

Community Sovereignty as A Regulatory Membrane: Governing Systemic Vitality in Regenerative Tourism Destinations

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Abstract

Regenerative tourism has emerged as a transformative paradigm capable of addressing the structural limitations of sustainable tourism by repositioning destinations as living social-ecological systems. Consequently, regeneration is often framed as an aspirational outcome rather than as a governed systemic condition. This article argues that the transformative potential of regenerative tourism cannot be realized without addressing the issue of structural regulation. Drawing on living systems thinking and political economy perspectives, this paper introduces community sovereignty as a regulatory membrane that governs selective permeability within a destination's metabolic system. Employing a conceptual theory-building approach, this study develops an integrative analytical framework that reconceptualizes destination governance as an active process of metabolic regulation rather than merely a coordinative arrangement. The framework identifies four key regulatory dimensions—collective decision-making authority, institutional coherence, normative orientation, and adaptive enforcement capacity—which collectively determine the quality and intensity of tourism flows. These theoretical propositions are empirically illustrated through analytical vignettes that contrast the extractive tendencies of highly permeable systems with the sovereign regulatory architecture of the Binyan Customary Forest (Hutan Adat Binyan) (Wanaprastha) in Bali. This article contributes to regenerative tourism scholarship by shifting the analytical focus from participation toward regulatory capacity and by reframing governance as an active practice of boundary-setting. Ultimately, this framework provides a robust foundation for analyzing systemic vitality as a governable condition amid intensifying global tourism pressures.

INTRODUCTION

In response to escalating socio-ecological crises within global tourism, sustainable tourism emerged as a dominant policy paradigm seeking to reconcile economic development with environmental protection. However, sustainability has faced substantial criticism for its managerial and technocratic orientation, which prioritizes mitigation and optimization without fundamentally challenging growth imperatives or underlying structural power relations (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018; Chassagne & Everingham, 2019). Reducing harm is not equivalent to restoring degraded systems, nor does sustainability necessarily prevent the reproduction of extractive dynamics under alternative frameworks (Pollock, 2019a; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Against this backdrop, regenerative tourism has gained prominence by moving beyond sustainability, positioning tourism as an active intervention that treats

destinations as living social–ecological systems rather than merely as sites of impact management (Mang & Reed, 2012; Bellato, Frantzeskaki, & Nygaard, 2022; Dredge, 2022).

Despite this important conceptual shift, regenerative tourism scholarship remains characterized by a significant analytical gap. Much of the existing literature continues to frame regeneration primarily through principles, shared values, and multi-stakeholder participation. While these procedural arrangements may enhance inclusion, they do not necessarily provide communities with authority over development trajectories, investment flows, or market integration (Hall, 2011; Scheyvens, 2011). Consequently, regeneration is often articulated as a normative aspiration, leaving a critical structural question insufficiently theorized: who governs exposure to global tourism pressures, and under what conditions? Participation alone cannot explain how destinations regulate extractive capital flows or speculative investment practices.

This article argues that the transformative potential of regenerative tourism cannot be realized without addressing this regulatory gap. Specifically, it proposes that systemic regeneration depends less on participation itself than on community sovereignty—the collective capacity of communities to define, regulate, and enforce the conditions under which tourism operates within their territories. Drawing on living systems theory, this study conceptualizes destinations as metabolic systems that process continuous flows of capital, visitors, infrastructure, and narratives. Within this system, community sovereignty functions as a regulatory membrane that governs selective permeability, determining whether external inputs contribute to systemic vitality or accelerate extractive degradation.

By introducing community sovereignty as a regulatory membrane within destination metabolism, this study advances regenerative tourism theory in three fundamental ways. First, it shifts analytical attention from participatory processes toward regulatory capacity as the primary determinant of regenerative outcomes. Second, it reframes destination governance as an active practice of boundary-setting rather than merely a mechanism of stakeholder coordination. Third, it proposes systemic vitality as an evaluative lens that extends beyond conventional growth-oriented performance metrics. Ultimately, this article provides a robust conceptual foundation for analyzing regenerative tourism as a governable system shaped by power relations, regulatory capacity, and selective permeability.

