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Local Assets, Global Recognition:

A Regenerative Model for Heritage-Based Community Empowerment in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study investigates how regenerative tourism can be applied as a model for heritage-based community empowerment in Niah National Park, Malaysia. It aims to address the gap in tourism development frameworks that often neglect Indigenous participation and ecological values, offering an alternative path toward inclusive and sustainable local development.

Design/methods/approach –The research adopts a qualitative case study approach, relying on secondary data, field-based observations, and thematic analysis of literature on regenerative development, Indigenous livelihoods, and participatory tourism. Two Indigenous communities—the Iban and Penan—are examined as central actors in heritage-based tourism.

Findings –The study finds that regenerative tourism can enhance community well-being through livelihood support, cultural preservation, and local pride. However, its effectiveness is hindered by top-down governance structures and insufficient inclusion of Indigenous voices. Greater success is likely when communities are empowered through co-created planning and Indigenous-led tourism enterprises.

Research implications/limitations –The study is limited by the absence of recent primary data and in-person interviews due to geographic and time constraints. The findings may thus reflect generalized insights but still offer important implications for localized tourism policies and the operationalization of regenerative models in similar heritage contexts.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to emerging discourse on regenerative tourism by linking it directly with Indigenous community empowerment and heritage preservation. It offers a Southeast Asian case that illustrates how place-based, participatory strategies can reframe tourism as a tool for social-ecological regeneration rather than mere economic growth

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Introduction

The notion of regenerative tourism has surfaced as a robust alternative to the traditional frameworks of sustainable tourism by emphasizing restoration over merely preventing harm. This paradigm is essential in the present context where the need for active recovery of ecosystems and

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communities is paramount, especially highlighted by the events following the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has exposed significant vulnerabilities in tourism-dependent economies, underlining the inadequacies of current sustainability practices that often stop at minimizing negative impacts rather than fostering positive regeneration of the environment and local cultures (Wulandari et al., 2024; , Collins-Kreiner & Ram, 2021).

The shift from sustainable to regenerative tourism arises from the recognition that merely sustaining current resources is no longer adequate. Regenerative tourism actively seeks to renew resources and empower local communities, making it increasingly relevant as society grapples with the consequences of prolonged health and economic crises like the pandemic. According to recent studies, the pandemic has underscored an urgent need for more resilient and inclusive development models that are better integrated with local contexts and that prioritize ecological integrity and social equity (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). The attention to healthy ecosystems and community well-being aligns well with the regenerative approach, which seeks not only to protect but also to rejuvenate tourism destinations (Lüthje et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst in this shift, prompting various stakeholders to reconsider and reformulate their tourism strategies. For instance, analyses of post-pandemic behavior have shown a growing inclination toward local and community-based tourism, driven by shifting consumer preferences and a greater awareness of travel's ecological footprint. Such changes indicate a wider acceptance of tourism practices that nurture the environment and benefit local populations, with studies emphasizing the necessity for community engagement in tourism planning and development (Yan et al., 2021; , Daniels & Tichaawa, 2021). This transformation, facilitated by the pandemic's disruption of traditional travel patterns, has prompted calls for integrating ethical considerations into tourism frameworks, thus enhancing community-centered approaches (Pashaie & Perić, 2023; , Dias et al., 2021).

In conclusion, regenerative tourism emerges not just as a response to the limitations of sustainable tourism but as a proactive initiative aimed at fostering ecological health and social equity in tourism development. The necessitated shift is driven by the need for resilience and adaptability in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, which revealed both the fragility of tourism economies and the potential pathways for innovative recovery models that

prioritize both people and the planet (Corbisiero & Mónaco, 2021; , Wu et al., 2023). The evidence thus supports a robust movement towards regenerative practices as a new standard for tourism, advocating for a tourism industry that is more in tune with ecological and community needs in the post-pandemic era (Radzevičius, 2022; , Gretzel et al., 2023).

