Understanding Environmental Actions in Tourism Systems: Ecological Accommodations for a Regenerative Tourism Development

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the transformation towards a regenerative tourism system based on a mindset change, communitarian and collaborative work. The study analyses the role of ecological hotels as agents of change. A qualitative design was used to analyse the relevance of hospitality environmental actions from the supply perspective as a driver for a regenerative development of tourism. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews with a total of 12 ecological accommodations. Results show that ecological accommodations have a big potential to be agents of change for regenerative tourism through their identity, their practices and their management and marketing. The paper argues that achieving a truly regenerative tourism model requires a shift both from the demand and supply side and a transformation of the current industrial operating model.

KEYWORDS

ARTICLE HISTORY

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1. Introduction

As a consequence of the increasing awareness of a potential climate change, more concern has been placed on environmental issues during recent decades. The authorities' calls to stop the world's natural ecosystems' degradation have been in line with sustainable development measures. One of the earliest calls to place environmental concerns on national policy agendas was the Brundtland Report "Our Common Wealth" by the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987). The report's concerns were poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation. The analysis of these problematics was conducted and recommendations were given to allow economic growth within a socially and environmentally sustainable context.

The sustainable movement has gained a lot of importance in the last two decades in the tourism context. A clear example is that from 1998, the year in which the United Nations Environmental Programme published the first report on tourism ecolabels (UNEP, 1998) – which encouraged their development by governments and NGO's –, there has been a rising number of ecological certificates in tourism. In 2001, the World Tourism Organization already identified 500 ecolabels and codes of practice within the tourism field (Font, 2002).

Tourism is a fruitful tool for economic development. As the United Nations World Tourism Organization pointed out, in 2017 it accounted for 10% of the global economy and it was projected to grow 3.3% each year until 2030 (UNWTO, 2018). However, the sector has a big dependency on the natural and socio-cultural heritage of destinations. The tourism industry has tremendous environmental, cultural and economic impacts that need to be addressed. As experts point out, there is the need for a better destination management that acknowledges the invisible burden of tourism – thus considering the net economic benefit – and that preserves tourism's valuable assets (Epler Wood, Milstein & Ahamed-Broadhurst, 2019).

To date, the sustainability concept has been the most widely used term in proposing solutions to the pressure placed by tourism on the environmental and cultural resources, on which the sector depends (Hussain, 2021). Sustainable tourism is based on three different pillars: the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural dimension (UNWTO, 2004) and it plays an important role in the 2030 Agenda and in the implementation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. However, is sustainability enough to address the challenges that the tourism industry and the world's ecosystems are facing? Experts call attention to regenerative tourism and state that sustainability within the tourism industry will not bring the necessary systemic change. On the contrary, experts consider that regeneration within the sector can bring the needed transformation (see, for example, Pollock, 2019; McEnhill et al., 2020).

The 'regenerative' concept was used for the first time within the tourism context by Owen in 2007. She defined regenerative tourism as a holistic approach to create positive impacts to all the sector's stakeholders. Moreover, the regenerative tourism model has been directly linked to conscious travel (Pollock, 2013) and related to transformative tourism (Sheldon, 2020). The Covid-19 outbreak made us realize about the fragility of the tourism activity and made authorities and citizens reflect about the importance of ecological practices. A shift towards a different way of planning and managing tourism was initiated and calls for a truly regenerative tourism were spread among tourism stakeholders. However, there is no clear guidance on how destinations can become regenerative (see Fusté-Forné & Hussain, 2022).

Therefore, the tourism sector needs to be transformed, not modified. Otherwise, we will continue to strongly contribute to climate change and environmental degradation; but we will also end up causing the disappearance of the socio-cultural and natural values on which the tourism activity is based and thus, provoking the loss of places' essence and uniqueness (Pollock, 2019). In this sense, the first purpose of this paper is to find the essential steps to achieve the change towards a new regenerative system. Also, this study has the goal of investigating the role of hosts, concretely tourist accommodations, as agents of change for a regenerative development. The qualitative approach of this research focuses on the supply side of the tourism sector. Moreover, the focus of this research is put on tourist accommodations with environmental concerns which serves to inform the aim to understand the implementation of environmental actions in tourism systems as a driver for a regenerative development of tourism. Finally, we want to gain some insights into the impact of ecolabels on accommodations and their potential as a 'tool of change' for tourism transformation.

First of all, desk research is conducted in order to see the background in the field. In the second part of the study, a qualitative approach is taken in order to analyse the role of ecological tourist accommodations for a regenerative development. In total, 12 Catalan ecological accommodations, spread among the territory, are interviewed using a semi-structured protocol. These accommodations are part of two different samples: Sample A composed by accommodations that are environmentally certified, concretely by EU Ecolabel, and Sample B which is composed by non-certified establishments. As a consequence of the impacts of the current mass and over-tourism and its consumerist patterns, calls for a regenerative tourism model seem to be gaining importance. This paper aims to contribute to the lack of empirical knowledge on the topic and to the future development of a regenerative tourism framework.

