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"It seems that even regenerative actions don't justify us turning a blind eye"

Regenerative tourism and the continuing carbon-dependency in the North

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Abstract

Travelling to destinations, particularly air travel, has been highlighted as the largest contributor to the climate crisis in tourism. The Arctic is experiencing some of the most severe impacts of climate change, making the growth of tourism – often reliant on aviation – appear contradictory. As interest in regenerative tourism continues to rise, it is important to discuss what growing aviation means in this context. Interviews with small and micro-sized tourism enterprises revealed that engaging in sustainable and regenerative tourism can be a way to overcome feelings of cognitive dissonance. Although the enterprises had found ways to impact the carbon emissions associated with their customers' travel, a broader system-level transformation is required to shift the trajectory.

Keywords: regenerative tourism; climate change; aviation; sustainability; socio-ecological vulnerability

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Introduction and literature review

The Earth is currently heading towards an irreversible climate disaster (Ripple et al., 2024). At the same time, the climate emergency is intertwined with other socio-ecological threats, such as biodiversity loss and series of conflicts – forging a global polycrisis (Hoyer et al., 2023). Despite decades of climate discourse among tourism practitioners and researchers (Scott, 2024), tourism remains fossil fuel-dependent, carbon-intensive, and contributes an increasing share of global greenhouse emissions (Lenzen et al., 2018). The prevailing growth paradigm, coupled with the growth of aviation and long-distance travel, represents a barrier to staying within 1.5 °C limit (Becken, 2019; Gössling et al., 2023; TPCC, 2023). Despite high hopes, the decarbonisation of aviation through technological advancements has proven to be difficult, particularly in the context of continued growth in the sector (Gössling et al., 2023; TPCC, 2023).

The Arctic and sub-Arctic are among the most socio-ecologically vulnerable areas due to the rapid rate of warming and the cascading impacts of climate change (IPCC, 2022). These regions are becoming increasingly more attractive as travel destinations, driven by phenomena such as last chance tourism (Varnajot & Saarinen, 2022) and, more recently, 'coolcations'. In Northern Europe, destinations are already targeting Southern Europeans seeking relief from summer heat (Visit Levi, n.d.; Visit Sweden, n.d.). The situation is paradoxical: increasing travel to the North inevitably leads to a rise in aviation, further exacerbating the climate crisis (D'Souza et al., 2023). This intensifies the vulnerability of operators who themselves rely on Arctic imaginaries (Tervo-Kankare et al., 2018; Varnajot & Saarinen, 2022). Consequently, all stakeholders in the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions must take responsibility for mitigating the carbon emissions associated with travel. Given that tourism enterprises in the region are predominantly small, medium and even micro-sized (Rantala et al., 2019), it is also important to consider their ability to influence a carbon-dependent tourism system.

In recent years, tourism researchers and tourism practitioners have increasingly turned their attention to regenerative tourism. Rather than being solely a type of tourism, regenerative tourism represents a transformational approach that views tourism as a living system, inseparable from nature (Bellato et al., 2023). Tourism is understood "as a potential partner that cultivates reciprocal relationships rather than considering communities and places as a resource for tourism" (Bellato, 2024, p. 2). Although regenerative approaches are essential for addressing the root causes of the climate crisis (Becken & Coghlan, 2022), tourism research has so far had limited number of critical discussions that acknowledge the climate impact of tourism mobilities within the context of regenerative tourism (see Mathisen et al., 2022). In a globally connected tourism systems, focusing solely on the well-being of individual places can be problematic. Greater attention is required to understand what decarbonising travel entails in practice within regenerative futures. Hence, in this research note, I aim to examine how sustainability-oriented tourism enterprises located in Northern Finland perceive the connections between the climate crisis and regenerative tourism, and what opportunities they have to mitigate the climate impacts of travelling to (and within) destinations.

Methodology

To understand the relationship between regenerative tourism development and the climate crisis, interview data was analysed. The data consisted of 26 interviews with small- and micro-sized enterprises (SMiEs) located in Northern Finland. These enterprises were contacted due to their strong and holistic commitment to sustainability. This involved minimising negative impacts across all operations and even realising actions that have a positive impact beyond their own activities. Decisions to contact the enterprises were made based on researcher's prior knowledge of them, recommendation from other entrepreneurs, and/or enterprise's sustainability communications. A focus on sustainability-oriented enterprises allowed for the gathering of more critical perspectives within the tourism industry.

The interviewed participants were owners, managers, or employees in tourism enterprises with 0-10 full-time employees. The interviews were conducted in 2024, primarily online via Teams. The interviewees were asked to discuss the topics from the perspective of their enterprise. However, for solo and lifestyle entrepreneurs, personal views were more evident, and the work done under the enterprise often intertwined with their private life. The semi-structured interviews included questions related to place relations of the enterprise, sustainability understanding in the enterprise, and development of regenerative tourism. The data was analysed by extracting all mentions related to climate change and applying thematic coding to these extracts.

