

VISITOR ECONOMY IN PRACTICE

Opportunities
for local communities to boost
regenerative and transformative
tourism services within the visitor
economy framework

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Budapest-Vienna, 2025

Benchmark Study

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**Interreg
Danube Region**



Co-funded by
the European Union


People Powered Tourism



This paper was supported as part of People Powered Tourism, an Interreg Danube Region Programme project co-funded by the European Union.

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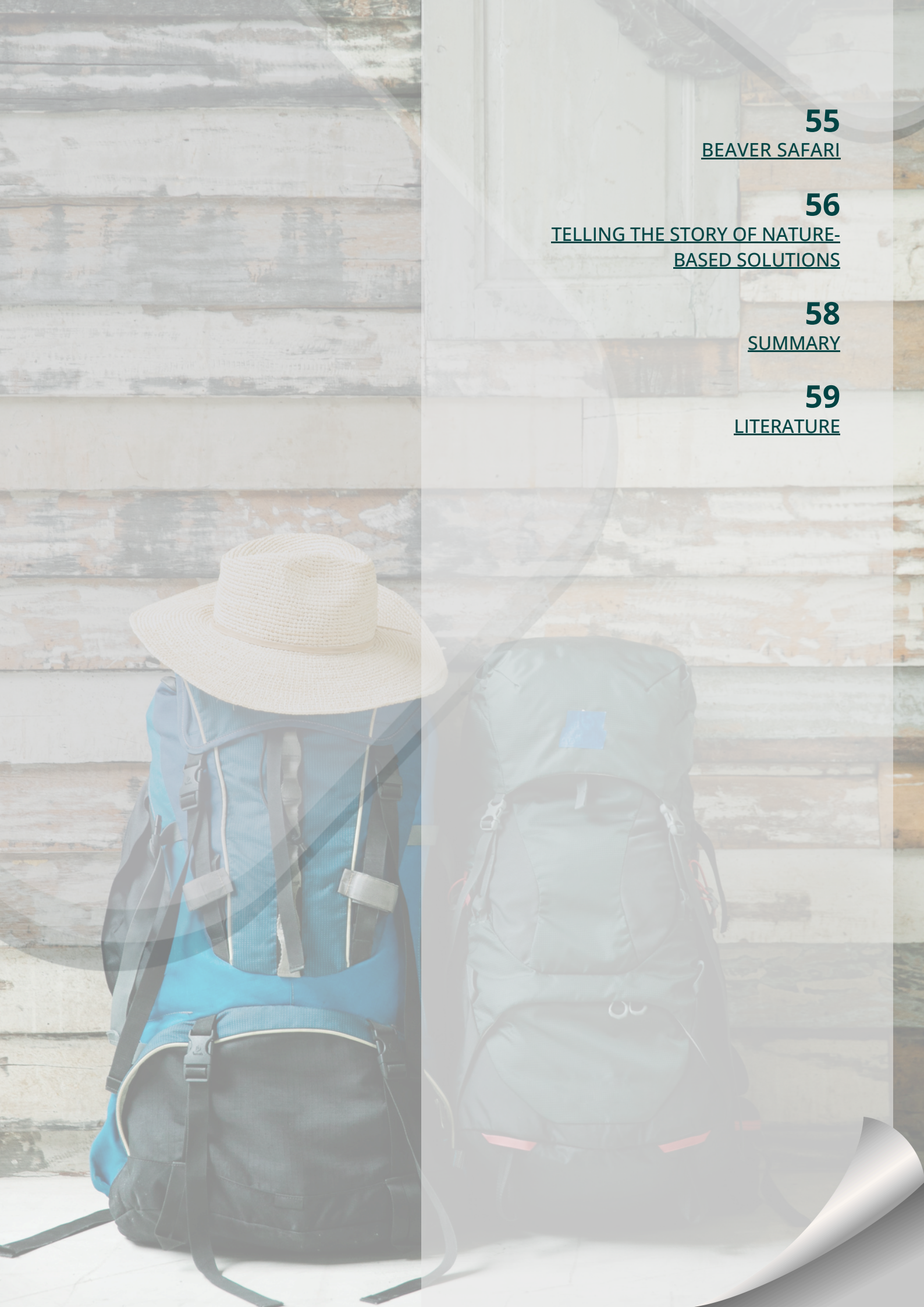
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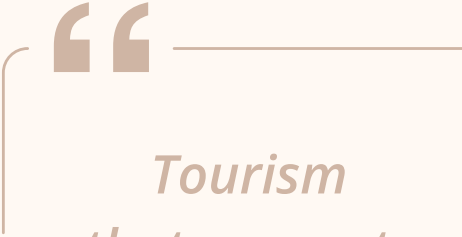
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FOREWORD

Across the Danube Region, 14 project partners from 10 countries are joining forces to put people at the centre of tourism. With the support of 12 Associated Partners, we're rethinking how tourism can work for communities, not just for visitors.

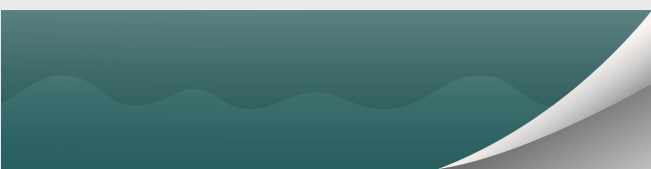
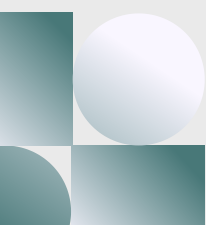


*Tourism
that connects*

The main goal of the People Powered Tourism project is to empower local communities — including marginalised groups — in under-visited urban neighbourhoods and remote rural areas to valorise unexploited cultural and natural assets. Through social innovation, local communities at each partner location (1. Szeged, 2. Dubrovnik, 3. Slavonski Brod, 4. Sarajevo, 5. Brasov, 6. Timișoara, 7. Sombor, 8. Vratsa, 9. Kotor, 10. Maribor, 11. Chișinău, 12. Zakarpattia and 13. Kőspallag) will co-design sustainable, experience-based and transformative tourism products and services that support the growth of a locally driven visitor economy and create tangible socio-economic benefits. The best ideas will be tested as pilots, while all feasible ideas will be worked out and published in business portfolios. Based on this experience, responsible partners will work out the project outputs: 1. a Toolbox of practical tools to support communities in designing tourism services with real local value; 2. a Guidebook for developing sustainable, regenerative tourism services; 3. the

Danube Visitor Economy Platform – an online hub for tourism providers, policymakers and innovators to exchange knowledge and access best practices; and 4. Visitor Economy Roadmaps – 10 co-created action plans to guide local tourism transformation based on the principles of the visitor economy.

The main goal of this Benchmark Study is to provide a pool of inspirational knowledge from Europe and worldwide that partners can constantly use during the lifetime of the project, from the preparation of capacity-building actions to the fine-tuning of pilot projects and development of business portfolios. So, this is not a manual, nor a scientific piece of work, but a source of inspiration that explains and concentrates on the complex nature of the topic. It highlights the most important trends, but for full understanding, the readers, including the trainers and organisers of the local capacity building events, must open and study the case studies linked in the document.





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Balázs Kovács is an international tourism strategist and sustainability expert with over 20 years of experience across government, academia, and private consultancy. As managing partner of the Vienna-based GD Consulting, he supports destinations and institutions in the fields of strategic and sustainable tourism development, branding, and EU-funded projects. He is a member of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council and an EU Climate Pact Ambassador. A respected lecturer and speaker on responsible tourism, he is also active as a “new tourism” podcaster and professional blogger. His work bridges policy, practice, and communication to drive meaningful, positive change in the tourism sector. His motto: more fun with less stuff.

AUTHORS

Ferenc Albert Szigeti

Geographer and urbanist by profession, ecologist and journalist by heart. Since 2009, he has been managing, developing and facilitating knowledge transfer projects across Europe in the field of urban regeneration, environmental protection, nature-based solutions, climate adaptation, cultural heritage and social innovation.



Ferenc's main reference is the URBACT Programme focusing on integrated urban development, where he designed 11 successful networks, while he was the Lead Expert of the "CHANGE! – social design of public services", the "Come in! – Talking Houses / Shared Stories" and the "BiodiverCity: community-based approaches to foster urban biodiversity and nature-based solutions" networks. As the key expert and managing director of BURST (Bright URban Solutions Team - a team of senior experts from the Netherlands, Hungary and Slovenia), he carried out thematic expert tasks related to nature-based solutions, environmental protection, nature conservation, urban biodiversity, climate adaptation, urban green infrastructure and social innovation. As a journalist focusing on solution journalism, Ferenc is also committed to spreading knowledge related to the above fields, including ecology and mountaineering as well. This led him to found TeAM HUb – the Hungarian Nature-based Solutions Hub, to share knowledge and nudge people and communities towards a more sustainable and fair future.



INTRODUCTION

Due to our impact on the planet, we face never-before-seen ecological and societal challenges, and these pose huge tasks and responsibilities for the growing tourism industry as well. Following the fundamental economic, security, and pandemic turmoil between 2008 and 2020, international tourism is regaining its ground. Overtourism hits the most frequented urban destinations again, and the environmental footprint of the sector is drastically growing. Following the Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action (2021), COP28 in 2023 clearly stated that sustainable tourism is an urgent necessity. The required transformation of the industry will include decarbonization, increasing the sector's capacity to enact concrete climate action, connecting to the renewable energy revolution, establishing stronger infrastructure, and smarter planning, as well as reacting to current trends in other thematic fields, such as farm-to-fork strategies and the boom in agroecology.

“

*When tourism is
not only about
seeing the world
anymore, but
saving it too*

However, the question remains the same: does sustainable tourism truly exist?