This section establishes the theoretical foundation of the study by systematically reviewing and synthesizing key literature across three interconnected domains. It begins by critically examining the unresolved governance challenges within regenerative tourism discourse, highlighting the structural limitations of current participation-centered approaches. Subsequently, it explores living systems thinking to conceptualize tourism as a dynamic metabolic process requiring active regulation rather than solely impact mitigation. It then introduces sovereignty-oriented perspectives to articulate the necessary transition from procedural participation toward structural regulatory capacity. Finally, these theoretical perspectives are synthesized to position community sovereignty as a regulatory membrane, providing the analytical foundation for the framework developed in this article.

Regenerative tourism has emerged as a necessary evolution beyond longstanding critiques of sustainable tourism, particularly its tendency to operate within an unquestioned growth paradigm (Fletcher et al., 2019; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). Although sustainable tourism frameworks have contributed to increasing environmental awareness, they have been

widely criticized for emphasizing efficiency, impact reduction, and managerial optimization without addressing the structural conditions that generate socio-ecological degradation (Chassagne & Everingham, 2019; Dwyer, 2018). Doing “less harm” does not inherently restore degraded systems, nor does it transform the political-economic structures that externalize socio-ecological costs onto local communities (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

Regenerative tourism departs from these limitations by reframing tourism not merely as an activity requiring mitigation but as an active intervention within interconnected living systems (Ateljevic 2020). Drawing on ecological worldviews and Indigenous knowledge systems, it emphasizes adaptation, renewal, and the enhancement of systemic capacities rather than the static maintenance of impact thresholds (Mang & Reed, 2019; Pollock, 2019). However, despite this important ontological shift, regenerative tourism scholarship remains analytically uneven. Existing literature frequently emphasizes normative values—such as flourishing, well-being, and harmony—while insufficiently addressing the political ecology of destinations (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020; Cave & Dredge, 2020). It often leaves unexplored the structural mechanisms through which regeneration is either enabled or constrained when destinations are exposed to intensive global tourism economies (Cheer, 2020).

To address this analytical gap, an emerging body of scholarship conceptualizes destinations as complex adaptive systems rather than linear production units (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2004; Lew et al., 2020). This perspective aligns with regenerative development by viewing places as living systems governed by interconnected feedback loops and ecological thresholds (Hes & Du Plessis, 2015). Within this framework, tourism destinations function as metabolic entities. They continuously absorb external inputs—including capital, labor, visitors, and narratives—and transform them into economic and symbolic outputs while simultaneously generating ecological pressures and cultural commodification (Pollock, 2019; Bellato et al., 2022).

The metaphor of metabolism highlights a critical systemic insight: biological and social-ecological systems are not necessarily harmed by the volume of inputs alone, but by uncontrolled and poorly regulated flows (Dredge, 2022). In living organisms, metabolism is sustained through semi-permeable membranes that regulate exchange by selectively absorbing beneficial inputs while restricting harmful excesses. In conventional tourism governance, however, such regulation is frequently reduced to reactive managerial instruments, such as zoning or certification schemes, implemented only after degradation has intensified (Butler, 2015). A living systems approach requires destinations to actively regulate their metabolic exchanges, aligning with post-growth perspectives that emphasize the structural capacity to filter, reduce, or redirect harmful metabolic throughput (Fletcher et al., 2019; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022).

Collaborative governance and stakeholder participation are widely promoted as pathways toward more resilient tourism development (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Hall, 2011). Nevertheless, critical scholars have identified a fundamental structural limitation within participatory arrangements: inclusion does not guarantee control over outcomes, and participation does not automatically translate into decision-making authority (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Scheyvens, 2011). In many destinations, communities are invited to participate in planning processes where fundamental parameters, including large-scale capital investments and high-density development trajectories, have already been determined by

external actors (Bianchi, 2018). Without the capacity to regulate external flows, communities risk becoming co-managers of their own degradation rather than active agents of systemic renewal.

This paradox has been explicitly addressed within Indigenous and decolonial tourism scholarship (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015). For example, Matunga et al. (2020) demonstrate that regenerative aspirations are inseparable from questions of sovereignty, self-determination (tino rangatiratanga), and authority over land and development pathways. Regeneration is not merely a technical adjustment; rather, it represents a political and relational process requiring structural authority over destination governance (Matunga, McIntosh, & Carr, 2020).

Synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, this study advances community sovereignty as the central analytical and operational construct required to support regenerative tourism. In this framework, sovereignty does not refer exclusively to formal legal ownership but rather to the collective capacity of communities to define, regulate, and enforce the conditions under which tourism operates within their territories (Berkes, 2004; Ostrom, 1990). Unlike procedural participation, sovereignty implies substantive decision-making authority over systemic thresholds, including the ability to accept, modify, or reject tourism initiatives based on locally defined ecological and cultural constraints (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018; Sheller, 2021). In systemic terms, community sovereignty functions as a regulatory membrane within a destination's metabolic system, selectively allowing culturally aligned tourism practices and regenerative investments while restricting flows that threaten socio-ecological integrity. By introducing community sovereignty as a regulatory membrane within destination metabolism, this study advances regenerative tourism theory by shifting analytical attention from participation processes to regulatory capacity, reframing destination governance as an active practice of boundary-setting, and proposing systemic vitality as an evaluative framework beyond growth-oriented performance metrics.

METHOD

This section describes the methodological approach employed to develop the regulatory membrane framework. Given the conceptual-analytical nature of the study, the methodology involved an integrative literature review, an iterative process of conceptual analysis and synthesis, and the use of illustrative secondary data to support the theoretical framework.

Research Design

This study adopts a conceptual-analytical research design aimed at theory-building within regenerative tourism scholarship. Rather than generating primary empirical data to test predefined variables, the paper develops a conceptual framework by systematically integrating and reinterpreting existing bodies of knowledge across regenerative tourism, living systems thinking, and sovereignty-oriented governance. Conceptual research is fundamentally crucial in emerging fields where empirical operationalisation remains ambiguous. By employing this design, the study clarifies conceptual relationships, exposes underlying governance logics, and constructs an explanatory framework capable of informing future empirical trajectory and policy analysis.

Literature Search Strategy and Selection

To ensure a structured integrative review protocol guided methodological rigor and replicability, the literature synthesis. The search strategy targeted two primary academic

databases: Scopus and Web of Science (WoS), selected for their comprehensive coverage of high-impact tourism and social science research (Sadeghi, et al., 2025). The search algorithm employed a combination of Boolean operators focusing on three core domains: (“regenerative tourism” OR “tourism futures”) AND (“governance” OR “policy” OR “living systems”) AND (“sovereignty” OR “community control” OR “participation”).

The inclusion criteria were strictly defined to encompass: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles and foundational academic books; (2) publications written in English; and (3) literature published between 2018 and 2025, capturing the foundational emergence and recent surge of regenerative tourism discourse following the global pandemic disruption. Conversely, grey literature, non-peer-reviewed industry reports, and studies focusing exclusively on quantitative sustainability indicators without addressing systemic governance dimensions were systematically excluded.

Conceptual Decomposition and Metaphorical Synthesis

The analytical process progressed through a highly iterative, three-stage synthesis. Initially, conceptual decomposition was applied to critically examine how constructs such as regeneration, participation, and control are mobilised across the selected literature. This stage isolated the implicit assumptions regarding decision-making authority embedded within existing regenerative frameworks, effectively distinguishing the limitations of participation-centred models from true regulatory capacity.

Subsequently, the study employed metaphorical reasoning grounded in living systems theory to construct the concept of a "regulatory membrane." Within systems-oriented scholarship, metaphors are utilised analytically to translate complex, non-linear dynamics into tractable explanatory forms. The membrane metaphor was iteratively refined to ensure internal coherence with biological systems principles (permeability, filtering, buffering) and strict alignment with sovereignty-oriented governance perspectives.

Validity and Ethical Considerations

While conceptual papers inherently lack traditional empirical validation, the proposed framework's theoretical robustness was evaluated through logical coherence and illustrative application. The secondary data utilised to construct the illustrative vignette regarding the Binyan Customary Forest (Section 4.4) was derived from a previously validated doctoral research project. The foundational data collection for that specific vignette strictly adhered to established ethical protocols, including full informed consent from the customary authorities, ensuring that the integration of this community's narrative into the present conceptual analysis poses no ethical breach.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section articulates the core conceptual framework derived from the integrative methodological synthesis. It systematically develops the proposition that community sovereignty must operate as a regulatory membrane to secure regenerative tourism outcomes. The following sub-sections sequentially conceptualise tourism as a metabolic system, detail the specific filtering and buffering functions of the membrane, and delineate the operational mechanisms that distinguish regulatory control from mere participatory governance. To empirically anchor these theoretical propositions, the section concludes with illustrative

vignettes contrasting the extractive drift of highly permeable destinations against the sovereign regulatory architecture of the Binyan Customary Forest.

