

The future of tourism: interview with emeritus professor Pauline Sheldon on regenerative tourism

Ian Seymour Yeoman and Pauline Joy Sheldon

Ian Seymour Yeoman is based at the Hotel Management School, NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences, Leeuwarden, Netherlands. Pauline Joy Sheldon is based at the TIM School, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, Honolulu, Hawai'i, USA.

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This paper forms part of a special section "10th Anniversary of the *Journal of Tourism Futures*", guest edited by Dr Stefan Hartman, Prof. Albert Postma and Prof. Ian Yeoman.

Abstract

Purpose – As the *Journal of Tourism Futures* (JTF) celebrates its 10th Anniversary, Dr Ian Yeoman (Hotel Management School Leeuwarden) interviews Emeritus Professor Pauline Sheldon (University of Hawai'i) about transformation and the regenerative future of tourism, a special issue published by the journal in 2022.

Design/methodology/approach – A personal interview.

Findings – Emeritus Professor Pauline Sheldon highlights the importance of regenerative tourism for the future and the role the JTF plays in this field. In particular, Sheldon highlights the pioneering research and practice of Dr Dianne Dredge, who has championed a pathway on regenerative tourism.

Originality/value – The interview provides insights into the directions of regenerative tourism and research about the future of tourism.

Keywords Future of tourism, Journal of Tourism Futures, Regenerative tourism, Sustainability

Paper type Viewpoint

Pauline Sheldon

I am Emeritus Professor at University of Hawai'i School of Travel Industry Management where I also served as Dean. I have been residing in Hawai'i for over 50 years. Originally, I started my academic life as a mathematician and then an economist, undertaking research in tourism demand modeling and forecasting. After a few years, I decided that economics was not adequate to really understand the complex phenomenon of tourism. So, after focusing on information technology and tourism for a few years, I moved into studying sustainable tourism and, more recently, I have taken a strong interest in regenerative tourism. This blends my interest in tourism with my lifelong study of the evolution and transformation of human consciousness. I have worked with various international organizations, including the UNWTO, World Bank and APEC on various projects. I am now retired, but continue to write and speak about regenerative tourism, serve in an advisory role to Hawai'i tourism and Hawai'i green growth and conduct workshops on human transformation with the Art of Living Foundation.

Ian Yeoman

Most recently you edited a special issue of the *Journal of Tourism Futures* (JTF) (Vol 8, No 3) on *Transformation and the Regenerative Future of Tourism* with Dr Irena Ateljevic (Ateljevic and Sheldon, 2022). Why did you do this?

Pauline Sheldon

This issue was developed during COVID-19, when it was very clear to everybody that tourism was going to be very different going forward. Dr Irena Ateljevic approached me to see if I would be

interested in co-editing this special issue with her. I jumped at the chance as I had collaborated with her before writing about transformative tourism and we both shared a passion for a new and different type of tourism. As the topics of transformative and regenerative tourism were gaining traction during COVID-19, we decided to merge the two terms for this special issue. We wanted a diverse array of authors to grapple with the complex issues involved in transforming tourism toward a more meaningful regenerative model.

We decided to publish with *JTF* because it is the only tourism journal with a specific focus on the future, and it is open source. Both of these were important to us.

There is plenty of published research on sustainability and tourism, and the UN sustainable development goals are crucial in that area. However, in our view, sustaining the *status quo* is not enough given the state of our planet. Tourism must make greater contributions to an improved quality of life for all and this we call regenerative tourism. We also felt there was a vacuum of knowledge about regenerative tourism. It is sometimes seen as an incremental step above sustainability without the recognition for the necessary systemic changes. We wanted to provide understanding about these fundamental changes in mindset, values and systems for tourism to become regenerative. We invited researchers from all over the world working in the area to submit their research. The special issue integrated their work and we hope the results provide more understanding about this complex topic and how it can be implemented.

Ian Yeoman

So, what did you want to achieve from the special issue?

Pauline Sheldon

We wanted to achieve a deeper understanding of what regenerative tourism really is, not what people think it might be. We wanted to provide a more comprehensive framework that policymakers and academics could use to design tourism to improve destinations while facing the many astoundingly difficult constraints in the future.

Ian Yeoman

Is there a lack of action on regenerative tourism?

Pauline Sheldon

I think there is more a lack of understanding of what it really is and because of that, there is a lack of action. Knowledge is needed to shift the model and shift the whole system. Irena, I and other leaders in the field feel that the term is starting to be used in a way that is not so meaningful. It is like green washing – regenerative washing. Unfortunately, some companies and even destinations are using it for marketing purposes without fully understanding its true nature, thereby diluting the concept. We are happy, however, that some are genuinely making the paradigm shift needed to be regenerative, and a few of those are highlighted in this special issue.