A lot of different approaches have been developed in the last years to support the industry in better meeting this evergreen challenge. In line with the broader theory of ecotourism and sustainable tourism, the concept of the “visitor economy”, or as some refer to it, “new tourism”, the well-being and satisfaction of both visitors, locals and other stakeholders have been put in the spotlight. New tourism needs new narratives. Not only are experiences to be sold, but the stories linked to those local experiences can motivate, inspire and educate visitors and locals. The question is no longer what cities, villages and other destinations can do for tourism, but what tourism can do for them. This approach places active humans in the centre and intends to reestablish trust with local people since tourism too often has become a negative issue in too many places, either because of exaggerated interest in trendy, overcrowded areas, or because of the cultural differences between visitors and dwellers. Instead of the number of nights, new tourism intends to measure, for example, the satisfaction of locals in connection with the tourist infrastructure and services, the volume of local companies having an environmental certification, the number of tourists arriving with sustain-

able transport means, or the local added value of the visitor economy.

The rise of the concept of the visitor economy is parallel to many new trends of ecotourism (travelling environmentally and socially responsibly). Among them, “regenerative tourism” is a key and emerging concept, which is very relevant for the People Powered Tourism network: a tourism practice that seeks to leave destinations in a better ecological state than they were found and which directly aims at nature conservation and community empowerment.





GLOSSARY

As there is a whole range of – often overlapping – definitions around sustainable tourism and new forms of ecotourism, first, let's have a clear picture among them to better understand the need for a paradigm shift in the tourism industry.

▲ **Sustainable tourism:** *“tourism that fully considers its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, while addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities.”* (Global Sustainable Tourism Council).

“
It is a good feeling to do something good, and this is the ultimate goal of tourism development nowadays

▲ **Visitor economy:** The visitor economy is about creating “quality experience spaces”, where both visitors and residents feel satisfied. Through new experiences, the goal is to inspire and educate visitors and locals at the same time and create public value. To create new “quality experience spaces”, new narratives are needed: the visitor economy, by nature, shares the values of sustainable tourism and dispersing guests and benefits, helping visitors discover new destinations, and gener-

ating new revenues for families, businesses and communities that have not previously benefited from tourism. A visitor economy strategy is based on new metrics (e.g. satisfaction of residents with tourism) and “coopetition” (cooperation with competitors as well).

▲ **Ecotourism:** *“Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education”* (The International Ecotourism Society). Education is meant to be inclusive of both staff and guests.

Main characteristics of ecotourism:

- ✦ Minimise physical, social, behavioural, and psychological impacts.
- ✦ Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.
- ✦ Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts.
- ✦ Provide direct financial benefits for conservation.
- ✦ Generate financial benefits for both local people and private industry.
- ✦ Deliver memorable interpretative experiences to visitors that help raise sensitivity to host countries’ political, environmental, and social climates.
- ✦ Design, construct and operate low-impact facilities.
- ✦ Recognise the rights and spiritual beliefs of the indigenous people (or local communities) and work in partnership with them to create empowerment.

▲ **Experience tourism:** having a once-in-a-lifetime experience or gaining an emotional connection with cultures and nature. In general, many different studies confirm that the majority of millennials prefer spending more money on unique experiences rather than on material things.

▲ **Transformative Travel:** aims at making a difference in both the lives of visitors and hosts. According to the *‘Transtourism – Theoretical and methodological foundations’* study made by the Institute for Tourism, *“multiple authors explore the issues of how travel and tourism can change human behaviour and have a positive impact on the world. Investigating various types of tourism such as educational, volunteer, survival, community-based, eco, farm, extreme, religious, spiritual, wellness, and mission tourism, (...) these specific forms of travel as well as hosting provide conditions that foster the process of transformation.”* According to booking.com, 68% of global travellers would consider participating in cultural exchanges to learn a new skill, followed by a volunteering trip with 54%.

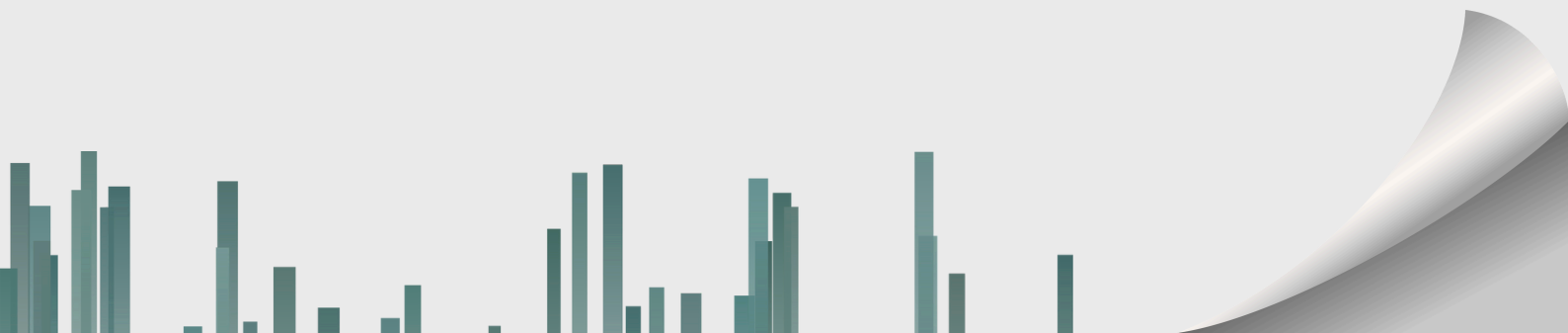
▲ **Regenerative Travel:** some say that it is just a buzzword. According to the [Global Sustainable Tourism Council](#), for example, sustainable tourism also focuses on increasing positive impacts alongside reducing negative ones, so sustainable tourism covers all the features of regenerative tourism. [Others](#) say that regenerative travel is the next step in our sustainable travel journey, because it is nature-positive and does not aim only to lessen the impact of tourism. By drawing inspiration from regenerative agriculture, which emphasises restoring ecosystems and enhancing biodiversity, regenerative tourism is travel that enables the area or environment to grow or grow again, a practice that seeks to leave destinations in a better state than they were found.

▲ **Overtourism:** this expression gained so much attention in the last years that even the Cambridge Dictionary has a related [article](#). According to it, overtourism *"is a situation when too many people visit a place on holiday, so that the place is spoiled and life is made difficult for the people who live there"*. Among People Powered Tourism partner countries, Bled, Bucharest, Budapest, Dubrovnik, Kotor, Plitvice Lakes National Park and the Sunny Beach of Bulgaria are victims of overtourism according to the [World Overtourism Map](#).

▲ **Undertourism:** a new phenomenon is developing as a response to overtourism, putting new stories and areas on the map. As [National Geographic](#) describes, *"Undertourism is the increasingly common marketing tactic being used by less-frequented destinations"*.

▲ **Nature Tourism** can be defined as the number of outdoor activities performed by tourists in the natural environment. Some of these activities have a high ecological footprint (e.g. adventure activities, safaris, hunting), but some of them increasingly aim at having a positive impact on ecosystems and local society, as well as target smaller carbon footprints. These are the same features as we mentioned in connection with regenerative tourism: helping nature heal, exploring local wildlife and natural resources and getting involved in local habitat restoration and landscaping projects, highlighting the benefits of biodiversity. This results in positive, optimistic spirits and tourists feel they are responsible for protecting their home country's nature and have the same feelings, which strengthens their relationship with it.

▲ **Nature-based tourism** is a part of regenerative travel. It aims at exploring nature-based solutions, including voluntary work. It presents an economic, livelihood, climate-positive, and non-formal method in promoting the multi-use and benefits of nature.



▲ **Nature-based Solutions** are actions to protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural and modified ecosystems that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, simultaneously benefiting people and nature (International Union for the Conservation of Nature).

▲ **Social innovation** is the development and implementation of new ideas (products, services and models) to meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. Social innovation is not linked to tourism per se, but the concept of visitor economy and social innovation can mutually reinforce each other.

▲ **The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)** is an independent and neutral organisation that represents a diverse and global membership, including national and provincial governments, leading travel companies, hotels, tour operators, NGO's, individuals and communities – all striving to achieve best practices in sustainable tourism. The GSTC establishes and manages global standards for sustainable travel and tourism, known as the GSTC Standards. The GSTC Standards form the foundation for Accreditation for Certification Bodies that certify hotels/accommodations, tour operators/transport providers, and destinations as having sustainable policies and practices in place.

▲ **Barcelona Declaration of Tourism and Cultural Heritage** is a statement promoting collaboration between the tourism and cultural heritage sectors for the benefit of European citizens, heritage sites, and businesses. The Barcelona Declaration “Better Places to Live, Better Places to Visit” seeks to demonstrate what tourism and cultural heritage sectors can achieve by working more closely together, for the benefit of European citizens and cultural heritage as well as businesses, visitors and destinations. Moreover, it assumes the collective commitment of both sectors towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

▲ **Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism** is a commitment by the tourism sector to accelerate climate action and achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. Launched at COP26 in Glasgow, the Declaration encourages stakeholders to align their climate ambitions with scientific recommendations and international agreements.



 **Global Destination Sustainability Index (GDS-Index) and the GDS movement.** With the mission to empower people with the mindsets, skill sets, and toolsets to create regenerative destinations to visit, meet, and live in, the GDS-Movement evolved from the Global Destination Sustainability Index (GDS-Index), one of the world's most-trusted performance improvement programmes to assess and accelerate the progress of a destination's regenerative journey. The index measures, benchmarks, and enhances the sustainability strategies, action plans, and initiatives of destination management organisations, municipal authorities, and their tourism supply chains globally. It originated from the Scandinavian Destination Sustainability Index, created by 15 cities and co-founded in 2016. The GDS-Index offers an unparalleled resource for visitors and event planners looking for destinations that offer the best in sustainable performance and for indicators of sustainable tourism development.



