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Destination marketing organisations: envisioning a regenerative tourism operating model

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ABSTRACT

This study critically evaluates Destination marketing organisations (DMOs) within the paradigm of regenerative tourism, shifting from conventional operating models primarily centred on marketing and economic growth to a regenerative-oriented framework. Building on the scarce tourism transition literature, this study integrates participatory normative scenario-building with the Three-Horizons framework in workshops with 26 DMO managers. It examines current DMO activities, identifies key operating characteristics, and explores how these align with either traditional or regenerative approaches. The findings highlight a need for DMOs to broaden their activities beyond traditional promotion, to include stewardship, management and regenerative marketing. Theoretically, this study contributes to advancing the understanding of regenerative tourism within DMOs, helping bridge the gap between its theoretical foundations and real-world practice. Methodologically, it provides a replicable and adaptable tool for participatory foresight in tourism governance. It contributes a manifesto offering actionable pathways to guide policymakers and DMOs in transitioning towards regenerative tourism futures.

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Introduction

The evolving landscape of the global tourism industry has resulted in challenges that have brought Destination Marketing or Management Organisations (DMOs) to a crossroads, necessitating a profound re-evaluation of their roles and operational strategies (Beritelli et al., 2014; Hristov & Zehrer, 2019). Historically conceptualised as bureaus primarily tasked with promoting tourist destinations (Pike & Page, 2014), DMOs are now confronting an array of complex challenges. The rise of critical issues, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, overtourism, commodification and escalating social conflicts, is not just challenging the traditional operational

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paradigm of DMOs but also raising questions about their relevance and efficacy in the contemporary tourism landscape (Dredge, 2016). The scrutiny of DMOs has intensified over the years, with a growing body of scholarly criticism emphasising their relative stagnation in innovation and adaptability. Many researchers and practitioners in the field of tourism have called for DMOs to extend their focus beyond merely driving tourist numbers. Demonstrations against tourism in many destinations (Barcelona, Venice, Amsterdam, Valencia, Canary Islands, Faroe Islands, etc.) have also highlighted the social unrest caused by tourism (González-Reverté & Soliguer Guix, 2024; Kassam, 2025). These protests emerge as a consequence of touristification and the social and economic inequalities generated within the local community by tourism (Milano et al., 2024) which are also calling for attention and action from DMOs. Thus, there has been a consistent push for these organisations to integrate principles of sustainability and stewardship into their core operational models (Albrecht et al., 2022; Morgan, 2012; Pechlaner et al., 2025; Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014). This shift is seen as critical not only in terms of redefining the success metrics of DMOs but also in aligning their activities with broader environmental and social objectives.

Amidst these emerging challenges, the roles of DMOs as coordinators and facilitators within tourism destinations is increasingly recognised as pivotal (Wagenseil et al., 2024). Moreover, the expanding demands for comprehensive policy implementation in line with sustainable tourism goals (UNWTO, 2024) emphasise the growing responsibility of DMOs to lead transitions towards more responsible practices. In this context, reimagining the role of DMOs, not merely as promoters of destinations but as stewards of a socially and environmentally just tourism model has become an imperative. However, growing scholarly and practitioner critiques contend that the sustainable tourism paradigm has failed to address the systemic causes of environmental degradation and social inequities, often reinforcing the status quo by focusing on minimising harm rather than enabling positive transformation (Becken & Kaur, 2022; Bellato & Pollock, 2025). This has sparked growing interest in alternative paradigms, with the paradigm of regenerative tourism becoming particularly relevant.

Regenerative tourism, which challenges the traditional growth-centric and industrial tourism paradigms, promotes a model of tourism that not only aims to mitigate negative impacts (as sustainable tourism does) but actively revitalises both human and non-human communities and restores ecological processes (Becken & Kaur, 2022; Bellato et al., 2023). According to Becken and Kaur (2022) comparative framework, regenerative tourism departs from both traditional and sustainable approaches by redefining success around net-positive outcomes and systemic transformation. Through this regenerative mindset, DMOs are inspired to move beyond models that perpetuate environmental degeneration and social inequalities. Instead, they are called to design strategies that rebuild, restore, and re-enliven the health, culture and sense of place for all beings (Kung, 2022). Despite the growing recognition of this paradigm shift, the literature offers limited insights into the transition process through which DMOs can operationalise regenerative tourism in practice. Existing research has instead extensively explored the prospective role of DMOs within the boundaries of the sustainable tourism paradigm (Beritelli et al., 2014; Morgan, 2012; Serra et al., 2017; Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014). If DMOs are to translate regenerative tourism from

normative ambition to enacted practice, closer attention is needed to how such transitions unfold in real-world contexts.

To address this gap, our study adopts a novel future-oriented methodology that combines two complementary tools: "participatory normative scenario-building" and the "three-horizon framework." The former enables the co-creation of plausible and value-driven future visions through structured, collaborative dialogue among stakeholders (Iwaniec et al., 2020). The latter offers a temporal structure for mapping transitions across three interconnected stages: business-as-usual (Horizon 1), the desired future (Horizon 3) and the space of transition and innovation (Horizon 2) (Sharpe et al., 2016). This methodological approach is designed to provide a comprehensive exploration of the potential transformative roles of DMOs in the context of regenerative tourism. The reasons for using this methodology are twofold: first, it allows for an open-minded exploration of what a regenerative tourism operating model for DMOs might look like, going beyond the well-established concept of sustainable tourism; second, it enables the co-creation of the action domains that are required to help accelerate such change.

The research is grounded in the insights gathered from two participatory, future-oriented workshops conducted in May and July 2022, involving a diverse group of 26 DMO managers from across Europe, a region where protests against "touristification" have been particularly pronounced, making the shift toward regenerative-oriented models even more compelling. These workshops were instrumental in eliciting a range of perspectives and experiences, thereby enriching the research with multi-dimensional insights. The participatory nature of the workshops aligns with the ethos of regenerative tourism, emphasising collaborative, inclusive and stakeholder-driven approaches to tourism development.

This study makes significant contributions in two key areas. First, it advances our understanding of how DMOs can evolve and adapt to play a crucial role in the systemic change needed within the tourism sector, particularly in the context of destination regeneration. It not only advances understanding of how regenerative tourism can be enacted within DMOs, thereby bridging the gap between its theoretical foundations and real-world practice, but also outlines a manifesto that sets out actionable pathways to support policymakers and DMOs in transitioning towards regenerative tourism operating models. Second, it contributes methodologically by providing a detailed guide on how participatory normative scenario-building and the three-horizon framework can be effectively combined to explore organisational change towards desirable and regenerative futures in the tourism industry.

Literature review

Destination marketing organisations (DMOs) and the need for transformation

DMOs were originally conceived as organisations tasked with promoting and attracting visitors to destinations (Hall & Veer, 2016). Historically, their primary objective has been to enhance tourism-driven economic growth, with success measured through key performance indicators such as visitor numbers, overnight stays, and tourism-related expenditure (Morgan, 2012). However, this growth-centric model has been increasingly

challenged by scholars and practitioners who argue that DMOs must evolve to address broader socio-environmental challenges such as climate change, social inequalities, overtourism, and biodiversity loss (Dredge, 2016; Pollock, 2010; Rivera et al., 2024). As tourism destinations face mounting environmental and social pressures, there is growing recognition that DMOs should transition from being primarily marketing-driven organisations to entities that actively contribute to the resilience and regeneration of the places they serve. This has led to calls for a paradigm shift in how DMOs define their purpose and responsibility within destination management (Albrecht et al., 2022; Morgan, 2012; Pechlaner et al., 2025; Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014).

The debate over whether the "M" in "DMO" stands for "marketing" or "management" has been central to the discussion about their evolving role. Traditionally, DMOs have been predominantly focused on destination branding, promotion, and visitor attraction, while destination management activities such as infrastructure development, environmental stewardship, and community engagement have been treated as secondary or external concerns (Presenza & Sheehan, 2005; Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014). In response to these critiques, some scholars advocate for the reconceptualisation of Destination Marketing and Management Organisations (DMMOs), thus fully integrating responsibilities for both management and marketing roles (Adeyinka-Ojo et al., 2014). However, others argue that this cohesive definition of DMMOs remains idealistic, as most DMOs lack the political autonomy, financial resources, and governance mandates required to take on expanded managerial roles, such as mediating social conflicts between residents and tourists or implementing environmental regulations to mitigate tourism's ecological footprint (Pike & Page, 2014).

Despite the growing recognition of the need for transformation, DMOs continue to face significant structural and operational challenges. One persistent barrier is the lack of human and financial resources, a challenge that intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, further constraining DMOs' ability to innovate (Gretzel et al., 2006; Zainal-Abidin et al., 2023). Additionally, most DMOs remain highly dependent on government funding, which exposes them to political influence, funding instability, and policy shifts, making long-term strategic planning difficult (Line & Wang, 2017). This political reliance also raises concerns about accountability and transparency, as DMO strategies may be influenced by short-term electoral priorities rather than long-term goals (Pike, 2016). The wide variability in DMO governance models, financial structures, and institutional mandates further complicates their ability to follow industry and academic recommendations and requires different and context-specific decision-making strategies (Zainal-Abidin et al., 2023). Lastly, many DMOs continue to operate with short-term planning mindset, which undermines efforts to institutionalise sustainability and regenerative tourism initiatives (Crabolu et al., 2023). For example, Crabolu et al. (2023) found that short-term political cycles hinder the long-term implementation of sustainability measurement frameworks, limiting their effectiveness in driving systematic change.