Ian Yeoman

You are raising serious issues about the tourism industry in that it is not giving back or in balance.

Pauline Sheldon

Yes, I would say that much of our industry has extracted and exhausted resources in the past. There is a lot of tokenism when it comes to sustainability. For example, *corporate social responsibility* programs are good, but they often fall short because they do not change the fundamental model of tourism firms which focus on short term profits. They are operating from neoliberal and capitalist thinking which cannot support a regenerative model for the future. Stockholder wealth as the north star for tourism must be replaced by stakeholder well-being.

Thankfully examples of destinations and tourism firms that are transforming that old model do exist with social entrepreneurs as some of the most effective changemakers.

Ian Yeoman

Why did you select the *JTF* rather than another journal for the special issue?

Pauline Sheldon

One of the key factors was that you are open source – that was very important to Dr Irena Ateljevic and myself. I had also published with *JTF* earlier and was impressed by the style of the journal and the guidance you (Ian Yeoman) gave me. The reviewing process was also very fair and quick.

Also the topic lends itself perfectly to the *JTF*. I do not think enough of us as tourism academics are grappling with the seismic future trends and the enormous impact they will have on tourism. Also, regenerative tourism is essentially about the long term future, and this is the focus of the *JTF*.

Ian Yeoman

The special issue on transformation and regenerative future of tourism seemed to be very successful and it raised a whole range of debates about the system of tourism and the systemic model of regenerative tourism, therefore, considering the range and depth of papers in the special issue, which ones come to the forefront?

Pauline Sheldon

The star paper in my mind is certainly Dianne Dredge's paper ([Dredge, 2022](#)) entitled *Regenerative Tourism, Transforming Mindsets, Systems and Practices*. This piece is mandatory reading for anyone wanting to understand regenerative tourism. In the paper, Dredge clearly defines the mindset and value shifts that are required in all areas for tourism to be regenerative. Transforming minds and value sets is the most difficult thing of all but something that all stakeholders need to do. Dianne clearly outlines the paradigm shifts needed, and she also clearly explains the systems that need to fundamentally change. The paper goes on to provide a theoretical foundation upon which to base future actions and decision making for regenerative tourism.

Dredge also explained that transitioning to a regenerative future requires a destination to change how it engages with stakeholders. Including stakeholders in a learning journey and not seeking a simple solution or the perfect marketing campaign is part of designing regenerative tourism. The other important contribution of her paper focuses on the different ways of knowing or gathering information required to move a destination into a regenerative model. In the West we tend to rely on our minds as our prime way of knowing, but the heart, the gut, the soul and ancestral knowledge are all important in making decisions about the future – as modeled in many indigenous knowledge systems. It was a very comprehensive paper, not only extremely well grounded in theory and concepts, but also in providing suggestions for how to take action in the future.

Ian Yeoman

What's your second paper?

Pauline Sheldon

The second favorite paper was *Transformative Roles in Tourism: Adopting Living Systems' Thinking for Regenerative Futures* ([Bellato et al., 2022](#)). This paper was important because it sheds light on a new model that can help tourism to become regenerative. Bellato *et al.* explain the need to emulate living systems models as the basis of moving forward in a regenerative way. This requires changing from considering tourism to be a production system to one of a living system. A key

thread of this paper is its focus on developing reciprocal relationships for a living systems model of tourism to succeed. When relationships in a destination are reciprocal and the interdependence of actors is nourished, we can approximate a living systems model. This leads to different decision-making than production thinking. The authors do a good job of explaining this in the context of tourism. I also appreciated that the authors provided many case studies of regenerative tourism in their paper. Unlike the standardization of sustainable tourism, living system models are place-based and each destination needs to design its own future, meaning that each place will take a different journey with different reciprocal relationships moving toward regeneration. The case studies in the paper gave insight into that.

Ian Yeoman

What about the third paper?

Pauline Sheldon

The third favorite paper was *Transformational Tourism – A Systematic Literature Review and Research Agenda* by [Nandasena et al. \(2022\)](#). This paper is important as a state-of-the-art paper. It collated and analyzed all the academic papers published on transformative tourism over the last decade, giving the reader an understanding of the field and of how regenerative and transformative tourism research has evolved.

Ian Yeoman

Reflecting back on the special issue, was there anything that was not said or you think was missing within the debate about regenerative tourism?

