

EXPLORING REGENERATIVE TOURISM IN HAWAII

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ABSTRACT

Between January and May 2023, I participated in a Fulbright program at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa, where I explored regenerative tourism. Building on a decade of research into commodification of Hawaiian culture this program helped me shift focus to regenerative practices that benefit local communities and ecosystems. Through interviews with stakeholders in Hawaii's tourism industry, I gained insights into the practical and theoretical aspects of regenerative tourism, deepening my understanding of its challenges and potential for global application.

Keywords: Travel • Sustainable • Regenerative • Qualitative • Polynesia



BACKGROUND IN INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE PROGRAMS

In 2023, I had the privilege of participating in a Fulbright program awarded by the Franco-American Commission at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa (UHM), where I was affiliated with the Department of Anthropology. Unlike many Fulbright scholars for whom the scholarship represents their first international exchange, my time at UHM in 2023 marked my fourth academic experience abroad. I had previously studied and conducted research at California State University Long Beach between 2009 and 2010, the University of California San Diego between 2012 and 2013, and taught at UHM between 2015 and 2016. Throughout these years, my research focused on the evolution of surfing, a native Hawaiian tradition that has evolved into a global sport. My work explored themes such as national identity formation, the commodification of indigenous customs through tourism, the appropriation of surfing by Hollywood studios, American imperialism, and the professionalization of surfing. After more than a decade of research in this field, my latest Fulbright experience represented a pivotal shift in my career, allowing me to redirect my focus towards regenerative tourism. While surfing remains a fascinating and richly informative research topic, I found that the societal impact of my earlier work was somewhat limited, despite its educational contributions. In contrast, regenerative tourism offers the potential for tangible benefits to communities and the environment. When applying to the Fulbright program in 2022, I sought to renew my research focus, contribute to the empowerment of marginalized communities, and foster understanding among stakeholders in the tourism industry.

Having previously resided in the United States for three years prior to joining the Fulbright program, I drew upon these past experiences upon my arrival in Hawaii in January 2023. I reestablished connections within my social network, reconnecting with friends and colleagues whom I had not seen since the pandemic. These reunions were both convivial and meaningful, as we engaged in various leisure activities and provided mutual support. While the professional aspects of my stay were highly enriching, the personal and intimate relationships I had cultivated in the past proved to be equally significant. For instance, during my search for accommodation, a friend introduced me to the founder of the France-Hawaii Association, who is a kumu hula (i.e., a traditional and authentic hula teacher). This kumu was seeking a tenant for one of her studio spaces on her property, and after a conversation, I moved in. Our daily interactions, through the sharing of stories, meals, and cultural insights, were transformative. These experiences profoundly expanded my knowledge and appreciation of the mutual exchange of knowledge, as well as the cultural practices between individuals living in France and the United States.

REGENERATIVE TOURISM IN HAWAII

The primary aim of this research project was to investigate regenerative tourism in Hawaii. Regenerative tourism is a relatively recent paradigm that draws from various industries and fields, each contributing principles and practices aimed at revitalizing and enriching both the environment and local communities. Depending on the context in which it is implemented, regenerative tourism incorporates elements from permaculture, regenerative agriculture, sustainable development, circular economies, and indigenous worldviews. It aspires to go beyond the objectives of sustainable tourism by considering all living beings as integral components of the Earth's broader ecosystem. While a definitive definition of regenerative tourism has yet to be established, it can be argued that "the goal of sustainable tourism is to minimize the harm done to a destination, while regenerative tourism seeks to replenish a destination's resources so that it can thrive in the long term." In Hawaii, regenerative tourism has received official support from the Hawaii Tourism Authority since 2019, aiming to provide long-term solutions to the challenges posed by mass tourism on the islands. Despite its potential, regenerative tourism remains a nascent business practice, with limited implementation. At the state level within Polynesia, it is officially endorsed only by New Zealand's Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment and Hawaii's Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism. At the city level in Europe, Amsterdam has adopted the Doughnut Economics Model since 2020, a framework that closely aligns with the principles of regenerative tourism, including its holistic approach, ecosystem narrative, and nature-based focus.