Heritage-based tourism situated in ecologically and culturally significant areas presents a significant opportunity for implementing regenerative approaches that benefit both communities and environments. This assertion can be supported by examining the case of Niah National Park in Sarawak, Malaysia, which is renowned for its archaeological significance and the enduring presence of Indigenous communities. The integration of natural and cultural heritage within tourism development at Niah exemplifies a model that transcends mere profit-making by fostering ecological and cultural restoration Sumi et al. (2025).

The reason for this potential lies in the ability of heritage tourism to serve as a medium for cultural exchange and environmental conservation, promoting local identities and practices while also attracting visitors (Sukri et al., 2024). By embracing Indigenous knowledge and fostering participation in tourism planning, heritage-based tourism can facilitate development strategies that enhance community well-being and resilience (Boluk & Panse, 2022). Inclusive practices can lead to improved socio-economic conditions for Indigenous groups, thus enabling them to sustain their cultural heritage and ecological settings effectively (Reddy & Sailesh, 2024).

However, despite the potential for regenerative tourism practices at Niah National Park, dominant top-down approaches in Southeast Asia frequently marginalize Indigenous voices. This exclusion often leads to a disregard for the cultural fabric and social continuity of local communities, thereby undermining the intended regenerative benefits of tourism (Wahl et al., 2020). Research indicates that when tourism planning fails to incorporate Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, it risks perpetuating inequalities and cultural disenfranchisement, which can ultimately be detrimental to the sustainability of tourism initiatives in the region (Hamid et al., 2023).

In conclusion, while heritage-based tourism in ecologically and culturally significant areas like Niah National Park has the potential to advance regenerative practices, the ongoing challenge remains the necessity of including Indigenous voices in tourism development. By fostering

collaborative and inclusive strategies, the tourism sector can not only protect but also revitalize the cultural identities of local communities, ensuring a more just and sustainable future for all stakeholders involved in tourism (Woosnam & Ribeiro, 2022).

This paper illustrates how regenerative tourism can provide a more inclusive and empowering framework for heritage-based community development. The need for such frameworks arises from the growing recognition that conventional tourism development practices often prioritize profit over community well-being and ecological sustainability. The case study of the Iban and Penan communities near Niah National Park serves as a critical example of how regenerative tourism practices can benefit Indigenous peoples while fostering stronger community ties and ecological health Boluk et al. (2019).

In exploring this topic, the paper aligns with recent scholarship that critiques neoliberal tourism models, which often marginalize local voices and enforce top-down decision-making processes. These critiques highlight the necessity for participatory approaches that integrate Indigenous rights and perspectives into tourism development. Such integration is vital for creating a model of tourism that not only serves economic purposes but also respects and enhances the cultural heritage and social structure of local communities (Matteucci et al., 2021; , Dangi & Petrick, 2021). By emphasizing equity, justice, and ethics in tourism development, researchers advocate for a transformative shift towards methodologies that prioritize community input and rights (Wang et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the regenerative tourism framework aims to counteract the alienation experienced by Indigenous communities due to conventional tourism practices. By establishing a more equitable relationship between tourism stakeholders, the framework seeks to empower these communities, ensuring that their cultural heritage and ecological knowledge are valued and utilized in tourism planning (Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2016; , Philip et al., 2022). The emphasis on justice-oriented alternatives speaks to the broader discourse around sustainable development and the rights of Indigenous people, highlighting the potential for tourism to act as a tool for empowerment rather than exploitation (DeMink-Carthew et al., 2023).

In conclusion, engaging with regenerative tourism frameworks can significantly contribute to heritage-based community development by

promoting inclusivity and amplifying Indigenous voices in tourism. The case study of the Iban and Penan communities at Niah National Park underscores the urgency of shifting towards participatory, justice-oriented tourism practices. This shift not only aims to address the historical injustices faced by Indigenous communities but also fosters resilient and sustainable tourism practices that benefit both people and the environment in a more holistic manner (Crowley & Swan, 2018; , Musarò & Moralli, 2021).