Although these challenges remain widespread, some DMOs have begun experimenting with alternative governance and operational models. For instance, several European destinations have adopted sustainable tourism indicators schemes, using a data-driven approach to track and manage environmental, social and economic impacts to make evidence-based decisions (Torres-Delgado et al., 2023), although their attempts

to do so have proven to be quite challenging (Crabolu et al. 2024; Font et al., 2023). Others have leveraged digital innovation to foster sustainability, such as the development of online platforms to enhance stakeholder collaboration (Zainal-Abidin et al., 2023), and the implementation of blockchain technology for measuring their water and carbon footprints (UNWTO, 2021). More radical transformations include Vancouver Island DMO's decision to restructure itself as a social enterprise, reinvesting all tourism revenues into local communities, environmental restoration, and cultural initiatives (44VI, 2022).

As DMOs face increasing pressure to move beyond growth-oriented strategies, regenerative tourism provides a compelling framework for reimagining their role in destination governance. Rather than functioning solely as marketing entities, DMOs are increasingly positioned as facilitators of regenerative change, fostering the long-term resilience of destinations by embedding tourism within social-ecological systems. The shift from sustainability to regeneration challenges DMOs to adopt governance models that actively restore ecological integrity, empower local communities, and co-create meaningful tourism experiences that contribute to place-based well-being. The following section expands on the conceptual foundations of regenerative tourism, outlining how it differs from traditional sustainability models and examining its potential to drive transformative change across tourism governance structures.

Regenerative tourism

Originating from the regenerative development movement, regenerative tourism is an emergent paradigm that seeks to generate net positive effects and to increase the regenerative capacity of both human societies and ecosystems (Bellato et al., 2024). It has emerged in response to growing disillusionment with the sustainable tourism narrative which, after decades of implementation, has been criticised for producing only marginal changes to the wider "business as usual" model (Dwyer, 2018; Pollock, 2019). Unlike sustainability approaches that centre on minimising harm, regenerative tourism advocates for continuous adaptation, renewal, and co-evolution of tourism within broader social-ecological systems (Becken & Kaur, 2022; Reed, 2007). This shift acknowledges that destinations are not static units to be "managed," but evolving living systems whose long-term viability require dynamic governance approaches that enable resilience-building and socio-ecological flourishing. The urgency of such shift id underscored by evidence that the planet has entered an overshoot phase, with six of the nine planetary boundaries already transgressed (Richardson et al., 2023). Tourism has massively contributed to this overshoot through its impacts on climate change, biodiversity loss, overtourism, and the deterioration of labour conditions (Cave & Dredge, 2020; Dwyer, 2018). Against this backdrop, regenerative tourism reframes tourism development as a lever for long-term socio-ecological flourishing rather than as a sector to be rendered "less harmful."

As shown in Figure 1 (Becken & Kaur, 2022; Reed, 2007), regenerative tourism moves beyond sustainable tourism, which primarily seeks neutrality or reduced negative impacts. Sustainable tourism strives for a balance between economic growth, social progress and environmental protection, by minimising the negative impacts of

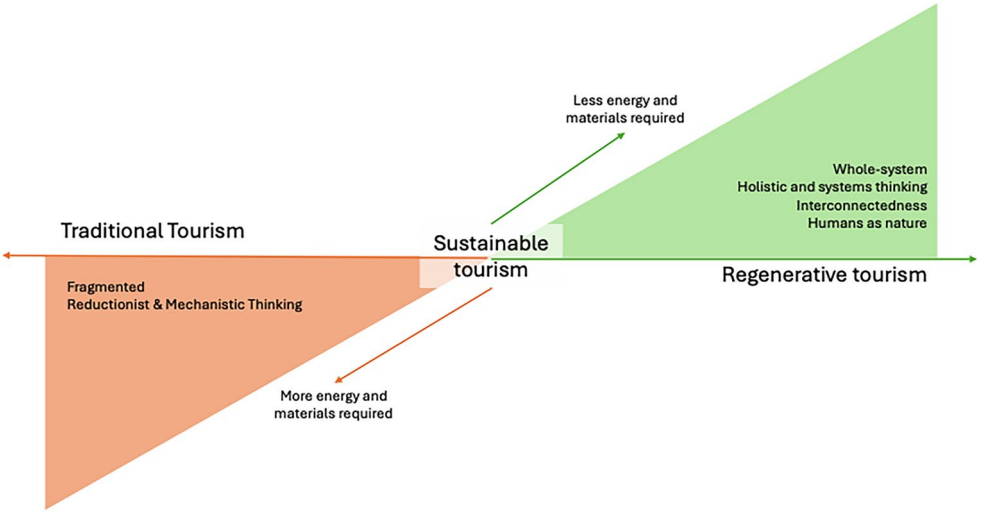

Figure 1. Traditional, sustainable and regenerative tourism (Adapted from Becken & Kaur, 2022; Reed, 2007).

tourism (Sharpley, 2020). Although this approach has undoubtfully reduced negative impacts, for example through improved resource efficiency (carbon, water, and waste reduction) and through mitigation of social impacts (Taveras-Dalmau, 2024), these measures alone have prevented progressive destination degeneration (Zaman et al., 2023). A key limitation is the tendency to treat tourism-related problems as externalities to be managed, rather than addressing the underlying root causes, such as values, worldviews, and governance structures that reproduce unsustainable trajectories and constrain system change (Dredge, 2021). Instead, regenerative tourism adopts a generative approach, focusing on restoration, renewal, and the revitalisation of ecosystems and communities as a pathway towards a thriving future (Bellato et al., 2023).

A core principle of regenerative tourism is to embed tourism within the natural rhythms of living systems, so that destinations regenerate through tourism rather than being depleted by it (Hutchison, 2021). This requires shifting from an anthropocentric view of tourism to a biocentric or whole-systems perspective, where nature and culture are not separate from tourism but integral to how tourism is designed, governed and lived (Becken & Coghlan, 2024). In this framing, the "community" is expanded beyond humans to include living beings and non-living entities (e.g. rivers, mountains, and forests), emphasising relationships of reciprocity and care (Becken & Coghlan, Becken and Coghlan 2024). This shift from a fragmented problem-solving to whole-systems thinking reflects a deeper and needed cultural transformation in tourism development and management (Hajarrahmah et al., 2024).

While regenerative tourism has been extensively conceptualised, its translation into practice remains an ongoing challenge. Nevertheless, a small but growing set of destinations and organisations have begun experimenting with governance and operational models consistent with regenerative principles. For example, Visit Flanders has adopted the "Travel to Tomorrow" initiative, shifting from a growth-oriented tourism model to one that prioritises community well-being, cultural vitality, and ecological restoration through participatory governance and co-creation with local stakeholders

(Bellato et al., 2023). Playa Viva in Mexico exemplifies regenerative tourism in action by embedding regenerative agriculture, permaculture design, and ecosystem restoration into its tourism framework, ensuring that tourism actively enhances biodiversity, supports community development, and fosters cultural renewal (Bellato et al., 2023; Pollock, 2019). In the Waitaki region of New Zealand, Māori Indigenous knowledge has been integrated into destination governance, ensuring that tourism development aligns with natural cycles and Indigenous stewardship principles (Fusté-Forné & Hussain, 2022). Finally, destinations such as Scotland and Hawaii have explored governance models that position tourism as a regenerative practice, with explicit attention to long-term ecosystem stewardship and cultural regeneration (Bellato & Pollock, 2025). Taken together, these examples illustrate a gradual, though still uneven, transition from extractive models toward regenerative, place-based strategies that seek to regenerate both people and places.

Regenerative tourism also resonates with degrowth thinking, which advocate for a contraction of tourism activities that promote over-consumption and the exploitation of human and non-human resources (Fletcher et al., 2019). In this framing, tourism should be reoriented towards activities that enhance biodiversity and conservation, and that support health, well-being, personal development, and critical thinking (Fletcher et al., 2019). Stewardship is central to these principles, whereby the destination host becomes a proactive champion, steward and custodian of natural and cultural contexts (Dwyer, 2018). Similarly, Dredge (2021) calls for a grassroots approach that effectively captures community perspectives and residents' ambitions, counteracting the more common top-down, pro-growth decision-making models that prioritise economic return over socio-ecological outcomes. This aligns with Reed's (2007) argument for place-based approaches that attempt to understand how systems function within specific geographical contexts. Incorporating regenerative principles into tourism governance, is therefore inherently placed-based and adaptive, requiring long-term planning that takes is grounded in each destination's distinctive ecological, cultural, and economic characteristics (Reed, 2007).

