

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a woven basket filled with fresh vegetables, including red onions, a green zucchini, and leafy greens. The person is wearing a dark, patterned shirt. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with green foliage.

From Sustainable to Regenerative

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Wellness tourism is all about holistic wellbeing. But an individual's pursuit of wellness should not come at the planet's peril. As the tourism industry moves toward a more inclusive and sustainable future with the 2030 sustainable development goals in sight, wellness tourism companies face even greater scrutiny.

For the past 10 years, there has been a concerted effort to consider the triple bottom line—environmental, social and economic impact—in terms of sustainability. Zero plastics and waste policies, certified design and construction standards, energy and water efficiency have been widely implemented across hotels and destinations. But those policies, at best, are net neutral, with sustainability being about doing no harm.



Beyond Sustainable

That's why sustainability is no longer enough. According to James Thornton, CEO of Intrepid Travel, "Sustainable travel is our aspiration, but not our reality. By definition, at the current rate of global emissions, the industry cannot be 'sustained' without irreversible damage to the planet." That's where the concept of regenerative travel comes in.

Regenerative travel builds on sustainability principles and takes things a step further. While a sustainable model looks to stop biodiversity loss and prevent negative social impacts, a regenerative approach to travel actively improves the health of degraded ecosystems, increases community wellbeing and promotes regional financial growth.

According to Amanda Ho, co-founder and CEO of Regenerative Travel, "Sustainability is more of a quantitative approach, measuring things like water usage, energy efficiency and the like, while a regenerative approach is more qualitative. It's a more holistic approach—everything that is done restores the community and the environment."

Regenerative Travel

"When you think about it, regenerative travel is wellness travel," says Ho. "It's about reconnecting and reexamining values, learning and giving back." So, if a wellness tourism business truly wants to walk the wellness walk, "tourism organizations will have to have a mindset shift in terms of operating their businesses and dealing with their customers."

Whether it's called sustainable or regenerative, a large part of what makes it so is when local culture, knowledge, social relationships, and natural resources are strengthened rather than undermined by tourist traffic.

For example, the highly acclaimed Fogo Island Inn was built from the ground up with the community in mind. The property is filled with locally made furnishing and accessories, leveraging traditional skills like woodworking, quilting and knitting. In this way, it provided opportunities for younger generations to carry on traditional practices while also creating jobs for the community.



Future Proofing with Regenerative Principles

Beyond buying and employing locally, Thornton suggests wellness tourism organizations should develop plans like providing a living wage, using a responsibly sourced supply chain, and making efforts toward gender equality. For example, in Sri Lanka, Intrepid Travel has partnered with an Australian development fund to boost female participation in tourism. The partnership aims to build capacity for female suppliers to become more market ready and create a pipeline for employment as trip leaders.

In Malaysia, the Datai Langkawi provides a model for wellness resorts to follow. In 2019, it developed a pledge to adopt a holistic approach, considering the needs of stakeholders, the environment, and evolution. Over the years, the pledge has laid the groundwork for carbon neutrality and introduced initiatives for wildlife and climate mitigation. Zero waste and upcycling strategies include training community members, including single mothers, to create products made out of materials recycled from the resort.

Funding regeneration is another way the industry can walk the talk. Every Six Senses property funds sustainable causes, earmarking

money for local environmental and community projects. It also encourages guests to donate. But Six Senses also has a goal of instilling sustainable values in its guests. CEO Neil Jacobs has been quoted as saying, **“So much about wellness and regeneration goes hand in hand. The question is how to articulate it in a hotel stay. I think we can influence how people live their lives through our programming.”**

Ho agrees. One of the easiest ways to start the regenerative journey is by selling experiences that provide for moments of transformative thinking on and off site, suggest Ho. **“Creating the space for engagement, interaction, and understanding for travelers to learn and experience the vibrancy of a place is an important first step in inspiring a transformative shift,”** Ho said.

Six Senses experiences include everything from zero-waste candle making workshops at their on-site Earth Labs to watching turtles hatch to supporting local women’s cooperatives.

“If you can do good work on even just one issue, that’s what’s important,” says Ho. **“That is the beginning of regeneration.”**