From Governance Structures to Regulatory Functions

Building on the theoretical foundations outlined above, this study proposes a conceptual framework that shifts the analytical focus from governance arrangements to regulatory functions within tourism destinations. While governance literature has made important contributions by identifying actors, institutions, and coordination mechanisms, it has been less successful in explaining how destinations actively regulate their exposure to external tourism pressures (Hall, 2011; Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

In regenerative tourism discourse, governance is frequently treated as a procedural condition—who participates, how decisions are made, and which stakeholders are involved. However, such procedural accounts do not adequately capture the functional role of power in shaping development trajectories. As a result, destinations may appear participatory while remaining structurally permeable to extractive capital, speculative investment, and market-driven growth imperatives (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018; Dwyer, 2018).

This framework addresses that limitation by reconceptualising governance as a regulatory capacity embedded within the destination system. Rather than asking whether communities are involved, the framework asks whether communities possess the sovereign capacity to regulate flows—to decide what enters, what is transformed, and what is excluded from the destination’s socio-ecological metabolism.

Destination Metabolism and Selective Permeability

The analysis conceptualises tourism destinations as metabolic systems embedded within broader social–ecological contexts. Destination metabolism refers to the continuous circulation of material, financial, social, cultural, and symbolic flows that sustain tourism activity over time. These flows include, but are not limited to, capital investment, visitor movements, labour, infrastructure development, resource extraction, waste generation, and cultural representation. In regenerative tourism, the objective is not to maximise the volume or speed of these flows, but to maintain their alignment with local ecological limits, cultural values, and long-term wellbeing. However, the analysis reveals that metabolic imbalance commonly emerges when destinations are exposed to external pressures that exceed their internal regulatory capacity. Such pressures may include rapid capital inflows, aggressive destination marketing, infrastructure-led growth strategies, or policy interventions prioritising national or global tourism objectives over local conditions.

The findings indicate that regenerative outcomes cannot be explained solely by the presence of regenerative practices or intentions. Instead, they depend on whether destinations possess governance mechanisms capable of regulating metabolic intensity, determining which flows are permitted, constrained, redirected, or refused. This shifts analytical attention away from outcomes and indicators toward the governance structures that shape systemic behaviour.

Constitutive Elements of the Regulatory Membrane

The regulatory membrane of community sovereignty is not a singular policy instrument or a static institutional body, but an emergent systemic property shaped by four mutually reinforcing dimensions. At its structural core lies collective decision-making authority, which represents the degree of binding, non-consultative power held by a community over tourism-related flows. Unlike conventional participation that often remains at the periphery of power,

this authority confers the capacity to define internal rules, enforce systemic thresholds, and exercise absolute veto rights over development approvals that contradict local regenerative aspirations.

The operational effectiveness of this authority is further secured by institutional coherence, which requires a seamless alignment between formal regulatory frameworks—such as land-use planning and zoning—and informal institutional norms, including customary protocols and locally embedded governance systems. When formal tourism policies operate in contradiction to these local normative systems, the destination suffers from "systemic leakage," where external extractive pressures easily penetrate the system's boundaries. Providing the internal "filtering logic" for this membrane is the normative orientation of the destination. This dimension encompasses the specific values and criteria that guide regulatory selectivity, ensuring that long-term systemic vitality and place-integrity are structurally prioritised over short-term revenue maximisation or volume-driven growth imperatives.

Finally, reflecting the foundational principles of living systems, the membrane is characterised by an adaptive enforcement capacity. This ensures that the membrane remains dynamic rather than rigid, allowing the community to continuously monitor socio-ecological feedback and adjust systemic permeability in response to volatile market pressures or environmental shifts. Together, these dimensions condition the quality, direction, and intensity of tourism flows, providing the analytical basis for evaluating the resilience of regenerative governance.

The elements described above do not operate in isolation; they intertwine to form the integrity of the regulatory membrane itself. To help visualise how these dimensions operate in practice to maintain destination balance, Figure 1 presents an operational framework. This diagram illustrates how decision-making authority, institutional coherence, normative orientation, and adaptive enforcement capacity work together as a unified membrane.