Based on the different operating models presented (traditional, sustainable, and regenerative), we use the comparative framework developed by Becken and Kaur (2022) and shown in Table 1 to guide our research design and analyses. While regenerative tourism continues to evolve as a theoretical paradigm, its translation into destination governance, particularly through DMOs, offers new opportunities for systemic change. However, there remains limited evidence on how regenerative principles are operationalised in tourism governance, and little is known about how DMOs navigate the transition from traditional to regenerative operating models over time. This is partly because DMO's capacity to pursue such shifts is often constrained by funding dependencies, electoral cycles, and performance regimes that reward short-term visibility rather than long-term stewardship (Line & Wang, 2017; Pike, 2016). These conditions also intensify concerns around accountability and transparency: when mandates are politically contingent and success metrics are dominated by volume-based indicators, it becomes difficult to justify, and sustain, investments in regenerative outcomes that unfold across longer time horizons (Crabolu et al., 2023). In this context, regenerative tourism's emphasis on inclusive, holistic and long-term place-based wellbeing is not only a normative aspiration; it also has concrete

Table 1. Comparison of traditional, sustainable, and regenerative tourism (Becken & Kaur, 2022, p. 55).

Characteristics	traditional tourism	Sustainable tourism	Regenerative tourism
Scale	Global and national: Decision making powers are centralised at national or global levels (e.g. multinational corporations).	Cross-scale: Destination needs are considered in national and global decision making.	Place-based: Decision-making is collaborative and recognises place and its unique geography, history, culture, local environment, and changing human needs.
Underpinning values and belief	Human above Nature: Humans make use of natural and cultural resources to extract economic benefit.	Human around Nature: Tourism seen as economic activity, but seeking to internalise external costs.	Human in Nature: Tourism occurs within the biosphere and socio-cultural systems and understand/respects system dynamics and boundaries.
Ideology and solutions	Capitalist: Emerging problems are addressed by investing more capital and/or over-extracting resources to stimulate growth as a solution.	Technological and managerial: Improved technology and management are preferred solutions to minimise negative impacts and increase positive ones.	Innovative, Adaptive, Responsive: Allow for entrepreneurship and support small business, or alternative business models (e.g. social enterprise). Adapting to change and dynamics of living systems is the norm.
Understanding of wealth	Commercial return: Maximise wealth for single-dimensional parameters and small number of players.	Commercial – damage control: Allocates resource towards generating benefit for non-commercial return, but focus remains on creating financial wealth.	Multiple well-beings: Seeks a balance across multiple wealths and promotes fair distribution of benefits.
Systemic perspective	Compartmentalised: Single focus, fragmented approach on individual parts of a system.	Industry Focused: Industry needs are understood as being part of a 'sector'; these precede community and environmental needs.	Holistic: Tourism is a sub system that functions within a larger system. The health of all human systems depend on each other and the health of the natural system.
Organising principles	Accumulation: Maximisation of system outputs for human benefit.	Efficiency: Systems are driven towards increasing efficiency.	Biomimicry: Principles such as redundancy, abundance, and regulating feedback loops are important. Learning from nature and collaborating with it are central.
Participation	Elite: A small number of stakeholders have disproportionate levels of influence.	Participatory: Input from a wide range of stakeholders is sought before decisions are made.	Distributed – networked: Participation involving all parts of the larger whole in ways that empower people. Everyone provides their unique contribution towards system health.
Knowledge base	Disciplinary: Focused on neoclassical economics and management.	Multi-disciplinary: Includes a broad range of disciplines including engineering and environmental management.	Trans-disciplinary: Knowledge comes in many forms, including Western science, indigenous, and practical knowledge.

implications for destination governance, shaping what DMOs prioritise, how success is measured, and how responsibilities are allocated over time (Mathisen et al., 2022).

To engage with these temporal and governance tension, this study draws on futures-oriented methods that create structured spaces for anticipatory knowledge and collective deliberation. In tourism, futures approaches have been used to navigate uncertainty, broaden strategic imagination, and support systemic change in complex policy domains (Postma, 2015; Postma et al., 2017; Postma & Yeoman, 2021).

However, futures methods remain largely absent from regenerative tourism research on DMO transitions. In particular, scenarios provide coherent narratives about the future of a place or a situation with the aim to create anticipatory knowledge (Iwaniec et al., 2020). In sustainability science, scenario development techniques have been used both exploratively—to predict likely futures from past and present trends—and narratively—to examine desirable and dystopian scenarios shaped by diverse human values (Durance & Godet, 2010). In tourism, the majority of studies have so far focused on explorative approaches (Dubois & Ceron, 2007; Seyitoğlu & Costa, 2024), and only a few narrative approach studies exist (Gössling et al., 2012; Postma, 2015). Scholars opting for a narrative approach have increasingly incorporated participatory techniques into their studies, to increase stakeholder engagement and accountability (Gössling et al., 2012; Iwaniec et al., 2020; Pereira et al., 2018), although the use of participatory techniques in organisational settings is not widespread. For DMOs, participatory narrative scenarios are particularly relevant because they can make explicit the value commitments and trade-offs embedded in alternative operating models, while strengthening legitimacy through transparent, collective sense-making and clearer responsibility allocation (Gössling et al., 2012; Pereira et al., 2018; Postma et al., 2017).

To connect future narratives to the dynamics of transition, scenario-building can be paired with the Three Horizons framework, which supports discussion of how dominant systems persist, how alternatives emerge, and how innovations can be mobilised and contested over time (Fazey et al., 2020; Sharpe et al., 2016). The Three-Horizon Framework is a relatively new framework used in complex contexts to enable transition from business as usual to an alternative future, while retaining valuable present features (Sharpe et al., 2016). Its growing application across various fields (Johansson et al., 2022; Schaal et al., 2023; Sharpe et al., 2016) has not yet been extended to the field of tourism. By distinguishing between the dominant present (H1), the transitional space of experimentation and reconfiguration (H2), and the desired future (H3), Three Horizons provides a practical structure for linking long-term regenerative ambitions to near-term actions, obstacles, and enabling conditions (Sharpe et al., 2016). These futures-oriented methods can thus be understood as a form of complexity-aware design, in which interventions are co-created to address wicked problems through iterative, context-sensitive processes rather than linear planning (Crabolu, 2025). This pairing is therefore well-suited to DMOs as it helps them identify pathways for transitioning from extractive tourism models towards regenerative, place-based strategies that are consistent with regenerative tourism's call for inclusive, holistic, and long-term commitments to well-being (Mathisen et al., 2022). Building on this conceptual foundation, our study aims to bridge the limited evidence on how regenerative principles are operationalised through destination governance by employing futures-oriented methods and Becken and Kaur (2022) model to generate empirical insights into the role of DMOs in facilitating regenerative tourism practices and promoting long-term destination resilience. In doing so, we respond to Bellato et al. (2024) call to advance regenerative tourism research and facilitate practice transformation through knowledge co-production between academics and practitioners.

Research methods

Similar to most futures-oriented methods, this study adopts an interpretative, constructivist philosophical view, in which knowledge claims are understood as contingent on context, culture (Kuusi et al., 2015). This aligns with what has been termed "Interpretative Foresight" (Jakil, 2011): an approach that examines how a particular future has become universal in certain cultures (e.g., the growth-oriented future) and how alternative futures (e.g., sustainability or regenerative-oriented futures) can be surfaced and explored. By comparing alternative futures, decision-makers recognise that prevailing models reflect particular values and power relations, rather than universal truths. This epistemological orientation is therefore well suited to interrogating and potentially reshaping governance and organisational systems to support transformations towards sustainable development (Jakil, 2011).

In line with interpretative foresight, in this study, we combined participatory normative scenario-building with the Three-Horizon Framework (Schaal et al., 2023; Sharpe et al., 2016). Participatory normative scenarios enable stakeholders to co-create contrasting narratives anchored in explicit values, while Three Horizons provides a temporal structure to explore persistence, emergence, and transition dynamics from present dominant practices to desired futures. Empirically, the study is based on two sequential participatory workshops with participants from the DMOcracy project, launched in December 2021. The broader DMOcracy project aimed to support European urban DMOs in rethinking their roles within local governance structures and exploring more participatory approaches to tourism planning. The workshops reported here formed one component of that wider process and were designed specifically to elicit DMO perspectives on operating-model change under contrasting future logics. Workshop 1 generated two value-driven narratives (a "business-as-usual" trajectory and a "regenerative" trajectory), and Workshop 2 mobilised those narratives to identify transitional innovations, obstacles, enabling conditions, and responsibility allocations across horizons. The workshop design aligns with complexity-aware design principles by creating conditions for collective creativity and generative emergence through structured dialogue and co-production (Crabolu, 2025).

Becken and Kaur (2022) comparison of traditional, sustainable, and regenerative tourism served as a sensitising analytical reference for the research design and interpretation, rather than as a prescriptive teaching framework imposed on participants. At the start of each workshop, participants received a brief orientation to the broad distinctions between traditional growth-centric tourism logics and regenerative aspirations (e.g., moving from impact minimisation toward net-positive, place-based outcomes), primarily to establish a shared vocabulary and avoid conceptual ambiguity in subsequent exercises. However, consistent with the study's inductive intent and philosophical stance, we deliberately avoided extensive conceptual instruction or evaluation of "regenerative literacy," because foregrounding a specific academic framework risked steering participants toward rehearsing theory rather than articulating their own contextual understandings and tensions.