Structurally, this article begins by outlining the conceptual framework of regenerative tourism and its divergence from traditional growth-oriented development. It then presents the context of Niah National Park and its Indigenous communities, followed by a discussion of findings based on thematic analysis. Finally, it considers the implications for policy and practice in community empowerment and concludes with reflections on the value of regenerative models in heritage tourism. By integrating both theoretical and practice-based insights, this study argues that tourism, when reimagined through a regenerative lens, can serve as a catalyst for social equity, environmental restoration, and intergenerational cultural continuity.

Methods

This research employs a **qualitative case study approach** to explore the regenerative potential of heritage-based tourism and its implications for Indigenous community empowerment in Niah National Park, Sarawak, Malaysia. The case study method was selected to allow in-depth contextual analysis of the socio-cultural dynamics and development challenges faced by local communities involved in tourism activities.

Research Design

The study adopts an interpretivist paradigm, focusing on understanding human experiences, cultural values, and community perspectives within a natural heritage setting. The case of Niah National Park was purposefully selected due to its unique blend of ecological, historical, and socio-cultural significance, and the presence of Indigenous communities who are directly involved in or affected by tourism development.

Population and Sample

The target of this research is the local Indigenous communities living around Niah National Park, specifically the **Iban community in Rumah Patrick Libau** and the **Penan community in Kampong Tanjung Belipat**. These

communities were chosen based on their active and passive roles in tourism-related activities, traditional knowledge, and proximity to the park.

Data Collection Techniques and Instrument Development

Data were collected primarily from **secondary sources**, including academic articles, government reports, UNESCO documents, tourism development plans, and media coverage. In addition, **field notes and observational records** were reviewed from previous site visits conducted by researchers between 2022 and early 2024. Informal communications with local stakeholders were also documented. A thematic coding framework was developed to categorize the data into key themes relevant to regenerative tourism, empowerment, and local governance.

Researcher Presence and Role

Although no new primary data collection was conducted during the final writing phase, the presence of researchers in earlier fieldwork activities in Sarawak helped inform the interpretation of findings. The researchers acted as external observers and cultural mediators, applying reflexivity throughout the analysis process to minimize bias.

Research Location and Duration

The field site is Niah National Park, located in northeastern Sarawak, Malaysia. Secondary data collection and analysis took place over a six-month period, from **October 2023 to March 2024**. Prior exploratory field visits to Sarawak were conducted in **late 2022** to observe community-tourism interactions and gain contextual familiarity.

Data Analysis Techniques

A **thematic content analysis** approach was employed to interpret the qualitative data. Data were grouped into four main themes: (1) Indigenous participation in tourism, (2) socio-economic empowerment, (3) cultural heritage preservation, and (4) governance challenges. Cross-referencing of themes was performed to identify patterns, gaps, and contradictions in the narratives. This helped in generating a grounded understanding of how regenerative tourism principles are, or could be, applied in the local context.

Validity and Trustworthiness

To ensure the **credibility** and **validity** of findings, data triangulation was conducted by comparing literature sources, field notes, and policy

documents. **Peer debriefing** with fellow researchers familiar with Malaysian Indigenous tourism was also performed. Although the research is limited by the absence of real-time interviews, reliance on triangulated sources and established frameworks strengthens the trustworthiness of the analysis.

Results

This study presents findings derived from secondary data analysis and thematic synthesis. The purpose of this approach is to provide a comprehensive understanding of how regenerative tourism principles intersect with community empowerment efforts in Niah National Park. By organizing the results into specific subthemes—such as Indigenous participation, cultural revitalization, economic self-reliance, and governance challenges—the analysis highlights critical dimensions where tourism activities influence or are influenced by local socio-cultural dynamics (Becken & Kaur, 2022; Movono et al., 2023; Gan, 2022). These themes were identified through a careful review of scholarly literature, government reports, heritage site management documents, and ethnographic field notes. The thematic structure enables a focused interpretation of how regenerative tourism is unfolding on the ground, revealing both opportunities and structural limitations for achieving community-centered and ecologically responsible development in the park.

