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Regenerative Potential and Problems in Nature-based Tourism

The Case of Private Game Reserves in South Africa

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Abstract

The importance of sustainable development has been firmly acknowledged worldwide. This is no less apparent than in the context of tourism, which despite its promise as a driver of development in low-income countries has produced a number of negative externalities for local communities, ecologies, and the environment at large. Popular conceptions of sustainable tourism like that from the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) claim to support a triple bottom line of economic vitality, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. However novel approaches like that of regenerative tourism criticize the above for not challenging the underlying adherence to economic growth and for not being ambitious enough in producing a positive environmental impact instead being satisfied in solely maintaining and mitigating existing practices' impacts.

This thesis, based on the case of private game reserves in South Africa, explores the qualitative implications of shifting towards regenerative models based on in-depth interviews with relevant stakeholders to highlight its strengths and limitations. By performing a discourse analysis, this thesis finds that private game reserves consider and problematize sustainability in tourism largely through neoliberal terms of supply and demand, which misses an opportunity to produce a more substantive impact on surrounding communities and the environment. Regenerative tourism, by virtue of its living system and place-based approach, provides an opportunity for reserves to address some of the challenges they face, yet is unlikely to manifest this to the fullest extent due to its relatively immature formulation in literature at this moment in time. If the concept can ground itself in the practical conditions and capabilities of all relevant elements of the tourism system, perhaps by reconsidering its inherent radicalness, it can serve as an important tool for producing truly sustainable outcomes in the context of tourism.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Context of Research

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines tourism as the “ (...) social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes.” (UNWTO, N.D). Tourism in practice is, however, as highlighted by Rodriguez-Giron and Vanneste (2019), inherently more complex. Its multidimensional nature encompasses an incredibly broad range of activities and experiences and therefore materializes heterogeneously across space and time in its forms and outcomes. There are a multitude of actors ranging from the visitors themselves to public and private facilitators as well as local residents all of which play a role in determining the tourism experience, even without their direct participation. Local geographies, culture, and politics further differentiate these experiences and inundate tourism with a unique and diverse character. As Rodriguez-Giron and Vanneste suggest, tourism is characterized by a certain intangibility, as subjective experiences evade quantification with the phenomenon not as much a provision of host facilitators but an evolving social construction derived from the interaction of all of tourism's parts (Rodriguez-Giron and Vanneste, 2019).

Neverminding such complexity, the scale and scope of tourism have increased significantly as incomes and living standards, primarily in the high-income countries of the global north, have improved alongside declining costs of transport. International tourism, notwithstanding domestic tourism, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019 had risen to approximately 1.5 billion, approximately 800 million more than at the turn of the millennium (UNWTO, 2020). Such impressive growth has seen tourism leveraged as a “ valuable avenue” in the elusive quest for growth, as remarked by the UNWTO during the UN Conference on Trade and Development in 2001 (UNWTO, 2001,p.1). What is particularly attractive about tourism in socioeconomic terms is its potential to bring in financial investment and employment at relatively low upfront costs,

particularly in cases where the attraction is defined by existing natural landscapes and wildlife (Tefler and Sharpley, 2007).

This aspect is perhaps no better exemplified by the experience of South Africa in recent decades. Since the abolishment of apartheid in 1994, the country has become one of the top tourist destinations in Southern Africa. A large part of this feat is owed to the country's endowment of flora and fauna endemic to the region, with South Africa being the third most biodiverse country globally possessing a diverse landscape characterized by the various biomes within the countries borders (DEA, 2017; Akinboade and Braimoh, 2010). In 1994, the number of international tourists was 3.7 million (Akinboade and Braimoh, 2010, p.150). By 2019, there were approximately 10.23 million and contributed 3.7 percent of the national GDP, and 4.8 of employment nationally being directly associated with the phenomenon (Statsa, 2021a; Statista, 2023). Nature-based tourism - referring to any kind of tourism situated within the natural environment as defined by Goodwin (1995) - is thus of major importance to the South African economy.

9.2 percent of the South African land is considered publicly protected, which whilst in absolute terms means the country has a large area under public protection than the entire size of Cuba, it is proportionally lower than the global average of approximately 15.8 percent (Statsa, 2021b; CBD, 2022, p.1). What makes nature-based tourism in South Africa unique is thus not its extent but its structure. Since the early 1990s, the private sector has become a major force in both tourism and the conservation of the flora and fauna in the country owing to the unique legal status of wildlife ownership. It allows animals such as the charismatic big 5 - the African buffalo, Elephant, Leopard, Lion, and black rhino - to be owned outside the public sector, contrary to the global norm. Land under private protection is twice that of the public sector at approximately 18 percent (Van Hoven, 2015, p.102). Private game and nature reserves have accordingly become a major player in South Africa's nature-based tourism, with the total number of game reserves ranging between nine to eleven thousand (Van Hoven, 2015; Banasiak et al, 2019; Kreuter, 2010).

Yet generally, tourism's relation to economic development in practice has also been scrutinized across its social, economic, cultural, and increasingly environmental dimensions. Tefler and

Sharpley (2007) note that its volatile nature, as highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic, hinders long-run welfare gains and any kind of capital accumulation that could form along its extensive backward linkages. Integrating local communities and cultures into tourist experiences is a double-edged sword as it can both be a source of economic empowerment resulting from the revenue generated. Simultaneously it can adversely affect the communities' capacity towards self-determination as tourist interests dictate decision-making at the expense of local customs or traditions (See Benedixen, 1997). Tourism, as with the economy at large, has further been acknowledged in regard to its ecological and environmental impact. Forecasts on the phenomenon's resource consumption of land and water by Gössling and Peeters (2015) show that by 2050 both could increase by 92 and 189 percent respectively. Gössling (2013) finds that tourism alone comprises 5 percent of total carbon dioxide emissions globally, which is only likely to continue to grow if all else remains equal. As Tefler and Sharpley maintain, there are inherent dilemmas embedded across the social, cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions of tourism as a driver of economic development.

The inherent unsustainability in tourism, particularly in the aftermath of its exponential growth towards the end of the twentieth century saw alternative approaches arise to what had become known as mass tourism (Fennel (2012). Shaping popular discourse at the time was the emerging concept of Sustainable Development as brought forth by the United Nations Brundtland report (1987) which defined it as “ (...) meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (UN, 1987, p.16). Sustainable tourism as such came to be similarly demarcated by the UNWTO - and UNEP - (2005) as taking “ (...) a full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities.” (UNWTO and UNEP, 2005, p.12).

The UNWTO offers three key objectives across the dimensions of sustainability as described above. Firstly, sustainable tourism should use the optimum amount of resources to maintain and conserve critical ecological processes, natural heritage sites, and biodiversity. Secondly, it should respect host communities' cultures and lastly sustainable tourism should support economically feasible activities that lead to equitably distributed socio-economic benefits across relevant

stakeholders (UNWTO and UNEP, 2005, p.11). Table 1 presents the 12 aims UNWTO has for sustainable tourism in general. The terminology utilized implicitly reflects the delicate compromise the concept has attempted to strike between supporters of continued economic growth and development as a lasting goal and rationale and environmentalists seeking a more cautious approach to resource use (Weaver, 2006, pp.9-10). For instance, the economic aims in Table 1 demonstrate notions inherent to neoclassical economics such as the maximization of profits and market competition, and economic growth for prosperity. This is contrasted by the more cautious formulation of the environmental aims. Terms such as “minimize”, “conserve” and “efficiency” implies approaches that limit and restrict tourism's environmental impact. As Weaver (2006) concludes, sustainable tourism can be observed as reducing the negative impacts, largely posited as environmental, whilst escalating the economic and social potential for tourism.

Table 1. UNWTO’s 12 Aims of Sustainable Tourism (UNWTO and UNEP, 2005, p.18-19).

Economic	Social	Environmental
<i>1. Economic Viability:</i> To ensure the viability and competitiveness of tourism destinations and enterprises, so that they are able to continue to prosper and deliver benefits in the long term.	<i>4. Social Equity:</i> To seek a widespread and fair distribution of economic and social benefits from tourism throughout the recipient community, including improving opportunities, income, and services available to the poor.	<i>9. Physical Integrity:</i> To maintain and enhance the quality of landscapes, both urban and rural, and avoid the physical and visual degradation of the environment.
<i>2. Local Prosperity:</i> To maximize the contribution of tourism to the economic prosperity of the host destination, including the proportion of visitor spending that is retained locally.	<i>5. Visitor Fulfillment:</i> To provide a safe, satisfying, and fulfilling experience for visitors, available to all without discrimination by gender, race, disability, or other ways.	<i>10. Biological Diversity:</i> To support the conservation of natural areas, habitats, and wildlife, and minimize damage to them.
<i>3. Employment Quality:</i> To strengthen the number and quality of local jobs created and supported by tourism, including the level of pay, conditions of service, and availability to all without discrimination by gender,	<i>6. Local Control:</i> To engage and empower local communities in planning and decision-making about the management and future development of tourism in their area, in consultation with other stakeholders.	<i>11. Resource Efficiency:</i> To minimize the use of scarce and non-renewable resources in the development and operation of tourism facilities and services.

race, disability, or in other ways.		
	<i>7. Community Wellbeing:</i> To maintain and strengthen the quality of life in local communities, including social structures and access to resources, amenities, and life support systems, avoiding any form of social degradation or exploitation.	<i>12. Environmental Purity:</i> To minimize the pollution of air, water, and land and the generation of waste by tourism enterprises and visitors.
	<i>8. Cultural Richness:</i> To respect and enhance the historic heritage, authentic culture, traditions, and distinctiveness of host communities.	

Sustainable development in general has since the turn of the millennium become what Lafferty and Eckerberg (2013) describe as the “global development paradigm” in the realm of national and international policy-making (cited in Sharpley, 2020, p.1932). This was only further affirmed by the unveiling of the 15 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, of which all have some relation to tourism due to the inherent breadth and complexity of the tourism phenomenon (Rodriguez et al, 2020). This broad description of sustainable tourism have lead to the development and popularization of numerous interrelated yet times distinct approaches to achieving sustainable development. Examples of this include notions of “Green Tourism”, “Responsible Tourism” and “Ecotourism” (Hussain, 2022; Sharpley, 2012; Pforr, 2001). Whilst there is an entire conceptual debate to be had in this regard, what can be said is the growing resonance of these terms commercially amongst practitioners and policymakers has brought forth scholarly criticism as helping to enable greenwashing on the part of practitioners and lower each stakeholder's respective accountability in contributing to more sustainable tourism due to the general ambiguity and framing of sustainable tourism.