THE CONCEPT OF VISITOR ECONOMY EXPLAINED

We are witnessing the transition of the well-known "old" world of tourism to the world of "new tourism" or "visitor economy", centred around the so-called "quality experience spaces", where both the visitors, the residents and the service providers are satisfied and educated.

The issue is that the old world of tourism has put too much focus on the tourists, who therefore simply over-dominated the entire tourism ecosystem, while the host environment has become nothing else than the "servants" of tourists. Whereas in the past, the aim of tourism professionals was to satisfy the needs of tourists as much as possible, today the visitor management process is increasingly integrating the needs of locals as well. Through these new quality experience spaces, the goal is to inspire and educate visitors and locals at the same time and create public value. To create new quality experience spaces, new narra-

tives are needed: the visitor economy, by nature, shares the values of sustainable tourism and dispersing guests and benefits, helping visitors discover new destinations, and generating new revenues for families, businesses and communities that have not previously benefited from tourism. So, the concept places greater emphasis on visitor management by optimising and managing the flow of guests and visitors. At this point, it meets the concept of undertourism. A visitor economy strategy is always based on new metrics and strong networking among players that cooperate along long-term sustainability rather than short-term benefits. Countries and cities with well-developed tourism institutions and strong planning traditions have in recent years begun to refine their tourism economies to apply the visitor economy approach, which is centred around the following four principles:



When the visitor does something good for the destination while getting unique experiences and rewards

- ▶ **Quality Experience Spaces:** while organising unique experiences and educational opportunities for visitors as well as locals, the question is no longer what the city and other destinations can do for tourists, but how tourists can contribute to improving the quality of life of local communities.
- ▶ This needs completely **new narratives** to be told by new actors: a key part of the experience is the replacement of impersonal visits by iterations based on real human interactions between the visitor and the person in the place, managed by “encounter moderators”, formerly known as guides.
- ▶ **New metrics** are also needed for this paradigm change. The new approach puts people in the centre. It aims at measuring the success of tourism at the satisfaction of all actors: locals, visitors and the service providers. Vienna has launched, for instance, the tourism acceptance indicator: a regular representative survey among locals about their satisfaction with tourism.
- ▶ **Coopetition (networking):** the visitor economy concept fosters strong networking to reach long-term sustainability rather than short-term benefits. The globally unique Vienna Tourism Card, for example, consists of only services with approved green certificates.

The Visitor Economy concept is pretty much in line with innovation theories. Cities are often frontrunners of innovations, and in line with this, destination management organisations are “conductors” of innovative thinking and approaches, enabling the tourism industry to become a lab of urban innovation.

Let's see some concrete examples!





“
*Copenhagen
attractions reward
thoughtful actions*

COPENPAY AND THE GREENKAYAK

One of the best-known city-wide examples of the new concept is the CopenPay system in Copenhagen. Copenhagen, one of the most liveable cities, which is also famous for its effort to make the city carbon neutral, recognises that tourists can contribute to the beautification, cleanliness and sustainability of the city by encouraging them to do so. In this spirit, a system has been developed whereby if a visitor is willing to volunteer for the city or its inhabitants, they are rewarded with small tokens to be used at attractions.

Visitors can be rewarded by Copenhagen attractions such as a free lunch, a free boat tour, free bike rental, excursions or museum discounts. All tourists need to do is, for instance, bike

instead of driving, help maintain the city, work in an urban garden or take the train to Copenhagen instead of flying, and stay longer at the destination.

If you book, for example, a 4-night stay, you are entitled to a day's free bike hire at some hotels. If you help to clean up the city or take care of a city garden, you can get discounts at museums, free lunch at some restaurants, a free boat trip, excursions or free bike hire for a limited period. There are some promotions that are announced at specific hours of the day, e.g. 30-60 minutes of litter picking on the city streets or at the harbour is rewarded with a 50% lunch discount at two prestigious hotels.

There is a wide range of opportunities for everyone to find the discounts and incentives that interest them and contribute to the sustainability of Copenhagen. You can find all the great CopenPay offerings on its [website](#).

One of the flagships behind CopenPay is the [GreenKayak](#) initiative, established in 2017 by an environmental NGO (it is now operational in several countries: Sweden, Germany, Finland and Norway). The NGO simply involves visitors as volunteers in the fight against pollution while kayaking. The green kayak service makes the kayaking experience free for those who are willing to collect litter in the water during paddling and share the experience on social media using the hashtag #GreenKayak. Since 2017, tens of thousands of people have paddled in sturdy, double-decked GreenKayaks in

the harbours, rivers and lakes of five European countries, collecting more than 100 tonnes of litter. As a result of green kayaking, people are becoming more careful about how they handle plastics and other waste in their daily lives, while local harbours become cleaner.

The initiative is a great and very effective way for residents and visitors to act locally, connect themselves and others to water, and start a dialogue about what we all need to do to combat plastic pollution in our environment. As well as contributing to the development of the local environment, the initiative is an excellent example of involving visitors in the development of responsible behaviour towards the area they visit, and it is also an excellent opportunity to participate in a unique sightseeing programme.



Spittelberg - © WienTourismus/Gregor Hofbauer



When the visitor economy boosts urban development

HEARTBEAT STREETS VIENNA

One of Vienna's pioneering solutions to overcrowding at central tourist hotspots is to include the outer districts and widen the spatial scope of visitor traffic. The 'Heartbeat Streets Vienna' campaign involves different districts off the beaten tourist track in visitor traffic, where tourists can interact with local people, experiencing their daily lives. Each district has its own architecture, charm, trendy shops and unique character.

The areas within the city are designed to attract and engage specific target groups. Alternative routes can appeal to

some special interest visitors and provide a lasting experience for visitors and locals alike. This experience can be even boosted by pop-up hotel rooms in vacant shops, from where visitors can enjoy street life, but thanks to the special window mirror, they can keep their privacy. This is a clear win-win-win situation: the visitor might get unique experiences, and at the same time, they contribute to urban development through increasing the purchasing power of less frequented neighbourhoods. A similar concept also exists in Copenhagen.



© Vollpension Wien

!!!
*When social
innovation boosts
the visitor economy*

CAFÉ OF GENERATIONS

Another excellent example in Vienna is the launch of the "Café of Generations" ([Vollpension](#)). Running for more than 10 years, the basic idea was to provide lonely or disadvantaged elderly people with a means of earning money so that they could live their daily lives as active, integral and valued members of society. To do this, they set up the Café of Generations, which has developed over the years into a social enterprise. In the first case, a grandmother's community living room was set up to welcome and cater for both young and old. Anyone who wants "grandma's delicious cake" can get it there. Seniors have been signing up to work there, and the business has become increasingly suc-

cessful, with a second location opening in 2019.

This project has not been a short-term economic gain but has brought long-term income supplementation for several elderly people and satisfaction for residents and, thanks to its reputation, now also for visitors, since the initiative attracts lots of tourists as well and fits very well with the tourism development goals of the city. The sites nowadays serve not only as places to eat and drink, but also as learning workshops and meeting points for young and old, where the elderly teach the young to bake and discuss current social issues.



© Austria Guides For Future



*What if urban
climate actions
become tourist
attractions?*

THE CASE OF AUSTRIA GUIDES FOR FUTURE

Although it has just lost the first place as the world's most liveable city (having this prestigious label in the previous three years consecutively), Vienna has also been among the most sustainable cities on our planet. The Austria Guides For Future was born behind the local branch of the global Fridays For Future movement. This start-up supports the movement and its goals at the regional, national and global levels. Austria Guides For Future offers several thematic walks related to climate action,

environmental protection, sustainability and culture in Vienna. Away from mass tourism, they help explore everything that makes Vienna greener, cooler and livelier: the green facades as well as the colourful street art walls, the cool streets and the solar roofs on historic houses, and the community gardens in the densely built-up urban area.

Good practices behind the visitor economy concept



FROM NEIGHBOURHOOD GUIDES TO POLITICAL TAXI TOURS

In the case of Vienna or Copenhagen, the municipality consciously transforms its tourism industry along the principles of the visitor economy and the goals set in tourism strategies. But there are many other great examples across Europe combining social innovation with tourism, and where perhaps a comprehensive strategy does not specifically support this, but unique initiatives exist.

In the frame of Belfast's Political Taxi Tours, for example, visitors can visit both sides of the Peace Line with the men and women who have served time in the prisons of Northern Ireland for standing up for their beliefs. Ex-combatants who are either ex-prisoners or ex-soldiers from both sides share their own personal stories and the effects on their communities and explain the murals that tell the local history and culture of the area.

Visiteering (a combination of volunteering and visiting) is an emerging trend to build engagement at heritage sites. The National Trust (UK), for example, has recognised that societal changes are affecting people's ability and willingness to volunteer. It has therefore developed



There are many more examples across Europe...

a more flexible volunteering offer, including one-day visiteering. It is about micro-volunteering, making it easier for people with limited availability to participate and make a difference. National Trust properties, like Croft Castle, identify bite-sized, drop-in volunteering opportunities for visitors. These are likely to be fairly informal, with no commitment to repeat, and often involving short and specific actions that are quick to start and complete. It also allows the Trust to target the demographics missing from its volunteer base, like, for example, parents of young children whose free time is often limited or tourists. By giving these new audiences an insight into the work of the castle team, allowing them to see behind the scenes and participate in vital conservation work, the Trust can build vital public engagement.

A great example of dispersing guests and helping visitors discover new destinations and stories is the Street Art Tours of Zaspá with [Local Guides](#). Zaspá district of Gdansk is a typical prefabricated housing estate built during Socialism, but Zaspá in the previous decades became the largest open-air art gallery in Europe by transforming great grey block walls into canvas for muralists. Within a dozen or so years, one of the world's largest mural collections was created here. And Zaspá is best visited with the Local Guides. All walks are free, and by using a guidebook, it is also possible to visit Zaspá alone (the guidebook with the map can be obtained free of charge at the Institute of Urban Culture).