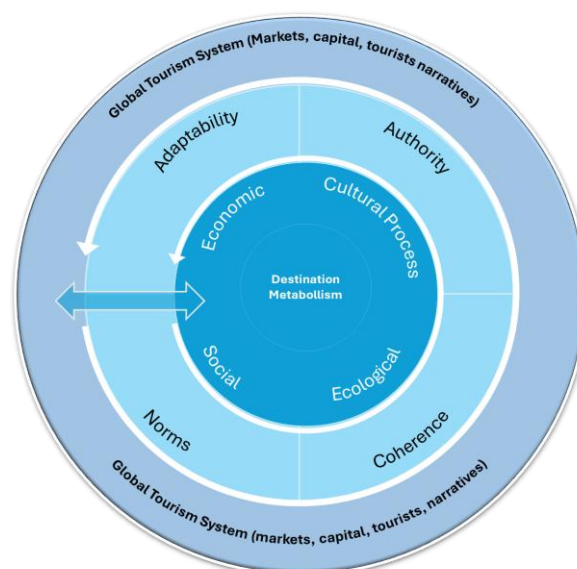


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Community Sovereignty as a Regulatory Membrane.

Figure 1 operationalises community sovereignty as a regulatory membrane by identifying its constitutive dimensions: collective decision-making authority, institutional coherence, normative orientation, and adaptive enforcement capacity. These dimensions mediate the interaction between external tourism pressures and internal destination metabolism, conditioning the quality, direction, and intensity of tourism flows. The framework illustrates how variations in regulatory strength shape systemic vitality, providing an analytical basis for evaluating regenerative tourism governance, investment selectivity, and policy effectiveness.

From Participation to regulation: mechanisms of Sovereignty

The analysis identifies several critical mechanisms through which community sovereignty operates as a functional regulatory membrane. These mechanisms transform the theoretical elements of sovereignty into active governance practices that direct the destination's development trajectory.

First, sovereignty enables boundary-setting, allowing communities to define the acceptable scales and forms of tourism development within their territory. This includes strategic decisions regarding land use, infrastructure density, visitor capacity, and the overall pace of growth. Boundary-setting is essential because it establishes the outer limits of metabolic expansion, preventing the gradual and often invisible escalation of tourism activity driven solely by external market logic.

Second, sovereignty supports flow governance, whereby communities influence the specific direction and quality of tourism-related flows rather than merely managing their volume. In practice, this may involve prioritising locally embedded enterprises over externally controlled investments or favouring niche forms of tourism—such as restorative or educational travel—that reinforce cultural continuity and ecological regeneration. Through flow governance, the membrane ensures that external capital and visitors act as "nutrients" that feed systemic vitality rather than "toxins" that overwhelm it.

Third, sovereignty facilitates adaptive regulation, ensuring the system remains resilient amidst volatility. Rather than relying on rigid, universal standards, regulatory membranes allow for the adjustment of permeability in response to real-time feedback and changing socio-ecological conditions. Collectively, these mechanisms reveal that community sovereignty is the foundational structural condition for regeneration. Where this sovereign capacity is weak or absent, destinations remain profoundly vulnerable to extractive trajectories, even if they have adopted regenerative rhetoric or participatory labels. To synthesise these findings, Figure 1 provides a conceptual overview of how this membrane governs the metabolic interaction between the external global system and the internal destination environment.

Collectively, these mechanisms reveal that community sovereignty is the foundational structural condition for regeneration. Where this sovereign capacity is weak or absent, destinations remain profoundly vulnerable to extractive trajectories, even if they have adopted regenerative rhetoric. To synthesise these findings, Figure 2 provides a conceptual overview of how this membrane governs the metabolic interaction between the external global system and the internal destination environment.

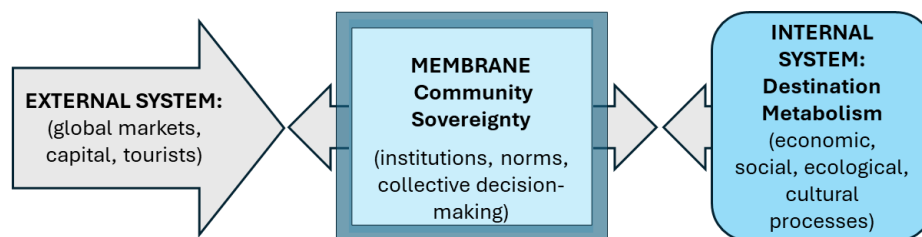


Figure 2. Community Sovereignty as a Regulatory Membrane in Destination Metabolism

Figure 2 conceptualises the tourism destination as a living metabolic system embedded within the dynamics of global tourism markets. External flows—encompassing capital, visitors, development models, and global narratives—interact with the destination through a regulatory membrane constituted by community sovereignty. This membrane performs its critical function by governing selective permeability; it acts as a filter that mediates which flows are absorbed, transformed, or constrained, thereby actively shaping the destination’s internal metabolic processes across economic, social, ecological, and cultural dimensions. The diagram provides an ontological foundation for understanding regeneration not as a passive managerial outcome, but as a function of active and empowered systemic regulation.