2. Doing Tourism Regeneratively? A New Model Towards Transformative Tourism and Conscious Travel

2.1 An Approach to the Regenerative Economy

Experts question whether it is possible to 'fight' current global threats – such as climate change, rising inequality and financial crisis – through sustainable principles. It is highlighted that a deeper change, called regenerative sustainability is needed. Sustainability implies the minimization or elimination of irreversible effects on the environment – such as ecosystem degradation, soil debasement and biodiversity loss – and of unchangeable impacts on the economic and socio-cultural systems, but restorative sustainability goes one step further, restoring environmental, economic, and socio-cultural systems back to a healthy state. In addition, regenerative sustainability goes even further and it consists of "creating the conditions that enable vital social and ecological systems to evolve continuously" (Andreucci et al., 2021, p. 7). While sustainability has the goal of limiting the damage caused by human actions to economic, environmental, and socio-cultural systems, regeneration is a holistic approach that seeks to improve the whole living and economic model by "creating better conditions to support the life-enhancing qualities of ecosystems" that allow to "maintain and upgrade the conditions of ecosystems functionality" (Morseletto, 2020, pp. 768-769).

Climate change and the degradation of life-supporting functions of a healthy ecosystem are threatening the capitalism system as we know it. Capitalism promotes endless economic growth with no regard for the physical boundaries of the planet. At one point this will make it necessary for the capitalism system to evolve in order to face big challenges such as climate change and to avoid economic and social collapses (Li, 2009). Therefore, regenerative economy – called as well regenerative capitalism (Fullerton & Lovins, 2013) – is presented as the new stage of capitalism born for the necessity to stop prioritizing economic growth over the well-being of the humanity and the biosphere's health. Regenerative economy is an economic system that serves humanity and the earth's ecosystems' health, which has the aim of protecting and supporting the long-term health of the whole society (Fullerton & Lovins, 2013).

Within the capitalism system there is the belief that Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth leads to prosperity. However, regenerative economy has a holistic understanding of wealth, understood as the well-being of the whole (Fullerton, 2015). From a regenerative economy perspective, "maximizing profits for corporate shareholders, optimizing consumer material utility and growing GDP do not automatically lead to prosperity" (Fullerton, 2015, p. 37) because "economic vigor is a product of human and societal vitality, rooted in ecological health and the inclusive development of human capabilities and potential" (*ibid*, p. 40).

2.2 The Challenges of Regenerative Tourism

Regenerative tourism is a dimension of regenerative economy. It has gained attention in recent years and the 'regenerative' concept was mentioned for the first time in the tourist sector by Owen (2007). There is a general consensus that regenerative tourism was born for the necessity of overcoming the constraints of sustainable tourism to achieve the necessary systemic change within the tourism system (see, for example, Pollock, 2019; McEnhill et al., 2020).

While sustainability in tourism is essential, it is not enough (Pollock, 2019). Given the difference between regeneration and sustainability, the divergence between sustainable and regenerative tourism can be interpreted in two ways. In the first place, it can be understood that the future sustainability of the social and environmental systems participating in the tourism industry will not be achieved without regeneration. On the other hand, regenerative tourism can be seen as an extension of sustainable tourism (McEnhill et al., 2020). Both views end up concluding that sustainability is not enough in order to address the challenges that the current tourism model is facing.

The tourism industry is an extractive activity that depends on limited natural resources and on valuable cultural and social capital (Hussain, 2021). Both sustainable and regenerative tourism acknowledged that continuing business as usual within tourist activities would lead to the degradation of natural, cultural and social resources, the basis on which tourism is performed and promoted. In order to address this challenge, while sustainable tourism aims to sustain the current state of our planet, the objective of regenerative tourism is to improve the current state of Earth. In other words, while sustainable tourism wants to do less harm (or no harm), regenerative tourism requires doing more good than harm (McEnhill et al., 2020). In this sense, sustainable tourism has received criticism by experts for its incapacity to recover the damage that has already been done by unsustainable practices (Robinson & Cole, 2015).

Therefore, sustainability addresses the symptoms of the problem while regeneration identifies its root and works for a systemic change (Pollock, 2019). Sustainable practices within the tourism industry can be understood as a first step towards the healing of our natural, cultural and social environment. However, it is of high importance to not lose sight of the need for a holistic approach to tourism which can create the conditions for the industry to reborn and continuously renew itself, thus ensuring that the whole system becomes regenerative (Hussain, 2021).

Regenerative tourism is a model in line with the eight regenerative economy's principles. As Owen (2007) stated, it is a holistic approach as it wants to create positive impacts for all participants: from the hosts, guests, community and place to its natural and socio-cultural capital. Therefore, in the regenerative tourism model humans are not considered apart from nature or as beings that have to deal with the scarcity of natural resources. Conversely, humans are part of nature and want to harness the potential of tourism as a vital force in making communities regenerative (Ajoon & Rao, 2020).