As suggested by Gössling (2013 and 2015) and Sharpley (2020) there is little evidence that tourism has indeed become more sustainable in practice even in light of the growing recognition

of its importance. This has brought up the question of the internal trade-off apparent between the economic and environmental aims of sustainable tourism, which Sharpley views as inherently contradictory. Without recognition of such sustainability in tourism is unlikely to make substantive progress globally. In light of this, there is a growing body of literature calling for redefining the role and importance of economic growth in the economy at large (See Duxbery et al, 2020; Dredge, 2022; Sharpley, 2020). One such example in the case of tourism is that of “regenerative tourism”. In defining regeneration, the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2023) notes the term can refer to both a “ spiritual renewal or revival” as well as the “restoration of a body, bodily part, or biological system” (Merriam-Webster, 2023).

This description captures the essence of regenerative sustainability which distinguishes itself from the more conventional alignment of sustainability as described above by positing itself as transformative in both the nature of tourism practices and also of mindsets. The major critique of sustainable tourism is the lack of ambition and underlying assumptions embedded within it. As remarked in Table 1, environmental sustainability under the 12 aims is operationalized through limiting and minimizing adverse impacts whilst using resources more efficiently. Regenerative models challenge this by arguing firstly that this does not restore lost ecosystems but rather only maintains what is left and secondly fails to question the intrinsic relationship people and nature possess. Under sustainable tourism natural resources and their value remains tied to their utility for human activity, and their conservation is acknowledged for long-run economic development (Gabel, 2015; Gibbons, 2020, Duxbery et al, 2020).

Regenerative sustainability begins with the basic premise that the philosophical division of people and nature is erroneous (Lyle, 1994). In the case of tourism, the two are instead viewed as interrelated elements of a self-organizing system that increase in complexity through their interaction with one another and with non-tourism-specific systems (Bellato et al, 2022a). Nature is perceived as an agent in and of itself rather than a passive resource that is to be used for humans' benefit. By challenging the supposed technocratic nature of sustainability as defined by international organizations regenerative tourism can consider the vitality of the system at large rather than the fragmented approach of its counterpart (Dredge, 2022). Gibbons (2020) and Mang and Reed (2020) argue that the latter understand environmental and social costs of tourism

as problems that can be solved through changes in technologies, policy, or market dynamics whereas regenerative approaches view the same issues not as problems but as symptoms of the underlying values, paradigms, and worldviews.

Regenerative approaches are especially critical of what they perceive as the enduring dominance of neoliberal paradigms in popular conceptions of sustainable development at large. By challenging the inherent sacredness of economic growth, regenerative tourism argues for decision-making based on the vitality of the specific tourism system as a whole (Bellato et al, 2022a, Duxbery et al, 2020; Gibbons et al, 2020). In transforming the underlying relationship between man and nature, the concept also allows for greater integration of non-western forms and ways of knowing allowing for more diverse interventions to be considered (Bellato et al, 2022a; Robinson and Cole, 2015). Importantly, the objective of interventions under regenerative tourism is to move beyond mitigating and minimizing the environmental and social costs of tourism and to create a net-positive impact rather than the at best ecological neutrality of sustainable tourism. Regenerative sustainability and its application are therefore far more ambitious and aspirational in comparison (Robinson and Cole, 2015; Ho, 2020).

1.2 Scope and Aims of Research

The covid-19 pandemic has had disastrous economic impacts on tourism globally and in South Africa in particular. International arrivals in the country in 2021 totaled 2.6 million, an almost 75 percent decrease from pre-pandemic levels and the lowest it had been since the apartheid era (Statista, 2023; Akinboade and Braimoh, 2010). The abrupt shock not only emphasized tourism's well-known volatility but encouraged proponents of regenerative tourism to use the crisis as an opportunity to rethink and call for reconsiderations of how tourism should be undertaken by relevant stakeholders and for alternative economic systems that shift the focus away from economic growth towards the system-wide health of the tourism phenomena in question (Dredge, 2022; Duxbery et al, 2020; Hussain, 2021; Sharma and Tam, 2023). As evidenced by the recency of the available literature on the topic, with a majority of publications arising in the last 3 years, the approach remains a novelty. Consequently, its practical implications for stakeholders remain relatively unknown. This thesis aims to address this gap by asking the following research questions;

1. How do private game reserves in South Africa represent issues of sustainability in tourism?
2. How can regenerative tourism contribute to sustainable tourism?

Private game reserves in South Africa are of interest due firstly to their comparatively unique origins and structure with respect to the rest of the world, the cultural and economic significance of wildlife, and due to the nature-based tourism in the country in which private game reserves are major facilitators. Lastly, tourism within these reserves serves to be instrumental in exploring the core principles of regenerative tourism as they, like national parks, can be seen to be the nexus of the social dimensions - in terms of employment and spatial relationship with local communities - economic - in terms of revenue and how it is reinvested across the other dimensions - and environmental which refers not only to their role in the conservation of the surrounding ecology but also in the impact of facilities and services and the socioeconomic forces that drive them.

The first research question serves to explore the existing perceptions and explicit and implicit assumptions that can be identified within private game reserves which have implications for both the practical and cognitive opportunities and challenges for more sustainable tourism phenomena. The second research question in asking how regenerative tourism can contribute is meant to be iterative in its application. This is to say that this thesis will consider the prospects it has for private game reserves in realizing more sustainable tourism but also reflect on how the concept itself can evolve and mature to be aligned with the practical aspects of tourism across all dimensions. The general discourse within regenerative tourism is generally optimistic and hopeful of its transformative potential. Assuming that regenerative tourism is universally positive, however, would not only contradict the internal logic of the concept but succumb to the same deterministic interpretation of sustainability that the concept is trying to replace. This thesis aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of regenerative tourism to further its maturation as a concept as well as identify its potential for private game reserves and by extension wildlife tourism in South Africa to be more sustainable.

The thesis answers the research questions by performing seven qualitative interviews with several private game reserve personnel spread across South Africa, focusing on premium reserves that offer accommodation and catering as these reserves explicitly encompass the handling of resources, energy, and waste to a greater extent than reserves where these facilities are absent.

1.3 Outline of Thesis

This thesis is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a brief history of private game reserves in South Africa and the key moments in their development that shape where they are today. Section 3 outlines the concept of regenerative tourism and how this thesis operationalizes in order to answer the research questions posed above. Section 4 then canvases the existing literature both in regenerative tourism and tourism on private game reserves to provide context and identify the gaps in existing research this thesis aims to address. The next section presents the methodology and research design employed by this study as well as reflects on the ethical considerations and limitations of this design in the interpretation of the results. These are presented in section 6, which is discussed in relation to the conceptual framework in section 7. Section 8 concludes.

2. Background

The first formally protected area in South Africa was the Sabie game reserve formed in 1898 and was the precursor to the Kruger national park (SANParks, N.Da). As European settlers migrated north during the “Great Trek”, the local ecology would be put under extreme pressure through excessive hunting activities and widespread diseases amongst wildlife borne out of the accompanying livestock which in turn resulted in widespread culling campaigns which led to this period in hindsight becoming popularly known as the “century of extermination” (Kreater, 2010, p.510). Consequently, wildlife populations were devastated and the transformation of large swathes of land for agricultural purposes would also lead to its general degradation over time. During the early 1900s, discussions had begun to take place governing the protection of South Africa’s landscape for recreational purposes.

In 1926, the Board of National Parks, the predecessors of SANParks, was founded to oversee the newly formed Kruger national parks, itself a merger of the Sabie and Shingwedzie game reserves (SANParks, N.Da). The years preceding its establishment were characterized by contestations between agricultural interest groups who were invested in the commercial potential of the region and others who viewed its preservation as critical to providing a visitor-friendly environment and as an eventual holiday destination. Like many national parks formed around this time, the notion of conservation for its own sake remained relatively marginal in these debates. Responsibility over Kruger and other protected areas would be largely in the hands of the state which was quick to recognize its commercial potential and embarked on infrastructural projects to accommodate tourists in national parks (Carruthers, 2009).

The initial tourism policy enacted by the South African government was in Carruthers's (2009) words “ad-hoc” and often resulted in rowdy and irresponsible tourist experiences which disrupted the surrounding ecology. The unsustainability of tourist behavior in Kruger was recognized, but limited state resources made existing, such as the limit on overall tourist numbers introduced in the 1950s, effectively impossible to enforce. It also can not be understated that the formation of protected areas and the commercial revenue they produced were done to the deliberate exclusion of the black South African population. Much of the land used was arbitrarily expropriated from black communities under apartheid law, and they were often not welcome in the parks as tourists, only as a source of menial labor. National parks and wildlife viewing was thus a distinctly privileged experience (Carruthers, 2009). By 1960 the state of South African wildlife was dire, reaching a low point of only about 500,000 animals (Van Hoven, 2015).

As the 20th century wore on motivations to protect wildlife grew not just on grounds for conservation, but for their growing commercial value particularly within private sector farmers active in the biltong industry, who often operated on shaky legal footing due to them technically not owning the animals they harvested (Van Hoven, 2015). Most countries today do not allow private ownership of wildlife, and this was largely also the case in the 1960s in South Africa, where there was skepticism due to its perceived threat to livestock, as evidenced by the Department of Agriculture not viewing it as a legitimate practice (Kreuter, 2010; Van Hoven,

2015). But discourse surrounding private ownership was slowly shifting, and by 1976 the National Parks Act allowed in theory for land surrounding national parks to be designated as a “contracted national park” which would enable the total amount of land under conservation to be increased at a lower cost.

This signaled the beginning of a shift from what was once a heavily centralized and top-down approach toward conservation to the inclusion of a greater array of actors (Kreuter, 2010). The National Parks Act and its amendments during the 1980s also allowed the South African government to expropriate land from private landowners. This also created an incentive for private landowners on the borders of national parks to enter such contractual agreements as it would exempt them from expropriation. The model also allowed for the board of national parks to expand protected land across areas sought after by the mining industry, as responsible government departments were often unwilling to directly aid the acquisition (Kreuter, 2010; Reid, 2001).