Illustrative Vignettes: The Regulatory Membrane in Practice

To empirically ground the conceptual framework, this section presents two contrasting illustrative vignettes. These cases demonstrate how the presence or absence of a regulatory membrane dictates the metabolic trajectory of a destination, shifting the outcome from extractive degradation to systemic regeneration.

Vignette 1: The Permeable System and Extractive Drift

Consider the trajectory of hyper-developed coastal destinations in the Global South. In these settings, local communities frequently exhibit high rates of participation in the tourism workforce and are routinely included in multi-stakeholder planning consultations. However, they lack structural sovereignty over land-use zoning, foreign direct investment, and large-scale infrastructure approvals. Without an operational regulatory membrane, the destination system becomes highly permeable to external pressures. Capital inflows dictate the rapid proliferation of high-density accommodations, driving real estate speculation and the displacement of local populations. The destination metabolism accelerates beyond ecological carrying capacities, resulting in water scarcity, waste mismanagement, and the commodification of local culture. In this scenario, participation without sovereignty fails to prevent the extractive drift; the community captures marginal economic benefits while absorbing the entirety of the socio-ecological costs.

Vignette 2: The Sovereign Membrane at Binyan Customary Forest

In stark contrast, the Binyan Customary Forest (*Hutan Adat Binyan*) in Bali, Indonesia, illustrates the operationalisation of community sovereignty as a robust regulatory membrane. Functioning as a living laboratory for regenerative tourism, the destination is governed by the intersecting authority of the customary village council (*Banjar*) and the local community-based tourism group (*Pokdarwis*). When confronted with the prospect of tourism development, the customary authorities initiated a discursive evaluation to assess the ontological boundaries of integrating their sacred forest with commercial activities. Discourse analysis of community

deliberations revealed a profound tension between "spirituality" and "commercialisation," reflecting a collective apprehension towards mass tourism modalities.

Exercising their structural sovereignty, the Binyan community enacted strict flow governance. Rather than opening the forest to volume-driven mass tourism or external hospitality conglomerates, they established regulatory boundaries that exclusively permit high-value, low-volume restorative tourism (*Wanaprastha*). The membrane functions by actively filtering external pressures: daily visitor capacities are strictly capped, technological interventions within the forest are prohibited, and tourism revenues are directly reinvested into forest conservation and customary rituals. In this system, the community does not merely "participate" in the tourism value chain; they hold the absolute veto power to modulate the scale and speed of external capital flows. Consequently, the destination metabolism remains stable, ensuring that tourism acts as a regenerative force that finances ecological preservation while safeguarding the community's cultural sovereignty.

Synthesis of the Vignettes

These contrasting scenarios validate the theoretical premise of the regulatory membrane. Vignette 1 demonstrates that even with robust participation, a highly permeable system inevitably succumbs to market-driven extraction. Conversely, Vignette 2 confirms that regenerative outcomes are actualised when a community possesses the sovereign authority to filter, buffer, and modulate external flows. It is the capacity to say "no" to incompatible external pressures—the essence of regulatory boundary-setting—that ultimately secures a regenerative future.

This section contextualises the regulatory membrane framework within broader macro-theoretical debates on regenerative tourism, destination governance, and tourism futures. Taken together, the findings demonstrate that regenerative tourism is best understood as an emergent property of regulated destination metabolism rather than a mere set of sustainable practices. Community sovereignty functions as the critical mediating mechanism that determines whether tourism contributes to renewal or reinforces extractive dynamics. This synthesis reinforces the central argument of the study: regeneration cannot be achieved through participation alone, nor through the adoption of regenerative rhetoric; it requires structural regulatory capacity that enables communities to govern the conditions of tourism engagement on their own terms. By transcending the descriptive limits of participatory frameworks, the following discussion articulates how this regulatory capacity aligns with the imperatives of political ecology and the tourism degrowth paradigm.