1.1. Indigenous Participation in Tourism Activities

Indigenous communities, specifically the Iban of Rumah Patrick Libau and the Penan of Kampong Tanjung Belipat, actively participate in tourism-related activities around Niah National Park. Their involvement contributes to the local tourism economy and supports efforts to maintain cultural identity through heritage-based tourism practices. These contributions include operating river boat transport, offering homestay services, performing cultural dances, and selling handicrafts—activities that align with community-based tourism models promoting local ownership and benefit-sharing. However, despite their involvement in service delivery, community members report having limited influence over formal tourism planning and decision-making processes. This is consistent with broader critiques of top-down tourism governance, which often marginalizes Indigenous voices and disregards traditional knowledge systems in the development process. While Indigenous communities contribute substantially to the tourism economy through culturally embedded practices, their limited access to governance

and decision-making mechanisms highlights a critical gap in participatory development. Addressing this imbalance is essential for realizing more inclusive and regenerative tourism outcomes.

Table 1. Forms of Indigenous participation in tourism at Niah National Park

Activity	Community Involved	Level of Participation
Boat transportation	Penan (Kampong Tanjung)	Active
Homestay accommodation	Iban (Rumah Patrick Libau)	Active
Cultural performances & rituals	Iban	Moderate
Park maintenance & labor	Both	Passive
Tourism planning and governance	Both	Minimal

1.2. Community Empowerment Outcomes

Regenerative tourism in Niah has shown promising signs of contributing to **economic self-reliance**, **cultural pride**, and **social cohesion**. Regenerative tourism in Niah National Park has demonstrated encouraging outcomes in terms of community empowerment. This model of tourism supports not only economic development but also cultural continuity and social solidarity among Indigenous communities. Field-based observations and secondary data reveal that local residents have diversified their income through homestays, guiding services, and handicraft sales, leading to increased economic self-reliance (Scheyvens & van der Watt, 2021; Gan, 2022). Moreover, participation in cultural performances and heritage-based tourism experiences has fostered a renewed sense of pride in Indigenous identity and traditions, while collective involvement in tourism activities appears to enhance intra-community relationships and cohesion (Smith, 2021; Travesi,

2018). These outcomes suggest that regenerative tourism can serve as a meaningful pathway for advancing inclusive development by reinforcing both the material and immaterial dimensions of empowerment within local communities.

1.2.1. Economic and Psychological Empowerment

Economic and psychological empowerment are among the key benefits experienced by residents involved in tourism at Niah National Park. Through their participation in tourism-based livelihoods, local community members not only gain income but also develop a stronger sense of self-worth and cultural purpose. Residents who engage in tourism services—such as guiding, homestays, food provision, and craft sales—report improved household income and financial independence, which directly supports their daily needs (Scheyvens, 1999; Becken & Kaur, 2022). Involvement in showcasing their cultural traditions to visitors has further fostered pride and motivation among the Iban and Penan people to preserve their language, rituals, and customary knowledge (Smith, 2021; Travesi, 2018). These psychological gains are especially important in Indigenous settings where cultural erosion and marginalization have historically occurred (Gan, 2022). Thus, regenerative tourism at Niah not only stimulates economic opportunity but also nurtures internal drivers of empowerment—namely confidence, identity, and the will to sustain heritage—making it a multidimensional tool for community development.

1.2.2. Cultural and Ecological Stewardship

Tourism has also promoted cultural visibility and ecological awareness. Local communities increasingly perceive themselves as **guardians** of both cultural heritage and the park's biodiversity, aligning with regenerative principles.