Results and discussion

Relationships with climate change

When asked about the biggest threats to the places they operate in, most enterprises identified climate change as a major concern. The interviewees linked the climate crisis to slow changes, such as changes in seasons, weather patterns, species distribution, and fell habitats, as well as increasing weather extremes. Particularly, the changing winter and snow conditions required flexibility in activities and stirred worry among the participants, which is common for operators in the European Arctic (Brouder & Lundmark, 2011; Tervo-Kankare et al., 2018). Some also noted that the worsening snow conditions in the Alps or the rise of 'coolcations' during summer were already bringing, or were expected to bring, more visitors to Northern Finland. Although this growth was seen as a business opportunity in some respects, it was also recognised as an indirect threat of climate change, potentially affecting the carrying capacity of places:

> So how much are people coming here now to seek that slightly cooler summer? [...] We've discussed this a lot in the region, about what this means. And, well, this is something we can't really directly control. So, we have to hope that the summer growth – which is now possible – will focus specifically on the existing buildings, structures, and facilities. (int. 8)

Issue of carbon-intensive travel

The impact of tourism on the climate crisis was widely recognized among the interviewees, with international air travel to the North being seen as the main culprit. The interviewees struggled with the contradiction that, despite their operations being highly sustainable at a local level, they were contributing to fossil fuel-dependent international travel. These feelings of cognitive dissonance were balanced, for example, by arguing that as small enterprises they could not influence the larger travel systems (denial of control), and by offering sustainable services, they could at least make the inevitable visit more responsible (downward comparison) (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014). While regenerative tourism was not considered as an excuse for the emissions, it could be seen as a strategy to alleviate the entrepreneurs' personal dissonance, as showcased by the following quotes:

> But I don't know if this has been some sort of self-deception, that through these regenerative tourism projects, I've managed to justify my existence in this field a bit better. Somehow, [...], I feel I'm at least contributing something to certain areas of development. So, I guess that's how I see it, since I'm still in this role. But to be honest, I don't know for how long. (int. 10)

> I don't know if anything really justifies those emissions, but at least I justify it to myself by thinking that all the positive things tourism brings might, in some way, provide a form of compensation. Especially in these remote areas, where there aren't many ways to make a living. (int. 21)

On the contrary, a few of the entrepreneurs were no longer able to justify their climate impact and were currently phasing out from tourism to other sources of livelihood. More critical viewpoints questioned whether a transition towards regenerative tourism was sufficient to address increasing carbon emissions from travel:

> I don't believe that the [regenerative] actions can be significant enough [to justify the issues of tourism], especially when thinking about something like climate change. If we're constantly creating negative impacts on a large scale, how substantial would our efforts need to be to offset that? I honestly don't quite see it at the moment. Of course, it's possible that solution for climate change will be found, like perhaps electric aviation or something else. What that might be, I don't know. But right now, it seems that even regenerative actions don't justify us turning a blind eye to what we're otherwise doing or what else is happening. (int. 24)

Bottom-up pathways to decarbonize travel

Although the interviewees felt mostly powerless to affect the current fossil fuel-dependent tourism system, data revealed multiple strategies that the enterprises were employing to impact the climate burden originating from their customers' travel to the North. The measures mentioned were related to their own services, creating or maintaining carbon storage locally, and encouraging a mindset change. In the minds of interviewees, these actions were not linked solely to climate but to broader sustainability. However, as the quotes show, the enterprises are still facing challenges or questioning the effectiveness of some of the actions:

> Well, with some, we've managed to extend their length of stay. Of course, that doesn't really reduce the number of flights. (int. 18)

> We help draw attention to how, for example, climate change is visible and affects our region. But as far as I understand, research shows that it's quite ineffective— information doesn't necessarily influence people's actions. But at least it's been communicated. (int. 7)

Multiple participants recognised that potential tourism growth should be directed towards slow travel or proximity tourism. At the moment, tourist arrivals in Northern Finland mostly depend on air travel, and thus increasing flights would also benefit the enterprises economically. As mentioned by few entrepreneurs, serious efforts towards slow travel would require changes to current busy lifestyles (Dickinson & Peeters, 2014) and fossil fuel subsidies (Gössling et al., 2023). This dependency on long-distance travellers has been also identified by Mathisen et al. (2022) as a major challenge for regenerative tourism in rural areas.

Despite positive attitudes towards proximity tourism, the interviewees were sceptical about its prospects. The reasons for this included small local markets (Mathisen et al., 2022), lower spending by domestic visitors (Jeuring, 2018), and the assumed lack of attractiveness of the services. Therefore, regenerative approaches to tourism should incorporate a shift in thinking to value the proximate. At the enterprise level, this can mean creating spaces and services that also serve the locals and are meaningful to them (Everingham & Francis-Coan, 2023).

Conclusions

I started this research note by arguing that current discussions on regenerative tourism do not adequately consider climate impact of tourism mobilities. To address this gap, a set of interview data from tourism enterprises was analysed. The interviewed SMiEs recognised both the vulnerability of

their enterprise and the socio-ecological environments they operate in, as well as the connections between the two. This may explain the feelings of cognitive dissonance, which were overcome by engaging in sustainable and regenerative tourism. Despite feeling stuck in a fossil fuel-dependent tourism system, enterprises had found ways to mitigate climate impact of travel within their own sphere of influence.

Although this paper has focused on bottom-up approaches to decarbonise tourism, deeper leverage points for transformation are also required (Fischer & Riechers, 2019). Identifying system level solutions to mitigate the climate impacts of tourism and ensuring climate justice should be part of future research and development of regenerative tourism. This could include transitions towards slow and proximity tourism. Although some of the study participants represented a more sceptical approach to the sustainability of current tourism trajectories, both the industry and academia remain optimistic about the prospects of regenerative tourism (e.g., Atladóttir et al., 2023). The results of this study indicate that we must be cautious not to let growing interest in regenerative tourism to justify the growth of carbon-intensive travel. Instead, regenerative tourism should incorporate ideas of degrowth (Nieuwland, 2024) to ensure that definitions and conceptualisations of regenerative tourism initiatives remain within planetary boundaries (Bellato et al., 2023).

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