The pivotal moment would come in earnest in 1991 with the “Game Theft” Act, which allowed for private ownership of wildlife as long as the animal were in a fenced enclosure (Banasiak et al, 2019). As private reserves emerged, associations grew to represent and lobby for their interests in government and would negotiate with national parks to remove fencing between them to allow for wildlife to cross freely between parks, which was mutually beneficial for both parties as the public parks could save money on conservation whilst the private sector could profit from the potential tourism revenue the animals would attract. This, in combination with the opening up of the South African economy following the abolishment of apartheid in 1994 led to an explosion in the number of private actors involved in wildlife production.

The reasons for such a drastic increase are two-fold. Firstly, agriculture which had at one point been heavily protected and subsidized had embarked on a journey of market-led development heavily encouraged by the IMF and World Bank. The process of deregulation left South African agriculture unable to compete globally and forced many farmers to reconsider their own land use, whilst others went bankrupt. Alongside this was the aforementioned growing international

market for tourism, many of whom longed for an idyllic vision of Africa as “wild” and untouched by human activity (Spierenburg and Brooks, 2014).

The opening up of South Africa in the 1990s saw a massive increase in the number of tourists coming to the country and provided an attractive alternative to an increasingly stagnant agricultural sector (Akinboade, 2010; Spierenburg and Brooks, 2014). It also attracted investment from wealthy individuals in the country, endowing the demographics of private game reserves as a mix between formerly small-scale commercial agriculturalists and others founded by large conglomerates looking to commodify nature (Brooks et al, 2010). This diversity in both the land and landowners meant that the scope and scale of transforming land to produce the wilderness to attract tourists varied accordingly. Brooks et al (2010) point out that this transformation also occurred on a discursive level, arguing that what is being sold is as much a lifestyle as any other kind of good, which the authors argue paints a picture of the land that does not always corroborate with its historical use. This reframing is often contested by other people's view of the land, such as the former farm workers who lived and worked on these farms and whose integration into conservation and tourist activities has not been successful (Brooks et al, 2010).

The sheer extent of private reserves implies great variety in both the specific activities undertaken and management approaches, particularly in the absence of formal requirements to protect the land as well as wildlife which may leave land vulnerable if its inherent profitability changes (Banasiak et al, 2019). The phenomenon of private game reserves in South Africa has also warranted investigation as to its relationship with land ownership, a pertinent issue in the country considering the legacy of apartheid and colonialism in its present unequal distribution. Whilst a full discussion of this is beyond the scope of this thesis, there is a growing literature relating private game reserves as a form of “green grabbing” and a consolidation of disparities in land ownership (See Zoomer, 2010; Brooks and Kjelstrup, 2014; Spierenburg and Brooks, 2014).

This history invariably shapes the activities and approaches present today on private game reserves in how tourism is practically and socially constructed. The legacies of agriculture on land use as well as the socioeconomic and political development unique to South Africa are

likely to shape and represent themselves in how sustainability in tourism is approached and the priorities and limitations they have in doing so. Exploring the contribution of regenerative tourism necessitates that this context is acknowledged.

3. Conceptual Framework: Regenerative Tourism

This section aims to describe the key principles of regenerative tourism and elucidate how these principles relate to one another and the aims outlined by this thesis's introduction. This begins with presenting the definition provided by Bellato et al (2022a) which serves as an instructive tool for the purposes of this thesis. As evident below, the key principles of regenerative tourism can be summarised as being a net-positive approach built on living systems thinking and the combination of multiple kinds of knowledge across Western and indigenous backgrounds. All of this makes the practice of regenerative tourism transformative. The below also provides a brief historical overview of the concept's development to explore its origins and how its interpretations have evolved over time.

“Regenerative tourism is a transformational approach that aims to fulfill the potential of tourism places to flourish and create net positive effects through increasing the regenerative capacity of human societies and ecosystems. Derived from the ecological worldview, it weaves Indigenous and Western science perspectives and knowledge. Tourism systems are regarded as inseparable from nature and obligated to respect Earth’s principles and laws. In addition, regenerative tourism approaches evolve and vary across places over the long term, thereby harmonizing practices with the regeneration of nested living systems.” (Bellato et al, 2022a, p.9).

As is evident in Bellato et al’s definition is that the notion that tourism is not merely an economic sector as traditionally viewed but as a living system comprised of economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Inspired by literature on social-ecological systems, systems thinking in regenerative tourism reflects the epistemological bridging of the two moving away from a notion of either as separate entities and external drivers of change in either field to a recognition of the complex and intertwined nature of both systems. Social factors in the SES refer to the

economic, political, cultural, and technological aspects whilst the latter comprises both biotic forces, such as animal and plant population dynamics and food web interactions, and abiotic forces like nutrient flows and climatic patterns (Biggs et al, 2021). System thinking provides a holistic and evolutionary approach to tourism by elucidating the complex relationships across the various stakeholders whose practices and behaviors are entrenched in systematic patterns of interaction which themselves shape and are influenced by ecological and non-human factors (Bellato et al, 2022b).

The use of regeneration as referring to a systemic phenomenon in the sense described above originated in the work of Lyle (1994) and the Regenes group (1994) in the field of landscape architecture and general discussions of the built environment, though many of the major principles inundated by this literature are broadly applicable and remain poignant in regenerative tourism today. Bellato et al's definition indicates that regenerative approaches broadly are an alternative to mainstream approaches as implied by their use of the term "transformational". Lyle and others in promoting regenerative design argued that the growing paradigm of sustainable development, as already mentioned in this thesis's introduction, was focused on mitigative strategies to minimize new and existing infrastructures' impact on the environment and continued to further a mechanical view of nature as a resource to used and controlled by society. The transformative nature of regenerative approaches comes from viewing nature and its ecosystems that support it as "alive", implying a kind of agency and thus as a co-evolving "living" system. Mang and Reed (2020) described people's role in nature as not bit as literal architects but as "gardeners" (p.129).

Bellato et als (2022a) use of the term indigenous, though not explicitly stated by the authors, further supports this argumentation due to the intrinsic value of nature that has independently arisen amongst these communities (Mang and Haggard, 2016). In advocating for a new relationship with nature the role of local geography is put in focus. The uniqueness or centrality of place as referred to by Roös (2021) and Bellato et al (2022b) respectively, is indicative of the context-specific nature of regenerative interventions. Lyle (cited in Roös, 2021) proposes built environments that incorporate existing ecological processes rather than supplant them for technological solutions. Evidently, this is not always possible given the demands of populations

for certain services, but Lyle argues that nature still serves as a model that can be imitated, particularly in shifting from linear material flows to cyclical ones “at source” (Roös, 2021, p.104), and which regenerate value for local ecologies and communities. This alludes to regenerative approaches as inherently bottom-up in their design and functions and relatively small-scale in their application as top-down and universal stratagems contradict the uniqueness of place.

In prioritizing ecological sustainability, which as Roös argues is a major aspect of Lyles's work, regenerative design implied a value shift in the decision-making process away from the mainstream neoliberal discourse which constrained choices through rationales of supply and demand. Much of the regenerative literature (See Duxbury et al, 2020) posits itself as a contributor to alternative economic systems to the dominant capitalist global economy, which for the purposes of this thesis indicates an inherent radicalness to regenerative approaches given that they present themselves as a modification of the economic system rather than an extension of it. Another important element mentioned in the definition above is the notion of net-positive impacts. Unlike sustainable development discourse which Lyle and others view as largely a form of maintenance of ecosystems and “ecologically neutral” (cited in Roös, 2021, p.104), regenerative designs allow for not only the restoration of lost ecosystems but their continual growth.

As implied by the description above, the inherent complexity of the system’s thinking within the field of SES warrants an elaboration of how it can be represented in the context of tourism and private game reserves in South Africa. Rodriguez-Giron and Vanneste’s (2019) tourism systems framework, cited in Bellato et al (2022a and 2022b), is in this sense elucidative. At its most basic level are the components of the system, which the authors break down into elements, functions, dynamics, and the environment. Elements refer to the individual actors who comprise the system and form the locus for interactions. Importantly, actors in this context do not exclusively refer to human agents but rather encompass non-human and technological entities. The authors give examples of national parks, which act as facilitators of tourism and therefore shape the tourist experience. Implicit here is the rejection of nature and ecological forces as resources waiting to

be consumed by human actors, highlighting the intrinsic value of nature inherent within regenerative discourse at large (Rodriguez-Giron and Vanneste, 2019).

By expanding upon the notion of actors, the functions of elements - what Rodriguez-Giron and Vanneste refer to as the process of transforming a resource¹ into an output - allow for a more multidimensional perspective on the motivations and actions of actors. Tourism at large is the result of the aggregation of each element's functions which themselves are constrained by an evolving and context-dependent set of resources. Another component is the dynamics between individual elements and their function, which serve to produce the system as a whole (Rodriguez-Giron and Vanneste, 2019). The networks of interactions make, as with SES in general, make tourism a complex adaptive system, or in the lexicon of regenerative scholars, a living system (Biggs et al, 2021; Bellato et al, 2022a; Mang and Haggard, 2016, p.10).

They consist of a multitude of independent parts whose interactions create system-wide patterns which in turn influence individual actions (Biggs et al, 2021). This elucidates both how rationales and action can on one hand become widespread at various scales and scopes whilst not being static, constantly adapting to emerging conditions (Biggs et al, 2021). As Rodriguez-Giron and Vanneste note this leads to patterns of organization that are endogenous to the specific system in question. The capacity to self-organize relates to the overall adaptability of the system as a whole and its resilience to the volatile nature of tourism. The authors also note how this materializes through visitors and the factors that influence their choice of destination. The dynamics also shape how the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of tourism interact and the outcomes that are produced, and the ones that are hindered.

The last component mentioned by Rodriguez-Giron and Vanneste is that of the environment which serves as the boundary of the tourism system of interest and those outside of it. These external systems serve to constrain the elements within the system and are dependent on the relationships and interactions across systems. Environmental components include the surrounding local communities and public policy and infrastructure, all of which shape the

¹ Resources in this context is meant in the broadest sense by Rodriguez-Giron and Vanneste, referring to “ time, budget, logistics, information, and energy” as examples (Rodriguez-Giron and Vanneste, 2019, p.5).

tourist experience and system at large. Considering the examples listed above by the authors imply the term environment is broadly defined as the conditions in which the elements and functions of a system operate as opposed to solely the natural world. Tourism and non-tourism-specific systems can be viewed as a series of feedback loops whilst the latter shape what is possible in the former, the tourism system itself influences the latter which points to an essential feature of systems thinking as evolutionary and yet incremental in its rate of change (Biggs et al, 2021; Rodriguez-Giron and Vanneste, 2019).