Figure 1. (a) Visitors crossing the Sungai Niah with a community-operated boat; (b) Cultural showcase at Rumah Patrick Libau longhouse.

! [Example Figure Placeholder]
(a) Community-led boat service for tourists; (b) Cultural dance performed by Iban youth during homestay program.

1.3. Governance Gaps and Structural Barriers

While community participation is evident on the surface, deeper governance structures remain exclusionary. Development policies are largely designed by external actors without meaningful community consultation.

The centralized control by state or tourism authorities (e.g., Sarawak Forestry Corporation) limits the potential for local entrepreneurship and long-term capacity-building.

- (1) Indigenous groups lack legal frameworks to co-manage park assets.
- (2) Local tourism businesses face challenges in accessing markets and training.
- (3) Power dynamics favor formal institutions over customary governance structures.

Discussion

The findings of this study reaffirm the significance of **regenerative tourism** as a transformative alternative to conventional, growth-driven tourism models. In line with prior literature (Becken & Kaur, 2022; Movono et al., 2023), the case of Niah National Park illustrates how tourism—when developed with local participation and ecological awareness—can support long-term community empowerment and cultural preservation.

2.1. Regenerative Tourism and Community Empowerment

The study confirms that regenerative tourism effectively fosters multiple dimensions of empowerment, particularly economic and psychological, through mechanisms such as income diversification and cultural revitalization. This assertion is supported by evidence that when communities engage in regenerative tourism practices, they experience not only increased financial stability through diverse sources of income but also enhanced self-esteem and community pride arising from the revitalization of their cultural heritage Acharya (2023).

The underlying reason why regenerative tourism promotes empowerment lies in its holistic approach that emphasizes community participation, local control, and recognition of cultural identity. These principles align with Scheyvens' (1999) empowerment framework, which identifies the need for equitable benefit-sharing and local agency in tourism development. By empowering Indigenous communities to take charge of their tourism offerings, such as homestays, cultural programs, and community-managed transport, regenerative tourism positions these groups

not merely as service providers but as potential stewards and active participants in sustainable tourism development (Komariah et al., 2019).

Evidence from various studies highlights the significant role that an inclusive tourism model plays in societal transformation. Research shows that when local communities are given control over tourism-related decisions, they can better align tourism development with their cultural values and social structures. This results in improved psychological empowerment by reducing power imbalances often found in tourism-based economies where benefits are concentrated among a small number of influential individuals (Khalid et al., 2019). Moreover, initiatives that promote gender equity, particularly regarding women's involvement in tourism, contribute to a more balanced distribution of economic benefits and foster a sense of empowerment across the community (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2013).

Findings of this study underscore the potential of regenerative tourism to catalyze empowerment across economic and psychological dimensions. By embracing Scheyvens' framework and providing Indigenous communities with the tools and authority to shape their tourism landscapes, there is a path toward greater social equity, environmental sustainability, and the preservation of cultural heritage. Thus, regenerative tourism emerges not only as a viable economic strategy but also as a vital mechanism for achieving empowerment and revitalizing Indigenous identities (Wang & Wei, 2022). The persistence of top-down governance structures significantly undermines the full potential of regenerative outcomes in tourism development. While the shift towards regenerative models aims to empower local communities and enhance social equity, the continued dominance of hierarchical decision-making processes often limits these ambitions. This observation is supported by previous studies, notably Falak et al. (2014) and Haigh (2020), which indicate that development initiatives led by external institutions frequently marginalize Indigenous voices. Such practices reduce community members to passive participants in processes that should ideally engage them as active decision-makers in shaping their socio-economic futures.

The underlying reason for this marginalization is rooted in the power dynamics typically present in top-down governance, where external stakeholders often dictate terms and frameworks that do not reflect local priorities or cultural contexts. As a result, development efforts often fail to consider the unique needs and perspectives of Indigenous communities, which can lead to disconnection, dissatisfaction, and ultimately, a lack of

genuine investment in tourism initiatives. Furthermore, when local voices are sidelined, the positive impacts of regenerative tourism—such as enhanced environmental stewardship, cultural preservation, and socio-economic benefits—are diminished, perpetuating cycles of dependency and inequity within these communities.

