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The Rise of Regenerative Tourism in Geoparks

Industry
Trends, Scope,
and Emerging
Opportunities



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In an era defined by planetary boundaries and socioeconomic inequality, tourism is undergoing a radical transformation. The industry's new frontier is regenerative tourism—a model that not only sustains but restores and improves the natural and cultural environments it touches. Within UNESCO Global Geoparks, these regenerative principles are finding fertile ground.

Geoparks are more than scenic destinations. They are integrated territories where geological heritage intertwines with biodiversity, culture, and livelihoods. With 229 Global Geoparks across more than 50 countries, this network is becoming a testing ground for regenerative practices—and a growing niche in the global tourism economy.

What is Regenerative Tourism?

Regenerative tourism is a paradigm shift in how we understand travel, development, and place-making. It is defined by its intent to leave a destination better than it was before—not just environmentally, but also socially and economically. Where sustainable tourism often aims to minimize negative impact, regenerative tourism goes further. It is proactive, not just protective; participatory, not just extractive; and transformative, not just transactional.

In practice, this means that tourism becomes a tool to restore degraded ecosystems, revitalize local economies, strengthen cultural identity, and foster deep human connection to places. It invites travelers to engage not as consumers, but as co-stewards—active participants in the long-term health and resilience of the destinations they visit.

This approach is particularly relevant within UNESCO Global Geoparks—living landscapes that celebrate the deep time of Earth's history, while also serving as home to vibrant communities and complex ecologies. Geoparks are not static monuments; they are dynamic systems, deeply embedded in the lives, languages, and livelihoods of those who inhabit them. As such, they offer a powerful testing ground for regenerative tourism models.

What Regenerative Tourism Looks Like in Geoparks

In the context of UNESCO Global Geoparks, regenerative tourism is not a theoretical ideal—it's a practical framework for aligning geoheritage conservation with inclusive economic development. It encompasses four interdependent pillars:

Conservation of Geological and Ecological Heritage

Geoparks safeguard some of the most significant geological features on the planet—volcanic formations, fossil records, karst systems, and tectonic structures that tell the story of Earth's evolution. Yet these landscapes are also ecologically sensitive, often overlapping with biodiversity hotspots, water catchment areas, or climate-vulnerable zones.

Regenerative tourism reinforces conservation by directing resources toward ecosystem restoration, geo-education, and low-impact infrastructure. Tourism revenues can be reinvested into rewilding programs, trail maintenance, erosion control, and wildlife monitoring. Visitors, in turn, become more than observers—they become ambassadors of geoconservation, empowered through knowledge and experiential learning.

Integration of Local and Indigenous Knowledge

Geoparks are often deeply intertwined with the ancestral knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples and local communities. These groups possess rich oral histories, land-use traditions, and cosmologies that illuminate the geological and ecological significance of the territory.

Regenerative tourism places these voices at the center—not as performers, but as producers of meaning and memory. It supports community-led interpretation, traditional ecological practices, and the protection of intangible cultural heritage. In doing so, it rebalances power within the tourism economy and ensures that knowledge is not only respected, but recognized as a form of stewardship.

Support for Locally-Rooted Circular Economies

In many geoparks, local economies are at risk from globalized supply chains, youth outmigration, and resource dependency. Regenerative tourism offers an alternative path—one where economic activity is circular, localized, and socially inclusive.

This involves designing tourism value chains that prioritize local ownership, local labor, and local materials. It includes promoting cooperatives for guides and artisans, sourcing food from nearby farms, using renewable energy, and eliminating waste through closed-loop systems. By embedding tourism within broader strategies for community resilience, geoparks can become hubs of rural innovation and regeneration.

Deep Educational and Participatory Experiences for Visitors

Regenerative tourism is not just about changing places—it's about changing people. It offers visitors the chance to engage deeply with landscapes and communities through hands-on, educational, and reflective experiences.

Whether learning about geology through participatory science, helping restore habitats, cooking with Indigenous families, or hearing the stories embedded in stone and soil, visitors are transformed from passive spectators into active contributors. These experiences build empathy, understanding, and a sense of shared responsibility—essential ingredients for long-term, regenerative change.

