Regenerative Hospitality: The Case of Rural Lebanon

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Abstract

Regenerative hospitality sees accommodations as interventions that make the capacities of places, communities and their guests grow; regenerative leaders abandoned a mechanistic vision of the reality to focus on a living systems ecological worldview; regenerative businesses foster net-positive impact on natural and social ecosystems, and they foster transformative experience creation. This research presents the preliminary results of a regenerative hospitality study in two Lebanese Biosphere Reserves triangulating descriptive survey, social networking analysis and semi-structured interviews. Results show the characteristics of Lebanese regenerative hospitality and shed lights on the importance of the regenerative mind shift, the guest perception of authenticity in regenerative hospitality and the key characteristic of Lebanese regenerative hospitality landscape.

Key Words:
Regenerative Hospitality, Net-Positive, Place Intelligence, People Intelligence, Regenerative Mindshift, Lebanon.

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Introduction

The discourse on sustainability in the hospitality industry has evolved beyond merely mitigating impacts to encompass a more ambitious aim: achieving regenerative goals toward a net positive impact on society and the environment with a clear impact on the host-guest relationship (Inversini et al., 2023). In fact, initially, sustainability was perceived as a desirable add-on, but it has now become a non-negotiable starting point for the industry. However, the concept of sustainability alone is no longer sufficient in the face of escalating ecological and social challenges. This has led to the emergence of the net positive (Polman & Winston, 2022) and regenerative approaches (Bellato & Cheer, 2021), which go beyond sustainability by aiming to leave the planet and its inhabitants in a better state than before.

Net positive, as defined by Polman and Winston (2022), occurs when a business's positive impacts outweigh its negative ones. This involves shrinking the ecological footprint while simultaneously increasing the social and environmental handprints of a business. The shift towards a net positive approach requires hospitality businesses to move beyond mere sustainability credentials and focus on the scale and ambition of their restorative and regenerative practices. The peculiarity of hospitality is that this ecosystem approach can have an impact also on the relationships between host and guest, with a special focus on transformative experience creation (Inversini et al., 2023).

Corporate responsibility, a key component of the sustainability paradigm, has evolved over decades through concepts such as the Triple Bottom Line, Corporate Social Responsibility, Creating Shared Value, and Environmental, Social, and Governance approaches (e.g. Legrand et al., 2022). The regenerative approach represents the latest stage in this evolution, aiming not only to minimize harm but to actively contribute to the betterment of society and the environment. It is here important to note that the regenerative approach is not a 'new sustainability standard': on the contrary it is a responsible business orientation deeply rooted into the sustainability literature and practices (Inversini, 2023).

Review of The Literature

There is an increasing fatigue towards the adoption of sustainability standards: this is because current standards and methodologies are struggling to solve the growing negative impacts of human and business activities on society and environment (Hahn & Tampe, 2021). In the hospitality field, the adoption of corporate sustainability practices has proven to be even more difficult due to the fragmented nature of the industry (with independent small players) and the actual scope and horizon of current sustainability practices (e.g. Legrand et al., 2022). Small hotel owners are in fact struggling with the sustainability standards and reports as they could find little value in those tools which have been designed for larger corporations (Derchi and Inversini, 2021).

Thus, there is a widespread call for new approaches and methodologies to support the everchanging competitive needs of hospitality businesses in conjunction with the concept of sustainability and more broadly with responsibility (Inversini et al., 2023). These should be designed for the size and scope of hospitality SMEs: most of the time hospitality businesses are deeply engaging both the natural and social ecosystems around them and - of course – with their customers in a deep and meaningful way. Therefore, sustainability and responsibility approaches for hospitality should be in line with preservation and, hopefully, regeneration of natural environment and community fabric around the hospitality businesses (Bellato & Cheer, 2021) and cater for relevant and possibly transformative experiences for customers (i.e. the relational ecosystem within the hotel). In other words, there is the need for a bottom-up approach to sustainability and responsibility that bypasses meaningless standardization and compartmentalized interventions (Reed, 2007) designed for large corporations which struggle to make sense for independent hospitality businesses.