According to the regenerative tourism model, in order to make a destination regenerative, it is necessary to heal and restore it. So, when a community wants to be regenerative, the damage and degradation suffered by its social, environmental and cultural capital needs to be repaired in the first place. When the system becomes healthy, it is possible to create the conditions in order human and natural systems to flourish, thrive, adapt, self-organise and regenerate (Axinte, Mehmood, Marsden & Roep, 2019). In addition, the ultimate goal is to strengthen the adaptative capacity of the tourism systems so that it can end up renewing itself without much human intervention (Du Plessis & Brandon, 2015). In this sense, Ajoon and Rao (2020) stated that "when done properly, tourism can be a vital force to flourish regeneration of the society in all aspects- financially, mentally, physically and emotionally" (p. 3).

Through literature research different advice and guidance is found regarding regenerative tourism. There is not a unique way to make a touristic community regenerative. Moreover, it cannot be achieved using the same pathway for different communities. The aim of this section is to highlight the most important concepts when applying the regenerative concept within tourism.

2.2.1 Mindset Change

Regeneration in tourism cannot happen without a change in humans' mindset. Experts agree on the fact that humans should stop thinking that we are separate to the natural world and that we can use its resources for our benefit (Du Plessis & Brandon, 2015; Pollock, 2019). We should realize that destinations are embedded in the natural environment and integrate within our values and actions the willingness to operate under nature's rules and principles (Hussain, 2021). Instead of thinking that the planet is full of resources that can be exploited, we should change the way we perceive the World and discover the capacity of the living system to evolve and self-generate (Pollock, 2019).

2.2.2 Collaboration

Collaboration is one of the key elements in the design and implementation of regenerative tourism. It is necessary that all the participants of the tourism system collaborate. So, local authorities, governments, tourists, destination management operators, tourist establishments and host communities should work together to create the conditions for the destination to adapt to continuous changes, thrive, flourish and self-regenerate (Pollock, 2019; McEnhill et al., 2020).

2.2.3 Community

In some cases, when governments, destination management operators, hosts or tourist establishments plan or organize the touristic activity in a place, its residents and community are not considered. Often, tourists' needs and rights are prioritized over the ones of the residents (Pollock, 2019). Nowadays we live in a global World characterized by continuous technological advancements. This technology enables destinations to be connected and visible through the internet and social media. This contributes to the fact that the residents of a place have no control of their town, city or region when it becomes a popular destination and attracts a lot of tourism (Hussain, 2021). To apply a regenerative tourism model, residents need to be listened. Considering that both the positive and negative impacts of tourism affect residents, their needs, aspirations, experiences, and contributions need to be given attention and comprehended. There should be a greater involvement of the destination's community in tourism decision-making (Pollock, 2019).

2.2.4 Tourism: From an Industry to a System

The concepts of collaboration and community are linked with the urgent need of considering tourism as a system instead of an industry. When considering tourism as an industry, we are forgetting the necessary collaboration with the community which is present in the tourist place (Pollock, 2016). Related to the mindset change, there should be a shift from an industrial approach to a system approach that considers the community and works in a collaborative networking (Ajoon & Rao, 2020). As Pollock (2019) stresses, tourism products and services cannot be considered as a result of an industrial production. When doing so, the fact that tourism is a system subject to nature's operating rules and principals is not taken into account and nature's degradation is perpetuated.

2.2.5 Marketing

Marketing will be a challenge in the regenerative context (Hussain, 2021). In other words, there must be a shift from a superfluous marketing which promotes mass-tourism and unsustainable practices towards a marketing that has a deeper purpose and uses its huge regenerative potential on communities, nature, enterprises and tourists. Regenerative tourism is not about stopping marketing, but about promoting a destination in a mature way, encouraging the commitment to protect the natural environment, participating in natural resources recovery and regeneration, and influencing tourists to leave their tourist place better than they found it (Pollock, 2019). Marketing has a huge force to encourage collaboration, resilience, and regeneration.

2.2.6 Suitability

Every place and community are different. Therefore, policies, plans, actions and strategies must be in line with the characteristics of each destination, as each one has its own social, cultural, and environmental processes (McEnhill et al., 2020). It is of high importance to get a deep understanding of the current state of the place and community in order to design the most suitable regenerative strategies. This implies the willingness to profoundly listen and observe (Pollock, 2019). What does the community want for their destination? What does the community want to share with their guests? What defines the uniqueness of the place? What is the state of the destination's cultural, environmental and social capital? All this information must be considered.

2.2.7 Conscious Travel Habits

Conscious travel habits are a key element of the regenerative tourism model (Hussain, 2021). In this sense, mass international tourism, based on an industrial operating model, is unsustainable (Pollock, 2020), and a conscious tourism consumption needs to be planned and developed. Its meaning and implications are explained in the next section.

2.3 Towards a New Tourism Operating System

Regenerative tourism is directly linked with conscious travel as regeneration within the tourism system takes place when tourists are conscious consumers (Pollock, 2013). In the last two decades this concept has gotten more attention, especially environmental conscious travel (Škrinjarić, 2018). Conscious travel transforms tourism into a positive contributor to well-being and thriving of all the stakeholders involved in the tourism system. Conscious travel is not about de-growth, it is about growth in quality over quantity. In other words, it is about the preservation of the environmental and cultural resources on which the touristic activity depends. This type of growth brings higher quality to tourist experiences and also benefits hosts and communities by protecting their social, cultural and environmental capital (Pollock, 2012).