Importantly, while the project discourse emphasised community-facing and participatory ambitions, the participants in our workshops were primarily DMO managers and tourism governance actors, alongside a small number of allied organisations (e.g., city council, consultancy, NGO, monitoring scheme). As shown in Table 2, the study

therefore captures an organisational and sector-facing perspective on transition, providing a platform for DMOs to critically reflect on their mandates, capabilities, and constraints, rather than a fully bottom-up process in which residents/community representatives directly shaped the futures articulated. This boundary conditions the claims that can be made from the study: the outputs should be read as DMO and industry-centred imaginaries of regenerative transition, which may diverge from resident priorities and lived experiences. This limitation is addressed explicitly in the limitations section. The researchers participated in the project as knowledge and expert partners, contributing expertise in participatory methods and destination governance. Across the two workshops, the researchers acted as facilitators and co-facilitators, designed the prompts and templates, and ensured procedural consistency while allowing participants to populate the content.

The first project workshop (Workshop 1) was held in Copenhagen as part of a 2-day event in May 2022 and lasted 120 min. As shown in Table 2, 16 participants attended Workshop 1, representing European urban DMOs (13), a European city council (1), an international sustainable tourism monitoring scheme (1), and an international consultancy company for destinations (1). The second workshop (Workshop 2) was held online in July 2022 with a duration of 90 min. In total, 18 participants from the DMOcracy project attended, representing European urban DMOs (12), an international sustainable tourism monitoring scheme (2), an international consultancy company for destinations (2), an urban DMO alliance (1), and an international NGO (1). Although only four individuals participated in both workshops, each DMO was represented by multiple staff members across the project. As such, continuity was maintained at the organisational level. Because representatives from a given DMO drew on shared organisational priorities and place-specific experience of the same destination, these personnel changes did not materially disrupt the continuity of discussions or outputs.

Workshop 1: participatory normative scenario-building

Inspired by a unique study on participatory, narrative scenarios in organisational contexts (van den Berg et al., 2021), we adopted this approach to structure Workshop 1. This study aimed to develop two contrasting scenarios in coherence with Becken and Kaur (2022) comparative framework: (1) a dystopian scenario rooted in traditional tourism growth values, and (2) a desired scenario based on regenerative tourism values. During Workshop 1, participants were grouped and provided with two flipchart papers (one for each scenario) that contained targeted questions to translate values into concrete DMO operational features (see Figure 2). Scenario 1 stated: "In this scenario, Tourism Growth governs DMOs," whereas Scenario 2 stated "In this scenario, Regenerative Tourism governs DMOs." The group conversations were recorded and transcribed by the lead author. The results served as the groundwork for designing Workshop 2, using the Three-Horizons Framework.

Workshop 2: the three-Horizon framework

As shown in Figure 2, we adapted the Three Horizon Framework to our study to map time across three development stages—the present, the transition and the

Table 2. Workshop participant information.

N	Participant	Workshops attended	Gender	Geographic location	Position
1	DMO	Workshop 1 & 2	Male	Sweden	Marketing Manager
2	DMO	Workshop 1	Female	Denmark	Project Manager
3	DMO	Workshop 1	Female	Denmark	Senior Manager
4	DMO	Workshop 1 & 2	Female	France	Responsible Tourism Officer
5	DMO	Workshop 1	Female	France	Promotion Officer
6	DMO	Workshop 1 & 2	Male	Greenland	Senior Marketing Analyst
7	DMO	Workshop 1 & 2	Female	Belgium	Product Expert Sustainability & Accessibility
8	DMO	Workshop 1	Female	Estonia	Marketing Manager
9	DMO	Workshop 1	Female	Spain	Head of Institutional Operations
10	DMO	Workshop 1	Male	The Netherlands	Director
11	DMO	Workshop 1	Female	The Netherlands	Managing Director Insights & Marketing
12	DMO	Workshop 1	Male	The Netherlands	Programme Manager – Destination Development
13	DMO	Workshop 1	Female	Norway	Account Manager
14	DMO	Workshop 2	Female	Israel	Director of Tourism
15	DMO	Workshop 2	Female	France	Director of Tourism
16	DMO	Workshop 2	Female	Denmark	Manager
17	DMO	Workshop 2	Male	Greece	Digital Manager
18	DMO	Workshop 2	Female	UK	Head of Business
19	DMO	Workshop 2	Female	Norway	Sustainability Project Manager
20	International consultant	Workshop 1	Male	USA	Director Research and Online Marketing
21	International consultant	Workshop 2	Female	Denmark	Chief Research Officer
22	International consultant	Workshop 2	Male	UK	Head of Strategic Communication
23	International consultant	Workshop 2	Female	Denmark	CEO
24	City Council	Workshop 1	Male	Denmark	Director
25	International Sustainability Indicator Scheme	Workshop 1	Male	UK	Managing Director
26	International Sustainability Indicator Scheme	Workshop 2	Female	Norway	Senior Changemaker
	Facilitators				Role
1	Researcher	Workshop 1 & 2	Female	–	Facilitator
2	Researcher	Workshop 2	Female	–	Co-facilitator
3	Researcher	Workshop 1 & 2	Male	–	Co-facilitator

future—against the dominance of certain DMO operating models. The framework includes three different pathways of transitions (Fazey et al., 2020; Johansson et al., 2022; Schaal et al., 2023; Sharpe et al., 2016):

- The first horizon (H1 in red) reflects the current, dominant (yet, not fit-for) future operating model represented by the Tourism Growth scenario discussed in the previous workshop. In the future, there will be features of the traditional model that will be retained and incorporated into the desired operating model.
- The third horizon (H3 in green) denotes the desired regenerative tourism operating model, as discussed in the previous workshop. At present, this model is only emerging with a few, small-scale examples in existence.
- The second horizon (H2 in blue) captures the transition area and includes all the disruptive innovations and actions that impact this shift.

This workshop was conducted online combining Teams and Mural for interactive participation. Participants were sent instructions a week before the session, including

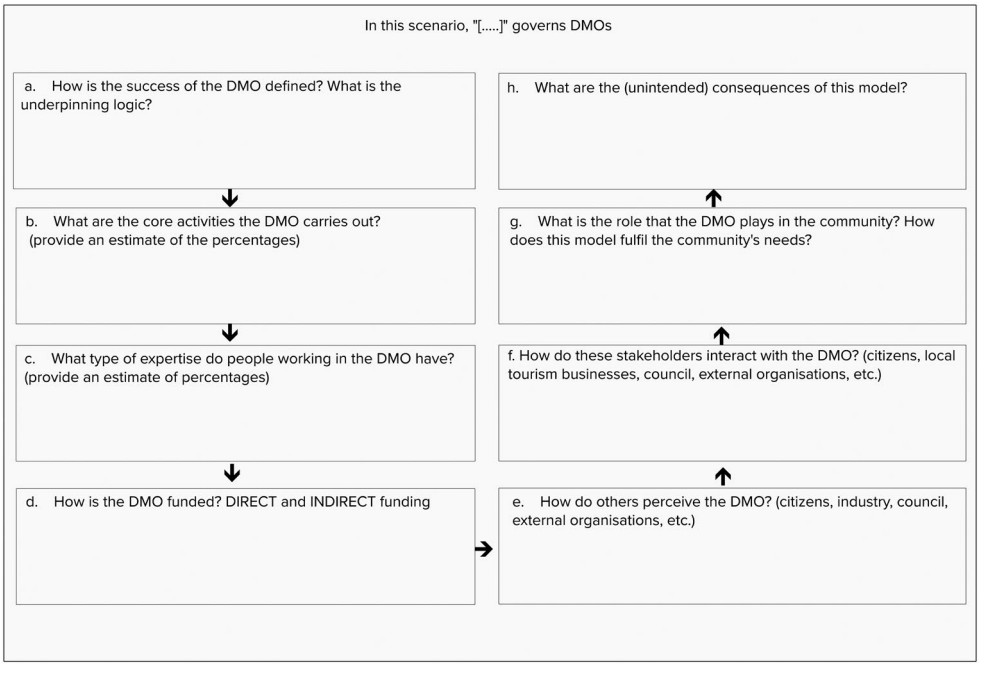

Figure 2. Flipchart content of participatory normative scenario-building.

an introduction to the three-horizon framework and an invitation to contribute individually to the questions included in each quadrant (see Figure 3). Quadrants 1 and 2 were pre-populated with the results from the first workshop. Respectively, the findings from the first workshop were analysed to highlight the operating structure under the "Tourism Growth" model (Quadrant 1), and the "Regenerative Model" (Quadrant 2). Quadrant 3 ("what changes are already happening?") was pre-populated with the key examples drawn from the presentations and discussions during the 2-day event in Copenhagen, such as newly established resident forums and citizen panels, pilot sustainable tourism indicator schemes, experiments with data-driven visitor management, and early attempts to reframe destination strategies around resident well-being rather than visitor numbers.