© Boutiquehotel Stadthalle

THE VISITOR ECONOMY CONCEPT ALSO APPLIES TO HOTELS

Hundreds of hotels are searching for ways to minimise their ecological footprint, but in a city like Vienna, which makes sustainability a core organising principle within urban development, there are even frontrunner hotels in this field. Boutiquehotel Stadthalle is the first city hotel with a zero-energy balance in Austria. By using photovoltaics and solar energy, and by doing without energy-guzzling appliances, the

hotel is now able to produce as much energy per year as it consumes.

The green mindset is basically an attraction in the hotel: they have turned their idyllic courtyard into a peaceful green oasis. Their lavender roof is not only for guests enjoying the view or a glass of wine, but also for pollinators, who reward the hotel with their best honey that visitors can even taste as part of their delicious organic breakfast. In addition, hotel rooms are dedicated to Sustainable Development Goals and most rooms are furnished with stuff collected from the flea market and upcycled during regular workshops organised by the hotel. This is facilitation of the green mindset of both



*When the green
mindset becomes
an attraction in a
unique hotel*

visitors and employees, which is so important in this high-class hotel that even used clothes of employees can be re-used in the hotel as cover of furniture, for example, prepared during an upcycling workshop. What's more, environmental awareness pays off at Boutiquehotel Stadthalle: they use a green bonus. Guests arriving by train or

by bicycle receive a 10% discount on the price of their room. In Boutiquehotel Stadthalle everyone is involved in the storytelling of the new concept: doing something good is a good feeling and the goal of tourism development.

NATURE-POSITIVE TRAVEL: THE REGENERATIVE TOURISM

Regenerative tourism is often described as a practice that seeks to leave settlements or destinations in a better state than they were found before travelling there. It draws inspiration from regenerative agriculture, which emphasises restoring ecosystems and enhancing biodiversity.

According to the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), there are key misconceptions relating to regenerative tourism. Proponents claim that regenerative tourism goes beyond merely minimising harm, asserting that it actively improves local ecosystems and communities. However, this assertion is misleading according to GSTC, which has long emphasised that sustainable tourism also focuses on increasing positive impacts alongside reducing negative ones, as outlined in the GSTC Standards (known previously

“When tourism directly aims to restore destinations and biodiversity

as GSTC Criteria), serving as the global standards for sustainability in travel and tourism. The Standards are used for education and awareness-raising, policymaking for businesses and government agencies and other organisation types, measurement and evaluation, and as a basis for certification.

Sustainability in tourism is arranged in four pillars:

-  Sustainable management
-  Socioeconomic impacts
-  Cultural impacts
-  Environmental impacts (including consumption of resources, reducing pollution, and conserving biodiversity and landscapes)

The GSTC Standards have been built on decades of prior work and experience around the world, and they consider the numerous guidelines and standards for sustainable tourism from every continent.

Others say that regenerative tourism is more than sustainable tourism, and nine key aspects have been identified in which these two concepts differ. Let's see the most important ones:

-  **Paradigm:** according to sustainable tourism, tourism is an industry, while propagators of regenerative tourism say that tourism is a living system that coexists with the regenerative paradigm.
-  **Purpose:** sustainable tourism intends to minimise the social and environmental impact of tourism while pursuing economic growth, regenerative tourism intends to enable communities and ecosystems to evolve, renew, and restore.
-  **Approach:** sustainable tourism seeks ways to lessen the impact of tourism on ecosystems and communities; regenerative tourism aligns with nature and achieves harmony in economic, social, cultural, spiritual, and ecological development.

The most important difference, however, is that regenerative tourism directly aims to restore, regenerate and rejuvenate destinations, benefiting both ecosystems and local communities. The number of eco-minded travellers is significantly growing, and besides their everyday life, they are willing to do something good while they are on holiday. Regenerative tourism emphasises the interdependence between travellers and destinations, where tourism activities contribute positively to the environment and society. Regenerative tourism redefines the travel experience by putting restoration, community and sustainability at the forefront, and obviously, long-term sustainability is more important for regenerative tourism businesses than profit maximising. Four principles guide this approach:

-  **Ecological restoration:** travel activities actively contribute to restoring ecosystems and habitats, enhancing biodiversity and environmental resilience.
-  **Community engagement:** local communities play a central role in the decision-making process, ensuring that tourism supports their needs while protecting cultural heritage.
-  **Economic inclusiveness:** by supporting local businesses and reducing economic leakage, regenerative tourism creates resilient economies that directly benefit residents.
-  **Holistic impact assessment:** environmental, social and economic impacts are carefully assessed to maximise the positive contribution of tourism.

INCREASED DIRECT IMPACT ON LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND THE ENVIRONMENT ORCHESTRATED BY THE DESTINATION MANAGEMENT

One of the best-known examples of Regenerative Tourism is Grootbos Private Nature Reserve in South Africa. The Nature Reserve is home to 765 plant species, 100 of which are endangered. It started as a self-catering facility in the 90s and now offers guests exquisite 5-star accommodation offerings. It is not only nature to be experienced, but conservation efforts, education and community empowerment as well. As a result, they had more

nature-based experiences to offer to travellers than before. The Grootbos Foundation, formed in 2003, is a true example of how a tourism product can make a difference to both guests and visitors alike. They helped establish community-owned enterprises, protected endangered plant species, restored ecosystems, and created multiple education programs. The cornerstones of the model are:

 A key pillar of the foundation is its Green Futures project, which, among other things, offers Horticulture and Life Skills College, established in 2003. Since its inception, 118 young people have graduated, and 90% of graduates have found employment.

 The foundation also manages a successful project to combat invasive alien species, employing 61 previously unemployed people from the surrounding community.

 The Siyakhula Organic Farm, which was established in 2009, now employs a full-time staff of six and runs as a commercial enterprise to make an income for foundation projects and provide fresh food for the hotel.



© Grootbos Foundation

 The foundation runs a successful football academy which provides the youth in surrounding communities with access to facilities, life skills training, HIV education, female empowerment and more.

 Guests are often seen immersing themselves into the local culture by joining the youth for a game of football or assisting in clearing invasive vegetation or getting their hands dirty on the organic farm.

Forest Friends, a Green Initiative program, has developed a comprehensive ecosystem restoration approach. It implements reforestation with a diverse range of native plant species in strategic regions as Peru's Tanbopata National Reserve and Costa

 Guests are also constantly reminded about how their actions contribute to the greater good of the community, which is achieved by using many channels of communication.

So, in the Grootbos Private Nature Reserve Lodges, sustainability is not just a nice-to-have policy. The foundation and associated non-profit programmes now employ ca. 150 full-time staff, more than 80% of whom are from locally disadvantaged communities.

Rica's Osa Peninsula – both classified as Biodiversity Hotspots. In Madre de Dios, Peru, a region that has lost over 200,000 hectares of forest mainly due to illegal gold mining, Forest Friends implemented restoration with locally adapted native species. Each traveller not only offsets their emissions but also contributes to the planting of native trees specifically selected to maximise both carbon sequestration and biodiversity recovery. The monitoring is made by local people, who observed that after five years, the restored areas showed an average 40% increase in biomass and 65% recovery in species diversity.

In New Zealand, the country's tourism board invites visitors to take the "Tiaki Promise", in which tourists promise that they will help protect and preserve their home, take care of their land, nature, sea, their culture, keep the island clean



© Forest Friends - Green Initiative

and show respect to local people. Before travelling to the targeted destination, the history and cultural, natural heritage should be studied, so that by the time of arrival at the destination becomes prepared for the journey and the host's habits. The Ministry of Tourism also established a Regenerative Tourism Model. Indicators of regenerative tourism to measure the degree to which a tourism product or

service is regenerative and sustainable have been set. The regenerative tourism paradigm not only operates under a focus on economic well-being, but it also encapsulates environmental, cultural and social well-being. Tiaki Promise is a code based on the commitment by people to care for New Zealand, for now, and, especially, for future generations, which many New Zealand businesses also support.

Another example is [the Malama Hawaii Program](#) by the Hawaii Tourism Authority, which aims to balance the economics of tourism with the well-being of communities, natural resources, and culture. The Malama Hawaii Program helps visitors engage with the community in a meaningful way, strengthening the relationship be-

tween people and place. Malama in Hawaiian means 'give back' and encourages travellers to give something back to the land, the sea, the ocean, the wildlife, the forest, the fishpond, and the community. In the program, there are several volunteer opportunities to choose from: reforestation, tree planting, beach cleanups, and picking up debris from hiking trails. Further, as an incentive, the program provides travellers with discounts at participating hotels if they participate in a volunteer activity.



© 2024 Hawai'i Tourism Authority

[World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms](#) is a non-profit movement made up decades ago of people who are passionate about sustainability and regenerative farming. WWOOF links visitors with organic farmers, promotes an educational and cultural exchange and builds a global community conscious of ecological farming practices. WWOOFers step into the daily life of their host family to learn

about agroecological and sustainable farming methods through hands-on experience. Hosts offer accommodation and meals with no money exchanged

between hosts and WWOOFers. WWOOF provides a way to learn about organic food, agriculture, and sustainable ways of living.

Read further inspiring case studies related to regenerative and transformative travel in the ["Global Report on the Transformative Power of Tourism: a paradigm shift towards a more responsible traveller"](#) published by UNWTO (World Tourism Organisation) and the Institute for Tourism, Croatia, which is a knowledge partner within the People Powered Tourism project.



Examples of Regenerative Tourism

PAVING THE WAY FOR COMPREHENSIVE VISITOR ECONOMY OR REGENERATIVE TOURISM STRATEGIES

The Danube Region has extremely rich, largely underexploited natural and cultural heritage, especially in rural settings. It is thus not a surprise that many innovative initiatives try to reconnect visitors with local rural communities and lifestyle through tourism, where the income stays in the village and visitors directly support the local way of life. These initiatives provide a great opportunity to co-design powerful, transformative tourism products and services as well as to build comprehensive visitor economy strategies.