The regenerative approach is a systemic approach has been rising to prominence in recent years (Hahn & Tampe, 2021) and stems from an ecological and living systems worldview where the goal is to promote the conditions for

all life to renew and restore (Reed, 2007) fostering a net-positive mentality towards the destination (Hahn & Tampe, 2021). In contrast to sustainability, the regenerative approach can be considered as going beyond the commercial logic (Hahn & Tampe, 2021) towards actively serving the ecosystems around the hospitality business. Regenerative development paradigm in wider travel sector promotes innovations by embedding tourism practices within local communities and ecological processes that elevate human and non-human wellbeing (Bellato & Cheer, 2021). Tourism can be in fact reshaped in a more sustainable, inclusive, and caring model (Cheer, 2020). In essence, to move from sustainability to the regenerative approach, there is a need to shift from net zero impact (or "doing less bad") to net positive impact ("doing more good"- Polman & Winston, 2022), enabling the well-being of all stakeholders and ecosystems.

The current literature mostly tackles the regenerative approach in the tourism industry, and more specifically with a systemic (Bellato et al., 2022) and destination angle (e.g. Fusté-Forné & Hussain, 2022). Regenerative tourism is here seen as a virtuous practice able to encourage systemic impact on nature and communities fostering land and cultural reappropriation promoting indigenous knowledge; at destination angle, regenerative tourism is therefore described as local bottom-up process focused on social ownership and decolonization (Bellato et al., 2023).

The Regenerative Hospitality approach starts from these premises but has a different scope. Regenerative hospitality can be in fact defined as a sustainable development paradigm where businesses are positioned as interventions that make the capacities of places, communities and their guests grow (Inversini et al., 2023; Ateljevic & Sheldon, 2022). Regenerative hospitality is a responsible business orientation (Inversini, 2023) that looks at hotels as changemakers at the destination level: hoteliers are the building block of destinations and – in most cases – they are already contributing to destination challenges and ecosystem development (Inversini et al., 2023).

Regenerative hospitality is designed around two main concepts:

- 'place intelligence' that is the outer hospitality layer with the natural and social ecosystem (Inversini et al., 2023); in these layers hotels engage a with net-positive orientation both towards natural ecosystem (i.e. regenerative farming and agriculture etc.) and towards the social fabric ecosystem (i.e. inclusivity, marginalized support etc.).

- the 'people intelligence' that is the inner hospitality layer with the relational and experiential ecosystems (Inversini et al., 2023). The net-positive orientation towards the place has an impact also in the inner layer that is the one promoting host-guest relationships with the co-creation of authentic – and often transformative – experiences involving both the nature and the community.

Central to the development of regenerative hospitality is what can be called the 'regenerative mindshift': this can be described as a shift of mind to implement regenerative approaches abandoning the current mechanistic vision to focus on an ecological worldview and to incorporate the living systems principles in a holistic way (Dredge, 2022).

Methodology

Moving from the literature above, this paper aims at understanding the peculiarities of regenerative hospitality businesses in rural Lebanon; specifically, it focuses on two biosphere reserves: Al Shouf Cedar Nature Reserve and Jabal Moussa Natural Reserve. Thanks to a case study approach (Yin, 2009) and based on the triangulation of three different data points, this research has been designed to generate an initial understanding of:

- [Objective 1] the net-positive contribution to place intelligence and people intelligence aspects in regenerative hospitality in rural Lebanon;
- [Objective 2] travelers' perception of regeneration in rural Lebanon;
- [Objective 3]the peculiarities of the regenerative hospitality businesses in rural Lebanon.

In order to tackle these objectives, and in collaboration with the office of tourism and nature preservation of the two biosphere reserves, three complimentary methods have been used:

- The quantitative survey was submitted to service providers in the selected areas by partner organizations. A total of 47 valid answers were collected. Although not statically relevant, this survey showed a lack of engagement with sustainability certifications, but a positive mindset of the wider hospitality sector towards regenerative practices (i.e. an interest in natural and social ecosystems). The survey has been analyzed only in a descriptive manner to shed lights on (i) place intelligence, (ii) people intelligence and (iii) regenerative mindset.

- The desk research analyzed the reviews of all accommodations and restaurants in the selected areas. A total of 5,121 reviews were analyzed from Tripadvisor.com and Airbnb.com. Data went through lemmatization and co-occurrences were then analyzed and clustered (Inversini et al., 2020). Place intelligence and people intelligence were as key for interpretation of the clusters.

- The qualitative fieldwork occurred from June 12 to June 16, 2023, in the two selected areas. Representatives from nineteen organizations operating in the accommodation and the food and beverage fields were interviewed. The sample featured accommodations and restaurants in the two biosphere reserves and was created thanks to the snowball technique. The semi-structured interviews were analyzed with an inductive coding strategy and revealed the characteristics of the Lebanese rural and regenerative hospitality businesses.