Rodriguez-Giron and Vanneste's system approach to tourism is founded on various levels of abstraction to capture its essential features and elucidate the prevalent forms of organization that give each tourism system a unique structure. Doing so unveils the emergent properties that characterize these features. An emergent property refers to characteristics that emerge from the interaction of various elements to generate a new phenomenon despite not being present in any single element. In short, the tourism system is not so much concerning the elements themselves but the relations between them. This insight moves away from any deterministic modeling as the emergent properties that are formed through element interactions are inherently unpredictable and non-linear in their relationships due to the inherent subjectivity and intangibility of the tourism experience (Rodriguez-Giron and Vanneste, 2019).

In the context of this thesis, this can be exemplified in the social construction of national parks as a tourist experience. Within this construction is the interaction of human elements like that of tourists and relevant tourism facilitators who are both seeking or providing an opportunity to experience nature for educational or recreational purposes which leads to them interacting with non-human elements, such as the savannah biomes in Northern South Africa which has become home to many private game reserves and national parks, to accommodate for this. These interactions generate new systemic features beyond the individual elements. For instance, the fencing that delineates the geographic boundaries forms what is now an exclusive area to view nature and wildlife where tourism is concentrated, where social norms, public legislation and policy, and park guidelines shape and are shaped by tourist and human facilitators' ever-changing experiences. Environmental components include the local communities affected by the transformation of land into protected areas or reserves and the wildlife itself, which necessitates

guidelines for health and safety and often mediates the tourist experience through the use of vehicles for game viewing. As Rodriguez-Giron and Vanneste suggest, it is only the combination of a visitor's involvement that transforms an attractive scenery into an emerging tourism phenomenon (Rodriguez-Giron and Vanneste, 2019).

Based on the discussion above, this thesis aims to explore the opportunities and challenges regenerative tourism as an approach presents for private game reserves in relation to achieving a more sustainable tourism activity across all its dimensions. It is important to consider how notions of net-positive impacts, indigenous knowledge, and living systems thinking as well as its general framing as an alternative economic approach actually relates to stakeholder perspectives to first assess its transformative potential and secondly, to highlight the shortcomings and underlying assumptions behind both regenerative tourism and private game reserves in their respective conceptualizations. As evident by the conceptual framework, there are a number of inherent normative propositions embedded in regenerative discourses at large which necessitates a grounded understanding of their potential implications for the management of and outcomes from tourism on private game reserves. Without this, the potential regenerative tourism possess are unlikely to be realized, and risks either further saturating an already dense conceptual field or being appropriated for purely marketing purposes and not transformative change.

4. Previous Literature

4.1 Regenerative Tourism

Owen's (2007a and 2007b) papers on regenerative design in the context of ecotourism, as argued by Bellato et al, (2020a) and Hussain (2021; see also Hussain and Haley, 2022), represents the first explicit use of the term regenerative tourism. Owen (2007a) explores the concept on a conceptual level in terms of its potential for the built environments that facilitate ecotourism, arguing that the concept enables a more critical and reflexive engagement with a place than conventionally observed within ecotourism at the time of writing. Owen (2007b) builds on this notion by using the resort town of Yulara - now known as "Ayers Rock Resort - in Australia.

Owen highlight argues that the conventional approach to the built environment of many ecotourism destinations is founded on the idea of nature as “untouched” by modern society (p.42). Consequently, there is an inherent minimalist approach in the design of ecotourism facilities in an attempt to fulfill this expectation of embedding oneself in nature and detaching from tourists' industrial norms. Arguably this reinforces the notion of man and nature as separate and results in a tendency to create low-impact ecotourism experiences. Owens suggests this overlooks the opportunity for more regenerative design (Owen, 2007a).

The case of Yulara at least in principle offers an example of how regenerative design can enable novel engagements with place. As opposed to opting for the typical minimalist approach, the chief architect's vision was for the resort to feel more like a town, with a permanent population - hoped to be mainly the staff members - with design features mimicking nature and equipt with what was at the time an impressive renewable energy grid, and efficiency measures which would see it win a number of ecotourism awards. In this sense, Owen argues the design enables a shift in conception from people and nature as a continuum based on the involvement of the former in the latter to a view of the built environment as a mediator between the two, or as Owen puts it, the “space in-between” (Owen, 2007b, p.51). Whilst this vision is commended by Owen, the author also points to the practical challenges not only in implementing more regenerative designs but also in sustaining them. Aside from issues in maintaining a number of the key environmental designs in place - namely the vast array of solar panels, the cultural and spatial dynamics continue to struggle to evade the typical quandary between conservation and preservation and tourism as an economic phenomenon and its indulgent nature (Owen, 2007b).

For instance, the aforementioned design of the resort to resemble more of a permanent town for staff members to reside in did not come to fruition as they understandably were not entirely comfortable living in the constant gaze of tourists, which eventually necessitated the construction of a new staff living area. Their old accommodation was thus transformed into budget accommodation for tourists. On a cultural level, Yulara's design was also symbolic of the architecture found in many of the pioneer settlements that arose during the continent's colonization by European settlers which points to the underlying tensions with indigenous communities. Considering the prevalence of including indigenous culture and knowledge within

regenerative tourism as mentioned in the conceptual framework, Owen highlights the difficulty in actualizing a kind of tourism that empowers the socioecological system as a whole instead of becoming defined by the demands and outcomes of tourism (Owen, 2007b).

On a conceptual level, Owen (2007a) argues for a need for greater scrutiny in relation to the alternative paradigm of sustainability that regenerative design with Owen describing existing literature at that time as “somewhat uncritical”. In the philosophical bridging of man and nature, the author also points to the risk of overly romanticizing nature as well as indigenous cultures, viewing both as unilateral good. In the context of this thesis, Owen’s observation may yet bear some relevance in the discussion of regenerative tourism on private game reserves in South Africa, particularly in contrasting the concept with the practical limitations and opportunities of managing tourism in this situation. The field of regenerative tourism however has matured substantially since Owen’s research, and thus it remains pertinent to explore how and if the concept has matured within the literature and how its contribution is mediated by the unique context that private game reserves are situated within.

The existing body of literature on regenerative tourism has emerged in the context of the aftermath of the covid19 pandemic which not only highlighted tourism's inherent vulnerability but has served as a rallying cry for many scholars in advocating for a transition towards alternative economic systems, attitudes, and practices away from what is considered the dominant neoliberal and capitalist global tourism system. The literature is largely organized through critical reflections and reviews of existing literature on the topic as well as case studies of individual tourism enterprises or specific communities participating in tourism to various extents.

Morseletto (2020) reviews existing literature on the use of the term “regeneration”, whilst investigating the term in relation to notions of a circular economy, finds based on his extensive literature review the term to be largely symbolic in its definition and as such lacks practical utility outside agricultural aspects. Hussain and Haley (2022) similarly find applying principles from regenerative agriculture in this context difficult due to the inherent intangibility of tourism and difficulty in accounting for all the elements integral to the system's functioning. Whilst it

should be noted that the development of regenerative tourism has broader origins in that landscape architecture, the notion that transplanting certain principles from one discipline to another requires clarification for the supposed benefits of regenerative tourism to be fulfilled. As the authors argue, without it increases the risk of the concept being misappropriated and “greenwashed” (Hussain and Haley, 2022, p.1)

The evocative nature of the term regeneration within tourism is exemplified by a number of publications. Dredge (2022) in exploring the obstacles facing the global tourism industry in transitioning to a regenerative paradigm identifies several areas of change, all of which the author argues are embedded within Western scientific rationale that are not consistent with regeneration. Dredge scrutinizes the inherent bias towards individuals supported by growing commercialization and marketization that favors the pursuit of private interest and wealth accumulation at the expense of collective interests. By relying on economic laws and the “invisible hand”, wears down individual responsibility as Dredge argues it detaches people from the consequences of their actions. The reductionist approach to problem-solving neglects the emergent properties of complex challenges. Dredge calls for a shift towards more collectivist thinking on the societal level and the valuing of indigenous and non-western forms of knowledge creation and learning and lastly embedded within a bottom-up and community-centered approach. On a personal level Dredge as well as Sheldon (2020) call for changes in interpersonal relations towards greater compassion, trust, and respect, all of which they argue are undermined generally and within tourism by the neoliberal model.

Hussain (2021) similarly calls for a psychological shift in how tourism is approached which is more inspirational and uplifting than contemporary discourse and finds regenerative tourism as useful in this regard. Bellato (2022a) concludes that regenerative paradigms involve among others mental, emotional, and spiritual transformations. The scope and scale of the transformative aspects of the concept thus are to some extent extremely broad, yet as Tham and Sharma (2023) note tend to be based largely on rhetoric and normative devices rather than empirical quantitative or qualitative evidence. Poignantly favoring bottom-up and community-centered solutions over top-down and centralized planning is one example of the above. This is meant only as an observation and not as an inherent critique of the literature cited

above. It is of relevance when reflecting on and examining its potential for private game reserves in South Africa, many of which consider sustainable tourism through their own assumptions. Naturally, these may present opportunities and challenges for regenerative tourism as a viable alternative in this context.

One potential consequence of the above is as Tham and Sharma note a lack of clarity on its particular relationships with different destinations and communities and the respective roles of the various stakeholders in the tourism system. Bellato et al (2022b) can be seen as an attempt to address the latter through their conceptualization of five transformational roles within regenerative tourism which they identify through a combination of a literature review and consultation with leading practitioners in the field. Many of the roles described here are not necessarily specific to certain stakeholders for example stewarding - which is described as the general upkeep and regeneration of local ecosystems and communities - is not directly related to tourism itself despite inextricably being linked to the tourism experience. Hosting in this regard is the more direct provision of tourism services such as the various hospitality, transport, and tour arrangements that may be on offer. Tourists perform the role of guesting. This is defined as the knowledge and experience tourists bring with them to the destination and the process of connecting with a new location. Communing similarly refers to the interaction between a local community and tourists, which alludes to facilitatory roles that can be played by legislation and civil society, and private businesses. Lastly, placing refers to the ecological and environmental surroundings of the destination.