According to Pollock, we do not need modification but transformation of the actual industrial operating model. Humans do not have to wait the change to come from the top (governments, for instance). As the expert states, there is no hero that will save us from mass tourism and will bring regeneration and consciousness into our communities. The change will come from the bottom: each individual, each tourist establishment, each destination's community, each enterprise can make a difference (Pollock, 2016). Tourism is a network of relationships between hosts, guests, and community, all of which are embedded in a place. Therefore, tourism is a human system which will change when the mindset of its participants changes (Pollock, 2012).

Other experts also stress the importance of responsibility as an inseparable factor from conscious tourism. Conscious tourists have a superior sensitivity and empathy and consider tourism as an experience of giving and receiving. It is both hosts and tourists' responsibility to avoid the negative impacts that tourism can have on biodiversity, cultural heritage, local population, and endogenous resources. Moreover, tourists that have conscious travel habits seek a sense of love for the destination they visit, implying an ethical dimension that goes beyond sustainability -which only comprises economic, social and environmental dimensions. (Liberato et al., 2021). Hence, it is important to highlight that conscious travellers' vision goes beyond engaging in responsible tourism practices: they seek to make a difference and to undergo through experiences that bring them personal and collective development (Živoder et al., 2015).

This paper departs from the understanding of the role of hosts as change agents. Conscious travel considers that hosts should be the leaders of the tourism model transformation due to their responsibility for the kind of tourism they create in their community. Moreover, if hosts change their behaviour, they have the power of changing tourists' mindset and travel habits. Hosts should be interested in being change agents and in preserving the natural and cultural context on which their activity is based (Pollock, 2013). Being a conscious host means to "help the guest slow down in a destination, learn to fully savour their experience by stimulating and satiating all their senses and making them feel more fully alive" (Pollock, 2013, p. 14). Becoming a conscious host is a work in progress that requires the development of their self-awareness and that hosts meet with community's participants to share their vision of the type of community they want to create and share with guests (see Pollock, 2016). Therefore, hosts need to attract, engage, and create the conscious traveller by designing experiences that transform because tourists with conscious travel habits want to be transformed and enriched when traveling (Pollock, 2013).

3. Methodology

This study aims to contribute to the lack of empirical knowledge on the way forward the development of a regenerative tourism model. In this paper the focus is on the role of tourism supply, specifically on tourist accommodations, due to their mentioned potential as drivers of regenerative tourism. The

objective of the study is to understand the role of tourist accommodations as agents of change in the tourism system. Concretely, the focus is on tourist accommodations that bring environmental concerns to the heart of the design and implementation of their business products. Some of them have been awarded an environmental certificate and others have not but all apply sustainable and ecological practices.

This paper contributes to the understanding of the implementation of environmental actions in tourism systems as a driver for a regenerative development of tourism. Moreover, it studies the importance of ecological certificates, as a critical information for the planning and development of tourism futures. In the end, the role of hosts as change agents is examined. In order to analyse the role of tourist accommodations for a regenerative development of tourism and explore their potential to drive change in the tourism system, this paper adopted a qualitative approach. Since exhaustive empirical knowledge is lacking and further research is still needed to have a conceptual foundation to develop a regenerative tourism framework from empirical data, qualitative studies are suitable for producing valuable contribution to our understanding of the importance of hosts' actions for a regenerative development.

The study sample is composed by two groups of tourist accommodations. The first group is formed by the ten accommodations with the EU Ecolabel certificate (European Commission, 2022) in Catalonia. While all the accommodations were contacted, six of them accepted to participate, which will be named 'Sample A'. Six other Catalan accommodations, in this case without environmental certificates, were also selected. Based on a non-probabilistic sampling method, seven tourist establishments were invited to be part of 'Sample B' following different criteria. First of all, they also had to be located in Catalonia for future data comparison. In the second place, sustainability or ecology had to be part of their activity's philosophy. Previous personal experience and consultation to Catalan rural experts allowed the elaboration of the list of seven mentioned establishments. Six of them positively answered and conform 'Sample B'. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents and the characteristics of the accommodations.

