where they will lead us. Creating the conditions to explore these questions allows a new vision for a place to emerge, co-created by local stakeholders.

One key question that emerges from this practice is as follows: what is tourism's purpose? The regenerative model challenges the idea that tourism exists only for economic growth and transactional relationships between the visitor and host. Many suggest that community well-being, fostering connections and nurturing a love of place should be at the heart of tourism's purpose. Michelle Holliday raised these questions about tourism's purpose in our interview with her on the GOOD Awaits podcast.

We're starting to ask for community well-being as the primary deliverable of tourism, and really, why would you do it otherwise? Why would you invite people over if what you're left with is a worse condition than when they first arrived? [10]

Nadine ToeToe goes further to explain why it was critical to her and her husband to enhance their community's well-being through their tourism business. They provide an experience of deep cultural exchange where international visitors share food rituals, help deliver leftover food to locals in need and exchange stories of their culture and lives with local Māori youth.

For us there was no way we could move back out to my husband's tribal lands and sit on the pigs back and flourish off the benefits of tourism while we knew hand on heart that some of our people were still struggling, so we always wanted to give back as much as we could with what we had to try and make a difference [. . .] And to inspire people to do the same really [. . .] it does not take a lot of money to put the effort and time and investment back into your community to help make positive change. You literally just have to roll your sleeves up and get out there and do it [11].

Regenerative tourism in practice

Placing purpose and passion back at the centre of how we do tourism invites new economic models for business to thrive. Social enterprises that value people and the planet as much as profit will help lead this transition. A regenerative model requires us to shift away from a transactional and dollars and cents-based system to one that acknowledges the deep encounters and values that tourism has the potential to create. On the GOOD Awaits podcast, Lee-Anne Jago describes how her waka (Māori canoe) tourism business has community at its heart, ahead of profit, and how tourism contributes to their community's ability to thrive.

The business structure needs to be a little bit different. So what drives our business is the things that are in the front, and money is not in the front. Money is something that is a mechanism to help us do what we do [. . .] They [tourists] support our community mahi, our community work, so when a tourist comes out, and we're very honest about this, they pay more than our school kids and our community groups. And sometimes our community groups do not pay anything because they do not have the money, and so when a tourist comes we let them know that they are supporting other people in our area to get on the water [12].

The deep encounters tourism creates also has great potential to impart meaning through highly engaging and emotional experiences. Trent Yeo, the Director of ZipTrek Ecotours, spoke to this in our GOOD Awaits podcast interview with him:

I think that in tourism we have a unique example of something which is highly memorable. so it's kind of the perfect place to impart some influence on getting people inspired about what is really important [13].

This idea of meaning-making expands tourism's purpose well beyond transactional interactions. It means tourism has a role in influencing people not only while they travel but to be a catalyst for meaningful change in their lives. Tourism experiences embedded in a regenerative model can help people to see themselves as a part of a living system and to recognise their interconnectedness with the people and places they visit and return home to.

The visitor economy equally has 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, systems that cross traditional "industry" boundaries and link people and places, could foster potential for unprecedented collaboration and much needed systems level change.

A regenerative model also requires a shift in the way we care for our own people within the visitor economy, showing manaakitanga ((hospitality and generosity) for our tourism people. The past 18 months of COVID-19's impact in Aotearoa have brought unprecedented hardship and challenges for tourism businesses and professionals. A regenerative model invites us to see our network within the tourism industry as a living ecosystem that needs to be nourished in order to serve the larger eco-systems it is nested within (encompassing the global network of tourism professionals or the visitors whom we host). Manaakitanga for our own industry should be holistic in nature too, supporting the economic, social, cultural and environmental well-being of our ecosystem.

As demonstrated in Michelle Holliday's principles above, living systems require webs of relationships and structures to support the system to thrive. A regenerative tourism ecosystem would require many layers of connection both vertically – from local communities up to national governance bodies – and horizontally across sectors. Operating in silos, as has been the dominant way of working, is not regenerative and creates disconnect where collaboration could better support thriving.

Conclusion

It is evident from our podcast conversations that continuing as we were pre-pandemic will not result in the changes needed at the scale and speed required for the challenges and disruptions we will face in the future. We are each being called to open ourselves up to a new paradigm, one that sees ourselves in relationship with each other and to nature. The opportunities for tourism actors to see tourism within the wider ecosystems of their communities changes the traditional business model. It invites us to ask questions that help us co-evolve with each other and our planet. How can we collaborate with others in our communities who are already leading the way in stewarding our places?

Rather than creating *experiences for visitors*, placing the communities' needs first will allow our visitors to *experience* our interconnected thriving communities and just maybe they will want to create the same in their own communities when they return home.

Notes

1. GOOD Awaits Podcast, Episode 1.
2. IPCC (2021).
3. Pollock (1995).

4. [Reed \(2007\)](#).
5. GOOD Awaits Episode 3, 2021.
6. [Holliday \(2016\)](#).
7. [Holliday \(2016\)](#).
8. [Holliday \(2016\)](#).
9. Used by many regenerative leaders, including Anna Pollock and Bill Reed.
10. GOOD Awaits Episode 4, 2021.
11. GOOD Awaits Episode 3, 2021.
12. GOOD Awaits Episode 10, 2021.
13. GOOD Awaits Episode 5, 2021.

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Further reading

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