The Political Ecology of the Regulatory Membrane

A central contribution of this study lies in its explicit shift from participatory governance toward a regulatory governance architecture grounded in political ecology. Much of the regenerative tourism literature emphasizes shared values and mindset shifts; however, this framework demonstrates that such normative elements are fundamentally insufficient in the absence of structural power. From a political ecology perspective, participation without sovereign control leaves destinations profoundly vulnerable to the asymmetries of global capital.

The membrane metaphor fundamentally re-politicises destination governance: it clarifies that regeneration is not merely a collaborative ecosystem, but a contested political arena. The capacity to regulate permeability—deciding which external pressures are permitted

and which are structurally refused—is the ultimate determinant of socio-ecological survival. This conceptual reframing directly explains why destinations with identical regenerative aspirations frequently experience radically divergent metabolic outcomes. To clarify how this study advances existing approaches, Table 1 synthesises the key differences between dominant tourism governance paradigms and the regulatory membrane framework

Table 1. Regulatory Dimensions and Indicators of Systemic Vitality in Regenerative Tourism Destinations

Regulatory Dimension	Analytical Focus	Indicative Regulatory Indicators	Implications for Systemic Vitality
Collective Decision-Making Authority	Degree of community control over tourism development decisions	Binding community consent mechanisms; local authority over land-use change and tourism licensing; capacity to approve, modify, or reject tourism investments	Determines whether tourism flows are selectively filtered or enter the destination unregulated; strong authority enables tourism to reinforce long-term social, cultural, and ecological renewal rather than short-term extractive accumulation.
Institutional Coherence	Alignment between formal governance structures and informal normative systems	Consistency between tourism policy, spatial planning, and environmental regulation; recognition of customary norms and cultural protocols; cross-sector coordination among governance institutions	Stabilises destination metabolism by reducing regulatory contradictions and leakage, supporting integrated social–ecological functioning and institutional trust over time.
Normative Orientation	Value framework guiding regulatory selectivity	Explicit articulation of destination values (e.g. wellbeing, ecological integrity, cultural continuity); clear criteria distinguishing acceptable and unacceptable tourism practices; prioritisation of long-term vitality over short-term revenue	Shapes the qualitative direction of tourism development, ensuring that vitality is expressed as systemic balance, continuity, and place integrity rather than growth in volume or revenue.
Adaptive Enforcement Capacity	Ability to respond dynamically to feedback and change	Monitoring of social, ecological, and cultural impacts; capacity to revise thresholds and regulations; mechanisms for learning, reflection, and policy adjustment	Enables the destination system to remain resilient and regenerative under changing conditions, sustaining vitality through adaptive regulation rather than rigid control.

Table 1 should be read as an integrated analytical lens rather than a prescriptive checklist. The four regulatory dimensions are mutually reinforcing and operate collectively as a regulatory membrane that conditions destination metabolism. High performance in one dimension cannot compensate for weakness in others; systemic vitality emerges only when

decision-making authority, institutional coherence, normative orientation, and adaptive enforcement are aligned. In this sense, vitality is not a measurable output of tourism growth, but an emergent property of regulated socio-ecological interaction. The table therefore provides an analytical bridge between the conceptual framework (Figure 2) and the discussion of governance, investment, and policy implications that follows

Theoretical Propositions: Sovereignty, Coherence, and Adaptability

Through the development of the regulatory membrane framework, this study advances three core propositions regarding the dynamics of destination governance. The first proposition holds that the quality of tourism flows is fundamentally conditioned by the degree of community sovereignty embedded within destination governance structures. Where communities possess the structural authority to define thresholds and selective criteria, tourism flows tend to align more closely with local values and ecological capacities. Conversely, weak sovereignty produces unfiltered inflows that prioritise market responsiveness over systemic balance, often resulting in extractive outcomes. Empirical evidence suggests that destinations with robust local control mechanisms are significantly better equipped to channel investment toward locally embedded enterprises and resist externally imposed development models.

The second proposition asserts that regenerative outcomes depend not only on the presence of these mechanisms but on their internal coherence across institutional, normative, and operational dimensions. Fragmented governance—where formal policies, informal norms, and market practices operate in isolation—inevitably weakens the regulatory membrane and undermines metabolic balance. Destinations achieving higher levels of systemic vitality typically exhibit strong alignment between land-use planning, customary protocols, and community-defined values. This coherence enables consistent signaling to external actors regarding acceptable forms of engagement, whereas internal contradictions create "permeability gaps" that allow extractive practices to penetrate the system.