Table 1. Summary of Accommodations and Respondents' Characteristics

N	Sample	Destination			Accommodation		Respondents and Interview Information					
		Province	Town/City	Inhabitants	Type	Rooms	Gender	Age	Position	Date	Format	Duration (min)
1	A	Lleida	Senterada	50	Rural house	9	Female	46	Owner	16/02/2022	Face-to-face	122
2	A	Tarragona	Alcover	5108	Three rural houses	up to 30 people	Male	48	Owner	14/03/2022	Online	46
3	A	Barcelona	Tavertet	111	Rural apart-hotel	6 rooms, 3 studies and 3 little rural houses	Female	38	Director	15/03/2022	Face-to-face	59
4	A	Barcelona	Guardiola de Berguedà	887	Camping	67 camping pitches and 6 bungalows	Male	54	Co-owner	16/03/2022	Online	73
5	A	Barcelona	Sant Esteve de Palautordera	2749	Hotel	9	Female	24	Receptionist	18/03/2022	Online	48
6	A	Barcelona	Vilada	430	Holiday camp	84 children	Male	45	Co-owner	31/03/2022	Online	68
7	B	Lleida	Éller	20	Rural hostel	4	Female	47	Owner	19/02/2022	Face-to-face	45
8	B	Lleida	Toló	4	Rural house	4	Female+Male	55+57	Onwers	17/02/2022	Online	90
9	B	Tarragona	Vallverd de Queralt	25	Rural house	4	Female+Male	54+58	Owners	20/02/2022	Face-to-face	77
10	B	Barcelona	Rellinars	800	Rural house	3	Male	47	Owner	18/02/2022	Face-to-face	43
11	B	Lleida	Barruera (Vall de Boí)	578	Rural house	6	Female	57	Owner	20/02/2022	Online	55
12	B	Girona	Cadaqués	2752	Rural house	3	Female+Male	32+46	Owner	13/03/2022	Face-to-face	146

Source: Own Elaboration

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, as an interview protocol was used not in a rigid but a flexible manner. From Sample A, two interviews were conducted face to face and four via Google Meet, with a duration between 46 and 122 minutes. From Sample B, four interviews were conducted face to face and two via Google Meet, with a duration between 43 and 146 minutes. Therefore, the average duration of the interviews was 73 minutes.

The interview protocol consisted of five parts, each one composed of a series of questions which was designed to respond to the objective and understand the characteristics explained earlier. The questions asked to tourist accommodations were divided in the following five sections:

1) Accommodation's history: in order to know when and why the business opened its doors; also its mission, vision, and values.

2) The second part of the interview protocol differs depending on whether Sample A or B is concerned. In the first place, this part consists of questions about the obtention of the EU Ecolabel certificate. The aim is to know the reason why the accommodation applied for it and the set of environmental practices that the accommodation follows. For the second sample, the purpose is to learn about their sustainable and ecological practices and their vision regarding environmental quality certificates.

3) The third section ais to understand the accommodations' management of the environmental practices, also in relation to their staff and customers.

4) The fourth part of the interview aims to understand the guests' profiles and the usage of environmental practices as a marketing strategy.

5) The fifth part aims to know the accommodations' opinion about the current state of the tourism system, to understand their vision about the future in tourism after Covid-19, and to comprehend the characteristics of their ideal tourism model.

These five parts specified above were used as an interview protocol. Each of the five sections contains different questions. Before conducting the interviews, its protocol was sent to a representative of the Catalan EU Ecolabel Competent Body, who gave us advice. He recommended offering to the accommodations the possibility of making the interview personal or virtual, thus increasing their chances of availability. This person also acted as the first contact to put them in context about this study, the interview and its objectives.

Moreover, the interviews' confidentiality and anonymity were explained at their start. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed in Catalan while the results are translated into English. It is important to highlight that the interviews' transcripts were sent to the respective respondents to clarify any issues arising from the transcription in order to confirm the reliability and validity of the data. Since no issues were reported, the data analysis was conducted and the results are explained in the next section. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify the topics and the relationships between the topics and allows to structure the results in four sections that, based on the examples of practices, discuss the corporate identity of ecological accommodations, the environmental concerns for ecological hospitality, the impact of environmentally friendly practices, and the contribution of ecological accommodations as agents of change for a regenerative tourism model.

6. Results and Discussion

6.1 The Corporate Identity of Ecological Accommodations

Results show that accommodations with environmental concerns, whether certified or not, have incorporated their sustainable and ecological way of living into their establishments' operations from the beginning of their operations. The interviewed accommodations are small and family businesses where the own founders are at the forefront and those who have extrapolated their sustainable and ecological way of life to the way of working, for example in relation to the provision of dining services (Coll-Barneto & Fusté-Forné, 2023).

The only difference is that environmentally certified establishments have a more planned vision for their business than non-certified establishments, which are committed to living more on a day-to-day basis and continuing with their activity without considering any type of business growth. This shows that environmentally certified accommodations are more business-minded. In contrast, interviewees of the accommodations without environmental certification do not have this spirit as well developed and their establishment is a way to materialise their desired lifestyle change.

It is clear that both types of accommodations search for customers that are in line with their sustainable and ecological values. However, it is important to remember that according to certified accommodations, large operators such as Booking are a good way to attract many customers but a bad channel to receive the customers they are looking for. According to certified establishments, this type of platforms should give more importance to sustainability criteria and less to price criteria (Arzoumanidis, Petti & Raggi, 2022).