The roles described above were applied across two cases to highlight the inherent fluidity of these roles across stakeholders (Bellato et al, 2022b). More direct applications of regenerative tourism include Mathisen et al (2022) who in reference to a Norwegian tourist accommodation that the individual values of firm owners will play a key role in establishing regenerative practices. The author argues that smaller eco-centered firms that may have the intention to become more regenerative are actually hindered by the demands of the dominant capital-centered tourism system. Authors find that for regenerative ideals to become practiced there must be a widespread shift in mindsets towards a “gardner” mentality. Major and Clarke (2022) similarly

maintain in the context of New Zealand that collaborations across stakeholders are vital, whereby Becken and Kaur (2021) highlight the role of the public sector crucial facilitator in this regard.

There have been a number of case studies based in New Zealand, particularly exploring the harmony between regenerative tourism and the Maori population. Matunga et al (2020) argue that tourism in the country generally has been environmentally and culturally extractive, due in part to what Becken and Kaur consider a governmental bias towards economic standards of success and therefore measurement. As a result, Maori culture is prone to misappropriation, and local customs are not recognized or respected but treated to an extent as tourist attraction. Regenerative tourism in the light provides an opportunity not only for better environmental management but as a means for self-determination, or Rangatiratanga as it is known in the Maori community. In addition to the above, the authors levy several other cultural and spiritual concepts and practices in proposing a Mauriora Systems Framework. The Mauri refers to the world spirit that inhabits all living things, whilst Kaitiakitanga translates to the role of people as custodians and protectors of nature and Manaakitanga to acts of generosity, care, and reciprocity.

Based on the roles described by Bellato et al (2022b) above, there is evidently an overlap in the latter's articulation with what Matunga et al describe. Bellato et al (2023) emphasize the importance of indigenous and non-western forms of knowledge in the development of regenerative tourism on a scholarly, which also echoes the views of Dredge (2022) and Sheldon (2022). Becken and Kaur as well as Fuste-Forne and Hussain (2022) affirm this claim in the case of New Zealand mentioning that indigenous values should hold primacy in managing tourism at both regional and national levels in their review of existing literature. In relation to nature-based tourism, considerations of regenerative tourism have been loosely regarded within the context of whale-watching. Suárez-Rojas et al (2023) in identifying a research agenda based on a quantitative and qualitative bibliometric analysis argue that the concept should vital guide for future research due to its potential to benefit the animals and to improve awareness of their needs amongst tourists to restore their ecosystems. As far as this thesis is aware, there has not been any scholarly literature on the concept of regenerative tourism directly in the context of private game reserves

4.2 Sustainability and Tourism on Private Game Reserves

There is substantial literature concerning private game reserves spanning a multidisciplinary frontier. Due to this breadth, this literature review aims to consider publications that have implications for how reserves consider sustainability in the tourism experiences they offer and the attitudes that shape them. Stolton et al (2014), in examining the future of privately protected areas generally, note that motivations behind their initial establishment vary and are evidently context-dependent. They can be intrinsic due to an individual's personal values or family inheritance or extrinsically motivated by commercial interests or available private and public funding, or likely a combination of the two. As previously discussed in the background of this thesis, much of the land occupied by private game reserves used to be used for agricultural purposes. In the time that has passed, it can be fair to assume that these initial motivations to form private game reserves may not carry as much weight in the present, and these dynamics inherently influence the state of sustainability in tourism amongst private game reserves.

Langholz and Kerley (2006) explore the quantitative socioeconomic effects of shifting from farming to ecotourism on a number of private game reserves. The authors find that the number of workers employed rose dramatically as well as their respective salaries. Over the period of the study, the authors find that the price of the experience was steadily rising, heading towards a more up-market and luxurious model. This is to say that whilst private game reserves may be employing more people and, as the authors suggest, make a comparatively more productive use of land the general local population is being effectively excluded as consumers. It is also important to acknowledge that this does not explain the impact of the shift on those already employed as agricultural workers.

As Brooks et al (2011) argue, many of the old tenants on former farms have been left forgotten as the landscape is transformed into a new wilderness. By switching to a tourism model, private game reserves have effectively transformed not just the land but the discourse surrounding it to appeal to the demands of wildlife tourism which in the authors' view have neglected other viable interpretations of the land, particularly from the perspective of the former farm dwellers and their families and communities who depended on the income. It should be noted that many private

game reserves have established social foundations to support their nearby communities, yet existing literature (see Lyon et al, 2017; Muzirambi, 2017; Spenceley, 2005) indicate that local communities in South Africa generally feel more could be done on behalf of private game reserves to improve their socioeconomic wellbeing.

Clements et al (2016) identified 4 business models presently active amongst private game reserves as they explored the sector from an organizational ecology perspective to examine the financial sustainability of each model. Their results indicate that the models centered around ecotourism opportunities, to which they refer to as big game stay and big game day reserves, held the most potential for value creation. Both models are characterized by charismatic game species and available accommodation and catering. The key differences would be the larger size and topographical diversity of big game stay reserves which accommodated for higher numbers of wildlife and prolonged stays due to their inherent size. Smaller big game day reserves, whilst also possessing a number of tourist facilities were oriented around day visitors (Clements et al, 2016).

Hunting reserves were found to be amongst the least financially sustainable, and existing accommodations tend to be uncatered and immediately priced. This vulnerability can be explained partly by the sunk costs involved in maintaining such a model and the small demographic that is being targeted, as most tourists tend to have a negative perception of the activity and thus are difficult to attract. Aside from sunk investments, changing models for these reserves is inherently costly as it implies a restructuring of the basic design of the park with the authors approximating such a transition to cost around 4.1 million USD. The last model identified was budget reserves, which were small in size, had a low density of wildlife and often had uncatered accommodation. The models described above are of utility to this thesis in relation to the purposive sampling strategy employed, which is elaborated further in the methodology section (Clements et al, 2016).

With tourism as a major pull factor for the establishment of private game reserves in South Africa, there have been concerns that tourist preferences and profit-centered landowners may distort conservation outcomes (Cousins et al, 2008; Cousins et al, 2010; Boone and Hobbs,

2004. Tourist demand for the Big 5 induces a disproportionate interest in their conservation at the expense of less charismatic species and biomes other than the savannah landscapes which the Big 5 rely on (Langholz and Kerley, 2006). Management and planning of wildlife are in Cousins et al (2008) view done without clear conservation goals, which has led to overstocking and breeding of animals which has led to on one hand issues with overpopulation and poor genetic diversity amongst populations and on the other the decline in populations of other species, particularly prey animals. Introducing animals into unfamiliar environments is also problematic for the overall ecosystem which is worsened by a degree of short-termism amongst landowners reacting to ever-changing demand neglects long-run considerations (Cousins et al, 2010).

Boone and Hobbs (2004) note that fencing, a large reason why private landowners are able to own wildlife, prevents natural flows of animals and plant life creating substantive changes in animal behavior and breeding rates. Smaller reserves also necessitate more intensive land and wildlife management which Cousins et al note is not always within either their interest or capabilities as many do not have formal education in conservation, relying more on trial and error (Cousins, 2008). Van der Merwe and Maia (2019) and Pienaar et al (2017) in contrast find that conservation is a major priority amongst private game reserves with a myriad of relevant practices undertaken (See Pienaar et al, 2017, p.176). Van der Merwe and Maia relate how tourism shapes these practices, noting how visitors expect a landscape that reflects minimal human intervention as part of a romanticized vision of Africa.

This raises the question of whether this necessarily aligns with the empowerment of the underlying ecological system or a creation of a third nature as Brooks et al (2010) refer to. Whilst Clements et al (2016) raise the question of how short-termism and reactionary response to socioeconomic changes relate to long-run ecological shifts, which whilst less immediate may pose significant negative impacts and externalities if not addressed soon. These dynamics inevitably shape how private game reserves problematize the state of sustainability in tourism and inform what contributions and challenges regenerative models provide and will face in becoming relevant in this context.

Lyon et al (2017) explore stakeholder discourses and sustainable tourism development in the Waterberg biosphere reserve, as designated by UNESCO, which itself is not a private game reserve but does incorporate a number within its boundaries. The authors note the difficulty of achieving sustainable development in the region as different stakeholder groups have distinctly different ideological motivations in their perception of tourism and these discrepancies are further exacerbated by the unequal power relations between them. The aforementioned move towards luxury experiences on private game reserves is for local stakeholders withering away their “sense of place”, indicative of desires to preserve natural environments and local communities. Across all stakeholder groups, Lyon et al observe that the neoliberal paradigm evident in their literature review is also witnessed in ongoing discourse in the research context. The authors conclude that sustainable development has been at best weakly reformist, which has not been sufficient to address the significant socioeconomic challenges in the area (Lyon et al, 2017).

Roos et al (2021) based on a survey of the Sabi Sand private game reserve, based in the greater Kruger area, found that attitudes towards waste management were generally positive, noting the importance of balancing it with visitors' satisfaction. Roos et al (2022) however in following up this survey with qualitative interviews of staff conclude that a major obstacle facing the implementation of sustainable waste management systems is the prevailing negative attitudes amongst them. The authors call for increased training and education as well as increased financial and logistical support not only to involve and generate socioeconomic gains in local communities but to facilitate sustainable waste handling in a context where game reserves tend to be isolated geographically (Roos et al, 2022).

5. Methodology

5.1. Research Design

This research is designed as a qualitative case study with a focus on private game reserves as an instrumental tool to explore the concept of regenerative tourism. A qualitative approach was chosen due to its interpretive and naturalistic features that help elucidate social phenomena by

uncovering the meanings people bring and the factors that shape them (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, pp.2-5). As aforementioned, the novelty of regenerative tourism means its practical implications for stakeholders are currently not well understood (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, pp.26-34). The holistic nature of the concepts is thus suited to qualitative research as Ritchie and Lewis (2003) note due to the inherent complexity of approaching tourism as a living, or complex adaptive system. Additionally, the intangibility of tourism as a phenomenon obscures effective quantification and assessment through statistical means. This is not to say that quantitative indicators are not useful, but the basic intuition of regenerative tourism relies on viewing elements of tourism and the relationships between them as a part of broader systems rather than as individual parts (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, pp.26-34).