What Does Regenerative Tourism Encompass?

Regenerative tourism in geoparks is not a single activity or approach, but rather an integrated system of practices that span across environmental restoration, cultural revitalization, local economic empowerment, and experiential education. These interlinked sectors form the practical foundation of what regeneration means in action. They are not isolated silos, but components of a larger ecosystem where nature, people, and economy are co-evolving in balance. To understand how this model plays out in geoparks, we must explore the core sectors that define its implementation.

The first of these is nature-based and educational tourism, which lies at the heart of geopark experiences. Unlike conventional mass tourism that commodifies natural beauty, regenerative tourism is grounded in ecological literacy. Visitors are invited into deeper relationships with the Earth's geological and biological narratives—walking ancient lava flows, exploring fossil beds, or learning about tectonic movements through immersive geotrails and interpretive signage. These experiences are not merely scenic—they are curated to foster ecological awareness and a sense of planetary time. Geological interpretation centers, often run with the participation of local communities, serve as hubs for knowledge-sharing, connecting scientific research with traditional land-based knowledge. Small-scale museums, storytelling walks, and guided expeditions transform landscapes into classrooms, cultivating respect and responsibility rather than mere recreation.

Second, regenerative tourism depends on eco-infrastructure and green hospitality. Infrastructure is not just a backdrop to tourism—it shapes its footprint. In geoparks, regenerative infrastructure prioritizes low-impact design, often blending architecture with the natural terrain using local materials such as bamboo, stone, and earth. These structures are not just aesthetically harmonious, but are designed to reduce environmental degradation by incorporating renewable energy systems, such as off-grid solar panels, biogas digesters, and gravity-fed micro-hydro systems. Zero-waste hospitality models further support this approach, with composting toilets, greywater recycling, and minimal single-use plastics becoming the norm. Rainwater harvesting systems and organic onsite gardens often serve both the tourist and host communities, reinforcing the regenerative principle that tourism infrastructure should enhance—rather than extract from—the local ecosystem.

A third dimension of regenerative tourism is cultural and heritage revitalization. In geoparks, the story of the Earth is deeply intertwined with the story of people—particularly Indigenous and local communities whose lives are rooted in place. Regenerative tourism values culture not as spectacle but as a living, evolving system of memory, practice, and identity. It supports the revitalization of endangered languages, traditional arts, land-based rituals, and culinary heritage through participatory experiences. Guests may learn how to prepare ancestral dishes, join in seasonal celebrations, or hear oral histories passed down through generations. Living history programs—such as artisanal workshops or intergenerational storytelling—offer visitors a chance to witness heritage as an active, breathing force. In parallel, these initiatives generate income for culture bearers and elevate the social value of local knowledge systems. Heritage sites are not simply preserved—they are animated by the people who sustain them.

Equally vital is the development of community-led tourism enterprises. Regenerative tourism in geoparks is most powerful when economic benefits remain rooted in the communities who steward the land. Rather than relying on external investors or top-down tourism operators, local residents are supported to become entrepreneurs, guides, hosts, and co-managers of the visitor experience. Cooperatives emerge as a preferred model, where farmers, artisans, youth, and women's groups collaborate to offer integrated tourism services—from guiding and homestays to craft markets and local food experiences. These enterprises not only generate income but also build governance capacity, as communities engage directly in planning, pricing, and benefit-sharing. Decision-making authority is localized, reducing the risk of economic leakage and ensuring that the values of tourism align with local priorities, not external agendas.

Lastly, regenerative tourism in geoparks encompasses active restoration and conservation programs. These programs take the form of structured opportunities for tourists to contribute directly to the regeneration of the landscapes they visit. Volunteer tourism—sometimes known as “voluntourism”—provides hands-on engagement in trail restoration, reforestation, erosion control, or invasive species removal. In some geoparks, citizen science programs are developed, allowing visitors to participate in biodiversity monitoring, geological mapping, or climate impact studies. These efforts are often designed in partnership with local schools, environmental NGOs, and research institutions, ensuring that the data collected contributes to ongoing scientific and conservation efforts. In this model, the line between tourist and conservationist blurs—visitors become contributors, not consumers.