The workshop started with a brief introduction about the aim of the session (10 min). Quadrants that had already been completed (1, 2, and 3) were summarised, and time for additional contributions was provided. The remainder of the session adopted a world café format as it fosters "collective creativity" by using dialogic infrastructures that allow ideas to build across groups (Crabolu, 2025). Participants were organised in three different conversation spaces (virtual breakout rooms), each comprising six participants. Each space focused on one of the remaining quadrants: Q4. What do we want to retain from the traditional model? Q5A. What are the obstacles that could hinder the transition? Q5C. What are the enablers that could facilitate the transition?. After 10 min of structured brainstorming, participants rotated to a new conversation space to discuss the next topic; each rotation therefore entailed both a change of breakout room and a shift in discussion focus. The authors acted as host at each of the conversation spaces, synthesising and relaying the key insights

generated by the preceding group with the incoming participants to support continuity and cumulative sense-making. This cycle was repeated three times, so that all participants contributed to, and iteratively refined, each quadrant. Participants were then brought together in the plenary room to share the findings from each quadrant. Next, the same format was then applied to address the final quadrant Q5B (What needs to happen to make things change, and by whom?). Finally, the results were shared in the plenary session.

Data analysis

Group conversations from both workshops were audio-recorded and transcribed following the explicit permission of the study participants. The textual data resulting from the transcripts and the written content from the Mural platform were analysed following a generative approach (Fazey et al., 2020). Accordingly, items associated with each horizon were coded inductively to identify emergent properties of the dominant and desired futures, yet following the methodological structure outlined in Figures 2 and 3. Through this coding process, we distilled a set of recurring tensions articulated by participants, such as growth vs. regeneration, traditional marketing logics vs what some participants described as more "regenerative" forms of marketing, single-disciplinary vs. transdisciplinary expertise, fragmented vs. inclusive stakeholders' interaction, which were then used to characterise the contrasts between Horizon 1 and Horizon 2. Trustworthiness was ensured following the Decrop (2004) evaluation criteria, which include: Credibility (internal validity), Transferability (external validity), Dependability (reliability), and Confirmability (objectivity). Keeping these criteria in mind, the analysis process was discussed amongst the three authors and preliminary findings were shared with project beneficiaries (for credibility and confirmability). While interpretative foresight celebrates subjectivity, a varied pool of participants,

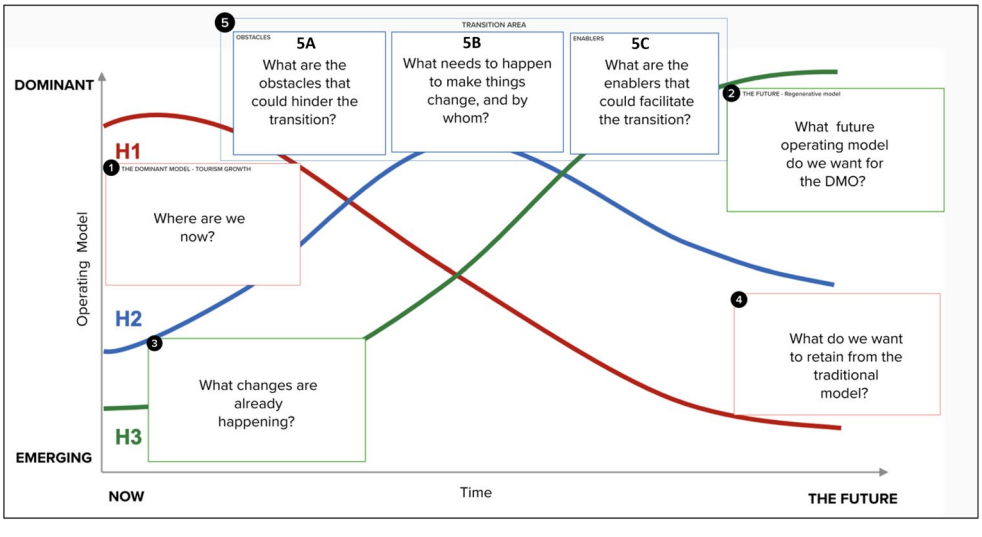

Figure 3. The Three-Horizons Framework adapted from Fazey et al. (2020).

representing DMOs across Europe and also international expert consultants, was recruited to ensure transferability. Finally, dependability was guaranteed by articulating in detail the workshop procedures. Considering the reflexive and interpretative approach of this study, the researchers' positions were mixed—acting at times as insiders due to their experience in the researched world (sustainability in tourism) and at other times as outsiders, to distance themselves during the group conversations. The author team comprises academics with long-standing engagement in sustainable and regenerative tourism, destination governance, and collaborations with DMOs in European contexts. This embedded expertise provided a contextually informed understanding of the policy and organisational context, but also carried the risk of shaping how questions were framed and how participants' contributions were interpreted. To enhance transparency and validity, the team engaged in ongoing reflexive discussions before and after the workshops on how their assumptions might influence the analysis, and deliberately foregrounded participants' own wording in the coding and interpretation process.

Results and discussion

Horizon 1

During the workshops, the participants critically examined the prevailing operational paradigm of DMOs. The consensus was that DMOs remain entrenched in a marketing-centric model, primarily aimed at economic metrics, which fall short in addressing modern tourism challenges (Dredge, 2016; Morgan, 2012). The participants acknowledged the economic pursuits of the industry—wherein the imperative of filling accommodation persists—and admitted this narrowly defined measurement of "success" predominantly influences DMO activities (Table 3). In line with Becken and Kaur (2022, p. 55) comparison, this ideology is entirely capitalistic, in that resources are invested to stimulate growth in tourist arrivals. This organisational model is increasingly seen as unfit for future challenges, as it inadequately addresses the complexities and future multi-faceted nature of contemporary tourism, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, over-tourism and social conflicts (Pollock, 2010; Presenza & Sheehan, 2005; Rivera et al., 2024). The critique extended to the internal composition of DMOs, which are predominantly composed of marketing professionals, leaving only a minority in roles like project managers, analysts and facilitators. This DMO knowledge configuration narrows the inclusivity of our approach and highlights a predominant focus on neo-classic economics and management, aligning with what Becken and Kaur (2022) previously expressed regarding traditional tourism.

Participants highlighted the political entanglement of DMO decision-making linked to public funding. As expressed by one participant, "*They [politicians] want their ambitions to be fulfilled*," which often translated to aspirations like being "*in the top 10 European destinations*." This focus has rendered DMO's roles within their communities somewhat opaque, as another participant mentioned: *"We [DMO] are quite invisible to them [citizens]. They think we are merely map providers"*—pointing to a disconnection with the public. Similar concerns were raised in relation to other stakeholder groups, which participants described as frequently reluctant to collaborate. This is

Table 3. DMO features in traditional operating model as identified in the data.

DMO features	Traditional model
Success	Growth in the number of tourists, overnights, length of stay, jobs and expenditure.
Activities	Promotion and marketing are the core activities of the DMO. Minor project-based activities are supported (e.g., place-making, research and development, conventions and events).
Expertise	Mainly marketeers, with a minority of project managers, data analysts and facilitators.
Funding	Publicly funded. Smaller proportion from external independent projects or private sector.
Stakeholders' perceptions of DMO*	Citizens: DMO is seen as the tourist's information office. Industry: DMO is seen as a publicly funded entity which should provide services. and support to the industry without the payment of additional membership fees. Council: DMO is seen as an organisation that provides information on the tourism industry. Other stakeholders do not understand the role of DMO.
Stakeholders' interactions with DMO	Fragmented interaction with each stakeholder.

*Note: Perceptions of participants regarding how they believe different stakeholders perceive the DMO.

consequential for regenerative tourism because it exposes a practical tension: while regenerative tourism is often framed around inclusion and plural participation, the empirical reality reported here includes refusal and disengagement as normal system conditions, not exceptions (Dredge, 2021; Mathisen et al., 2022). Participants associated this with a fragmented engagement model, where stakeholder groups interact with the DMO separately rather than through sustained cross-actor deliberation. Participants also described a divided governance landscape. Municipal councils were seen to shape project oversight and strategy formulation, reflecting the influence of political agendas. By contrast, industry actors were portrayed as lobbying for more tourism-centric activities. This mindset demonstrates the presence of extractive relationships between human systems (Bellato & Pollock, 2025). Rooted in a mechanistic and reductionist mindset, this organisational setup is characterised by fragmented stakeholders, who regenerative scholars metaphorically describe as 'individual cogs in a machine, contributing to the conveyor belt production line that the mass tourism product came to be" (Schmidt Rojas et al., 2025).

Transitioning to a regenerative paradigm requires not only envisioning an ideal operating model but also acknowledging the worthwhile elements of the current paradigm. As part of Horizon 1, it is essential to identify the elements from the current model that can be retained for the future model (as outlined in Quadrant 4 of Figure 3). Workshop participants have identified four essential activities to retain: marketing and communication, capacity building, data collection, and municipal relations.