Evidence from Falak et al. (2014) and Haigh (2020) highlights instances where top-down governance has stifled community engagement and led to the implementation of projects that do not resonate with the values and aspirations of local populations. Their research underscores the need for governance frameworks that facilitate collaboration between Indigenous communities and external stakeholders, ensuring that development decisions incorporate local knowledge and priorities. A critical step towards achieving this is the establishment of co-management frameworks that empower communities to have a central role in decision-making processes. Such frameworks can create pathways for inclusive and equitable tourism initiatives while promoting environmental sustainability and cultural continuity.

Predominance of top-down governance remains a significant barrier to realizing the full potential of regenerative tourism outcomes. The necessity of co-management frameworks and the institutionalization of community-led planning mechanisms is evident, as these approaches can dismantle existing power hierarchies and foster more meaningful engagement with Indigenous voices. By prioritizing local perspectives and collaborative decision-making, tourism development can become a tool for empowerment and transformation rather than merely an extension of external authority.

2.2. Heritage Tourism as a Site of Cultural Transmission

The role of heritage-based tourism in sustaining intergenerational cultural transmission is one of its most encouraging findings. This study highlights how traditional dances, food practices, and knowledge of the land are increasingly showcased to visitors, which in turn reinforces local pride and identity. Such initiatives are critical as they play a vital part in ensuring that cultural practices are not merely relics of the past but are actively lived and experienced by community members.

The positive impact of tourism lies in its ability to create a platform for cultural exchange and engagement, allowing visitors to appreciate and learn from the unique heritage of Indigenous communities. Nugroho et al. (2024)

emphasize the potential of collaborative tourism as a means to preserve cultural identity while providing Indigenous peoples with the agency to control their narratives, thus fostering a sense of belonging within their communities.

Moreover, evidence points to the effectiveness of participation in heritage tourism not only in preserving culture but also in enhancing economic benefits for Indigenous communities. Collaborative tourism efforts empower Indigenous groups by enabling them to manage and present their cultural heritage on their own terms, leading to sustainable economic opportunities that benefit the entire community. Hsieh et al. (2017) indicate that Aboriginal cultural tourism enhances local involvement, boosting cultural pride and economic sustainability by ensuring that the benefits of tourism flow back into the community. In conclusion, the integration of heritage-based tourism into the practices of Indigenous communities serves as a catalyst for sustaining intergenerational cultural transmission while reinforcing local pride and identity. This approach underscores the importance of honoring Indigenous value systems in the development and management of tourism initiatives. Consequently, heritage tourism not only enriches the visitor experience but also empowers Indigenous communities, ensuring that their cultural practices are celebrated and preserved for future generations.

The commodification of culture poses a significant risk if tourism expansion is not managed appropriately. The conversion of cultural practices into marketable commodities can dilute their authentic meanings, ultimately compromising cultural integrity. This concern is supported by various studies that highlight the negative effects of cultural commodification as communities face the challenges of tourism development (Nurhadi et al., 2022). This risk is primarily due to the tendency for economic opportunities to overshadow cultural considerations. Without mindful planning, cultural expressions, such as traditional dances and crafts, may be reconfigured as mere performances intended to entertain tourists rather than genuine representations of Indigenous identities. (Bai & Weng, 2023) discuss how this commodification often reduces complex cultural narratives to simplistic, consumable experiences, alienating the communities from which they originate and eroding local meanings (Bai & Weng, 2023).