Regenerative tourism in geoparks encompasses a holistic framework that activates the full potential of travel—as a tool for healing landscapes, strengthening local economies, and enriching human understanding. It is tourism as an ecosystem, as pedagogy, and as solidarity. Each of these sectors—nature-based learning, eco-infrastructure, cultural revitalization, community enterprise, and landscape restoration—works in synergy to transform geoparks from sites of passive admiration into engines of regeneration. This is where tourism becomes not an escape from the world, but a deeper return to it.

Industry Trends and Market Potential

The rise of regenerative tourism is not happening in isolation. It is unfolding at the intersection of shifting traveller values, climate-conscious capital flows, multilateral support systems, and digital transformation. Together, these trends are creating a fertile landscape for innovation, investment, and large-scale adoption of regenerative models—particularly within geoparks, which sit at the confluence of geological heritage, ecological stewardship, and community livelihoods. Understanding these trends is key to positioning geopark-based tourism as not just a cultural or conservation strategy, but as a viable economic opportunity with global relevance.

The first major trend shaping this industry is the growing global demand for authenticity and meaning in travel. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a decisive shift away from mass tourism and toward what has been termed “slow travel”—a movement that favours depth over speed, connection over consumption, and purpose over spectacle. This is especially evident among younger travellers—namely millennials and Gen Z—who increasingly prioritize ethical, educational, and environmentally responsible experiences. These demographics are not just seeking destinations to visit, but stories to connect with, communities to support, and causes to be part of.

Geoparks are uniquely equipped to meet this demand. As living landscapes shaped by deep geological time and inhabited by culturally rich communities, they offer an immersive sense of place that conventional tourist sites often lack. Whether it's walking on fossil beds alongside Indigenous guides, participating in soil regeneration projects, or sharing traditional meals in homestays nestled within volcanic valleys, geopark experiences resonate with travellers seeking authentic connection and personal transformation. The shift in consumer demand is not a passing trend—it signals a structural change in how travel is valued, and regenerative geopark tourism is on the leading edge of this transition.

The second trend fuelling this sector is the rise of green finance and ESG-aligned investment strategies. Investors are increasingly moving capital into portfolios that demonstrate clear environmental and social returns. This has given rise to impact investing—where financial performance is measured alongside metrics like biodiversity protection, community empowerment, and carbon sequestration. In this context, regenerative tourism in geoparks becomes a powerful investment vehicle. Unlike extractive tourism models that degrade natural and cultural capital over time, regenerative tourism can actively contribute to carbon offset schemes, watershed rehabilitation, biodiversity credits, and rural employment creation.

Nature-positive pipelines are in demand, and geoparks provide a tangible, place-based infrastructure through which such pipelines can be built. From eco-lodges powered by renewables to reforestation projects linked to carbon markets, investors now have the opportunity to participate in tourism models that restore ecosystems and generate returns. The integration of digital monitoring tools—such as satellite-based carbon tracking or biodiversity impact assessments—can further validate these outcomes, making geoparks not just scenic destinations, but platforms for scalable climate solutions.

The third enabling trend is the growing support from governments, multilateral institutions, and international development agencies. UNESCO, through its Global Geoparks Network, has provided a coherent policy framework that prioritizes education, conservation, and community-led development. Meanwhile, organizations like UNEP, UNDP, and various national ministries are increasingly channelling technical assistance and seed funding into regenerative models. These public and multilateral actors play a critical role in de-risking early-stage investments by offering co-financing, capacity building, and concessional lending to local tourism entrepreneurs.

For private sector actors and investors, this institutional backing provides a level of credibility and stability that can help unlock new capital flows. It also allows for innovative public-private partnerships, where governments provide foundational support—such as zoning, training, and permitting—while the private sector brings in adaptive business models, digital technologies, and operational expertise. In geoparks, these collaborations can catalyse entire regenerative value chains that link conservation finance, rural development, and international tourism into a cohesive system.

Lastly, the rise of digital technologies is accelerating the operational and educational capacity of regenerative tourism. New platforms are enabling smart visitor management systems that monitor foot traffic in sensitive zones, predict crowding patterns, and balance tourist flows to reduce environmental stress. Augmented and virtual reality tools now allow geoparks to offer immersive storytelling—turning a fossil site or ancient cave into a layered, interactive narrative. These tools enhance educational impact, preserve oral histories, and reduce the need for invasive infrastructure.