First, marketing emerged as a central point of contention among participants, reflecting broader debates highlighted in the literature regarding the interpretation of the "M" in DMO (Destination Marketing or Management Organisation). Specifically, discussions centred on whether marketing should be retained as DMO's primary function. There was consensus on the necessity to retain marketing and communication as primary activities, but participants argued that these functions should be redirected towards attracting visitors who balance a low environmental footprint with beneficial economic and social contributions, often framed as a shift towards "quality over quantity." This included using marketing to align expectations with place-based limits, encourage longer stays and lower-impact mobilities, redistribute visitation spatially and seasonally, and promote experiences that deliver stronger social and

ecological value. Importantly, this is not simply a rhetorical gloss on growth: it signals an attempt to repurpose marketing from volume-seeking promotion to boundary-setting and behavioural steering within a finite socio-ecological system. In that sense, participants' claims sit at the intersection of post-growth and regenerative debates: rather than treating "marketing" as inherently growth-oriented, they conceptualised it as an instrument through which destinations can operationalise "enough" by communicating limits, discouraging extractive demand, and supporting forms of visitation compatible with local wellbeing and ecosystem integrity (Coyle, 2011; Dwyer, 2018; Fletcher et al., 2019).

At the same time, this emphasis on attracting the "right" type of visitor raised ethical concerns, as one participant feared that such selectivity might inadvertently affect cultural exchange and peace-building efforts. This aligns with Becken and Carmignani (2016) findings, which showed how greater tourist arrivals are associated with a reduced risk of conflict. Although this issue extends beyond the scope of the current study, it highlights important ethical questions about selectivity, justice, and sufficiency in regenerative tourism that future research should explore.

A critical aspect of the shift to this new way of working concerns how DMOs reconfigure their marketing functions to support regenerative tourism. Recent marketing scholarship has begun to describe this emerging orientation as "regenerative marketing; signalling an ambition to move beyond harm-reduction claims towards net-positive contributions for people and planet (Foglia et al., 2021). In this study, however, participants" use of this language is treated as contested: it can denote a substantive reframing of marketing from demand amplification to destination stewardship (e.g., shaping expectations around place-based limits, inviting pro-social and pro-environmental behaviours, and supporting restoration initiatives), but it also carries a risk of "regen-washing" if promotional narratives are not matched by governance mechanisms and measurable outcomes. This mirrors longstanding critiques of seemingly contradictory policy discourses, such as Daly's (1990) critique of "sustainable growth," and aligns with evidence that tourism policy documents can accommodate both sustainability rhetoric and growth commitments simultaneously (Torkington et al., 2020). For DMOs, this entails that marketing campaigns would need to evolve from merely showcasing attractions alone towards communicating responsibilities, boundaries, and contribution pathways through which visits are framed as conditional on, and accountable to, destination wellbeing. A recent example of this is Visit Copenhagen's "CopenPay" campaign, through which tourists are rewarded with free cultural experiences in exchange for engaging in regenerative activities, such as participating in clean-up efforts and volunteering at urban farms (Visit Copenhagen, 2024).

Second, DMOs were praised for their exemplary capacity-building initiatives with tourism businesses. This vital contribution to the sector was agreed upon as an aspect to preserve, to continue fostering progress and innovation in tourism. Third, although DMOs were recognised for their use of market data in decision-making, a deficiency in regenerative data analytics was noted, suggesting an area for enhancement. This is in line with Pung et al. (2024) and Becken and Kaur (2022) who call for more studies to investigate more adequate regenerative tourism indicators to capture and understand the impacts of regenerative tourism practices. Lastly, despite aspirations

for diversifying their funding models, DMOs expressed a desire to sustain and expand municipal relations to encompass a wider array of tourism stakeholders, with a better focus on regenerative goals. These findings reveal that the traditional operational model is overly dependent on public funding and is influenced by the political objectives of local leadership; together, these factors may drive a political "top 10 destinations" mentality rather than a focus on regenerative practices. As highlighted by Pike and Page (2014), political reliance might make the desired managerial transition too idealistic. This stance aligns with Crabolu et al. (2023) who argued that political dependency is obstructing the institutionalisation of sustainability (and regenerative) instruments into destination management practices. Although some DMOs recognise the current operating model as outdated, it continues to have a substantial influence on most DMOs.

Horizon 3

Looking forward, workshop discussions shifted to the potential future functions of DMOs under Horizon 3. The emergent vision suggests that DMO "success" should be evaluated in relation to their ability to foster regeneration and enhance community well-being (Bellato et al., 2024; Cheer, 2020; Fletcher et al., 2019). One representative described it as the *"ability to create synergies among local inhabitants, tourists and the natural environment,"* while another participant stated: *"our success is based on our ability to regenerate, to create health and wealth, so not just balance."* This reframing implies a profound shift in how DMOs are evaluated: from performance metrics centred on visitor volumes and campaign reach to metrics tied to ecological and social outcomes. As outlined in Table 4, participants envisaged a multifaceted operational model combining (i) strengthened governance arrangements, (ii) an explicit stewardship role, and (iii) a reconfigured marketing function, sometimes referred to as "regenerative marketing," understood here not as demand amplification but as a lever for destination stewardship (e.g., shaping expectations around place-based limits, encouraging pro-environmental and pro-social behaviours, and supporting

Table 4. DMO characteristics within a regenerative operating model as identified in the data.

DMO characteristics	Regenerative model
Success	Ability to regenerate and to create connections between locals, tourists, and nature. Interconnectedness is created between human, non-human living, and non-living systems.
Activities	Marketing remains a core activity. There is a shift from traditional marketing practices to those designed to support regenerative tourism outcomes. Activities with regenerative potential to the destination are promoted. Tourists who bring positive value are the focus of marketing activities. Governance and stewardship are part of the activity mix.
Expertise	Transdisciplinary expertise. Knowledge is co-created with input from the community, science, and industry experts.
Funding	Multifaceted funding sources. Revenue is invested in regenerative projects through a participatory budgeting process.
Stakeholders' perceptions of DMOs*	A catalyst organisation for positive change in tourism. Perception aligns with the future activities and roles of DMOs in the community.
Stakeholders' interactions with DMO	Inclusive stakeholder approach with democratic processes. Interconnectedness is encouraged.

*Note: Perceptions of study's participants regarding how they believe stakeholders should perceive the DMO.

restoration initiatives). This envisioned model rests on an ethic of interconnectedness between humans (local inhabitants and tourists), non-human living and non-living entities (Becken and Coghlan 2024). It involves encouraging mutual relationships, learning from the environment, and forming conscious connections with the entire ecosystem (Bellato et al., 2023). In this framing, DMOs' actions are guided by their potential to restore ecosystems and return them to within planetary boundaries (Becken and Coghlan 2024).

In line with Horizon 1 "elements to retain," DMOs activity mix would be shaped by these repositioned marketing practices, with governance and stewardship also playing central roles (Foglia et al., 2021). Stewardship, a cornerstone of the regenerative tourism approach, positions DMOs as "proactive champions, stewards and custodians of the natural environment and cultural context" (Dwyer, 2018, p. 36). Adopting stewardship practices would place greater emphasis on relational approaches that foster stronger connections between people and their environment. As one participant put it, *"we will be able to truly steward tourism development in a way that represents the local ecosystem."* This mindset builds capacity for collaborative action - whether political, social, and cultural - aimed at revitalising both community and natural resources (Paddison & Hall, 2024). While participants highlighted the significance of embedding stewardship practices, it is important to initiate dialogue to understand the diverse interpretations of stewardship across different DMOs (Peçanha Enqvist et al., 2018). Future research should focus on exploring these different meanings in greater depth.

Workshop participants imagined that future DMOs would encompass a transdisciplinary team, including marketing professionals, project managers, transition facilitators, environmental scientists, and digital technology specialists. This aligns with Becken and Kaur (2022) findings who claim for a transdisciplinary knowledge-base configuration that integrates industry experts' knowledge from various disciplines with scientific and community knowledge. DMOs would be supported by multifaceted funding sources, comprising private sector membership, tourism taxation, and revenue from products and services. This structure would aim to enable accountability in fund allocation, focusing on regenerative development and innovation projects. Participants envisioned a character shift in DMOs to a more inclusive approach, engaging a broad spectrum of stakeholders in democratic processes to ensure their active participation in both strategic and tactical dimensions. In this regard, a workshop participant stated: *"Stakeholders have to be involved in all the areas of the DMO;"* while another one added: *"the project management becomes even more important, because this team will be managing properly those roles on a regular basis and make sure that the people in the organisation are connecting at the right time and at the right place with the stakeholders."*

Active stakeholder participation would also play a role in the distribution of funds through participatory budgeting, a method of public engagement that involves people in deciding how public funds are allocated. This process encourages discussion of spending priorities, allows stakeholders to submit their own proposals, and provides them with the opportunity to vote on these proposals (Lehtonen, 2022).