Finally, the third proposition emphasizes that the adaptive capacity of the regulatory membrane is a critical determinant of regenerative vitality. Since regenerative tourism operates within volatile environments characterised by market fluctuations and environmental change, static regulatory frameworks are often ill-suited to maintain systemic balance. Adaptive regulation—defined as the capacity to revise thresholds and recalibrate priorities in response to feedback—emerges as a vital feature of resilient destinations. By institutionalising learning processes and reflexive governance, destinations can remain open to beneficial exchange while preventing systemic overload, thereby sustaining long-term vitality through evolution rather than rigid control.

Rethinking Governance and Investment Selectivity

The findings of this study offer a significant challenge to the prevailing normative benchmarks of participatory and collaborative governance frameworks within tourism studies. While stakeholder participation is widely championed as a pathway toward equity, this analysis illustrates that participation without structural sovereignty remains a procedural trap that risks reinforcing extractive dynamics. In many destination settings, communities are invited into consultative processes where the fundamental parameters of development—such as capital intensity and market integration—have already been dictated by external actors. Consequently, the regulatory membrane framework clarifies that such participatory arrangements often fail to deliver transformative outcomes because they operate at the level of process rather than power.

Within a truly regenerative paradigm, collaboration must become conditional rather than unconditional; external stakeholders must engage with the destination through locally defined regulatory conditions that privilege place-based vitality over mere market expansion.

This re-politicisation of governance carries profound implications for tourism investment and market engagement strategies. Conventional development models frequently treat investment as an unqualified positive driver of growth, yet from a living systems perspective, investment constitutes a metabolic input that must be filtered by the sovereign membrane of the community. Destinations possessing strong regulatory capacity are positioned to distinguish between regenerative investment—characterised by local ownership, long-term commitment, and systemic contribution—and extractive investment that seeks rapid returns while externalising socio-ecological costs. The reliance on voluntary sustainability certifications or industry standards is shown to be inadequate when detached from the sovereign authority to enforce selectivity. Therefore, regeneration requires a shift in focus from capital attraction to metabolic regulation, ensuring that every inflow contributes to the sustained vitality of the destination system.

Finally, the centrality of sovereignty within this framework resonates with Indigenous perspectives, where regeneration is inseparable from self-determination and absolute control over ancestral territories. However, this study suggests that sovereignty is not an exceptional condition restricted to Indigenous contexts, but a foundational requirement for any destination seeking to resist the pressures of global tourism markets. Moving toward a regenerative future thus requires more than just technical upgrades or better management practices; it demands a fundamental political reconfiguration. This redistribution of decision-making power enables local communities to act as true custodians of their own destination metabolism, effectively reclaiming the capacity to say "no" to incompatible developments as the ultimate expression of regulatory boundary-setting.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to address a critical gap in regenerative tourism scholarship: the limited understanding of how destinations regulate their exposure to global tourism pressures. By conceptualizing tourism destinations as metabolic systems and introducing community sovereignty as a regulatory membrane, this study provides a mechanism-based understanding of regeneration that extends beyond normative aspirations. The analysis demonstrates that regeneration emerges not solely from participation or the adoption of regenerative discourse but from the structural capacity of communities to govern systemic boundaries. Where regulatory membranes are robust, as illustrated by the Binyan Customary Forest (Hutan Adat Binyan) (Wanaprastha), destinations are able to selectively engage with tourism markets, transform external inputs into restorative outcomes, and sustain systemic vitality over time. Conversely, where such regulatory capacity is limited, regenerative outcomes remain difficult to achieve regardless of policy intentions, as destinations remain structurally vulnerable to the extractive dynamics of unregulated global capital.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its integration of systems thinking, governance analysis, and political economy into a coherent conceptual framework. By shifting analytical attention from participatory processes toward regulatory capacity, this article advances a more political and relational understanding of regenerative tourism governance.

Practically, the framework provides a foundation for policy development and investment decision-making by emphasizing that destination success should be assessed through metabolic balance and regulatory coherence rather than solely through growth-oriented performance indicators. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the transformative potential of regenerative tourism depends on the capacity to regulate destination systems. This perspective repositions regeneration as a governable condition—an active practice of boundary-setting and selective permeability—while providing a pathway for communities to reclaim their role as custodians of their socio-ecological futures.

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