Meanwhile, blockchain-backed systems are being explored to issue traceable carbon and biodiversity credits linked to tourism activities, enabling transparent tracking of regenerative impacts. Smart payments, digital guide apps, remote bookings, and real-time feedback loops are also making it easier for local communities to directly manage and monetize their tourism offerings. In a world increasingly shaped by data, geoparks equipped with digital infrastructure become not just tourism destinations, but living laboratories for regenerative innovation.

These trends point to a clear opportunity: regenerative tourism in geoparks is no longer a fringe idea—it is fast becoming a strategic growth sector for nations seeking to align climate goals, community empowerment, and economic resilience. The combination of shifting market demand, targeted investment, institutional support, and technological advancement positions geoparks as the next frontier for climate-smart, culturally grounded, and economically inclusive tourism development.

Opportunities for Investment and Development

Regenerative tourism is not simply an ethical aspiration—it is a practical and investable development model. As more governments and communities seek to align their post-COVID recovery strategies with long-term sustainability goals, geoparks emerge as high-value platforms for climate-resilient, inclusive growth. But unlocking this potential requires intentional investment across key strategic areas. Below, we outline five core opportunity clusters where regenerative tourism in geoparks can catalyze scalable, high-impact ventures.

Ecotourism Ventures in Underdeveloped Geoparks

Many UNESCO-designated geoparks—particularly in Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America—remain underutilized as tourism destinations. These areas often possess extraordinary geological, ecological, and cultural wealth, yet lack the visitor infrastructure and market positioning to attract meaningful flows of regenerative tourism.

For impact-driven investors and ecotourism operators, these regions represent significant first-mover advantages. By investing early in community-based lodges, nature-immersive visitor trails, or conservation-centric tourism cooperatives, stakeholders can shape the identity and operations of a geopark's tourism economy from the ground up. In regions with high biodiversity and endemic species, geopark experiences can also serve as educational and scientific attractions, opening pathways for nature-based learning, biodiversity financing, and youth engagement.

Moreover, by developing ecotourism ventures that are grounded in local partnerships, investors can build lasting trust and generate resilient brands that align with emerging global values: environmental accountability, cultural respect, and authentic experience. The result is not only a viable commercial venture, but a market-creating mechanism for regenerative tourism in biodiversity-rich, underserved regions.

Training and Capacity-Building Hubs

A key constraint facing many geoparks is the lack of trained local actors capable of managing regenerative tourism businesses, applying sustainability best practices, or utilizing digital tools for marketing, finance, and monitoring. This gap presents a critical opportunity to invest in regional centers of excellence dedicated to upskilling local communities, youth, and tourism entrepreneurs.

These hubs can serve as incubators for green businesses, offering training in low-impact hospitality, circular economy principles, regenerative agriculture, and eco-guide certification. Through strategic partnerships with universities, NGOs, and tourism networks, they can also embed digital literacy programs—covering e-commerce, geospatial data analysis, online storytelling, and impact reporting.

In many geopark contexts, these hubs may be co-located within geological interpretation centers or community innovation spaces, making them accessible and culturally grounded. They offer a foundational layer for long-term economic self-reliance, ensuring that tourism growth does not bypass the communities who live in and care for these landscapes.

Circular Economy Infrastructure

Regenerative tourism relies on more than just low-impact behaviour—it requires the built infrastructure to support circular systems of energy, water, and waste. In geoparks, this includes investments in composting and bio digesters, rainwater harvesting, greywater recycling, and microgrid-scale renewable energy. It also encompasses the development of short, local supply chains—particularly for food, crafts, and construction materials—to reduce emissions and maximize local economic benefits.

This domain presents a robust investment opportunity for both private actors and governments, especially through infrastructure-as-a-service models or public-private partnerships (PPPs). Investors can work with community cooperatives and local governments to co-develop regenerative infrastructure that serves both tourism and community needs. These systems not only reduce operational costs and climate impact but also position geoparks as exemplars of environmental innovation.