Brasov, one of the most visited tourist attractions in Romania, has initiated actions to spread visitors from the extremely crowded historical city centre to its magnificent rural surroundings, based on the scientific analysis of visi-

tors' traffic. These projects are about creating unique and personal experiences for visitors, especially in rural settings where reconnection to rural lifestyle is a great tourism business niche, as well as generating income for individuals living in an authentic environment.

The "Local Gastronomic Points" project, launched in 2019 in Vama Buzăului as part of the national Gastro Local Network, is such an initiative. The concept allows local households to host tourists and serve them traditional meals prepared with ingredients from their own gardens or nearby producers, all in a familiar and authentic setting. The Local Gastronomic Points are officially authorised, operate under simplified legislation, and focus on food safety, the preservation of traditional recipes, and direct interaction with the hosts.



My Transylvania Association proposed a new model of interaction between tourists and local communities: Transylvanian Brunch. Created as a bridge between the culinary heritage of Saxon villages and the desire to bring rural life back to the forefront, Transylvanian Brunch quickly became a reference point for participatory rural tourism in Romania. The event is held monthly, usually in a different village, especially in areas influenced by Saxon culture. Each edition involves the direct participation of the local community: farmers, artisans, young and elderly people open their courtyards to host guests coming to enjoy traditional dishes made with local ingredients. The brunch is not just a meal; it is a reason to tell stories. Visitors are invited to join guided walks through the village, take

part in hands-on workshops, and discover stories about the area's history, traditions, and present-day challenges. Each edition is unique, but all follow a simple philosophy: food reconnects the place, the people, and the moment. Everything about the brunch is designed to keep the added value in the community: recipes belong to local families, ingredients come from nearby gardens and farms, and the money paid by visitors directly supports local households.

It is not a surprise that other regions transferred the practice, and it has been organising around Timișoara, another partner of the network as well. Banat Brunch is also a series of rural culinary events hosted in traditional households in the Banat region, while Breakfast in Margina is a branded local tourist initiative offering traditional breakfasts in villagers' homes in Margina, Timiș County, including horse-drawn carriage rides, visits to craft workshops, local storytelling, and homemade food. This approach is also followed in the neighbouring country, Moldova (from where Chișinău, the country's largest city and main cultural and commercial centre, is involved in the People Powered Tourism project). The model of Eco Resort Butuceni, for example, provides direct incomes for locals through accommodation, traditional meals, and guided tours, creating jobs (cooks, guides, housekeeping, transport) for the community since the entire value chain (food, lodging, entertainment) is managed locally.



© Eco Resort Butuceni



© WienTourismus/Paul Bauer

VISITOR ECONOMY IN TOURISM AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES IN VIENNA

In 2019, Austria adopted a new tourism strategy, which, according to its credo, sets out a "sector master plan" (Masterplan T), a path and principles along which the further success of Austrian tourism can be achieved. This plan aims to pave the way for "the most sustainable tourism destination in the world". The concept of destination has been redefined as a quality experience

space where both tourists and local people feel at home.

Vienna and Linz have contributed to the implementation of "new tourism" with pioneering Austrian urban examples. In the Vienna Visitor Economy Strategy, the concept of "city added value" is distinguished from "business added value" in the economic sense, whereby city dwellers and visitors can enrich each other. The Strategy supports only those developments and ideas that meet the values and criteria of the visitor economy concept and are listed in the strategy. Accordingly, the scope for businesses that pursue mass tourism and lack quality will be reduced in the future. Along the strategy, the



*The so-called
"City Added
Value"*

Austrian capital and some suburban districts will work together to develop clusters (place branding) with a significant hot spot function to relieve the city centre of excessive visitor traffic.

According to the strategy's creators, the focus should be on value creation rather than on increasing visitor and tourist numbers at all costs, and the objectives and indicators for measuring their achievement should be developed accordingly. In its new type of tourism strategy, the city of Vienna is breaking with the number of overnight stays as a benchmark and indicator to be followed. The targets to be achieved by 2025 include indicators such as the satisfaction of visitors and residents with the tourism infrastructure and services, the number of businesses with environmental certification, the proportion of visitors arriving by rail, the added value generated by the visitor economy and the Global Destination Sustainability Index.

The development of the Vienna Sustainable Tourism Observatory was supported by the Federal Ministry of Economy and the Energy and Tourism, to track the progress of the Visitor Economy along 11 measurement units: Local Satisfaction, Climate Action, Economic Benefits, Employment, Governance, Mobility, Seasonality, Accessibility, Energy Management, Solid Waste Management and Waste Water Management. The mission of the Visitor Economy Strategy is to promote growth that inspires the ongoing development

of the city as a destination while maintaining a constant focus on people's quality of life.

Vienna's Visitor Economy strategy has been updated, and the new version, entitled "Optimum Tourism", was presented on April 8, 2025. The aim is to optimise the positive effects of tourism and consciously improve the quality of life through transparent and responsible development. At the same time, a new, sophisticated indicator system for sustainability was also introduced, since the Vienna Tourist Board had recently joined the UN Global Compact for Sustainable Tourism.

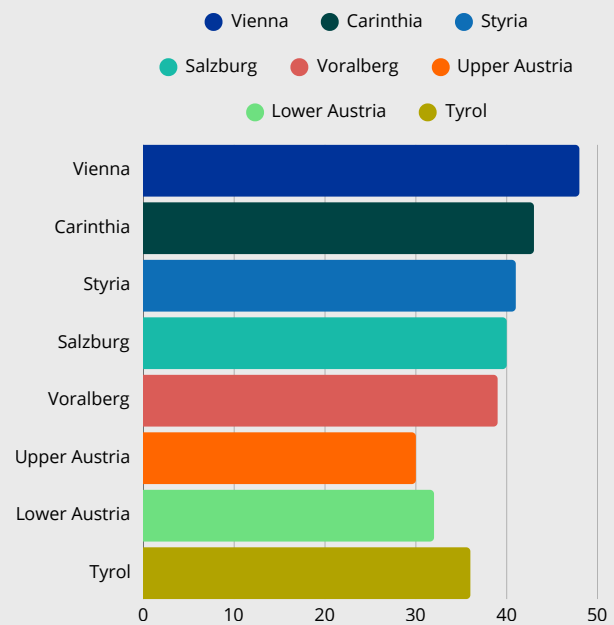
One of the most important indicators remains the local population's acceptance index of tourism in the city. This indicator currently stands at 9 (!) on a scale of 10, and the aim is to maintain this level. In Vienna, nine out of ten residents are currently satisfied with tourism in their everyday lives. Continuous and digitally transparent measurement of resident satisfaction ensures that the quality of life can be improved through the visitor economy.

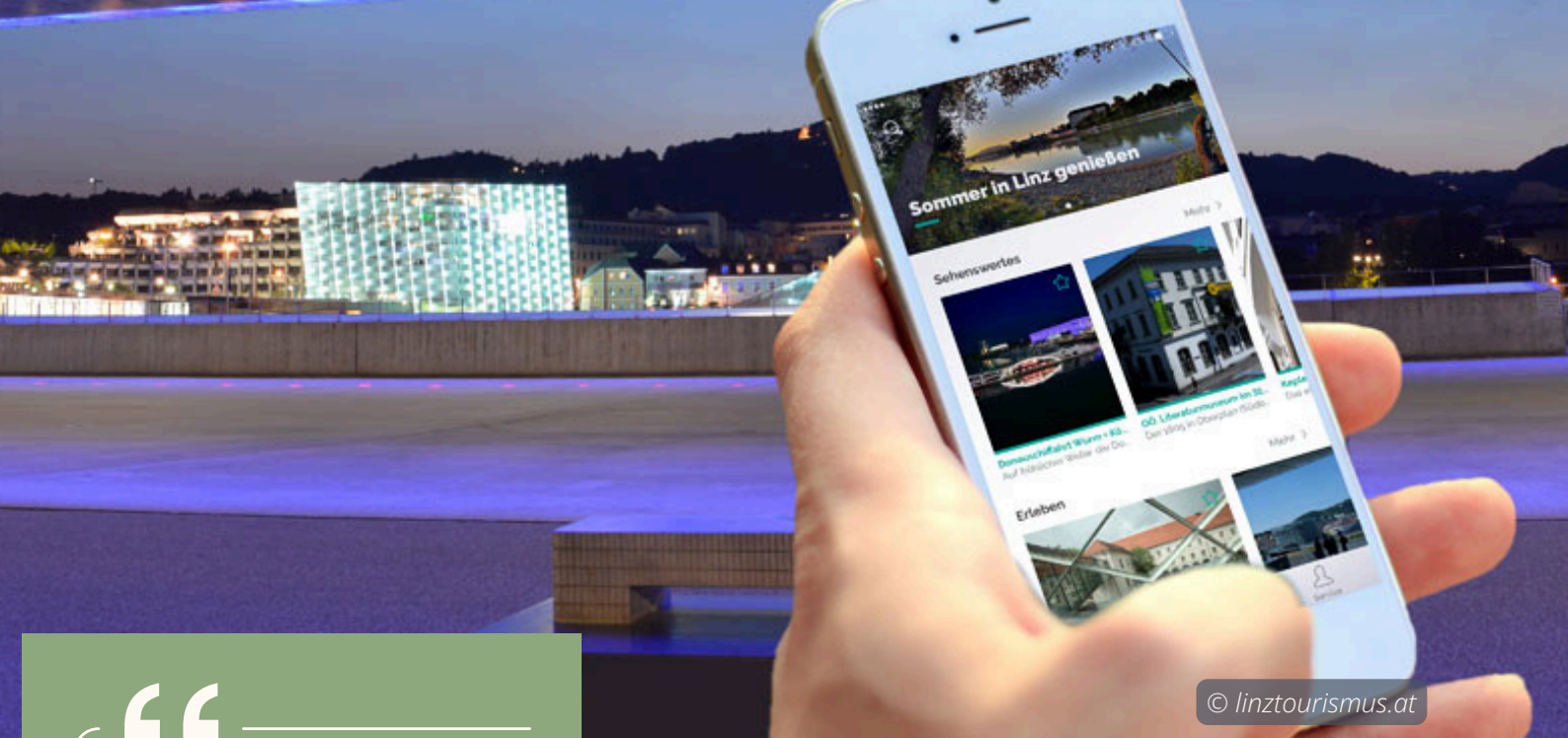
In addition, Wien Tourismus will pay particular attention to measuring sustainability and global standards in the future through its partnership with UN Tourism and promote flexible action programs to strengthen Vienna's leading position in international tourism and create value for everyone. Vienna intends to serve as a model of good practice and prove that, instead of

the "myth of growth".