Moreover, non-certified accommodations observe a positive relationship between the length of the stay and the match between the type of customer they receive and the customer they want to welcome. This points to a possible relationship between tourists who are responsible and respectful of the environment and their desire, whether unconscious or not, for the creation of a transformative tourism experience. In other words, the positive relationship described by the accommodations suggest that tourist who are more environmentally friendly want to take longer trips. Previous research also shows that long stays are one of the main enablers of transformation. Longer stays can provide tourists with more sources of reflection. The longer the stay is, the more likely tourists are to experience a transformation during their stay (Pung & Chiappa, 2020).

6.2 The most Important Environmental Concerns for Ecological Hospitality

Results show that the greatest investment is made by the accommodations on environmental energy practices. In this sense, the environmental improvements that the accommodations propose in the short or medium term are also focused on the energy field. The accommodations explain that investment in green energy systems is a way to achieve economic savings in the medium term. In addition, it also shows their concern about "the extent to which tourism is driving up energy costs at the destination level", a worrying reality warned by previous studies (Epler Wood, Milstein & Ahamed-Broadhurst, 2019, p. 14). In other words, this shows that the interviewed accommodations think that energy efficiency practices contribute to reduce the climate change.

Looking at the results, certified establishments are currently engaged in more environmental practices than non-certified ones. We also find the same situation for the accommodations' future environmental objectives. This reflects that the European environmental certification is an efficient guideline for accommodations seeking to lower their environmental impact while meeting their customers' needs, as expressed by the European Commission (2017).

On the other hand, some non-certified establishments interpret the obtention of environmental certificates as a possible form of greenwashing. Greenwashing practise is adopted to make a company look more environmentally friendly than it is (Aggarwal & Kadyan, 2014). However, the interviews' results show that the vast majority of certified accommodations have always been environmentally friendly and that they have applied for the EU Ecolabel with the pure intention of being able to improve day by day with the help of the guidelines and their Environmental Policy.

In most cases, certified accommodations are aware of the high expenditure of the environmental practices. In contrast, non-certified establishments do not see it as a big effort, but as a way of living that is in line with their values. This is related to the previously mentioned fact that EU Ecolabel accommodations are more business-minded; and probably because the majority of them have more employees and the organizational structure allows to have a better cost control.

In this sense, certified establishments spend more time and effort talking about or showing their environmental practices to customers. This is due to the certificate, since accommodations have to display information about their environmental practices and the EU Ecolabel certificate on their website, in the accommodation and in the questionnaires that are sent to the customers after their stay. Moreover, the certificate is an opportunity to demonstrate the accuracy of the environmental practices. In contrast, non-certified accommodations only do it when they find interested customers in the topic, as they state that they do not like to use their ecological and sustainable values as a marketing strategy. Uncertified accommodations do not talk about their environmental practices without request from customers because they want to avoid any interpretation of greenwashing.

6.3 Environmentally Friendly Practices as a tool to Achieve Internal Business Advantages or External Benefits for Society as well?

Establishments with environmental concerns are aware that the current tourism model and its operations are not sustainable, and they work for a change. They believe that both accommodations and tourists need to act in line with sustainable and ecological values in order to build a better tourism system. Therefore, accommodations realized that we should integrate within our values and actions the willingness to operate under nature's rules and principles. As observed in the theoretical section, this is part of the necessary mindset change for a tourism regenerative development (Hussain, 2021).

They define the ideal tourism model as a tourism that adapts to the conditions and characteristics of nature, villages and cities, and does not try to change their physiognomy. According to the interviewees, destinations should not be artificially created or adapted to the tourist activity; but should show visitors, respectfully, the authentic way of life of each place, thus showing the real world of the locals. If accommodations improve tourists' access to the residents' lifestyle is because they realized that somehow it is beneficial for them. However, they should understand that by truly encouraging tourists to immerse themselves in the real life of the locals, they will be acting as transformative practitioners (Soulard et al., 2019). In this sense, the access to residents' lifestyle acts as a transformative facilitator within tourists' experiences (Pung & Chiappa, 2020).

Responses from the EU Ecolabel accommodations reflect that the biggest advantage of having this certification is to improve day by day in environmental and sustainable terms. But none of them have experienced an increase in bookings or a change in the type of customers coming to the accommodation as a result of having the EU Ecolabel. Moreover, the vast majority of customers do not know what the EU Ecolabel is. However, they believe that their sustainable and ecological values, continuously improved thanks to the certification, can also help to improve their reputation. In contrast, we found that uncertified accommodations have not considered whether their environmental practices can have a positive impact on their reputation, nor do they believe that their customers use sustainability criteria when choosing them.

In addition, certified accommodations would like to see certificates such as the EU Ecolabel as part of tourists' decision criteria when choosing an accommodation. This means that one of the areas where the EU Ecolabel needs to improve the public awareness of the certificate. For example, a more powerful and eye-catching website could be created to advertise all accommodations with EU Ecolabel and where customers could directly book their stay from this website. Another thing that could be done by Competent Bodies, in this case the Catalan one, is to promote the EU Ecolabel for tourist accommodations through physical and online marketing campaigns. In this way tourists can get to know about its existence and implications. It could also be good for visitors because they would discover a way to become agents of change.