The centrality and uniqueness of a place that is a cornerstone of regenerative tourism literature effectively necessitate a case study approach as is applied by this thesis. Utilizing private game reserves in South Africa thus allows an understanding rooted in the specific socioeconomic, political, cultural, and environmental context unique to the country. This case study can be considered instrumental in the sense that it explores the opportunities and challenges regenerative tourism has for contributing to a more socially and environmentally sustainable tourism phenomenon. This enables both a reflection of how existing practices can be ameliorated and aspects of regenerative tourism as a model that can be enhanced or in need of revision. (Punch, 2013, pp.120-121). As argued in the introduction, the choice specifically of private game reserves is motivated by its multidimensional character and explicit use of nature as a tourist attraction, which serves to exemplify the relationship between people and nature central to regenerative tourism ideals. To operationalize these aims, this thesis poses two research questions;

1. How do private game reserves in South Africa represent issues of sustainability in tourism?
2. How can regenerative tourism contribute to sustainable tourism?

The intent of first question is meant as a descriptive tool to highlight how private game reserves perceive the state of sustainability in the tourism they offer in general. This serves two purposes.

Firstly it allows this thesis to consider the explicit opportunities and challenges facing game reserves in striving for more sustainable tourism and as a representation of the factors they consider most important. Secondly, in exploring how these issues are represented by private game reserves it also elucidates the underlying assumptions and mindsets that shape their approach. This is based on the premise elaborated in Bacchi's (2009) "What's the problem represented to be" (WPR) framework, in which the formulation of problems identified does not necessarily reflect an objective reality but a socially constructed one defined by how organizations, individuals or legislation - the context in which the WPR was initially developed - perceive reality (Bacchi, 2009, pp. IX - XXI).

The findings of the first research question are evidently relevant for exploring the potential contributions of regenerative tourism. The underlying assumptions and perceptions that represent private game reserves' understanding of the overall sustainability of tourism in the field also implicitly relate to the likelihood of certain interventions being adopted. By considering the above in relation to regenerative tourism this thesis performs an iterative series of reflections that contribute to elucidating how the conceptual principles of the approach relate to stakeholder attitudes and perceptions and the harmony and dissonance between them. Whilst this thesis is not interested in being explanatory, this does not take away from the intrinsic value of good description as noted by De Vaus (2001, p.2), and as a basis for further research that may well be more explanatory.

To achieve the above this thesis performed in-depth semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from seven private game reserves across South Africa, who are described in greater detail in the following sub-section. The interviews organized as they were allowed for the participant's views and knowledge to be fully expressed and thus properly represent their meaning and perspectives on the topic. The flexibility enabled by their semi-structured nature allowed a degree of spontaneity in participants' responses allowing for matters they considered important to be brought up during the process, imperative considering the aims of this thesis to explore how representatives of private game reserves problematize sustainability in tourism (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, pp. 141-142).

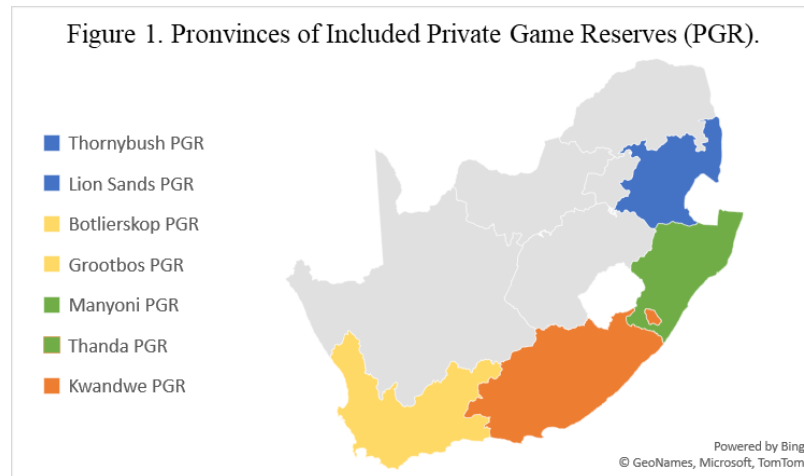
The interview began with a general introduction to the research followed by a general question on the initial establishment of the reserve and the underlying intentions which served both as a means to understand the initial circumstances they were formed in as well as a starting point to ease the participant into the interview process. Next participants were asked their thoughts on the general state of sustainability of tourism on private game reserves in general which was followed up with an aspirational question of what sustainable tourism would ideally look like and the efforts they were engaged in to realize this vision, as well as the obstacles and opportunities they faced in this regard (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, pp. 141-142). The interviews lasted 30 to 45 minutes long and were conducted virtually with the use of online programs like Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

5.2 Case Selection

The sampling strategy employed by this thesis can be described as purposive. This refers to the choice of participants due to particular characteristics that align with the aims of the proposed research and was enacted to identify specific game reserves generally (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, pp.77 - 81). Considering the abundance and variety of private game reserves in South Africa, this paper is informed by the typology of economic strategies Clements et al (2016) describe in their study of private land conservation areas in the western and eastern cape provinces in South Africa as summarised in section 4. Accordingly, this paper aims to focus on big game stay reserves. The choice of this model is justified due to the activities and facilities associated with tourism experiences in these kinds of reserves. The provision of catering services and accommodation in Big Game Stay areas necessitates different strategies in the management of inputs and outputs in comparison to their counterparts which rely more on self-catering and day visitors, which ultimately shapes their attitudes towards and understanding of sustainability in tourism. Out of a total of 29 identified game reserves, 7 agreed to participate in the research.

Figure 1 provides the geographical spread of the included private game reserves included in this research. They, as listed in the figure, include Thornybush and Lion Sands in Mpumalanga (Blue), Botlierskop and Grootbos in the Western Cape (Yellow), Manyoni in the Eastern Cape (Orange), and Thanda and Kwandwe private game reserves in Kwazulu-Natal (Green). Whilst it should be acknowledged that the respective structures, ownership models, and capacities

invariably differ between each chosen game reserve, they all share the key characteristics of big game stay reserves as previously described.



5.3 Data Analysis

In order to answer the research questions posed by this thesis a discourse analysis is performed on the collected data. This is done in order to move beyond what is being directly said by participants to examine how the language is being used, its purpose, and the context in which it is applied. How discourse analyses are defined differs depending on the research objectives. This thesis approaches discourse as to how it can reflect social phenomena, in this case, tourism in private game reserves (Punch, 2013; p.191-194). Potter and Wetherell (1994) note its value in highlighting how language constructs reality and how commonalities and differences in its use can be identified across individuals with unique backgrounds and experiences.

Furthermore, the approach is an effective means of exploring the rhetorical devices individuals use to justify and legitimize their actions which invariably is built upon a number of presuppositions that can be expected to be shaped by the surrounding social, political, economic, and environmental context (Potter and Wetherell, 1994). As mentioned, the WPR framework is a particular kind of discourse analysis that elucidates hows phenomena are socially construed by

specific or multiple stakeholders as problematic. Another crucial element to consider is what is left unquestioned by the data produced. This is to say a key aspect of this thesis's analytical approach is to consider both what is and is not said, as both can be to an extent as being a result of certain assumptions and worldviews (Bacchi, 2009, pp. IX - XXI). As regenerative tourism posits itself as an alternative to the dominant neoliberal approach to tourism globally, it is of the interest of this thesis to explore how the discourse produced by private reserves reflects this debate, and the extent to which their problematisation of sustainability in tourism is consistent with the tenets of regenerative tourism.

On a practical level, this thesis employs the Miles and Huberman framework for qualitative analysis (cited in Punch, 2013, p.171-173) which revolves around data reduction, its display, and the drawing of conclusions. Data reduction is done through the process of coding and memoing the collected data. The former refers to the labels given to pieces of data to attach meaning to them. Descriptive codes will be used to summarise the explicit references to issues of sustainability in tourism on private game reserves in the data. Inferential codes will then be used to bring together the descriptive codes to identify the underlying themes and assumptions present. Memoing on the other hand refers to the writing up of patterns and theoretical connections. The analytical process employed by this thesis involves the abstraction of data to explore how participants' attitudes and perspectives relate to the concept of regenerative tourism (Punch, 2013; p.173-177).

5.4 Ethical Considerations and Limitations of Study

The process of data collection and the reporting of its results has several ethical considerations to contend with. All interviews were conducted with the informed consent of the participants who were provided information both via email and at the beginning of the interview on the purpose of the study, the background of the researchers, the nature of how the data would be used, and how their participation contributes to the aims and objectives of the study. Permission was asked and permitted by all participants to record the interview for eventual transcription. All participants were assured of their anonymity in the reporting of results as well as their confidentiality. To avoid the use of identifiable information any interview cited will be done so in a generic format

of “Interview, A/B/C” to preserve their anonymity whilst providing an indication of which observations came from one source or the other (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, pp. 66 - 71).

A standard limitation typically levied against qualitative case studies like the one utilized by this thesis is the lack of generalizability of its findings. As Punch (2013) notes, universality is not always desired nor appropriated depending on the subject matter. In exploring how private game reserves represent issues of sustainability in tourism and the contribution of regenerative tourism the reported data is not meant to be directly scalable. Whilst this thesis argues that the conclusions will possess some relevance for wildlife tourism generally any such inference needs to be acknowledged that different contexts possess unique attributes and features which differ from the one being studied here.

Even within South Africa, the multitude of private game reserves also limits the generalizability of the findings. This thesis mitigates this by focusing uniquely on the big game stay model as already mentioned, but acknowledges that even within this group there is a degree of heterogeneity. In conducting a discourse analysis, there is also the limitation of the internal validity of findings due to the potential bias of the researcher in interpreting data. This research by embedding itself in the conceptual framework of regenerative tourism, the use of the coding scheme described in section 5.3, and the citation of data in the reporting of results to provide a sense of objectivity. It is also important to note the practical limitations faced by this research in terms of the limited time available to conduct interviews, the lack of resources to perform them in person due in part to the geographical spread of private game reserves and associated travel costs which necessitated virtual meetings as opposed to physical interactions.

6. Analysis

It can be said based on collected data that private game reserves, whilst invariably supportive of the need to become more sustainable acknowledge that various gaps remain across the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainability of the tourism they provide and enable. This analysis is organized in two sections. The first explores the identified obstacles private game reserves themselves highlight in achieving more sustainable forms of tourism

whilst the second explores the key features of their approach and visions for sustainable tourism to elucidate the explicit and implicit assumptions that shape them. It should be noted that this thesis does not intend to traverse the above in an evaluative manner, but rather as a descriptive tool to provide context and a nuanced for the discussion presented in section 7.

