

Rethinking Tourism in the Pacific

Regenerative Tourism and the Case of O’ahu, Hawai’i

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brought tourism on O’ahu to a halt and created an opportunity to rethink the island’s long-standing dependence on mass tourism. This pause sharpened debates around overtourism and limits to growth while drawing attention to regenerative tourism. The O’ahu Destination Management Action Plan (DMAP, 2021–2024) is the island’s central policy instrument aligned with this vision. This study evaluates the DMAP’s feasibility by combining semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from tourism, visitor management, and academia with a resident survey on awareness and perceptions. Findings indicate that while regenerative practices such as volunteer initiatives and community-based projects already exist, they remain fragmented and lack political support, funding, and binding regulations. Although participants regarded the DMAP’s objectives as meaningful, they criticized its weak visibility, symbolic implementation, and lack of enforcement, with few residents reporting direct awareness of the plan. Structural reliance on mass tourism and neglect of visitor behavior continue to constrain change. Genuine regeneration will require political will, coordinated governance, reliable monitoring, and the full integration of Native Hawaiian perspectives.

KEYWORDS: regenerative tourism, destination management, community participation, indigenous perspectives



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1 Introduction

The growth in international travel led to greater scrutiny of traditional tourism models, particularly in regions that are environmentally and culturally sensitive, such as islands and indigenous homelands. The long-running discussion on carrying capacity, which is defined by the UNWTO (2018) as “the maximum number of people who can visit a tourist destination at the same time without causing unacceptable impacts”, remains relevant and is fundamental to understanding limits to growth. In many places, tourism has exceeded local carrying capacities.

O'ahu exemplifies these tensions. With over six million visitors per year and a deeply rooted Native Hawaiian heritage (HTA, 2019), the island sits at the crossroads between economic reliance on tourism and the imperatives of social and ecological sustainability. The tension is not simply “visitors vs. economy” or “heritage vs. sustainability”, but a set of linked dynamics such as visitor volume and spatial concentration lead to externalities (overcrowding, costs, environmental impact), which in turn undermine the very cultural and natural values that form the basis of the industry and the well-being of the community. Because the O'ahu Destination Management Action Plan (DMAP) is the island's central policy instrument explicitly linked to regenerative tourism (HTA, 2020), this study takes it as the focal point for exploring how residents and stakeholders perceive the possibilities and limits of regeneration.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 From Sustainable to Regenerative Tourism

Promoted widely since the 1990s, sustainable tourism is defined by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2005) as tourism that “takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts”. Although sustainable tourism aims to minimise negative consequences, it often falls short of reversing degradation or promoting systemic healing. Consequently, the concept of regenerative tourism has emerged as a progressive evolution in tourism studies.

Regenerative tourism is grounded in systems thinking and ecological resilience. Duxbury et al. (2021) conceptualise regenerative tourism as a model that conserves and revitalises local ecologies and cultures. It emphasises reciprocity, stewardship, and co-creation between hosts and guests. Hussain and Haley (2022) contend that regenerative tourism is place-based and relational, necessitating the incorporation of local and indigenous knowledge systems to achieve socially just and ecologically restorative outcomes. This approach is particularly relevant to islands such as O'ahu, where overtourism has resulted in visible environmental degradation, cultural commodification, and displacement. McCool and Bosak (2016) advocate shifting the focus from controlling visitor numbers to enhancing destination resilience, referring to a system's ability to absorb disturbance while maintaining core functions.

2.2 Integration of Indigenous Knowledge and Social Justice

Dredge (2022) emphasises that regenerative tourism must prioritise indigenous perspectives to challenge colonial legacies and facilitate genuine decolonisation, while Bellato et al. (2023) propose a decolonial research and practice paradigm for regenerative tourism, urging transformative, trans-disciplinary approaches that elevate indigenous knowledges. This is particularly relevant for island contexts like Hawai'i, where tourism has profited from, but seldom benefited Native Hawaiian communities. A regenerative paradigm must confront colonial legacies and uneven benefit flows; embed Native governance and protocols in decision-making; and prioritize community-defined well-being over visitor volume. Regenerative tourism encompasses not only ecological restoration,



but also historical reconciliation and socio-political redress. Incorporating such models into modern tourism governance would align with regenerative principles emphasising relationality, equity, and ecological integrity.