In sum, environmental practices are beneficial for accommodations because they can be part of their brand image. However, if the tourism model they search for became a reality, it would not only benefit accommodations but also the tourism system and society in general. Through their environmental practices, accommodations can, both directly and indirectly, transform tourists into potential agents of change for the tourism model they desire: a non-consumerist tourism model that is far from the masses, that is conscious and slow, that adapts to the place's conditions, and which seeks transformation through experiences (see, for example, Morón-Corujeira & Fusté-Forné, 2022).

6.4 Ecological Accommodations as Agents of Change for a Regenerative Tourism Model

Most accommodations, based on their experience, believe that Covid-19 has only brought changes in tourism practices in the short term and these change were due to restrictions, but not due to a lasting growth of citizens' sustainable and ecological values. If that comes to pass, we will find ourselves in Hussain's (2021) pessimistic scenario entitled 'Back to normal', where after the pandemic the unsustainable paths of traditional, mass and over-tourism are not put under control. In this sense, the UNWTO World Tourism

Barometer (UNWTO, 2022) shows that "international tourist arrivals almost tripled in January to July 2022 (+172%) compared to the same period of 2021. This means the sector recovered almost 60% of pre-pandemic levels".

As respondents explain, there has been a growth in domestic tourism during the pandemic (see also Hussain & Fusté-Forné, 2021). This has made many people realise that there are beautiful and unknown places close to home. Thus, there is an opportunity to further promote domestic tourism after the pandemic and thus take advantage of its sustainable potential, also thinking in terms of deseasonalization of tourism. In addition, and it is observed by the establishments, tourists during the pandemic have preferred to stay for longer periods of time. As mentioned before, longer stays could be related to customers' needs, conscious or not, to be transformed during their stays.

Results also show that environmental concerned accommodations can become agents of change for regenerative tourism development. This has been demonstrated for several reasons. Firstly, their values and ideals fit with the mindset change that is necessary according to regenerative tourism. The first step towards a regenerative tourism model is a mindset change that implies being aware that humans are not superior to other life forms and that each of us can contribute to the Earth's health (Pollock, 2019). Secondly, the accommodations want to and are starting to work in a more collaborative way with other businesses and at a more community level. Related to the mindset change and for a regenerative tourism development, there should be a shift from an industrial tourism approach to a system approach that considers the community and works in a collaborative networking (Ajoon & Rao, 2020).

Another aspect is that, without realising it, they want to enhance their performance as transformative practitioners. By acting as transformative hosts, they can expand the sense of inclusiveness (Pritchard et al., 2011; Reisinger, 2013), and raise awareness about ecological and social impacts of consumption behavior (Neuhofer et al., 2020), and advocate for environmental protection and social empowerment in tourism (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011; Pung et al., 2020). If we shifted to a regenerative tourism model, tourists would have conscious travel habits (Pollock, 2013) that would transform tourism into a positive contributor to well-being and thriving of all the stakeholders involved in the tourism system (Pollock, 2012) where destinations are not products, but places.

7. Conclusion

The Covid-19 outbreak resulted in a global tourism closure, followed by a rapid reaction from the tourism system and a quick dissemination of guidance from the academia. During the pandemic the experts acknowledged that continuing business as usual within tourist activities would lead to the degradation of natural, cultural and social resources, the basis on which tourism is performed and promoted (Du Plessis & Brandon, 2015; Pollock, 2019; Hussain, 2021). While sustainability within the tourism system is essential, it is not enough (Pollock, 2019). The paper shows that there is an urgent need to move from sustainability to regenerative paradigm (McEnhill, Jorgensen & Urlich, 2020). Regenerative tourism is a holistic approach that wants to create positive impacts for all tourism stakeholders: from the hosts, guests, community and place to its natural and socio-cultural capital. It has been discovered that according to the regenerative tourism model, in order to make a tourist destination regenerative, in the first place it is necessary to heal and restore it. When the system becomes healthy, it is possible to create the conditions in order for human and natural systems to flourish, thrive, self-organise and regenerate (Axinte, Mehmood, Marsden, & Roep, 2019).

The results of the paper shows the relationship between regenerative, conscious and transformative tourism based on the environmental actions of ecological accommodations. Regeneration within the tourism system takes place when tourists are conscious consumers that search personal transformation in their tourist experiences which are facilitated by conscious hosts. Hosts are also agents of change and they have a pivotal role in preserving the cultural and natural environment on which their personal and professional life is based. Experts highlight the main role of hosts as change agents because if they change their behaviour, they have the power of changing tourists' mindset and travel habits (Pollock, 2013). There is currently no clear guidance on how the participants in the tourism system can move towards a regenerative model. This study adds texture to this understanding. Regeneration in tourism

cannot happen without a change in humans' mindset. There should be a shift from an industrial approach to a system approach that considers the community and works in a collaborative networking (Ajoon & Rao, 2020). Furthermore, regenerative tourism is not about stopping marketing, but about promoting a destination encouraging the commitment to protect the natural environment, participating in natural resources' recovery and regeneration, and influencing tourists to leave their tourist place better than they found it (Pollock, 2019).