Results

Net Positive Contribution

The exploratory survey obtained 47 valid answers. 35 questionnaires were filled in English, 10 in Arabic and 2 in French. Most of the respondents belong to the guesthouse segment (n=29) and are located in a mountain area (n=36). Respondents showed a net positive attitude towards the nature and the community net positive contribution (i.e. place intelligence) and a strong tie with net-positive attitude towards visitors (i.e. people intelligence). Although in their self-assessment, most of the businesses said to engage in sustainability practices (n= 30), very few of them are involved in actual certifications.

By computing the average of the survey items related to (i) place intelligence and (ii) people intelligence and plotting them against the average of the survey items of (iii) regenerative mindset, it is possible to compare the results by reserve.
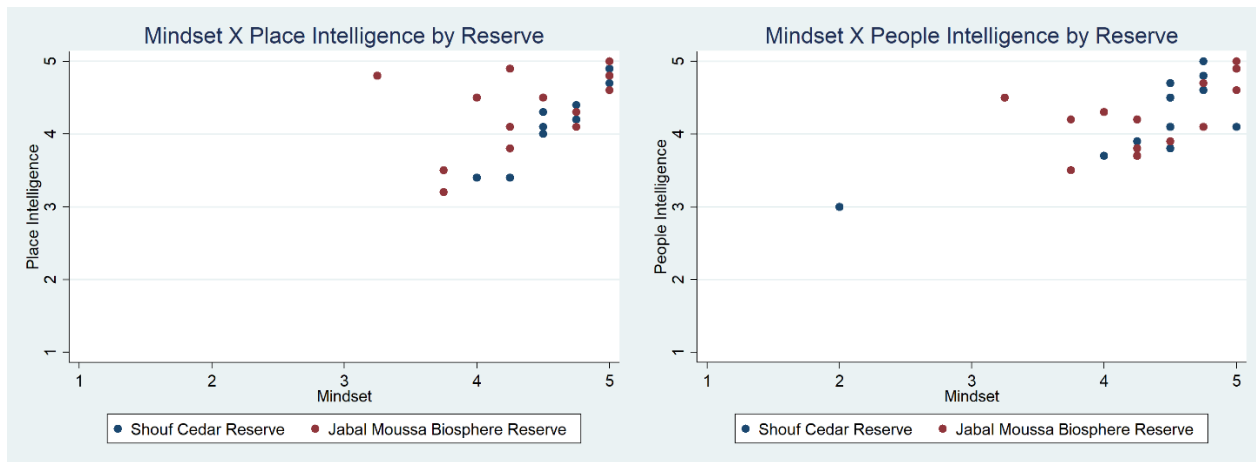
Figure 1.1 Mindset & Place Intelligence by Reserve | Figure 1.2 Mindset & People Intelligence by Reserve

Travelers Perception

Results showed that hospitality and restaurant establishments in the areas are leveraging heritage, culture and nature. Traditions in terms of food and excursions are dominating the scene on social media. There was general positivity in the reviews with no criticality highlighted.
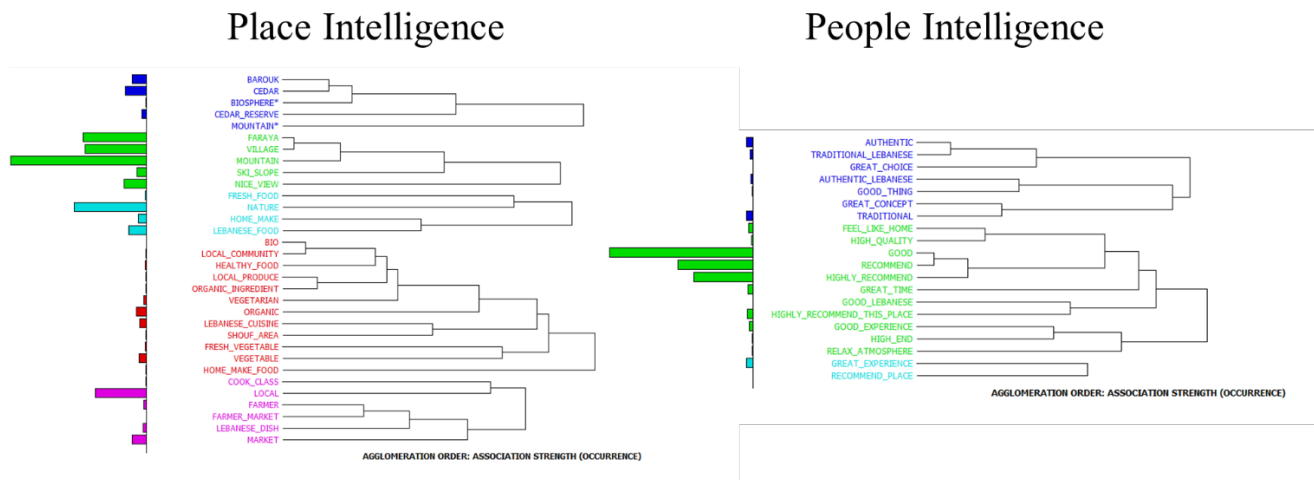