The development of "new tourism" in Vienna inspires the entire country. Therefore, the tourism acceptance balance was, for example, introduced in all regions. The Austrian population continues to strongly support tourism, according to the first national (representative) survey, conducted by Statistik Austria, which examines the acceptance of tourism regularly. According to the data, 45 per cent of the population has a positive attitude toward tourism, while only a small minority expressed criticism. After several years of preparation, the so-called tourism acceptance balance (TAS) was published for the first time in 2019. The survey also highlighted regional differences in the perception of tourism. The most positive ratings were given to Vienna (+48), Carinthia (+43), Styria (+41), Salzburg (+40) and Vorarlberg (+39), while Upper Austria

(+30), Lower Austria (+32) and Tyrol (+36) lag slightly behind the national average. Overall, the population considers tourism to be beneficial primarily from an economic and social perspective: they appreciate job creation, the revitalisation of local communities and opportunities for cultural exchange.





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*Liveseeing
instead of
sightseeing*

TAKE A RISK, VISIT LINZ!

A good example of how the tourism industry works together with urban development is the transformation of Linz from an industrial city to a vibrant cultural stage. Since winning the title of European Capital of Culture in 2009, Linz has come a long way – the city has undergone a radical transformation over the past two decades. The former gloomy industrial city has become a proud, innovative, environmentally conscious community at the forefront of digitalisation and innovation, whose residents can be justifiably proud of their achievements. The city is now the modern face of Austria. Linz, which also holds the title of UNESCO City of Media Arts, is at the forefront of visual culture and has become a test laboratory for

the world of "new tourism." The range of experiences on offer has also grown steadily over the past decades, with locals and visitors alike enjoying moments of happiness arising from surprising and joyful changes and encounters.

In the tourism concept of this vibrant cultural city, which is renewed every two years, the focus is on the people, the inhabitants of the city. Thus, destination management has been transformed into the management of experiences, not by guides but by 'encounter moderators' who introduce visitors to the life of the locals through the technique of visitor storytelling, generating interactions between the

inhabitants and visitors by various means. Linz will never develop to the level of Vienna or Salzburg as for cultural attractions, it will never be a cultural heritage centre, but it is a city full of life, which helps visitors to wonder about the everyday, to get out

of the daily grind and to experience the experience. Visitors can step out of their familiar surroundings and find new inspiration through themed day and night tours, which explore the city's history and attractions from different perspectives.

Let's see the strategic background behind the transformation!



New tourism brand and strategy. "Take a risk, visit Linz". On March 19, 2025, a new inspirational information (tourism) office was officially opened in Linz, which not only serves as a modern visitor centre but also provides a platform for presenting the city's new tourism brand and long-term strategy. The new brand message focuses on the experience of discovery and stepping out of one's comfort zone by responding positively to global challenges and our uncertain world, and moves away from traditional tourist clichés.



Expect the unexpected. Short films focusing on uniqueness (e.g. *Linz ist Linz*, *Planet Linz* and *Prinz von Linz*) have attracted considerable media attention in recent years with their surprising and innovative approach, further shaping the city's unique and innovative image. The newly presented tourism image was developed based on all of this. The new brand and communication strategy emphasises boldness, self-identity, and self-irony, offering a unique alternative to mass tourism. Linz is not a city that "must" be seen – it is much more a city that must be experienced, both by those who live there and by those who visit it, opening up new perspectives for visitors. The new brand message, which appeals to locals and tourists alike, can best be summed up by the motto "expect the unexpected": experience the thrill that you can only find here.



Destination strategy and time capsule. The vision for the future and tourism development of Linz and the surrounding region is based on the **Ecosystem:Strategy:2030** and the **4020in2040** vision that guides it. The playful name is derived from Linz's postal code (4020) and the 2040 target, which outlines a long-term vision for the city. The 2040 vision presents an optimistic but realistic vision of the future: Linz will become a sustainable, digitally advanced and resilient city that creates value not only for visitors but also for locals. The strategy is not just a fixed plan, but a flexible compass that ensures the city's competitiveness by combining innovation, digitalisation, and sustainability. After the presentation of the strategy, guests received a copy of the 2040 vision with its positive outlook in a uniquely numbered time capsule. The **Ecosystem:Strategy:2030** was developed through extensive cooperation between

arts and cultural organisations, economic actors, educational institutions, public administration experts, mobility service providers, residential communities, and interest groups. The strategy is based on three main pillars. Innovation and digitalisation open new opportunities in tourism, sustainability ensures the city's long-term liveability, while community participation shapes the future of Linz with the active involvement of residents. The goal is to create a form of tourism that not only benefits visitors but also has a positive impact on the city's entire ecosystem.



The implementation process. The strategy was developed through an interactive and community-based process. Residents and experts worked together to define goals and directions in various forums and workshops, such as the Visionboard, Create Your City, and Balanced Tourism programs. The diversity of participation formats ensured that as many perspectives as possible were taken into account in the decision-making process. With the opening of the new inspiration and information office, the city's new image has become tangible. The modern design of the location on the main square combines traditional industrial heritage with creative media arts, allowing visitors to immediately sense Linz's duality: the meeting of the past and the future. Linz's new brand communication does not promise postcard-perfect, easily consumable tourist attractions. Instead, it is an invitation to all those who are willing to take risks, discover new perspectives, and not just visit the city, but understand it.



Travelling: preparation for uncertainty. The slogan "Take a risk, visit Linz" encourages visitors to leave their preconceptions behind and discover the city in their own unique way, even pushing their own boundaries. The slogan is both an invitation to explore beyond the beaten track, away from mass tourism and tightly scheduled programs, and a response to the risky present of our "world without order." Surrendering to chance and not planning everything in advance naturally involves risk. But if we are not afraid of the future, it is a risk that brings a smile to our faces and is well worth taking. Taking risks is always a conscious decision: we leave something behind, habits and expectations, and embark on something new. The unknown has its charm. Just like travelling or living our everyday lives more consciously. The new campaign encourages city residents and visitors to break out of their usual ways of seeing things and their ingrained habits, in other words, to expect the unexpected, as was stated when the strategy was presented. Linz is constantly changing and offers experiences for those who are open to new things. The city does not want to be "perfect" for everyone, and that is precisely what makes it so special. The new strategy and tourism brand send a clear message: anyone who lives in or visits Linz should have the courage to be open-minded, and a unique experience is guaranteed...

Details of the new brand strategy can be found [HERE](#). The Ecosystem:Strategy:2030 document can be read [HERE](#), and the 2040 vision time capsule can be opened [HERE](#).



Festival of Curiosity – where the future and new tourism meet. An unconventional way to introduce and experience Linz's fresh future strategy was to organise the Festival of Curiosity. The message of the festival is clear: the future is not something distant and abstract, but something we shape together. Curiosity is one of the most important skills for the future – without it, there is no progress, no creativity and no real advancement.



REGENERATIVE TOURISM IN TOURISM MARKETING STRATEGIES

Marketing strategies tackling regenerative travel encourage a shift in perspective: instead of asking, “What can I get from this place?”, it prompts, “How can my visit contribute to this place?”. This is a real paradigm shift. Aspects for regenerative travel marketing strategies are summed up based on the *‘Promoting responsible consumption and support for alternative tourist destinations across Wales & Ireland’ guideline* and strategy. These aspects are not complicated theories, but rather practical considerations that anyone can incorporate into their travel mindset:



Respect for Nature. This extends beyond just avoiding harm; it is time to give something back to nature. It’s about actively and directly supporting conservation and restoration efforts.



Community empowerment. Travel should benefit local people directly. This means supporting local businesses, respecting cultural traditions, and ensuring that tourism revenue flows back into the community, improving livelihoods and opportunities.



Meaningful experiences. Regenerative travel is about depth, not just breadth. It is about experiences that foster connection, understanding, and personal growth, moving beyond superficial sightseeing to genuine cultural exchange.



Long-Term Vision. Regenerative travel marketing operates with a long-term outlook, aiming for lasting positive impacts that extend far beyond the immediate tourism season. Obviously, it is not about maximising the profit.

Regenerative travel intends to move past the idea of travel as pure consumption and embrace it as an opportunity for positive contribution. It is about understanding that our choices have power, and by making thoughtful decisions, we can collectively shape a travel industry that not only sustains but actively regenerates the world around us.



*How can my visit
contribute
to this place?*

Regenerative travel marketing challenges conventional promotional tactics that may prioritise visitor numbers above all else. It calls for a more responsible and truthful communication strategy. Instead of glossy images that may mask underlying issues, regenerative marketing should highlight the authentic character of a destination, including its challenges and opportunities

for positive engagement.