Critics of regenerative tourism argue that its implementation is impractical and overly ideological, serving either corporate interests through “greenwashing” or the recognition of minority interests. Conversely, numerous scholars and consultants advocate for its transformative potential, suggesting it could lead to ecological symbiosis with nature. Considering this debate, the research project sought to address fundamental questions such as: What is regenerative tourism in Hawaii? Where did it originate? When did this practice emerge? Who is responsible for its implementation? The project’s first objective was to conceptualize regenerative tourism by identifying its innovations in comparison to sustainable tourism. The second objective was to evaluate the implementation of regenerative tourism by stakeholders on Oahu, the most densely populated island in the Hawaiian archipelago.

COLLECTING IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

During my visit to the University of Hawaii at Mānoa (UHM), the core of my experience centered on conducting 30 recorded interviews. Admittedly, the Fulbright visiting scholar status facilitated interviews with stakeholders as it helped establish trust. Many individuals I spoke to were either busy due to their executive positions, or expressed skepticism about my ability to understand their issues and offer solutions. At times, these situations were challenging, particularly given that the number of key informants who are experts in regenerative tourism is limited. With that said, however, when I mentioned that my research project was part of a Fulbright program – which promotes mutual understanding – most individuals I reached out to were willing to participate in the study. For example, one elected official was eager to assist me because he himself had been a former Fulbright recipient. In this regard, the Fulbright program fosters international collaboration to the extent that alumni are often inclined to support one another.

Little by little, these in-person interviews, conducted in Honolulu, provided valuable insights from seven distinct groups directly involved in the tourism sector, including: (1) executives from the State of Hawaii working at the Hawaii Tourism Authority; (2) employees of the City and County of Honolulu; (3) hotel owners and employees; (4) owners and employees of adventure tourism agencies; (5) volunteers within associations dedicated to the preservation of Hawaiian culture; (6) tourists visiting Hawaii; and (7) residents of Hawaii. Through these interviews, I was able to gather original data that addressed many of my research questions. For instance, in response to the fundamental question, “Where does regenerative tourism originate?” the predominant answer pointed to the Hawaii Tourism Authority, which drew inspiration from models developed by consultants, particularly those of Anna Pollock. However, perhaps more significantly, I discovered that certain residents of Hawaii had already been integrating elements of regenerative principles for

over a decade through non-profit organizations, referring to their efforts as “community-based” and “plans to thrive.” This finding suggests that regenerative activities have predated the formal conceptualization of the term itself, involving a wide range of stakeholders within the tourism ecosystem.

IMPACTS ON SOCIETY, CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIP

Conducting interviews in Hawaii has enhanced both my critical thinking and my ability to identify practical solutions that could contribute to improving lives. First and foremost, the interviews provided me with a practical understanding of regenerative activities, moving beyond the theoretical insights found in journal articles, which were informative but largely conceptual. I discovered that within the tourism ecosystem, business practices can be either regenerative or non-regenerative, depending on the context. During interviews, State and local government officials demonstrated a thorough understanding of regenerative tourism, frequently referring to the model developed by Pollock, which appears to be the most accepted framework. It emphasizes not merely minimizing harm but actively improving and revitalizing destinations. This model encourages tourism practices that restore and enhance the natural environment, cultural heritage, and local communities, fostering a symbiotic relationship between visitors and hosts. Broader frameworks, such as the regenerative business model proposed by Carol Sanford, are less well-known, despite their potential applicability. Sanford’s model advocates for a transformative approach to business. Unlike traditional models that focus on efficiency and profit maximization, Sanford’s approach seeks to redesign work environments to cultivate creativity, responsibility, and personal growth among employees. While Sanford’s model seems easier to applied to Hawaii tourism industry in the short-term, State and local government officials would rather adopt a long-term regenerative approach. For example, the Office of Economic Rejuvenation of the City and County of Honolulu has contributed to regulating short-term rentals, aiming to limit the number of visitors staying in residential areas, and ultimately limit durably the number of visitors to the islands.

In shifting the focus to the private sector, a clear divide emerges between for-profit and non-profit organizations. The non-profit organizations surveyed tended to adopt a regenerative mindset, actively questioning the commodification of Hawaiian culture and expressing concern over environmental degradation. These organizations refine their ethical practices and engage in close collaboration with other stakeholders. However, they acknowledged the need to make further efforts to reduce their own environmental impact. In contrast, for-profit organizations were less inclined to question their business practices as long as they remained profitable. For these companies, regeneration is not a priority, although customer satisfaction

does remain central to their operations. Ultimately, this research highlighted a lack of coordination between public and private stakeholders, demonstrating that more active collaboration is required to establish a truly regenerative tourism ecosystem in Hawaii.