6.1 Challenges to Sustainable Tourism

When asked to describe the state of sustainability of tourism generally across private game reserves in South Africa, one participant bluntly noted “not very” (Interview A). Though across all participants it was clear that they believed the overall awareness and intentions in the management and practices towards more sustainability was growing. Several challenges facing private game reserves were noted throughout data collection, ranging from the financial resources available to them, geographical considerations, identifying relevant indicators and reliable measurements of sustainability impacts of tourism as well as socioeconomic factors relating to education and awareness of its impacts and best available practices.

Regarding financial aspects, several participants noted the relatively higher cost of performing typical activities associated with sustainable waste management like recycling due to the geographical remoteness of many of the reserves find themselves in. For example, one participant noted that “(...) in rural areas, getting services and service providers for things like recycling or to remove waste is really difficult” (Interview, B) whilst another affirmed this stating “because we are so rural, it does become expensive for private gain reserves to really look at a fully sustainable focus” (Interview, C). The notion of affordability is also important to consider in the context of recovering business from the covid-19 pandemic, which in economic terms was catastrophic for private game reserves in South Africa as expected.

Consideration of sustainability in tourism may become more of an afterthought. One participant encapsulates this sentiment by stating “I can't say that people are able to make decisions about prioritizing sustainability over just being a functional, viable business.” (Interview, D). Another contextual factor to consider is the difficult socioeconomic and political conditions that South Africa is currently facing, and issues like that of structural unemployment, poverty, and

inequality inevitably shape the priorities of private game reserves. As one interviewee put it “People (meaning the South African population in general) believe that there are other priorities” (Interview, C) and alludes to the notion that if the overall socio-economic situation improves more attention can focus on sustainability. That being said, the same participant noted that in comparative sense awareness of environmental sustainability “within a private reserve is much higher than the consciousness presented government reserve.” (Interview, C).

A comparison of the two is beyond the scope of this thesis, but what can be noted in the collected data is an underlying frustration both in regard to the lack of available financial support from the public sector as well as environmental legislation that, as one participant remarked, makes “an easy fix quite difficult and expensive” (Interview, B) or extensive “red tape” (Interview, E). Evidently, available financial resources do to an extent dictate the capabilities of private game reserves to invest in sustainable practices. In the absence of government support reserves become more dependent on both shareholder's wealth - when applicable - and notably on the tourism they can attract. This raises the question of whether the interests of the parties mentioned above consistently align with notions of sustainability and the extent to which they do. As one participant explained, private game reserves have “to be careful in the sector of tourism to not greenwash” (Interview, E).

It is not surprising that all participants in the data indicated that private game reserves were becoming more conscious of issues related to sustainability given the internationalized character of the majority of visitors. As sustainability became popular, particularly in the Western world, participants described welcoming “more conscious travelers” who “are becoming aware of the problem we're facing as a planet” (Interview, B). Regardless of the underlying intentions behind a supposed shift towards sustainability, another hindrance is the difficulty on behalf of game reserves to not only identify relevant indicators - with one participant stating “they don't even know where to start. They don't know what to quantify” (Interview, B). Even in light of emerging accreditation schemes that aim to address this, participants described that it remained “(...) quite difficult to measure the impact accurately.”(Interview, E). The above is important to consider in light of tourists who increasingly want “proof of good work being done with the money they paid to stay at the lodge” (Interview, E).

This indicates knowledge gaps in addressing sustainability in the context of tourism. These gaps are also evident across the internal structure of personnel of private game reserves. This is exemplified by the testimony of one participant who explained that one barrier is “keeping our staff conscious (of sustainability impacts)” and further explained the difficulties in “trying to communicate to our staff who've never heard about recycling is and why it's important.” (Interview, C). “Skill shortages” (Interview, B) as observed by another participant reiterates how broader socioeconomic factors relate to the capabilities of private game reserves.

The question of the social sustainability of private game reserves is also important to consider. Reserves are both a key source of employment for the surrounding communities yet do so in the service of an increasingly luxurious and premium tourism experience, which as one participant noted is effectively only sustainable amongst international or wealthier clientele which is an “aspect of economic tourism (on private game reserves), that's not sustainable for South Africans” (Interview, D). Another described it as a “predominantly white industry in terms of the average person that visits the game reserve” (Interview, F). Several of the participants noted the importance of ensuring that local communities “who live who happen to live close by to a luxury tourism entity should in their daily lives benefit from that not just from a direct job”. (Interview, A). Reserves often source food locally from nearby communities and operate social foundations to support other philanthropic endeavors such as education and nutrition.

6.2 Approaching Sustainable Tourism

In discussing general considerations of approaching sustainability on private game reserves and tourism it was remarked that it was neither “cheap nor easy” to accomplish (Interview, B). While on a surface level, this is undoubtedly true it also speaks to the implicit manner in which much of the discourse surrounding the matter is framed. This section will show how when it comes to the multidimensional nature of sustainability, the economic and financial aspects are key in understanding the underlying motivations and assumptions of private game reserves generally in South Africa. Notably much of the discourse evident in the UNWTO’s description of sustainable tourism is reflected in the reserves approach, and it can be argued that whilst shifts in practices

are occurring towards sustainable tourism, their extent and transformative nature can be debated. Such contestations will be reflected upon with respect to regenerative tourism in section 7.

It is important to acknowledge that alternative land uses to that of the private game reserves would change sustainability outcomes, perhaps for the worse. Considering that many of them were once farmland which through agricultural use had become “environmentally degraded until the reserve was formed” (Interview, B). The impact of covid-19 led some private game reserves to return back to agricultural activities as “money just ran out”. As aforementioned the issues of financial sustainability in its wake meant that “when the chips started to fall, projects in sustainability are the first to go” (Interview, C). Whilst the financial difficulties should not be ignored, a number of participants noted that approaching sustainability, despite improvements in recent years, was generally dictated by its respective affordability as noted one who stated “Sustainability is very much if you can afford it first” (Interview, C).

This notion is exemplified by the discussion of waste management indicated earlier. Whilst the rural setting of private game reserves presents logistical and financial challenges, the desire for reserves to take more responsibility was highlighted. One participant in acknowledging that generally waste management had not been prioritized due to what was described as an “out of sight, out of mind” mentality. This references the earlier quote of sustainability not being easy, and overcoming the seductive lure of convenience will be crucial in approaching it more comprehensively. Pursuing the “bottom line” invariably shapes the trajectory of sustainability in this context, and particularly as financial aspects are emphasized by the pandemic issues of “clean energy might be considered a nice thing to have rather than a necessity”. It was also noted that not only was a mind-shift adjustment occurring, but it is also necessary for the future commercial viability of game reserves in South Africa as apparent in the following statement “It has to change for the commercial viability of these places because if we all sit on our hands, we facing a massive crisis”.

The motivation behind change reveals a lot about the underlying assumptions behind many private game reserves' approach to sustainable tourism. By framing it as a commercial necessity, it can be argued that the underlying business-as-usual approach is not directly challenged. A key

driver of this shift has been international tourists who have already become more conscientious of their environmental impact. One consequence of private game reserves is that, as one participant stated, “your product is a lot more attractive if you're marketing something that is sustainable,” (Interview, D). This is an element that arguably has been accelerated by the pandemic as visitors are beginning to expect each reserve's work on sustainability to be openly available to them. There is also a growing trend towards active participation of tourists in conservation projects on private game reserves emphasizing the shift in tourist demand. One manifestation of the above is that the more luxurious a reserve is, the more sustainable it tends to be as expounded upon by one participant who argues that the “guys who are offering three or four-star experiences are probably less focused on it, because it's less their client, their customer base” (Interview, C) insinuating that engaging in sustainability is a financial privilege rather than a necessity.

When asked about the environmental sustainability of lodges on private game reserves, one participant remarked that “it was driven by the consumer himself”. Yet the manner in which their demands manifest into sustainability gains is not always evident. It is important to consider that a key feature of tourism on game reserves is to obtain the experience of living in a romanticized vision of the African bush yet largely without any of the actual hardships one could associate with such an experience as visitors still want to “have all the luxuries” associated with their typically urban home life, such as “aircon” and “Wifi”. It can be argued that more authentic nature experiences may to some extent be more sustainable in terms of its respective inputs and output, yet this issue points to the implicit trade-off that can materialize in catering to the tourist demands and overall sustainability. Yet less luxurious forms of wildlife tourism are likely not as commercially viable as the ones offered by private game reserves. This is further emphasized by another participant who argued that as the “primary draw” was wildlife viewing and being in the bush, “you're not going to get away from having to drive vehicles and physically impact the environment and have carbon emissions.” (Interview, D).

Considering the above, one can cynically speculate that the increasing engagement of private game reserves with sustainable tourism is merely a response to changing market demands rather than out of a genuine responsibility. Indeed this was the opinion of one participant who felt that

“I (...)there's very few entities that do it (engage in sustainability) because they should or because they want to. Most kind of follow suit because of pressure from our customers” (Interview, C). This points to a grander philosophical quandary over the intention behind the action and the extent to which it matters. Whilst inherently a subjective debate, it can be said that justifying one’s approach to sustainable tourism through economic terms may obscure alternative pathways for private game reserves moving forward.

One implication of the above can be exemplified by the commonly held assertion that by ensuring financial and commercial success through tourism, private game reserves can invest revenues into building a more sustainable tourism experience. As tourism has begun to rebound, one participant remarked that as “ business starts improving it's (sustainability) is going to become one of the most important aspects of running one of these reserves” (Interview, B) and another stated that “from changing where we are today to where we want to be in the future long term financial stability is essential.”(Interview, F). Implicit is the idea that by ensuring the viability of the business the financial benefits will eventually trickle into gains in overall sustainability. Along these lines, the notion of economic outcomes and environmental outcomes are framed to an extent as synchronizable rather than juxtaposed to one another. This kind of discourse strongly reflects the argumentation behind UNWTO’s conceptualization of sustainable tourism.