This involves a commitment to transparency. Travel providers must be upfront about their regenerative practices, demonstrating genuine efforts to benefit local communities and ecosystems. Marketing materials should educate potential visitors about the destination's unique values and how their travel choices can contribute to its regeneration. It's about crafting a truthful narrative that attracts travellers

who are aligned with these values and seeking meaningful experiences.

A regenerative travel marketing strategy aims to foster sustainable tourism growth by increasing footfall, enhancing customer lifetime value, encouraging the adoption of regenerative tourism and setting measures to improve local habitats and empower local communities. There are some special thematic fields such a strategy could refer to:



Storytelling with Impact. Move beyond superficial destination branding. Craft narratives that showcase the positive impact of regenerative tourism initiatives. Feature stories of local communities benefiting from tourism, conservation projects succeeding, and cultural heritage being revitalised.



Community-Centric Campaigns. Involve local communities directly in marketing efforts. Showcase their voices, their stories, and their perspectives. This fosters authenticity and ensures that marketing efforts are culturally sensitive and respectful.



Educational Content. Use marketing platforms to educate travellers about regenerative travel principles and practices. Provide practical tips on how they can make responsible choices, support local businesses, and minimise their environmental impact.



Partnerships for Progress. Collaborate with local NGOs, conservation organisations, and community groups in marketing campaigns. This demonstrates a commitment to genuine partnerships and amplifies the message of regeneration beyond just tourism promotion.

Conventional tourism marketing, often driven by metrics like visitor numbers and revenue maximisation, can inadvertently contribute to destination degradation. It's crucial to critique these approaches and understand how they

often prioritise short-term economic gains over long-term ecological and social well-being. This critique opens the space for regenerative marketing, which fundamentally rethinks the goals and methods of promotion.



Conventional Marketing (Critique):



 **Focus on Consumption.** Primarily promotes destinations as commodities for consumption, neglecting the inherent value of places and cultures.

 **Homogenisation of Experience.** Often aims to standardise tourist experiences, undermining cultural authenticity and local distinctiveness.

 **Environmental Externalities.** Frequently ignores or downplays the negative environmental impacts of tourism, such as carbon emissions, waste generation, and habitat destruction.

 **Power Imbalance.** It can exacerbate power imbalances between tourism operators and local communities, leading to exploitation and cultural commodification.

Regenerative Marketing (Contrast):

 **Focus on Contribution.** Promotes travel as an opportunity for positive contribution and reciprocity, emphasising the traveller's role in destination regeneration.

 **Celebration of Diversity.** Highlights and celebrates the unique cultural and ecological characteristics of destinations, fostering respect for local identity and traditions.

 **Environmental Responsibility.** Actively promotes environmentally responsible travel practices and supports conservation efforts, integrating ecological stewardship into the marketing narrative.

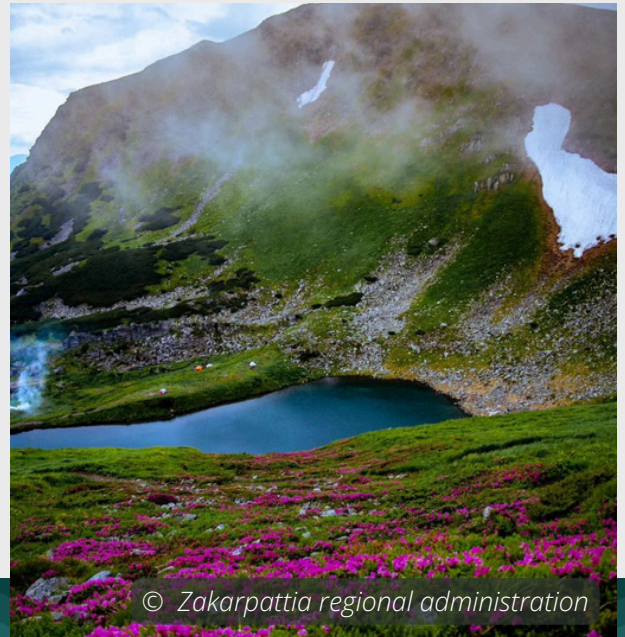
 **Community Empowerment.** Prioritises community involvement and benefit, ensuring that tourism revenue contributes to local well-being and empowers local agencies.

Measuring regenerative impact is a key milestone when building regenerative tourism marketing strategies. Regenerative travel marketing is not just about good intentions. It is about demonstrable positive outcomes. This requires developing metrics to assess the regenerative impact of tourism initiatives and marketing campaigns. These metrics might include increase in biodiversity, reduction in waste, improvement in water quality, carbon sequestration, increase in local employment, improved community well-being indicators, preservation of cultural practices, increased access to education and healthcare, increased revenue for local businesses, diversification of the local economy, fair wages for tourism workers, reinvestment of tourism revenue in community projects.

Many eco-lodges and tour operators offer volunteer opportunities that allow travellers to contribute to conservation efforts: tree planting initiatives, beach and river cleanups, wildlife conservation, habitat restoration, supporting local economies

(opting for locally owned accommodations, restaurants, and shops), visiting secondary destinations, participation in educational programs, and health and sanitation projects.

Many people are sceptical of greenwashing; thus, transparency and authenticity are paramount in marketing regenerative tourism initiatives.



UNDERSTANDING HOW SOCIAL INNOVATION CAN EMPOWER BUILDING THE VISITOR ECONOMY FRAMEWORK

Social innovation is not directly linked to tourism per se, but as we could see in the previous chapters, visitor economy and social innovation can mutually reinforce each other. From the aspect of social innovation, it might mean different valuable techniques to work together with locals. It is even more important to have a basic understanding about how social innovation works because People Powered Tourism is supported under Programme Specific Objective: 3.3 (Socio-economic development through heritage, culture and tourism). Last, but not least, in times when even personal sacrifices are much needed to tackle burning societal (incl. environmental) issues, fostering and enabling collaboration at all levels of society is of the utmost importance.

Social scientists do not know perfect recipes for public agencies, citizens and communities to address complex societal challenges we all face, but the outcomes of social innovation projects suggest that services which are better aligned with the needs and wants of local people run more efficiently and cost-effectively, while significantly con-



tributing to social cohesion as well.

So, collaboration is very much needed, but it does not happen by accident. Public agencies, including municipalities, should start this process from the top down by preparing a framework in which residents feel encouraged and empowered, thus collaboration might start and flourish, and meanwhile, public agencies are challenged by grassroots ideas initiated and learn how to absorb innovation. This should happen within the local communities that People Powered Tourism partners will work with.

Putting humans into the centre of a development process is a lovely topic,

but rather complex too. First, collaboration needs a serious amount of time. This is given within the People Powered Tourism project. Second, volunteering to benefit others or directly the nature (from small and often informal acts of being kind with our neighbours, through one-off volunteering in a time of crisis or in response to a specific request, to formal, regular volunteering) is a key phenomenon in social innovation as well as in the visitor economy concept or the regenerative tourism (just remember that according to a survey made by Booking.com 68% of global travellers would join cultural exchanges to learn a skill, and 54% would volunteer).

There is a long tradition of people helping people in almost every country

in Europe, but there is the potential for far more to be done. However, speaking about the collaborative capacity in the community, the level of general trust (trusting in people) and institutional trust and other socio-economic factors such as the level of voluntary work must be taken into consideration when planning local actions. This makes the picture even more complex and often results in bottlenecks regarding community engagement. Therefore, the following learnings of social innovation literature should be considered by partners while organising a stakeholder group in rural and urban settings. This is also important as tourism is too often seen as a lifebelt to be given to less developed areas without any intention to share its benefits with local people.

- ▲ **Generate deep insight into the needs and capabilities of local communities** to create meaningful outcomes. Hierarchical structures and behaviours often hinder honesty and creative energies. The question is what community members really want and what opportunities they might have within the visitor economy concept. There is a need for political recognition of this habit, enabling leaders to nurture local creativity to formulate and support innovative ideas. Just one example: neighbourhood volunteers are often core elements of active ageing initiatives across Europe, as (older) neighbourhood volunteers as peers can better solicit the elderly's needs, wishes and aspirations than local governments, thus a more responsive service can be built on.
- ▲ **Facilitative Leadership:** there are many manuals on "good leadership", but what does it take to lead effective collaborations? According to the Collaborative Framework (Kippin, 2015), good collaborative leadership is adaptive for complex challenges; puts community first; has the critical skills of mediation; has skills, networks and mind-set to bring together public, private and social actors; can give up control; can motivate teams; and is trustable as trust is the glue in cooperation. Leadership is also needed within the People Powered Tourism net-

work to select the most meaningful ideas as pilots to tackle the highest-impact areas.

- ▲ Using an **external facilitator** might mean a solution, as people are more likely to open up to a neutral person in general. Using an external facilitator also might convince leaders that collaboration works as (s)he can solicit valuable insight from residents.
- ▲ **Ownership:** please use the “**Let them go responsibly!**” attitude! Tourism services and products shall be co-designed, but at the end of the project, some locals should be responsible for the maintenance of the businesses (services or products) developed, as well as for launching new ones from the Catalogue, if relevant. So, it is essential to create an equal voice and a long-lasting reciprocal relationship with locals. Creating an atmosphere for creativity is a key success factor within development initiatives. In such an atmosphere, you have better chances to find the ‘engines’, the active collaborators of future tourism products or services. If locals do not feel ownership, if they are not emotionally linked to the idea, they will not be able to sustain the services/products.
- ▲ To have the right **incentives** and **rewards** for all stakeholders, to support their innovation efforts, is therefore crucial at this point. Besides the capacity building and the mapping, please think over what kind of local activities (invited speakers, joint excursion, etc.) can be beneficial for the local community to learn. It is also relevant for your organisation as the initiator. Perhaps your organisation also needs more capacity building to foster out-of-the-box thinking and enable them to find new ideas and scalable initiatives from communities. We believe that incentives have a place because many local people want local actions and local change, but only a few of them are committed enough to initiate action. It is also true that while volunteers are normally motivated by compassion and the desire to help others, modern-day volunteers are also looking for personal reward, skills and experience to improve job prospects or paid expenses. You, as the organiser of the local community, shall build on the self-interests of locals, as it plays a key role in this process, and the challenge for you as a broker is to ensure that this self-interest is negotiated fairly with all involved parties.
- ▲ The **power of experimenting:** by putting the citizen into the centre of the design process, design thinking is essential. Design thinking is about finding solutions unconventionally, to-



gether with the end-users, for a process which encompasses learning by doing, and constant feedback (loops) between these two elements (learning and doing). Pilots should be unconventional and a joint learning activities for the entire local community.