On a personal level, my professional skills improved significantly. I became more confident in navigating various professional settings, including conferences and workshops, and even co-organized my first roundtable at the Critical Tourism Studies conference in Vietnam, where I presented the Fulbright program and addressed questions from prospective applicants. This experience broadened my international network in meeting new colleagues in Asia, and deepened my understanding of how to effectively communicate and collaborate across cultural boundaries. Beyond my individual growth, the Fulbright program fostered enduring relationships and institutional partnerships that will continue to influence my career. For example, the connections I made with faculty at UHM and local stakeholders have paved the way for applying to collaborative research projects (ANR and IUF schemes) with Universities in France, such as Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne and the University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne. This partnership aims to expand the research on regenerative tourism and its applications beyond Hawaii, with a particular focus on France. Additionally, my interactions with stakeholders, including both government officials and local community leaders, demonstrated the importance of bridging academic research with practical implementation. For example, discussions with local government officials directly influenced the design of the aforementioned research projects by aiming at incorporating regenerative principles into community-based tourism initiatives, ensuring that theoretical frameworks could be tested and refined in real-world settings.

CONCLUSION AND THOUGHTS FOR PROSPECTIVE RECIPIENTS

Culturally, this Fulbright program allowed me to deepen my connections with the social fabric of Hawaii, gain a greater appreciation of the archipelago's tourism ecosystem, and better understand the indigenous perspectives on nature and culture. By visiting interviewees at their workplaces or homes, I developed intercultural competence and reflected on the economic disparities among the various actors I encountered. The experience fostered greater open-mindedness and complexity in my reasoning. Besides, I had the opportunity to share aspects of French culture with colleagues, interviewees, and friends. Professional meetings and social gatherings provided excellent opportunities to discuss French diplomatic history with the U.S. and the French presence in Hawaii.

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For new Fulbright recipients, many of whom are experiencing life in the United States for the first time, I believe it is important to offer guidance on administrative matters. Without an established network of colleagues or friends, it is essential to connect with the appropriate services and lay a solid foundation for successfully conducting research. A key priority, a few months or weeks before the program begins, is to secure accommodation. Staying in a hotel or hostel for the first one or two weeks can provide time to find more permanent housing. Many host universities offer housing search assistance for researchers and exchange students, and I recommend contacting these services as early as possible. Upon arrival in the United States, it is crucial to obtain a local phone number, as it is often required by administrative services and is useful for building and maintaining professional and personal connections. Following this, opening a bank account and completing forms with the Institute of International Education (IIE)—which administers the Fulbright program—to obtain a social security number are important next steps. While some recipients may already have a social security card from previous work in the U.S., it is worth noting that this number is frequently requested during various administrative processes.

Finally, regarding mobility, careful consideration of transportation options is essential, especially in locations where public transportation is limited. Public transit systems tend to be reliable in major cities such as New York or Chicago, but in states like California, owning or renting a car may be critical for conducting research effectively. In my experience in cities like Long Beach and San Diego, I utilized various forms of transportation, including walking, biking, buses, trains, electric scooters, carpooling, and car rentals. However, driving proved to be the most efficient mode of transportation, as these cities were designed around car mobility. Each location is different, so being aware of the most practical transportation methods is crucial. For longer stays, particularly those of twelve months or more, obtaining an American driver's license can be beneficial, especially in areas where car use is common due to urban design and infrastructure.

FURTHER READING

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Legend: Catherine Cruz (host), and Jeremy Lemarie (guest) at HawaiiPublic Radio on May 4, 2023. The author shares his findings with the public by the end of his Fulbright program, (May 2023) in a show, *The Conversation*. Picture taken by a staff member at Hawaii Public Radio and recording available at : <https://www.Hawaiipublicradio.org/show/the-conversation/2023-05-04/the-conversation-regenerative-tourism-national-portrait-gallery-exhibit>

BIOGRAPHY

Jeremy Lemarie is an associate professor of sports management at the University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne, affiliated to the research center PSMS (Performance, Health, Metrology, Society). In January-May 2023, he was a Fulbright visiting scholar on regenerative tourism in the Anthropology Department at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa, USA. His research interests are in economic anthropology and human-nature interactions in the USA and Polynesia. He can be contacted at jeremy.lemarie@gmail.com