Another way of exploring this is through the strategies considered by private game reserves themselves in achieving sustainable tourism. Considering the energy crises South Africa has faced for the better part of the last decade which has resulted in prolonged periods of “load-shedding” in which the electrical grid for certain regions is shut down for a few hours at a time private game reserves are keen to become self-sufficient energy-wise. The common workaround of utilizing diesel generators is problematic in the reserve context as highlighted by one participant who explained that “we can't be a sustainable tour operator. If we are running a diesel generator for 14 hours a day” (Interview, D). Rising gas prices globally is another incentive towards the adoption of renewable energy, particularly that of solar power which was mentioned by all participants to various extents. As mentioned by one participant this move will be “a positive sustainability move, but it's also an efficiency and economic move”. Again this

relates back to the question of intention and action as one could ponder where such a shift would have occurred without these external circumstances.

The use of renewable energy by private game reserves enables them to offer the same tourism experience as before with a smaller carbon footprint. This is exemplified through the consideration of the use of electric vehicles on safari drives, which one participant noted would “one day moving towards electric vehicles is a big move” (Interview, B).² Another strategy promoted by participants was the use of carbon credits. As explained by a participant who shared that they could “do is register as a carbon credit program, because we're obviously in a very green environment and are possibly eligible for that to offset our footprint” (Interview, D). A number of private game reserves are active in the upkeep and restoration of surrounding landscapes, and the purchasing of carbon credits by not just visitors but by people globally and therefore leading to overall gains in sustainability even if the tourism experience in private game reserves remains the same.

Aside from the multiple caveats to consider when discussing carbon credits as a sustainability tool, particularly in equating emissions from for example the aviation industry and the gains from carbon sequestration projects in degraded landscapes, the strategies discussed so far both do not challenge the existing way in which tourism is experienced on private game reserves rather serve to maintain them. Reserves have largely adopted the mainstream interpretation of sustainability as largely a mitigative approach focusing on having low impacts. As part of this mindset, the use of renewable energy, eclectic vehicles, and carbon credits embedded sustainable tourism on private game reserves with an inherent technocratic and deterministic outlook. This is not to say that the use of new technologies or novel financing schemes is without merit, but misses an opportunity to make a more substantial contribution to sustainability as a whole.

7. Discussion

In finding that the problematization of sustainable tourism reflects the internal logic and assumptions embedded in the paradigmatic version promoted by the UNWTO, this thesis now

² The private game reserve “Cheetah Plains”, part of the Sabi-Sand, are on the frontier of using electric safari vehicles in South Africa (See here; <https://www.cheetahplains.com/sustainability/>)

turns to answer the second research question posed; how can regenerative tourism contribute to sustainability in tourism in the unique context of private game reserves in South Africa given what we now know. This discussion is broken down into two sections. The first discusses the positive contributions the alternative model possesses that can be leveraged for moving towards more sustainable tourism. The second considers the limitations of the concept in becoming a viable alternative to existing approaches as well as its theoretical shortcomings.

7.1 The Potential of Regenerative Tourism

The key contribution of regenerative tourism is, in the view of this thesis, based on its holistic and systematic consideration of the myriad of factors and the interrelationship that eventually lead to the tourism phenomenon and overall sustainability of the experience. A key place to begin is with how to think of private game reserves as part of a tourism system. As described in this thesis conceptual framework, a tourism system can be seen as the dynamics between each individual element, human and non-human, and their respective functions. Instead of viewing private game reserves as a single element, there is a utility in viewing them instead as an entire system of their own, particularly in relation to the larger reserves. The diversity in tasks that encompass the management of a private game reserve and the number of staff required to fulfill them means that within a single reserve, multiple different elements with their own respective functions arise. For instance, there is the conservation aspect of private game reserves which require dedicated professionals and then the commercial lodge management and staff who source and provide guests with accommodation and food, and then the visitors themselves. These distinct functions invariably interact to produce the tourism experience at large.

One constraint indicated by the collected data as mentioned was the knowledge gaps between these different elements in understanding their impact on and general awareness of sustainability-related impacts. Regenerative tourism as a conceptual model can contribute to more sustainable tourism development by virtue of making the interrelationships between the various elements of private game reserves explicit. Recognizing the emergent properties these interactions produce enables allows for a better understanding of how to improve the conscientiousness of all elements and therefore sustainability in tourism. Whilst participants noted the private game reserves as single entities were increasingly communicating between

them taking this dialogue internally is crucial for maximizing the sustainability of the tourism experience.

The energy crises in South Africa and the covid-19 pandemic could also form leverage points for regenerative tourism. As mentioned the former has already seen private game reserves put renewable energy high on the agenda, the latter too has had a lasting impact on the demands of visitors. As mentioned by one participant after 2020 tourists “came with a whole new outlook on this day. And they really wanted to see proof of good work being done with the money that they're paid to stay at the lodge.” (Interview, E). Other participants discussed the importance of dialogue across all elements to remove the tendency towards convenient practices and towards sustainable ones, and in a demand-driven enterprise building upon an increasingly environmentally conscientious international tourist market provides a foundation to do so.

The aspirational nature of regenerative tourism and its discourse did arise at times during discussions with participants during this thesis’s data collection. For example, one participant noted “Tourism businesses can all change the model in order to do better and a more positive impact or start from scratch and redesign a model that is no longer focused only on benefit for shareholders in a commercial tourism business” (Interview, E), and another stated, “that we're not taking from the earth, we need to be giving back to the earth that's the big dream would be to make sure that whatever we taking would be able to replace and regenerate.” (Interview, A). Notions of regeneration were brought directly in terms of land use, and other novel economic approaches such as circular economy were mentioned. This is to say that even despite dominant attitudes reflecting a neoliberal paradigm, there is growing albeit modest interest in other forms of economic organization which could enable regenerative tourism to gain a foothold.

The centrality or uniqueness of place as enshrined in regenerative discourse is also particularly relevant in the context of sustainable tourism on private game reserves in South Africa. One by-product of the changing sensitivities to environmental sustainability amongst international tourists, most of whom are from North America or Western Europe, is that notions that come to define sustainable tourism are inextricably linked to these regions of the world. The risk with this is that more localized and potentially more appropriate forms of knowledge are perhaps obscured

which not only shapes private game reserves' interactions with local communities but the sustainability outcomes as well. Regenerative tourism by providing a holistic place-based approach could empower private game reserves to engage in more contextually appropriate interventions, which could also bridge that gap between them and the general public in South Africa. Regenerative tourism is built on bottom-up and vibrant communities, and the current international tourism market that reserves relies on struggles to achieve this.

7.2 The Problems of Regenerative Tourism

Regenerative tourism positing itself as an alternative approach to the dominant neoliberal conceptualization of sustainable tourism nevertheless suffers from a number of the same issues described in this thesis's introduction. This is most apparent in the discussion of trade-offs and complementarities between the various dimensions of sustainability. This is a common critique of the SDGs, and it is unclear based on this thesis's conceptual framework, literature review, and analysis how precisely regenerative tourism on a practical level navigates this. Implicit in striving for net-positive impacts and vibrant local communities is a similar notion of a win-win found in the paradigmatic sustainable tourism albeit more aspirationally framed. Somewhat ironically as such in promoting itself as a holistic it neglects how individual elements within a system can contradict one another. As shown in the analysis catering to tourism demands can at times lead to sustainability trade-offs as private game reserves are to a degree beholden to their financial investment.

The notion of the above is important to consider. Whilst it may lead to perverse outcomes from a sustainability perspective, transforming this invariably creates social and economic costs. In arguing for an alternative economic approach regenerative tourism remains limited in providing associated pathways for a transition to occur, which risks the concept becoming mired in aspirational and normative discourse without tangible effects on the tourism system itself. This also points to the notion of measurements and indicators, which as described in the analysis is already a challenge under the conventional approach to sustainability. Whilst the qualitative nature of regenerative tourism does allow for an appreciation of less quantifiable aspects of sustainability to be appreciated, which is undoubtedly a strength, it needs to be balanced with

some tangible aspects for its own internal accountability, without which the notion risks becoming misappropriated and “greenwashed”.

As mentioned above regenerative tourism in striving for more bottom-up and localized approaches neglects the inherent trade-offs this may incur. Whilst both it and its alternative have their own merits and limitations, this thesis argues that the state regenerative tourism literature at this moment remains, as Owen (2007a) remarked, generally uncritical of its own propositions. This perhaps exemplified in its discussion of the relationship between people and nature. Implicit in its discourse is a romanticized notion of the latter as both a universal good and a kind of natural state for people to self-organize around. A full discussion of this aspect is beyond the scope of this thesis, but what can be said is that it neglects how mechanisms of what can be considered “natural” ecological forces can disrupt socioeconomic well-being.

8. Conclusion

Regenerative tourism remains on the fringes of the discourse of private game reserves in their consideration of sustainable tourism. If it is to displace the dominant interpretation of sustainable tourism as defined by the UNWTO it will need to address and align itself with the challenges and capabilities of practitioners, tourists, and policymakers alike. This thesis has shown how embedded neoclassical rationales characterized by an adherence to revenue generation, marginal improvements in mitigative and low-impact strategies, and increasing efficiency permeate private sector attitudes in the context of private game reserves in South Africa. This is indicative of the path-dependant nature of tourism systems, and that initiating a transition requires a broad cognitive shift across all elements in their approach and priorities.

Viewing tourism as a holistic system and recognizing the uniqueness of place and its aspirational and evocative ideals of pursuing a net-positive impact could provide opportunities for private game reserves to consider other aspects of tourism outside narrow economic or financial terms. Simultaneously regenerative tourism needs to recognize the limitations and importance of the latter in generating value for human and non-human elements and local communities. It will be neither transformational nor helpful if regenerative tourism can not elucidate practical strategies

that are aligned with their calls for shifts in the underlying behavior, mindsets, and consequently the dominant global economic order within tourism and beyond. It could be questioned whether the strengths of regenerative tourism could be not levied alongside existing approaches to enhance and improve the overall sustainability of the existing tourism system rather than replace it entirely.

To achieve the above, this thesis highlights the need for further research on the concept, particularly in relation to identifying pathways toward incorporating more regenerative tourism practices across different contexts and capabilities. Identifying best practices would be instrumental in this context. In the Sub-Sahara African context and in South Africa in particular, it would be of use to explore how indigenous knowledge and customs specific to the region could contribute to the development of regenerative tourism. This aspect of the concept was not addressed adequately by this thesis and thus deserves more attention in future studies.

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