Figure 2.1 Place Intelligence Co-Occurrences Clusters | Figure 2.2 People Intelligence Co-Occurrence Clusters

Place intelligence

In the case of the outer dimension (i.e., nature and community – Figure 2.1), five clusters are formed. The blue cluster groups phrases related to both reserves. The Shouf Cedar Reserve with phrases such as *Cedar Reserve* and *Jabal Moussa Reserve* by mentioning places close by or activities in the area (e.g., *Faraya* and *ski slope*). Other clusters reference nature (i.e., light blue cluster) with phrases such as *bio, organic ingredient,* and *home make food;* and community (i.e., red cluster) with phrases such as *cook class, farmer market,* and *Lebanese dish.*

People intelligence

When only considering the inner dimension (i.e., guest experience – Figure 2.1), three clear clusters are formed. The blue cluster represents Lebanese tradition with phrases such as *authentic* and *traditional Lebanese*.

The green cluster represents the positive experience of guests with terms such as *feel like home* and *highly recommend.*

Regenerative Hospitality in Rural Lebanon

Interviews were analyzed in a inductive way to shed lights on the main characteristics of Regenerative Hospitality in rural Lebanon. Four codes families have emerged from the analysis:

- Blending with Nature: in the two natural reserves visited, there was a clear attachment from the hospitality managers towards nature. Nature was the single most mentioned topic in the interviews. This bond was clear and strong and was also radiated in the actual experiences provided by the interviewees.

- Inclusivity at the Core: a very strong bond with the local socio-cultural landscape was observed. The managers were in most of the cases active members of the local community who seek to foster inclusivity (for disabled and/or marginalized people) and to support people's development and professional growth by encouraging them to be part of their entrepreneurial journey.

- Long Lasting Relationships: networks and relationships were noticed to be at the core of the Lebanese regenerative hospitality. Clusters of people interested in common challenges (i.e. nature or community issues) are naturally emerging in a bottom–up manner which also fosters the sharing of good practices among the industry.

- Blossoming Experiences: the above points resulted in newly created and crafted experiences which leverage both the community and nature. This approach to human and non-human ecosystems is de facto fostering creativity in new businesses that wish to maintain a meaningful relationship with the natural environment and to support community regeneration.

Discussions and Conclusions

This contribution presents the preliminary results of a case study on regenerative (Reed, 2007) hospitality in rural Lebanon with a focus on (i) Shouf Cedar Reserve and (ii) Jabal Moussa Reserve. Thanks to a data triangulation (descriptive survey, social networking analysis and semi-structured interviews) this research highlights:

- the correlation between regenerative mindset and (i) place intelligence and (ii) people intelligence in the studied case (Objective 1). The analyzed properties (Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2) show the majority of respondents having a correlation between the construct 'mindset' and 'place intelligence' and 'people intelligence'.
- the customers' perception extracted from online reviews, shows an understanding of the natural and social connection in the accommodations and restaurants analyzed and highlights the concepts of authenticity of the experiences proposed (Objective 2).
- the inner characteristics of regenerative hospitality in rural Lebanon are essentially base on four interconnected pillars which are: (i) nature, (ii) community – exemplifying the place intelligence and (iii) relationships and (iv) meaningful experiences – exemplifying the people intelligence.

This paper presents the first attempt to investigate the mindset, the place intelligence, and the people intelligence (Inversini et al., 2023) in the context of regenerative hospitality; Lebanese rural hospitality can be seen as a case study of regenerative economy, fostering a net-positive impact on inner and outer thanks to a regenerative mind shift. Future research will delve into the regenerative hospitality issue moving from the dimensions here presented (Inversini et al., 2023) minimizing the limitations of the current research which can be

summarized in (i) case study approach with low generalization possibility, (ii) limited sample size for the quantitative investigation and (iii) not clearly defined borders for the social media analysis.

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