Evidence from regions engaged in mass tourism indicates that cultural commodification can result in a loss of authenticity. (Zhang et al., 2018) note

that the pressure to align with tourist expectations frequently leads to performances that cater to market demands rather than reflecting the true cultural significance of practices (Zhang et al., 2018). This commodification can transform cultural heritage into diluted versions of itself, stripping it of its original context and depriving future generations of their rich backgrounds (Prasiasa et al., 2023). For example, (Nurhadi et al., 2022) illustrate how the commodification of cultural elements in Indonesia's Osing community alters the community's relationship with its cultural identity, reducing heritage to a product instead of preserving it as a living tradition (Nurhadi et al., 2022). In conclusion, future tourism planning must balance economic opportunities with cultural integrity. Strategies should ensure that heritage does not merely become a performance for tourists but remains deeply rooted in local contexts and meanings. This necessitates co-management frameworks and community-led planning mechanisms that prioritize Indigenous voices and cultural values, fostering tourism practices that are sustainable and respectful of the communities involved (Whitford & Dunn, 2014; , Tolkach & Pratt, 2019). By adopting these strategies, tourism can become a vehicle for preserving and promoting authentic cultural expressions rather than a force of commodification that diminishes their significance.

2.3. Institutional Constraints and Future Opportunities

Despite the modest success of tourism at Niah National Park, the lack of policy frameworks that facilitate Indigenous governance, legal recognition, and equitable access to resources presents a fundamental barrier to achieving the full potential of regenerative tourism in the region. The absence of such frameworks limits the agency of Indigenous communities and hinders their ability to engage meaningfully in tourism-related activities. According to recent studies, these structural deficiencies are pervasive in many Indigenous communities, which struggle to navigate the complexities of tourism development without adequate support from policy-making bodies and frameworks that recognize their rights and contributions.

The concept of regenerative tourism advocates for a paradigm shift, necessitating reforms not only in tourism practices but also in governance structures. Such a shift should aim toward frameworks that honor land rights, acknowledge customary institutions, and promote local entrepreneurship. This approach is crucial for ensuring that Indigenous communities can exercise control over their resources and cultural heritage, allowing for more

equitable participation in tourism and economic benefits derived from it. Research indicates that integrating community governance in tourism development has shown positive outcomes in enhancing both cultural and economic resilience within Indigenous populations.

Opportunities for scaling the regenerative tourism model are present through initiatives focused on community capacity-building, youth engagement, and the incorporation of Indigenous ecological knowledge in tourism education and park interpretation. The engagement of youth not only ensures the transmission of traditional knowledge and practices but also fosters innovation and new ideas that can adapt traditional practices to contemporary contexts. Collaborative educational programs can empower young community members and instill a sense of stewardship over both their culture and the natural environment.

Furthermore, aligning local tourism strategies with UNESCO World Heritage principles presents a timely opportunity to embed community empowerment within conservation mandates. UNESCO's emphasis on community involvement in the protection and promotion of heritage sites supports the idea that Indigenous communities should be key stakeholders in the management of areas like Niah National Park. By leveraging UNESCO's framework, communities can advocate for their rights, strengthen their socio-economic conditions, and ensure that tourism contributes positively to both cultural preservation and ecological sustainability.

Addressing the policy barriers that currently impede Indigenous governance and resource access is imperative for harnessing the transformative potential of regenerative tourism at Niah. Through a paradigm shift in governance that respects Indigenous rights and promotes local entrepreneurship, along with engaging youth and aligning with UNESCO standards, communities can strengthen their capacity for sustainable tourism that supports both cultural and ecological integrity.

2.4. Future Research Directions

Future research in the domain of regenerative tourism can significantly enhance understanding and practice through several proposed avenues. One potential avenue is the implementation of longitudinal studies that track the socio-economic impact of regenerative tourism on Indigenous livelihoods. Such studies can provide essential insights into how tourism initiatives affect community well-being over time. While the literature supports the idea that

tourism impacts can correlate with quality of life, specifically regarding health and resident perceptions in various contexts Bornioli et al. (2022), there remains a need for targeted studies focusing explicitly on Indigenous communities.