3 Methodological Framework

3.1 Study Area: O'ahu, Hawai'i

Marketed as a “sun, sand, and sea” destination (Szuster et al., 2023), O'ahu's tourism appeal lies in its wide range of activities, including popular sites like Waikiki Beach and attractions like Diamond Head Crater and Pearl Harbor National Memorial. Receiving 6.15 million of the state's 10.38 million visitors in 2019, O'ahu is the most popular island among visitors. With a resident population of 974,563, the island accommodated around 114,596 visitors daily, who stayed an average of 6.8 days, and supported 99,152 jobs (direct, indirect, and induced), contributing \$8.14 billion to the local economy. The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted tourism, leading to a 75.4% drop in arrivals and the loss of 63,800 jobs in late 2020. However, by May 2021, signs of recovery emerged, reflecting broader trends across the state (HTA, 2020; 2023).

The O'ahu Destination Management Action Plan (DMAP) was a three-year strategy (2021–2024) developed by the Hawai'i Tourism Authority in collaboration with a steering committee representing community groups, cultural practitioners, and industry stakeholders. It sets out concrete actions to manage visitor impacts, disperse demand, enhance education, and embed community stewardship. The DMAP was selected as the focal point of this research because it represents the most recent and comprehensive policy instrument explicitly aligned with regenerative tourism principles in Hawai'i. Examining local awareness of, and responses to, the DMAP therefore provides a unique lens for understanding how regenerative tourism is interpreted, supported, and contested on O'ahu.

3.2 Mixed Methods Research Design

The research employs a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. The integration of both strands allowed to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the possibilities and limits of regenerative tourism on O'ahu. For example, it integrates quantitative, critically rational analyses with qualitative, interpretive perspectives in order to capture different dimensions of reality (Kromrey et al., 2016). In this study, the mixed-methods approach provided structured evidence of residents' perceptions, levels of awareness, and support for management measures through the survey, while the interviews offered contextualised insights into values and governance challenges. The interviews were first coded thematically (see 3.3) and then related to those themes to survey patterns (e.g., high support for reservation systems paired with narratives about crowding and resource strain).

3.3 Instruments, Development, Sampling and Data Analysis

The qualitative component comprises semi-structured interviews (Misoch 2019) with six stakeholders categorised into five groups: (1) destination/tourism organisation; (2) hotel/industry; (3) science/academia; (4) visitor management; and (5) Native Hawaiian community representative/resident advocate. The interviewees were selected using purposive sampling, guided by their professional roles, institutional affiliations and thematic relevance (Mey & Mruck, 2020). Interviews lasted 30-60 minutes via remote video, audio-recorded with consent and transcribed. For confidentiality, sector codes and numbers were used.

The quantitative component consists of an online survey that was accessed by a total of 268



people, 65 of whom completed the survey in full. The survey featured five thematic sections, measuring attitudes towards tourism, familiarity with regenerative tourism and opinions on it, awareness of and support for the DMAP, and preferences for future tourism development, as well as demographics. Likert scales and multiple-choice questions were employed to ensure standardisation and comparability (Steiner & Benesch, 2021). Survey participants were representative of cross-section of O'ahu residents in terms of age, ethnicity, and geographic distribution.

3.4 Ethical considerations

All participants were provided with information sheets and consent forms to sign. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by using pseudonyms and encrypting the storage of recordings and transcripts. Sensitivity to cultural context was paramount, particularly when engaging with Native Hawaiian participants. Due to Hawai'i's colonial history and the risk of extractive research; instruments were designed with attention to cultural protocols (e.g. the correct place names), and questioning emphasised agency, benefits, and governance rather than cultural "exposure". Consideration was also given to how the study could provide value back to the community, for example by sharing findings with local organisations to support community-led tourism planning and policy advocacy.

4 Discussion

4.1 Overall attitude towards tourism

Tourism is a double-edged sword for O'ahu. On the one hand, it remains the island's largest economic driver. It employs tens of thousands of residents, generates substantial state revenue, and supports various service sectors. Official statistics support this: in 2019, Hawai'i saw over 10 million visitors, with Oahu hosting around 6.15 million and generating over USD 19.8 billion in post-pandemic recovery in 2022 (DBEDT & HTA, 2023).