Findings demonstrate that according to the accommodations, the most important advantage of being green establishments is to be in line with the tourism model they want for the future, far from mass and over-tourism and that leaves the current consumerist patterns behind. Their ideal tourism model is the one that adapts to the conditions and characteristics of each place. Environmentally concerned accommodations are in favour of a tourism that shows visitors, respectfully, the authentic way of life of each place, thus showing the real world of the locals while respecting their environmental, socio-cultural and economic heritage. However, the accommodations agree on the fact that Covid-19 has not changed tourists' mindsets and that visitors' practices, when all restrictions disappear, will return to the previous unsustainable paths that are leading to the depletion of cultural and natural resources.

7.1 Theoretical Implications

The qualitative approach of the study aimed to analyse the potential of tourist accommodations to drive change in the tourism system. Concretely, this paper contributes to the understanding of the implementation of environmental actions in tourism systems as a driver for a regenerative development of tourism. Moreover, we have studied the importance of environmental certificates, as a critical information for the planning and development of tourism futures. Therefore, the focus has been put on tourist accommodations that bring environmental concerns to the heart of the design and implementation of their business practices. Our study reveals that the only difference between certified and non-certified accommodations in terms of their corporate identity is that EU Ecolabel accommodations are more business-minded, have more employees and their organizational structure allows a better cost control. From the study it was found that environmental practices are not used as a marketing tool, because environmental, sustainable and ecological values are truly part of the accommodations' philosophy. In the same way, EU Ecolabel is mainly used as a guideline that helps accommodations improve day by day in environmental terms.

Results showed that the most relevant environmental practices for both certified and non-certified accommodations are the ones dedicated to achieving increased energy efficiency and the use of green energy sources. One of the main things to note is that environmentally certified accommodations apply more environmental practices than non-environmentally certified ones. The EU Ecolabel is not a form of greenwashing, but a reliable certification that helps accommodations to continuously set new environmental targets. However, the distrust of the second sample is due to the lack of methods to ensure that these are not just a green wash and also due to the "proliferation of small, little known, limited value ecolabels in tourism and hospitality" (Font, 2002, p. 1). Therefore, there should be a strict control over the various ecolabels in order to ensure that they are strict, as "ecolabels will only be effective in promoting sound levels of environmental performance if they are credible to consumers, to national regulatory authorities, to environmental specialists, to international, national, local and civil society organizations, as well as to businesses themselves" (Kahleborn & Dominé, 2001, p. 15). If done, establishments that had a certificate would actually see their reputation increase and will be able to openly speak about their environmental practices to raise awareness among customers and the society (Kahlenborn & Dominé, 2001).

7.2 Practical Implications

This study shows that accommodations that bring environmental concerns to the heart of all their business practices can be agents of change for a regenerative development of tourism, both environmentally certified or not. Even though the majority of them are not familiar with the concept of regenerative tourism, their willingness to change the current tourism model is in line with the mentioned steps towards

regenerative tourism. In the first place, they demonstrated that they are prepared for the necessary mindset change. Secondly, they have the desire to work on a community level and in collaboration with tourism stakeholders, which is essential within the regenerative model. Moreover, they unconsciously want to act as transformative hosts and want tourists to engage in a more conscious and slow tourism.

A regenerative tourism model needs a transformation of the actual industrial operating model, and a shift both from the demand and supply side. The change will come from the bottom: each individual, touristic establishment, destination community, and enterprise can make a difference. Tourism is a human system which will change when the mindset of its participants changes. This transformation is urgent if we do not want to lose the essence of the sites and places' environmental and cultural heritage. We can not ignore the environmental and socio-cultural costs of tourism growth and its invisible burden. In this sense, regenerative practices have played a part in tourism systems, and there are examples of businesses and destinations which have shown a profound respect for the Earth's resources and pioneered a regenerative understanding of hospitality and tourism. After this study we believe that Catalan accommodations with environmental concerns are ready to become, if they want to, agents of change for a regenerative development of tourism.

7.3 Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions and implications, this paper includes several limitations. The sample exclusively interviewed Catalan respondents. Therefore, future studies could employ a cross-cultural investigation while taking advantage of EU Ecolabel's European scope. In addition, all the accommodations in the sample are small family businesses. Future research could extend the sample to include larger businesses located in bigger cities. Moreover, this research only focuses on environmentally concerned accommodation, which leaves a knowledge gap for future studies that want to compare our results with accommodations that do not use environmental practices.

While previous studies have analysed environmental initiatives of hotels, few research has analysed the role of environmentally concerned accommodations as agents of change in tourism systems. Future studies on the subject will therefore help to conceptualise the analysis of accommodations' behaviour in regenerative terms and their readiness to move towards a new tourism model. Moreover, there is room for future research on the demand side in order to understand tourists' environmental consciousness and their desire to choose accommodations, and experiences, that promote a deeper communion with place as a source of conscious travel and regenerative tourism.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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