▲ **Facing failure and learning by failure** is also a core component of social innovation. Your community first maps cultural and natural resources that can be attractive to be included in a tourism service/product. Then all the ideas are collected in a Catalogue, but only the best idea or perhaps ideas can be tested as pilots. During this test, do not be afraid of failure! During the capacity building.

▲ **Transparency:** without full transparency, trust, the glue of collaboration, simply does not work.



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IDEAL TARGETS OF REGENERATIVE TRAVEL: NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS



As more and more travellers demonstrate high commitment to environmental sustainability, regenerative tourism involving visitors to create nature-based solutions is a great opportunity in Europe, where 81% of EU protected habitats and 63% of EU protected species are in “poor” or “bad” conservation status (2020 ‘State of Nature in the EU’ report) and where the EU Nature Restoration Law, a globally unique initiative, aims at restoring degraded ecosystems across the European Union. It sets binding targets for restoring at least 20% of the EU's land and sea areas by 2030, to restore all ecosystems in need of restoration by 2050.

The term of nature-based solutions is not just a buzzword. According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the initiator of the ‘movement’, they are actions to protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural and modified ecosystems that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, simultaneously benefiting people and nature.

Nature-based solutions are very high in the EU policy arena, simply because one-third of the climate mitigation needed to meet the goals of the Paris



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Agreement can be provided by NbS. One example: peatlands cover only 3% of the world's land area, but store twice as much carbon as all the trees (!) on Earth combined. And North of Europe has significant peatlands. Restoration of wetlands and grasslands, the use of continuous cover forestry and regenerative methods instead of intensive agriculture (the No1. killer of biodiversity) have similar benefits.

Since most parts of Europe are facing increased frequency of meteorological drought, heavy winter (and partly summer) precipitation, and many parts of the old continent suffer extreme heatwaves shortly as well, we need to restore our forests, grasslands, wetlands and other habitats, we need a massive spread and use of NbS in cities



as well as in landscapes, we need to install water retention measures in all territorial levels and we need to improve the quality of our urban green infrastructure – and we need to halt biodiversity loss.

In addition, 44% of global GDP in cities is estimated to be at risk of disruption from nature loss, according to the World Economic Forum's 2022 Global Risks Report, while 1€ invested into

habitat restoration generates 8–38 € profit in Europe.

Nature-based solutions (NbS) are efficient, cheap, aesthetic, and good for nature, so they are ideal targets of regenerative travel too! Based on the review of existing practices (Dóra Almássy), the table below provides a categorisation for the ecosystem/setting in which NbS might be implemented.



According to the definition of nature-based solutions, besides ecosystem services, they also provide solutions for societal challenges. These can be categorised as follows (based on the above-mentioned study):



● Health and Well-being

● The creation or enhancement of forests and urban parks can improve physical and mental health through improved air quality and the provision of opportunities for recreation and physical exercise.

● The creation of community gardens can provide access to healthy food and opportunities for recreation.

● Installation of green roofs or walls can improve working conditions in office buildings and schools, and support individuals' recovery in health institutions.



● Social Cohesion and Justice

● Encouragement of sustainable agriculture practices can improve local food production and communal self-reliance.

● Tree planting, riverbank greening, and community gardening can improve the sense of community and identity.

● Urban green areas can provide opportunities for social interaction and improve social cohesion through the involvement of marginalised groups.



● Inclusive and Effective Governance

● Involvement of local communities in the creation/management of green or blue areas can increase ownership and ensure long-term maintenance of the NbS.

● Introduction of market mechanisms (e.g. water funds or forest bonds) can encourage improved management and use of natural resources.



Cultural and Natural Heritage Preservation

Promotion of traditional conservation or agricultural practices can encourage the safeguarding or restoration of natural ecosystems.

The connection of historic areas to nature can facilitate their reinterpretation as community centres, recreational spaces, and tourist destinations.

There are plenty of nature-based solutions that city planners and ecologists can work with, and online inventories are helping this work.

▲ NetworkNature is a resource for the nature-based solutions community, creating opportunities for local, regional, and international cooperation to maximise the impact and spread of nature-based solutions. The project was funded by the European Commission under the Horizon 2020 programme, while its continuation, the NetworkNature+, funded by the Horizon Europe programme, is just starting up. NbS hubs have been established in Europe to disseminate nature-based solutions.

▲ Oppla is the EU Repository of nature-based solutions. It provides a knowledge marketplace, where the latest thinking on natural capital, ecosystem services, and nature-based solutions is brought together.

▲ The Urban Nature Atlas, developed as part of the NATURVATION project, is the most comprehensive database of nature-based solutions for cities created to date. The Urban Nature Atlas has been produced as the result of a systematic survey of nature-based solutions interventions in 100 European cities and provides the basis for the analysis of socio-economic and innovation patterns associated with urban nature-based solutions in Europe. Furthermore, the Urban Nature Atlas is going global and now includes content from outside of Europe.

Since nature-based solutions are often not differentiated from nature conservation, it is not easy to find tourism products or services specifically targeting NbS. However, the following examples and plans can be inspirational.





POLLINATOR-FRIENDLY LJUBLJANA AS A TOURIST ATTRACTION

Urban beekeeping is now flourishing in Ljubljana with the culture and congress centre Cankarjev dom as a pioneer, leading the way. Honey produced in Ljubljana is of very high quality, because in a city, the vegetation is very diverse, and the use of pesticides is far less than in intensive agricultural fields. In addition to beekeepers, the City of Ljubljana also takes care of bees by planting perennials with many honey plants among them. The Bee Path, connecting and highlighting urban beekeeping and pollinator-friendly spots, was created in 2015 and is now

uniting already 46 members/spots from educational and cultural institutions, from health-care centres to economic entities and, of course, beekeepers and beekeeping societies. It is not just a path, it is a movement of like-minded people caring for the well-being of bees in the city with very diverse activities.



BEAVER SAFARI

The Hungarian award-winning (the first tourism agency in Hungary having a Good Travelseal certificate) tourism agency, Humtour, organises Beaver Safaris. At first sight, it is pure nature tourism: visitors participate in a guided tour, led by a nature conservationist, and learn about beavers. But beavers are very skilled ecosystem engineers: there are hundreds of projects worldwide where conservationists let beavers work and transform landscapes by building dams, and thus contribute to landscape-level water re-

tention, very much needed in areas facing desertification due to intensive agriculture and unsustainable water management. If this new story on nature-based solutions is also explained, that is another service. However, Humtour also organises many interesting excursions beyond simple nature tourism (e.g. the one dedicated to the fantastic world of fungi – complex world of fungi in nature, art and gastronomy: mushrooms in the forest, in the sketchbook, and on a plate.



TELLING THE STORY OF NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS

PP3 (Burst) has identified various potential pilot locations close to Budapest and, due to its great possibilities, has finally selected Kóspallag to co-design a regenerative tourism service with residents as a pilot. The main reason is that the village, located in the magnificent Börzsöny mountains, is very well-positioned among the candidates to tell the story of nature-based solutions and build up a community-sourced tourism product, sustainable in the long run. Kóspallag is a great location to co-design a regenerative tourism service

as it is possible to talk about three great – NbS or simply sustainability-related - topics in one site, and it is also possible to organise voluntary work and hiking. In Kóspallag, it is possible to explain how continuous-tree cover forestry methods work and why it would be essential to use this type of nature-based solutions widely. At the Pallagvölgy Organic Farm (a community-supported agriculture providing vegetable boxes weekly for ca. 70-80 families), soil diversity can be the topic, which is essential when talking about healthy food. Last, but not least, the unique “Oldhouse” project (community engagement aiming to increase the ecological knowledge of residents) also provides a great opportunity for learning and voluntary work. The wider area belongs to the Duna-Ipoly National Park, providing great possibilities for hiking.

Another idea to tell the story of nature-based solutions is Tápió-vidék, also close to Budapest. This is a protected area where beavers can freely transform some valleys, monitored by the national park directorate. Exploring the ecosystem engineering work of beavers (hiking, biking) can be accompanied by unique voluntary work (helping the local “water guardians” who copy the work of beavers and by building

small swales, dykes and hedges they support landscape level water retention) and nature tourism (bird watching), not to mention that a very active local environmental NGO full with youngsters could support this work.



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SUMMARY

A question for all of us within the People Powered Tourism project and beyond: are we brave and curious enough to step out of our comfort zone and build up new tourism?

Hopefully, this study gives some inspiration and the feeling that we are not alone, but rather among the frontrunners is also inspirational!

It is also worth mentioning that having a European-level visitor economy strategy or agenda is strongly recommended by the network of European Regions for Competitive and Sustainable Tourism. They advocate having a long-term vision, with clear objectives and principles, dedicated resources and performance indicators, while generating the behavioural change which is very much needed for European destinations to flourish and making Europe a “Better Place to Live and Visit” (inspired by the Barcelona Declaration Better Places to Live, Better Places to Visit). This strategy should lead destinations and their ecosystems to achieve smart and sustainable growth, address climate change and improve resource efficiency, embrace digitalisation, boost skills, deliver market intelligence and optimise the potential that tourism has as one of the drivers of the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals.



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