Additionally, ethnographic inquiry into how cultural meanings evolve through tourism encounters is another promising approach. This type of research can illuminate the dynamic interactions between tourists and Indigenous cultures, addressing gaps in understanding how tourism experiences can reshape cultural perceptions and identity. Ethnographic methods allow for capturing nuanced experiences, providing a richer understanding of the implications of tourism on Indigenous cultural transmission; however, the specific references provided do not directly support this claim (Liang & Hui, 2016).

Participatory action research (PAR) that co-develops tourism models with local communities should be prioritized. Involving community members directly in the research fosters collaboration, ensuring that tourism initiatives reflect local values and needs. While there is evidence that community involvement can enhance ownership in tourism projects and lead to better sustainability outcomes, the cited reference does not conclusively demonstrate these effects in the context of regenerative tourism practices (Nazneen et al., 2019).

Finally, comparative case studies across Southeast Asia would provide a broader context to identify patterns and policy implications regarding regenerative tourism practices. By comparing different regional contexts, researchers can elucidate common challenges and successful strategies in implementing regenerative tourism. While prior studies suggest that comparative approaches can enrich understanding of the impacts of tourism across different locales, details supporting this are lacking in the provided references (Wu & Chen, 2015; , Holzner, 2011). In conclusion, future research opportunities in regenerative tourism should focus on longitudinal studies, ethnographic inquiries, participatory action research, and comparative case studies. Together, these methodologies can provide valuable insights that not only advance academic understanding but also inform practical strategies for fostering sustainable and equitable tourism development that respects and enhances Indigenous cultures and livelihoods.

Conclusion

This study has explored the potential of regenerative tourism as a framework for heritage-based community empowerment in the context of Niah National Park, Sarawak, Malaysia. By examining the roles of the Iban and Penan communities in local tourism activities, the study demonstrates that regenerative approaches—grounded in ecological sustainability, cultural preservation, and participatory governance—offer a viable alternative to conventional tourism models.

The main argument advanced in this article is that **community empowerment is both a means and an outcome** of regenerative tourism. While local communities have benefited from new livelihood opportunities and cultural revitalization, meaningful empowerment remains constrained by structural governance barriers and limited policy support. Therefore, **bottom-up planning, Indigenous leadership, and co-management mechanisms** must be prioritized to unlock the full regenerative potential of tourism.

Key recommendations include:

1. Institutionalizing community participation in tourism planning and conservation governance;
2. Strengthening legal recognition of Indigenous rights and local entrepreneurship;
3. Integrating Indigenous ecological knowledge into tourism education and interpretation;
4. Leveraging UNESCO recognition as a tool for inclusive heritage management.

The framework proposed in this study can be applied in practice by development agencies, park authorities, and local governments seeking to promote **equity-based, culturally embedded, and ecologically restorative tourism**. It also provides a useful model for other heritage-rich, tourism-dependent areas in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Future research should further examine how regenerative principles can be operationalized across diverse cultural and policy contexts, ideally through participatory methodologies that center community voices. As the discourse on regenerative development continues to grow, empirical work is urgently needed to move beyond theory and demonstrate real-world pathways for transformation.

Declarations

Author Contribution Statement

All authors contributed equally to the conceptualization, design, and drafting of this study. They were jointly involved in the literature review, thematic analysis, and interpretation of findings related to regenerative tourism and community empowerment in Niah National Park. Each author critically reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission and publication.

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are derived from publicly available sources, including academic journals, government reports, and official tourism development documents. Additional materials such as field notes and observational records can be made available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

Declaration of Interests Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

Additional Information

This article forms part of a broader academic interest in sustainable and community-centered tourism development in Southeast Asia. The case of Niah National Park was selected due to its rich cultural heritage, Indigenous presence, and evolving tourism dynamics, especially in light of its forthcoming UNESCO World Heritage status.

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