These economic gains come at a significant socio-environmental cost. Interviews and surveys revealed growing tensions due to overcrowding (88.16%), rising housing costs (71.05%), traffic congestion (82.89%), and environmental pollution (71.05%). Results from this research note mirror those of the Resident Sentiment Survey and Visitor Satisfaction Survey, which both show declining satisfaction (HTA, 2019; 2020). Interviewees pointedly remarked that *Hawaiian identity* had become commodified, with the essence of "Aloha" repackaged into a touristic fantasy. Participants highlighted the pandemic period as a time of relief from tourism saturation, noting temporary environmental and social benefits, including cleaner beaches, reduced noise, and improved access to local areas. Interviewees, including HTL-01 and RES-01, emphasised how this hiatus revealed the fragility of the island's socio-ecological systems, inspiring a call for a shift in tourism paradigms.

Results echo broader overtourism literature on externalities and resident sentiment and align with calls to move beyond visitor-number control toward resilience and stewardship (UNWTO, 2018; McCool & Bosack, 2016). The expressed desire for systems-level change resonates with regenerative framings that prioritise socio-ecological health over throughput (Dredge, 2022).

4.2 Thoughts on Regenerative Tourism

Although initially unfamiliar to many, regenerative tourism emerged as a compelling concept, with 61.19% of survey participants endorsing the model after a plain-language explanation was offered. Interviewees described regenerative tourism as evolutionary leap beyond sustainability, defining it as "restoring what has been lost, not just preserving what remains", signalling a paradigm shift towards reciprocity and systemic healing. However, this vision was met with caution. While stakeholders viewed the model as a transition "from exploitation to mutuality" that reflects indigenous



values of interdependence, several respondents expressed concerns about its practical implementation. RES-01 emphasised that without being rooted in local communities and traditional knowledge, regenerative tourism risks becoming “just another form of greenwashing” and highlighted the danger of rhetorical appropriation.

Key elements identified included community participation, cultural stewardship and environmental restoration. Examples of such initiatives included beach clean-ups, reforestation, and further volunteer programmes. However, it was emphasised that such practices need to be institutionalised and scaled up beyond pilot programmes.

Duxbury et al. (2021) argue for a holistic approach that integrates ecological, social, and cultural dimensions. Similarly, Dredge (2022) emphasises that indigenous knowledge and intergenerational wisdom are essential for successful regenerative tourism. Further, Hussain and Haley (2022) argue that without measurable ecological and cultural indicators, regenerative tourism risks becoming a rhetorical label.

4.3 Awareness and Evaluation of the O’ahu DMAP

Despite being the flagship initiative, the DMAP was largely unknown among survey respondents. Once informed, 70.5% expressed their support for its goals. The DMAP outlines strategies for dispersing tourism, mitigating environmental impact, and fostering local partnerships.

Key actions endorsed by residents included:

- Limiting daily visitor numbers in ecologically sensitive areas
- Implementing visitor education programmes
- Creating reservation systems for natural sites
- Partnering with Native Hawaiian cultural organisations

The interviewees expressed mixed reviews. While participant SCI-02 acknowledged the plan’s vision, they criticised its lack of enforceable targets: ‘Policy without accountability is aspiration without transformation.’ DTO-02 noted that fragmentation between agencies hinders implementation and that funding mechanisms remain unclear.

Despite broad support for its goals, the DMAP was critiqued for its vagueness and lack of enforceability. Stakeholders praised the initiative’s integrative framework but warned of insufficient metrics and accountability mechanisms (SCI-02). The absence of clear benchmarks was seen as a significant barrier to effective implementation.

These critiques echo common challenges in destination management planning worldwide, where ambitious frameworks often falter due to underfunding, fragmented governance, and insufficient stakeholder buy-in (Dredge & Jenkins, 2007). The DMAP’s success, it seems, depends not only on its conceptual coherence but on the political will, institutional capacity, and participatory mechanisms that can translate strategy into action. This reflects broader academic critiques that regenerative policy frameworks must include detailed indicators and be integrated across policy levels (Hussain & Haley, 2022).