Pauline Sheldon

The one thing touched on by several authors, is the unclear distinction between sustainable and regenerative tourism. Very often these two terms are combined without an understanding of the profound differences. While the sustainable tourism model is a good model, it is not enough in these times of crisis. There is an urgency for tourism to make a more significant contribution to the well-being of our planet. I think there would have been room for more discussion in the issue to bring clarity to this distinction, because otherwise the waters are muddy, and this slows progress. Irena and I hope that this special issue has helped researchers understand the difference.

Ian Yeoman

If you were to do the special issue all over again, what would you have done differently?

Pauline Sheldon

If we did it again, time would have passed and I hope we would be able to include more papers about the successful experiences of designing regenerative destinations. It would be really interesting to track the progress and see what is happening in different parts of the world. I would love to include the progress of destinations such as Vanuatu who are on an exciting regenerative path. We also might have included more papers written by authors from different disciplines allied to tourism. Tourism has a lot to learn from and share with other disciplines. Transformation occurs at the edges between systems and that is where new knowledge is most easily created. We also would love to include more case studies from destinations with indigenous wisdom.

Ian Yeoman

So, going forward, what are the critical uncertainties for regenerative tourism to become more embedded, to succeed and to become part of our daily lives of tourism?

Pauline Sheldon

Well, the clear one is the corporate model of financial success that drives most tourism flows around the world. As long as short run profit decision-making dominates in a destination, it will be challenging for regenerative principles to move forward. For example, in Hawai'i for three years our government has voted down an environmental tax. Why? Probably because the corporate lobby does not want any extra tax on tourists which might diminish their occupancy rates and bottom line. Fundamentally, we are struggling with a value set that is contrary to regenerative tourism. In order to overcome this and succeed we need to engage with and deeply listen to our communities, to indigenous wisdom, to environmental scientists and to cultural practitioners among others. And reducing tourist numbers and encouraging respectful visitor behavior are challenges faced by many places. Success in regenerative tourism will require facing all these challenges.

Ian Yeoman

Anything else?

Pauline Sheldon

In the next few years I think we will see significant changes to how much we can travel around this planet. Overtourism, climate change, fuel costs, flight-shaming, economic status and political turmoil are all potential irritants for future travel.

Ian Yeoman

That is an interesting point. How do you reconcile that with an island destination like New Zealand or Hawai'i, where you have got a dependency on air travel?

Pauline Sheldon

Let us be real, this might mean islands need to be less dependent on tourism. I think as island destinations we need to find the right balance of tourism numbers and tourist behavior to be regenerative and give residents a good quality of life. If we are genuinely concerned about climate change and being kinder to our environment and host culture, we may not be able to host the same number of visitors in the future.

Ian Yeoman

What is your concluding message about for the future of tourism?

Pauline Sheldon

You may remember that Dan Fesenmeier and I co-founded the Tourism Education Futures [\[1\]](#) Initiative (TEFI) about 15 years ago to envision the future of tourism and the role of education in it. At our first meeting a professional futurist provided us with various scenarios about the world's future. He described eight different scenarios such as: a world run by corporations, a world run by terrorists or returning to subsistence living, etc. Our job was to envision how tourism would evolve in each of those scenarios and what role education would play. One of the biggest eye-openers for us from that conference was how difficult it is to think about tourism in future scenarios such as that. But we must do it even though it is difficult, and so TEFI continues to this day working on these issues. I just read the book *The Ministry for the Future* ([Robinson, 2020](#)) and I recommend it and similar books to your readers who are concerned about our future. Robinson describes many possible global scenarios likely to impact travel in the near future. Regarding our economic futures, he points out that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. His vision of air travel in the future is also worthy of attention.

In support of your journal, Ian, I do not think tourism academics and scholars think enough about the gravity of the future we are facing. I suggest that we urgently consider making this a priority for our research. In fact, it could be argued that it is the only topic worthy of our time researching. We need to give it more attention and that is why your journal is such an important contribution to the field. Thank you.

Notes

1. <https://www.tourismeducationfutures.org/>

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About the authors

Professor Ian Seymour Yeoman is Professor (Lector in the Netherlands) of Disruption, Innovation and New Phenomena at the Hotel Management School Leeuwarden part of NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences. Ian is also Co-Editor of the *Journal of Tourism Futures*. Ian Seymour Yeoman is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: ian.yeoman@nhlstenden.com

Professor Pauline Joy Sheldon is Emeritus Professor at University of Hawai'i School of Travel Industry Management, where she also served as Dean. Pauline was awarded the Ulysses Prize for academic contributions by UNWTO in 2008, the world's top award for contribution to research.

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