In geoparks that prioritize self-sufficiency and ecological regeneration, circular infrastructure becomes more than a utility—it is a storytelling and branding asset that reinforces the values of place and draws in climate-conscious travellers and funders alike.

Data and Impact Monitoring Platforms

To unlock the full value of regenerative tourism, geoparks must be able to measure and communicate impact—environmental, economic, and social. This opens the door to digital innovation in the form of data platforms that track reforestation efforts, water use, biodiversity restoration, carbon sequestration, and community income generation.

These platforms serve two critical functions. First, they enable real-time adaptive management, allowing park operators and communities to respond quickly to environmental stress or visitor pressure. Second, they provide the evidence base for ESG reporting and SDG alignment, which is increasingly demanded by

investors, donors, and development agencies.

This is an open field for innovation. Tech-enabled startups and sustainability consultancies can partner with geoparks to build user-friendly dashboards, visitor impact apps, and monitoring protocols that integrate local knowledge with scientific metrics. In doing so, they help turn geoparks into digitally intelligent, transparent tourism ecosystems, capable of attracting both mission-aligned capital and conscious travelers.

Storytelling and Geopark Branding

Every geopark is a mosaic of stories—of earth’s ancient past, of human adaptation, of cultural resilience and ecological interdependence. Yet many of these stories remain untold or underleveraged in the global tourism marketplace. Regenerative tourism creates space for place-based storytelling to become a central feature of economic development.

This opens up dynamic investment and partnership opportunities in IP development, media production, and branded ecotourism products. From short films and educational podcasts to immersive VR experiences and collectible artisan goods, the narratives of a geopark can be translated into experiences and content that captivate global audiences and elevate the park’s visibility.

Collaborations with local artists, historians, filmmakers, and Indigenous storytellers are essential to ensure authenticity. Meanwhile, partnerships with museums, schools, and travel platforms can help distribute these narratives widely. The goal is to transform the geopark into more than a destination—it becomes a living narrative ecosystem that educates, inspires, and mobilizes collective stewardship.

The Road Ahead

As geoparks continue to evolve from protected heritage zones into catalysts for regenerative development, a new frontier is opening—one where landscapes are not only preserved, but activated. These territories, shaped by geological time and cultural memory, are becoming living laboratories for sustainable innovation. In this transformation, regenerative tourism is the keystone: the mechanism that aligns environmental restoration, cultural vitality, and economic opportunity into a cohesive and scalable model.

Unlike conventional tourism, which too often extracts value from communities and ecosystems without reinvesting meaningfully in their future, regenerative tourism builds value over time. It restores natural systems, revives cultural practices, and repositions local communities—not as bystanders, but as stewards and entrepreneurs. In doing so, it creates layered, long-term returns: healthier ecosystems, more resilient economies, and stronger social fabrics.

The business case for regenerative tourism is not just emerging—it is becoming undeniable. Across the globe, we see a growing class of travelers, investors, and institutions that are not only willing but eager to support ventures that prioritize impact, authenticity, and resilience. Geoparks are uniquely poised to meet this demand. Their designation under UNESCO brings credibility and international visibility, while their inherent geological and cultural richness offers the raw material for world-class experiences. Add to this the growing availability of green finance, digital infrastructure, and multilateral backing, and you have a fertile ecosystem for venture creation at scale.

For policymakers, this means that investing in geoparks is not a luxury—it is a strategy. For investors, it means geoparks represent more than a tourism play; they are an entry point into climate-aligned economies of the future. And for communities, it means a pathway to self-determination and sustainable prosperity, rooted in identity, territory, and care for the land.

As consultants to the Business Advisory Division of the Geoparks Investment Advisory Council, our role is to act as bridge-builders. We are here to translate vision into ventures, policy into pipeline, and landscapes into living legacies. This means identifying investable opportunities, cultivating local capacities, aligning with ESG and SDG frameworks, and designing regenerative models that are financially viable and socially just.

The road ahead is not without challenges—scaling regenerative tourism requires patience, coordination, and systems thinking. But the momentum is on our side. With the right partnerships, policies, and investment strategies, geoparks can lead the global shift from extractive tourism to regenerative futures.

The time to act is now. And the tools are in our hands



About the Author



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