As part of Horizon 3, it is essential to identify the seeds of change - traces of this progressive model are already visible in some contemporary DMOs (as outlined in Quadrant 3 of Figure 3). For instance, a participant reported a two-year cessation of international promotion due to over-tourism. Moreover, examples of democratic

engagement are evident in the decision-making structures of DMOs such as Barcelona Tourism and City Council, Agora Tourism Bordeaux and Stockholm's citizen dialogues. The concept of "volunteering," where locals from disadvantaged groups are actively engaged in welcoming and interacting with visitors, has been implemented by DMOs in Aarhus, Brussels, and Lyon. While voluntourism has been critiqued for potentially displacing paid local labour, perpetuating unequal power relations, and prioritising visitor experience over community needs (Guttentag, 2009; Maes, 2012; McGehee & Andereck, 2009), these DMO-led initiatives exhibit structural characteristics that may mitigate such risks, including community ownership, democratic governance structures, and integration within broader regenerative frameworks. However, rigorous impact evaluation would be necessary to verify whether these models achieve more equitable outcomes in practice. Furthermore, the introduction of diverse and transparent funding structures was acknowledged by certain DMOs, such as participatory budgeting in Tartu, Estonia, and the introduction of tourism taxes or entrance fees at outdoor attractions in the Balearic Islands and various coastal areas in Sardinia.

Horizon 2

The intermediary phase, Horizon 2, centred on identifying actionable pathways for the DMO transition. It represents a pivotal phase in the transformation of DMOs towards a regenerative tourism model. It is in this intermediate phase that a space for experimentation, learning and innovation for DMOs is created. This phase highlighted the contextual nature of such transitions, revealing a disparity between Northern and Southern European DMOs. The former reported substantive progress in the regenerative transition, while the latter were acknowledged to be at the nascent stage of the transition, due to heavy reliance on tourism revenue and conventional governance. This regional disparity emphasises the importance for DMOs and transition researchers to consider context-dependent conditions, echoing the sentiment that a one-size-fits-all approach is untenable (Özer et al., 2022; Whitford & Ruhanen, 2010).

Five domains of action emerged as a foundation for a future DMO manifesto:

1. *Scale and Governance: Enhancing DMO decision-making autonomy*
   This domain related to addressing the dependency on public funding, which was identified as a significant barrier leaving DMOs politically vulnerable and with limited freedom to make decisions. Participants described a centralised governance structure that left them beholden to municipal approval processes: "*We [DMOs] need to ask approval for every step or change that we need to take*." This reliance was seen as an obstacle to stability and innovation due to the risk of funding cuts and skill gaps within DMOs. As one participant noted: "T*hey [DMOs] will be held back by the lack of confidence because they don't have the right skills, or they don't have the right funding to hire the right people with the right skills*." Therefore, diversifying funding sources through public-private partnerships, membership fees and tourism taxes was proposed to enhance autonomy and responsiveness. This conclusion is in line with findings that suggest that diversified funding streams could empower DMOs, granting them the flexibility to pursue innovative and long-term strategies for advancing a

regenerative tourism model (Line & Wang, 2017; Pike, 2016). Similarly, Becken and Kaur (2022) regenerative framework supports polycentric models that shift away from top-down unilateral control.

2. *Values and Beliefs: Clarifying DMO responsibilities.*
   The ambiguity around the role of DMOs emerged as a critical barrier to regenerative transition, often resulting in DMOs being burdened with unmanageable demands. The participants urged each DMO to undergo a self-reflection transitioning exercise to better comprehend their stakeholders' expectations. As one participant noted: *"We [DMOs] do so many things that are not related to tourism. Often the requests that we are asked to deal with are out of our control."* Another participant lamented the ambiguity surrounding responsibility, suggesting it could lead to discouragement: "*this grey area of who is responsible, who should do it, whose job is it, may make us [DMOs] take a step back*." Overall, the absence of defined boundaries for the DMOs' roles was cited as a pivotal barrier to enacting change, that needed to be addressed through internal consultations with their stakeholders. This identity crisis reflects a transitional moment between a values system grounded in service provision and a nascent orientation towards systemic stewardship. For this reason, DMOs are called to identify their own internal, specific boundaries and responsibilities; doing so, enables the DMOs to define their own transition strategies in response to the dynamic nature of their local tourism industry and the specificities of their operating environment (Beritelli et al., 2014). Participants' calls for role clarification mark an early but critical step in reorienting DMOs around a regenerative ethos. The need for self-reflection was seen as foundational for constructing a future-facing, place-based mission. Understanding the contextual and spatial, and political dimensions is therefore crucial for designing effective and equitable transition strategies (Coenen et al., 2012). As already emphasised by Reed (2007) and Bellato et al. (2024), for a regenerative transition to fully take place, it is essential to adopt a place-based approach that focuses on understanding how systems operate within specific geographical contexts. This would ensure a more tailored and effective regenerative transition plan for each DMO.
3. *Participation and Democratic Processes: Boosting citizen engagement in decision-making*
   This action addresses the reluctance of citizens to partake in DMO-led democratic initiatives, leaving them underrepresented in tourism strategies, despite the discontent arising from over-tourism (Elorrieta et al., 2022; Peters et al., 2018). One participant voiced: "*They [residents] don't want to be involved. They have an opinion, but it doesn't mean they want to get involved in writing this new strategy*." Participants attributed this reluctance to a perceived disconnect between the promised benefits of tourism and residents' lived realities, which weakens the perceived legitimacy and value of engagement.
   Discussions therefore focused less on "increasing participation" per se, and more on rebuilding the conditions under which participation might become meaningful and worth residents' time. One proposed avenue was to make the relationship between tourism's benefits and community priorities more explicit, thereby strengthening trust and clarifying what regenerative tourism would

deliver for residents in practice, and under what terms, potentially enabling DMOs to act with greater independence and social licence. At the same time, this finding complicates aspirational accounts of inclusive governance in regenerative tourism (Bellato et al., 2023); in practice, participation is shaped by mistrust, fatigue, and unequal capacities and incentives to engage. Plural perspectives do not automatically translate into willingness to participate, and non-participation (including refusal) emerges as a normal feature of the governance landscape rather than an exception. In this context, "community involvement" cannot be reduced to co-writing strategies, it may also entail creating legitimate channels for residents to shape priorities indirectly or selectively, in ways that reflect uneven capacities and preferences for engagement (Fusté-Forné & Hussain, 2022; Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019). Participatory budgeting, already piloted by some DMOs, was highlighted as a promising mechanism for shifting from consultation to distributed decision-making.

4. *Ideology and Solutions: Integrating a systems perspective*

Participants acknowledged the limitations of linear, siloed approaches to tourism governance and expressed a growing awareness of the need for broader systemic understanding. DMOs noted that tourism cannot be treated as a self-contained sector and must be repositioned within a wider ecological, social, cultural, and economic web of relationships. For instance, a participant stated: "*we are trying to manage something that's connected to housing, mobility, climate, but nobody sees us as relevant*," reflecting the systemic disconnect between tourism and other industries. Additionally, while participants appreciated existing data-driven practices and market intelligence, many called for more nuanced indicators aligned with regenerative aims (Becken & Kaur, 2022; Miller & Torres-Delgado, 2023). A key insight was the inadequacy of universal performance metrics grounded in growth logics, which fail to capture the complexity and specificity of place-based regeneration. A participant argued: "*success is currently defined by bed nights…*," while another one stated: "*we don't know enough of the city to know if we are doing any harm*." For this reason, participants stressed the importance of developing bespoke indicator sets that are responsive to the distinct ecological, cultural, and social realities of each destination. This view aligns with Crabolu et al. (2023) argument that evaluation must draw on indicators that are culturally relevant and locally meaningful. As one participant stated, *"We lack the right kind of data,"* indicating the inadequacy of current measurement frameworks.

Crucially, the workshop discussions also revealed a growing sense of urgency due to citizen mobilisations for fair and transparent resource use. This urgency was driven by intensifying public pressure for the negative impacts of tourism and the growing demand for responsible travel, which were seen as potential accelerators for social momentum and political support for transformation. As one participant stated, *"If we don't change, we lose legitimacy."* From a systems practice perspective, this urgency can be seen as a catalytic condition—one that helps surface leverage points, align diverse actors, and generate the momentum needed to disrupt entrenched patterns (Abson et al., 2017). Some DMOs used this momentum to initiate reflexive processes, reframe their role

in the broader system, and experiment with governance innovations that bring new voices.

5. *Knowledge Systems for distributed participation*
   Participants highlighted the lack of transdisciplinary teams as a constraint on regenerative innovation. Existing DMO staff profiles were described as largely marketing-centric, with limited inclusion of environmental scientists, social planners, or transition facilitators. Acknowledging this shortfall, DMOs advocated for a reconfiguration of team expertise and knowledge creation processes. This aspiration reflects the movement away from sectoral silos towards integrated knowledge systems that bridges scientific, local and experiential forms of expertise.
   In tandem, DMOs identified the transformative potential of fourth-generation technologies - like Big Data, Artificial Intelligence and Blockchain—as enablers of real-time engagement, transparency and co-managed development These technologies were seen as means to enable relational infrastructures that can foster continuous feedback between DMOs, residents, and the various stakeholders. From a regenerative perspective, technology must be included as an additional knowledge base that connects stakeholders into an interactive system where feedback can circulate (Becken & Kaur, 2022). Examples might include a digital dashboard where citizens vote on tourism priorities, a live data platform that gathers tourist behaviour data to inform environmental limits (among other impacts), or smart contracts (*via* blockchain) that automatically allocate tourist taxes to regenerative projects. So rather than seeing technology as a top-down control tool, DMOs are enabled to use it to build relationships and enhance mutual responsiveness across social, ecological and institutional actors. Horizon 2 discussions reflected early steps in this direction, with some DMOs actively exploring how to use digital systems to facilitate inclusive participation, embed feedback mechanisms, and strengthen accountability across tourism stakeholders. When integrated into the framework of smart cities, these technologies offer substantial prospects for cooperative monitoring, management, and development; a fact reinforced by the literature that identifies these technologies as key enablers for smart tourism destinations (Gretzel, 2021; Zainal-Abidin et al., 2023), but also for creating a bottom-up alternative-capitalist economy (Cave & Dredge, 2020).