4.4 Social Justice and Indigenous Perspectives

One of the most powerful themes emerging from the discussion concerns the intersection of tourism, social justice, and indigenous rights. Quantitative data underscores widespread dissatisfaction among Native Hawaiians with the current tourism model. Striking 54% of respondents stated that tourism did not currently benefit their communities. Their narratives frequently referenced issues of land dispossession, cultural appropriation, and underrepresentation in tourism governance.

PHN-01 emphasized the broader social determinants of regenerative tourism: “It’s not just



about beaches; it’s about displacement, food security, and housing.” This aligns with regenerative tourism scholarship that centres equity and indigenous sovereignty as foundational principles (Hussain & Haley, 2022).

Participants advocated for the redistribution of tourism revenues towards community-led initiatives, including:

- Hawaiian language schools and cultural centres
- Conservation projects led by indigenous groups
- Formal consultation bodies involving Native Hawaiian elders

This aligns with decolonial framings (Bellato et al., 2023) and with Dredge’s (2022) call for leadership that reconfigures institutions to centre indigenous knowledge, not merely consult it. Regeneration is thus a justice project: it requires rebalancing authority and benefits, integrating cultural protocols and customary governance, going beyond simply improving operations.

4.5 Visions for the Future: Community-Based Models

The vision set out by residents and experts represents a clear shift away from high-volume tourism. More than three-quarters of survey respondents supported the idea of limiting the number of daily visitors to ecologically sensitive sites. Hanauma Bay and Diamond Head were cited as examples where concrete mechanisms (reservation systems concerning access and parking for non-residents) were already in use.

Residents expressed a desire for tourism models that prioritise community and local ownership, such as:

- Cultural workshops hosted by Hawaiian elders
- Eco-tours run by conservation NGOs
- Farm-to-table programmes involving local farmers

Economic diversification was also a recurring theme. Participants saw regenerative tourism as one pillar in a broader strategy that included renewable energy, education, and local agriculture. Interviewee SCI-01 argued: “Tourism can’t carry the economy forever. Regenerative tourism must align with a diversified future”.

Participants also called for a shift in visitor education, recommending a mandatory pre-arrival engagement in education on Hawaiian culture, environmental regulations, and protocols for entering sacred spaces, in form of digital learning modules or briefings at ports of entry.

These proposals reflect core regenerative principles: they are rooted in place, emphasise relationships and reciprocity, and are evaluated through social-ecological outcomes rather than simple visitor numbers (Dredge, 2022; Duxbury et al., 2021).

4.6 Lessons for Other Remote Destinations

While O‘ahu’s context is unique, there are clear parallels with other remote destinations. Regions that are ecologically sensitive, culturally rich, and economically dependent on tourism. However, they also suffer from overtourism in specific hotspots, infrastructure strain, and the marginalisation of indigenous communities.

The DMAP model could be adapted to provide a replicable framework for further regions, provided it is tailored to local governance structures, ecological constraints, and cultural values. Tourism stakeholders could benefit from:



- Engaging indigenous knowledge holders in planning
- Implementing reservation and permit systems
- Designing site-specific visitor education initiatives
- Creating metrics to monitor social and ecological impacts

As Duxbury et al. (2021) and Dredge (2022) suggest, regenerative tourism is not a static blueprint, but rather a dynamic process requiring local adaptation and a long-term commitment. Destinations can avoid the pitfalls observed in Hawai'i by prioritising community well-being, limiting extractive practices, and integrating tourism into wider regional development plans.

5 Conclusion

This research note describes how residents and stakeholders on O'ahu view regenerative tourism as both necessary and possible, but only if linked to concrete measures. Research findings highlight three key implications: (1) regeneration must be measured through social and ecological outcomes, not just visitor numbers; (2) governance needs transparent benchmarks and accountability; (3) justice requires redistributing benefits and authority to local communities. The DMAP offers a promising framework, yet limited visibility and lack of accountability hinder impact. Ultimately, regenerative tourism is not just a strategy but a moral imperative demanding systemic commitment. Further research should track resident sentiment over time, evaluate co-stewardship and revenue-sharing models, and compare island contexts to identify conditions for scaling regenerative approaches.

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