**Locals’ tales and tourist trails: a regenerative tourism approach for Bridgend, South Wales**

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**Introduction**

To date there is little empirical evidence of regenerative tourism case studies (Bellato et al., 2023b) perhaps due to the inherently organic nature of such a concept leading to methodological difficulties and complexities. This paper explores an action-oriented research paradigm, whereby the act of undertaking the research is a catalyst for regenerative tourism within a specific region. The paper presents several datasets forming the first phase of a project that seeks to explore the implementation of a successful regenerative tourism approach for Bridgend County Borough (BCB), South Wales, to culminate in the use of the ‘[Geotourist’ App](https://geotourist.com/). It offers an insight into the various techniques with which to engage with communities in order to enhance regenerative tourism in BCB, with the potential for a fairer society, richer culture, healthier communities and ecological respect. It adds to the current literature around regenerative tourism, providing a case study example of action-oriented research.

**Background information**

The long term aim of the project is to develop grassroots-inspired destination packages as a route to post-Covid-19 sustainable tourism recovery throughout Wales, creating visitor experiences to encourage knowledge and awareness of the destination’s local cultural and natural environments (Pope, 2018). This can also serve to improve the physiological and psychological well-being of both locals and tourists. In the process of piloting the project in the first phase of the study in the chosen location of BCB, it became apparent that a ‘regenerative tourism’ paradigm was more appropriate as opposed to ‘destination packages’ per se. The idea was that a set of trails could be developed to link together various elements of cultural and natural heritage within the county to include ‘hidden gems’ and the stories surrounding them. Local hospitality outlets, community-run events, eco-friendly accommodation offerings and sustainable transport networks would be highlighted on each trail to facilitate the experience for the trailfinder.

Regenerative tourism “seeks to ensure travel and tourism delivers a net positive benefit to people, places and nature, and […] supports the long-term renewal and flourishing of our social and ecological systems” (Dredge. 2022, p.270). It is a recent term that has developed or ‘matured’ (Pollock, 2019) from the previously well utilised ‘sustainable tourism’ literature and has been a particular focus post-pandemic, with some seminal foresightful works produced prior to the crisis (see for example Atjelevic, 2020; Cheer, 2020; Pollock, 2019). Predominantly, the term has been explored conceptually where the literature strives to highlight differences between ‘regenerative tourism’ and ‘sustainable tourism’ (Becken & Kaur, 2022; Bellato et al., 2023a; 2023b). In criticism of the development and terminology within the UNSDG framework, scholars stress that regenerative tourism goes beyond sustainable tourism practices in recognising that tourism systems are part of nature (Becken & Kaur, 2022; Dredge, 2022). Since COVID-19, studies in tourism are focusing on recovery, resilience and rebuilding (Farsari, 2023; Gibson, 2021), complex notions that can be drawn together in a regenerative approach.

The area of BCB, although rich in cultural and natural heritage, both tangible and intangible, has struggled to attract significant amounts of overnight tourists outside of key sites such as Porthcawl (Bridgend County Borough Council (BCBC), 2023) and still struggles with deprivation in many areas with unemployment and income well below the UK average (BCBC, 2022). Recovery, rebuilding and resilience through regenerative tourism is vital for the long-term viability of the region as a destination.

**The research approach**

As Bellato et al. (2023b) discuss, there are many epistemological shortfalls to current methods for exploring regenerative tourism. Suggested improvements that have been incorporated within this study address the importance of ‘relational ways of knowing place and community’, the ‘deep listening to marginalised voices’, the inclusion of ‘locally embedded storytelling narrative’, the use of ‘participatory approaches’, and the ‘co-designing’ of the research (Bellato et al. 2023b, pp. 13-14).

Collaboration was a key element of the research design. Trans-disciplinary in nature, researchers came from a variety of disciplines (creative writing, education, health sciences, tourism and events) and consulted with local cultural organisations, a festival organiser and Bridgend Local Authority. Each element of the research process to date is detailed in Table 1:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Research method** | **Details** |
| Desk based, secondary research | MSc Tourism and Hospitality students were given a list of categories and asked to search the internet for places within the county within each category, with a focus sustainable practices and locally sourced products. These will be used to develop a set of trails. |
| Primary research | ‘Story-mapping’ in a local festival: areas of interest highlighted by participants were pinpointed on a map and will be used to design trails. |
| Primary research | Post-festival interviews with festival attendees and stakeholders.  Areas of interest identified by interviewees will be grouped in themes and used to design trails. |
| Primary research | Creative writing workshops with local primary and secondary school children. Places highlighted by pupils will be used to design trails. |

**Table 1: The research methods**

**Discussion of results**

The **desk-based secondary data** returned the following numbers of places per category:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Accommodation | 48 |
| Cultural heritage | 16 |
| Food and drink | 69 |
| Community events and festivals | 22 |
| Outdoor activities | 25 |
| Arts and crafts | 32 |

**Table 2: Secondary data summary**

The **festival story-mapping** exercise proved very effective in highlighting various places that local stakeholders felt were important to them. The festival space was somewhat conducive to the collection of stories but also presented some challenges (for a more detailed critique of this method see Davies et al. (2024).

**Post-festival interviews** allowed for further elaboration on stories, folk tales and places of interest from people that were either present at the festival or recommended by people at the festival. Selected quotes from the interviews are as follows:

“*Underneath Brackla there are reputed to be a load of tunnels where the munitions were stored. It's got quite a strong connection with activity during the Second World War…”* (Participant 1)

*“Well, people like to visit spots. You know, you look at names of places and they've often got some connection with some sort of … historical or supernatural or … folklore event*” (Participant 2).

**Creative writing workshops** within local schools allowed children to identify areas they felt were most important to them, such as: Ogmore River, Rest Bay, Bridgend Town Centre, Newbridge Fields, Bryngarw, Merthyr Mawr, Bwlch Mountain, and Coety Castle.

A fundamental element of the project is the use of ‘mapping’ techniques to highlight areas of interest, to develop a set of trails based upon locals’ stories and recommendations. Mapping visualisation is a way of ‘fixing’ stories geographically, which mirrors the way that stories can directly strengthen a sense of place rather than exist as free-floating textual narratives. One of the main aims of regenerative tourism is the ‘anchoring of tourism value’ (Becken & Kaur 2022) which can be achieved through this kind of mapping technique. The eventual use of the ‘Geo Tourist’ App along with the trails will allow for recordings to be made by locals of the places they feel are most important to them in order to develop tourism from the grassroots up.

**Conclusions**

Regenerative tourism action research can be unwieldy and complex (Farsari, 2023). Different communities and voices require varied approaches which present challenges in collating and triangulating data. The use of mapping helps to embed and fix stories visually, which in turn helps to ‘anchor’ tourism value. More work is required to collate additional community voices to include recordings of locals’ stories in the trails that truly encourages regenerative tourism for the whole county and its ecosystems.

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