Conclusions

Directly responding to various calls for advancing regenerative tourism both theoretically and methodologically (e.g., Bellato et al., 2024; Bellato & Pollock, 2025), this study combines the techniques of participatory normative scenario-building with the three-horizon framework to shed light on the operational paradigms of DMOs and their transformative journey towards a regenerative tourism model. Envisioning this transformation represents a fundamental paradigm shift for DMOs. This shift involves transitioning from the existing dominant traditional marketing and growth-centric model, depicted in Horizon 1 as the undesirable future (Pike & Page, 2014), to a regenerative model outlined in Horizon 3 as the desirable future of the three-horizon framework.

Contributions to knowledge

This study makes substantial contributions to advancing knowledge in the DMO, regenerative tourism and transition literatures. First, it significantly enhances the theoretical understanding of DMOs within tourism studies. Traditionally, DMOs have been conceptualised primarily as marketing entities (Pike & Page, 2014). However, in line with Morgan (2012) and Hristov and Zehrer (2019), this study supports a systemic reconceptualisation of the DMO operating model, suggesting that integrating management and governance functions can enable a more transformative role. At the same time, we call for greater reflexivity regarding the place of marketing in regenerative tourism. We therefore treat "regenerative marketing," a term used aspirationally by some participants and in emerging practitioner debates (Foglia et al., 2021), as a contested reconfiguration of marketing functions aligned with regenerative tourism goals, rather than an inherently positive or sufficient lever of change. In line with our findings, this reconfiguration implies repurposing marketing from volume-seeking promotion to boundary-setting and behavioural steering within a finite socio-ecological system, for example, communicating place-based limits, discouraging extractive demand, and enabling forms of visitation compatible with local wellbeing and ecosystem integrity (Dwyer, 2018; Fletcher et al., 2019). While this new framing may support transition efforts by reshaping narratives, aligning partners, and communicating place-based limits, it also risks reproducing growth-oriented logics if DMOs remains centred on demand generation or place commodification (Torkington et al., 2020). Any reorientation of DMO marketing functions should thus be understood as one element of wider institutional change (mandates, accountability, measurement and decision-making), rather than as a standalone catalyst. While this study acknowledges that the transition will not be achieved without challenges (Gretzel et al., 2006; Line & Wang, 2017; Zainal-Abidin et al., 2023), the incremental, yet promising, shifts observed in some destinations should be interpreted with an explicit caveat: they are articulated primarily from the standpoint of DMO managers and tourism industry stakeholders and should therefore be understood as a partial, sector-driven vision of transition rather than a comprehensive blueprint for systemic change. These findings should thus be read as a provisional pathway to be tested, challenged, and refined through resident- and worker-centred research.

Second, this study contributes to the nascent paradigm of regenerative tourism—a concept that is gaining traction as a step forward from sustainable tourism paradigms. Regenerative tourism, as discussed by Becken and Kaur (2022) and Bellato et al. (2024), focuses on revitalising and restoring communities and ecological systems. This research provides empirical evidence on how DMOs can operationalise regenerative tourism principles, thus offering a practical dimension to the theoretical discourse. It demonstrates the complexities involved in shifting from a traditional to a regenerative operating model, addressing the calls by Morgan (2012) and Pollock (2010) for a transformative change in DMO operations.

Finally, this study significantly advances tourism transition research from a methodological point, by integrating participatory normative scenario-building with the three-horizon framework. This innovative methodological combination is a novel approach in tourism studies. Aligning with complexity-aware approaches (Crabolu, 2025),

it allows stakeholders to identify visions and pathways from less desirable to desirable futures (Johansson et al., 2022; Sharpe et al., 2016). Additionally, it represents the first application of a participatory normative scenario-building approach to organisational change within the field of tourism research (Gössling et al., 2012; Iwaniec et al., 2020; Pereira et al., 2018), making a unique contribution to a niche area previously highlighted by van den Berg et al. (2021). Moreover, this methodology both enhances the depth of the research findings and provides a replicable model for future studies exploring transition pathways across various contexts. This contribution addresses the calls by Bellato and Pollock (2025, p. 7), inviting tourism scholars to partner with industry stakeholders to "develop, add, or adopt new methodologies that align with this approach." This methodological approach has revealed to be a practical governance tool that has been welcomed by DMO practitioners involved in the process. It advances the discourse on tourism governance transitions by offering replicable, yet adaptable guidance tailored to local context, responding to the call for place-based regenerative approaches. Thus, we argue that our methodological contribution lies not only in its novelty, but in its capacity to facilitate systems change thinking, expand the toolkit for participatory foresight in tourism, and support DMOs in navigating complex transitions.

Policy implications for DMOs and policymakers

Moreover, the findings of this study offer substantial policy implications and actionable pathways (manifesto) for DMOs and policymakers, especially in the context of transitioning towards regenerative practices. First, DMOs should consider broadening their operational focus beyond traditional marketing and promotional activities. In line with Pike and Page (2014) and the regenerative literature (Dwyer, 2018; Foglia et al., 2021), the role of DMOs should now encapsulate managerial, stewardship and regenerative marketing responsibilities that focus on bringing net-positive change to tourism destinations. Policymakers should facilitate this transition by redefining the scope and objectives of DMOs, ensuring that their mandates include responsibilities that align with regenerative tourism principles. Transition co-creation sessions that use the methodology presented in this study should be conducted at individual DMO level.

Second, the study highlights the importance of inclusive and democratic processes in DMO decision-making structures. Policymakers and DMOs should foster environments where collaboration among diverse stakeholders—including local communities, private sector entities, environmental groups and government bodies—is actively encouraged and facilitated. Such collaborative efforts, as suggested by Fusté-Forné and Hussain (2022), can lead to more effective transformations that consider various perspectives and interests. Third, policymakers should support and incentivise DMOs to adopt regenerative tourism practices, as emphasised by Becken and Kaur (2022) and Bellato et al. (2024). This should include investing in initiatives that not only minimise negative impacts on the environment and local communities but also contribute positively to their revitalisation. Policies and funding mechanisms should be geared towards projects that demonstrate regenerative outcomes, such as ecological restoration, cultural preservation and community democratic participation and empowerment.

Lastly, to facilitate the transition towards a regenerative tourism model, DMOs require adequate resources and capabilities. Policymakers should allocate funding

and resources towards capacity-building programmes that equip DMOs with the necessary skills and knowledge. DMOs need to be empowered to realise their transformative role as stewards towards regenerative futures. Capacity building could include training in regeneration and transition management, community engagement and the use of technology for regenerative practices. Emerging technologies can aid in resource management, impact monitoring and the creation of democratic processes.

Limitations of the study and avenues for further research

This study has several limitations that open avenues for future research. First, as regenerative tourism advocates for place-based approaches, our focus on European urban DMOs may come up with findings that are not universally valid for all destinations. Future research should, thus, replicate this study in other specific contexts to gain place-based insights and explore the applicability and implications of regenerative tourism across diverse cultural and geographical settings. This expansion would enable a more comprehensive understanding of how different cultural values and social norms influence the adoption and effectiveness of regenerative tourism practices. Second, from a methodology perspective, potential biases may have occurred in devising action domains and interpreting horizon timelines (researchers' perspectives, beliefs, subjective decisions or assumptions). These biases were mitigated by implementing measures to enhance the researchers' reflexivity, such as allocating time for reflection among the researchers after data collection activities. However, subsequent studies could refine these methods, perhaps integrating quantitative approaches (measurements or indicators of advancements in regenerative tourism) for a more balanced analytical perspective. Additionally, exploring other foresight methodologies could offer alternative insights into the regenerative transition of DMOs. Third, while acknowledging the potential role of technology, this study does not delve into the potential impact of digital transformation on DMO operations. Future research could focus on how emerging technologies could revolutionise DMO's operations, addressing challenges like resource management, stakeholder engagement and regenerative marketing. Lastly, this study indicates that effective regenerative tourism relies on supportive policy and bottom-up governance which require engagement and consensus among all stakeholders. We acknowledge that our focus on DMOs reflects a top-down model which limits the scope of our analysis, as policymakers' perspectives on a destination's needs may differ significantly from those of the local community. Future research could address this by replicating our study with DMO managers, company representatives, and citizens to incorporate and reconcile potentially conflicting views in the pathways toward regenerative tourism transitions.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Gloria Crabolu**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Anna Torres-Delgado**: Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Manuel Alector Ribeiro**: Funding acquisition, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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