ЮБИЛЕЙНА МЕЖДУНАРОДНА НАУЧНО-ПРАКТИЧЕСКА КОНФЕРЕНЦИЯ

# ТУРИЗМЪТ В ЕПОХА НА ПРЕХОДИ: ЗНАНИЯ, ПОЛИТИКИ И УСТОЙЧИВИ БИЗНЕС МОДЕЛИ

Сборник с доклади

АКАДЕМИЧНО ИЗДАТЕЛСТВО „ЦЕНОВ" СВИЩОВ

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# FROM SUSTAINABLE TO REGENERATIVE TOURISM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BLUE ECONOMY

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**Abstract**: This paper examines the transition from sustainable to regenerative tourism in the context of the blue economy, with a specific focus on Bulgarian Black Sea municipalities. The core argument is that sustainable tourism is no longer sufficient as an analytical and policy horizon in destinations characterised by strong seasonality, territorial concentration and increasing pressure on coastal resources. The paper first outlines the conceptual differences between sustainable and regenerative tourism and then places the discussion within the framework of the blue economy. Special attention is paid to the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, where tourist activity remains concentrated in a limited number of municipalities and summer months. On the basis of official Bulgarian and European data, the paper argues that the current model generates not only economic benefits but also structural vulnerabilities related to environmental pressure, uneven territorial development and high seasonal dependence. The conclusion is that a regenerative approach offers a more appropriate long-term framework because it links tourism development to ecosystem restoration, local resilience and broader territorial value creation.

**Keywords**: blue economy; sustainable tourism; regenerative tourism; Black Sea municipalities; seasonal concentration.

## Introduction

Contemporary debates on tourism are increasingly shifting from the logic of quantitative growth to the logic of quality, limits and restoration. This is particularly visible in coastal destinations, where tourism depends directly on fragile ecological systems and, at the same time, often becomes one of the main sources of pressure upon them. In such contexts, the question is no longer only how tourism can be sustained, but also whether tourism development can contribute to the recovery of the very places on which it depends.

This shift in academic and policy discourse coincides with the rise of the blue economy. The European Commission identifies coastal tourism as the largest sector of the blue economy, generating major shares of employment and gross value added in maritime areas (European Commission, 2025). Yet this economic significance is inseparable from major environmental and territorial challenges: seasonal congestion, pressure on coastal land, waste generation, water stress and the overconcentration of tourism activity in a limited number of localities.

Within this context, the concept of regenerative tourism is gaining importance. It goes beyond the traditional aim of minimising damage and places

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emphasis on producing net positive outcomes for ecosystems, communities and local economies. Rather than asking how destinations can absorb tourism with fewer losses, the regenerative perspective asks how tourism can actively restore ecological functions, strengthen local resilience and improve the long-term quality of place (Bellato & Pollock, 2023).

The aim of this paper is to clarify the transition from sustainable to regenerative tourism in the context of the blue economy, with special emphasis on Bulgarian Black Sea municipalities. To achieve this aim, the paper first outlines the conceptual distinctions between sustainable and regenerative tourism and then analyses the Bulgarian coastal case through the lens of seasonality, spatial concentration, pressure on the coastal zone and the need for a model based on restoration rather than mere exploitation.

Methodologically, the paper is based on a conceptual analysis supported by selected official statistical and policy data, used to illustrate the structural characteristics of tourism concentration along the Bulgarian Black Sea coast.

## 1. From sustainable to regenerative tourism: conceptual emphases

Sustainable tourism historically emerged as an application of the broader sustainable development paradigm to the tourism sector. In its classical form, it seeks to reconcile economic viability, social acceptability and environmental protection. This approach has played an important role in moving tourism policy away from purely growth-oriented visions, because it introduced the need to account for carrying capacity, resource use, local communities and intergenerational balance. As Hall (2019) and Sharpley (2020) note, however, sustainable tourism has often remained trapped in a managerial logic that improves the efficiency of the existing model without questioning its deeper territorial and ecological contradictions.

The limitation becomes especially visible in coastal destinations. Waste-management measures, restrictions on single-use plastics, higher energy efficiency and environmental certification may all reduce the negative footprint of tourism, yet they do not necessarily alter the structural dependence on seasonal concentration, intensive land use and the commodification of fragile coastal environments. In this sense, sustainable tourism can sometimes become a language of mitigation within a model that remains fundamentally extractive in its spatial and ecological effects.

Regenerative tourism emerges precisely in response to this limit. According to Bellato and Pollock (2023), it is not confined to reducing harm, but seeks to restore the relationships between people, place and ecosystems. This means that destinations are approached not simply as products to be managed more efficiently, but as living systems whose social and ecological vitality should be enhanced through tourism activity. Bellato, Frantzeskaki and Nygaard (2024)

further show that the regenerative turn is closely linked to place-based thinking, systemic interdependence and long-term resilience.

This shift is also significant at the level of governance. Paddison and Hall (2024) argue that regenerative tourism development requires broader participation by local actors, sensitivity to the long-term needs of destinations and stronger integration between environmental restoration and local economic value creation. The objective is no longer limited to keeping tourism within acceptable limits, but extends to improving ecological quality, local embeddedness and adaptive capacity. In this sense, regenerative tourism does not reject sustainable tourism; rather, it deepens and reorients it toward restoration, renewal and territorial flourishing.

**Table 1**
**Sustainable and regenerative tourism: key differences**

| Criterion | Sustainable tourism | Regenerative tourism |
|---|---|---|
| Main objective | Limiting and balancing negative effects | Creating a net positive effect for the place |
| Relation to nature | Protection and reduction of pressure | Restoration and improvement of ecosystem functions |
| Relation to community | Participation and compatibility | Empowerment, co-creation and local resilience |
| Economic logic | Improved efficiency of the existing model | Transition to a model with higher local value added |
| End result | „Less harm“ | „The place should be better after tourism“ |

*Source: systematised on the basis of Hall (2019), Bellato and Pollock (2023), Bellato et al. (2024), and Aquino et al. (2024).*

The comparison shows that regenerative tourism does not replace sustainable tourism; it builds upon it. It accepts ecological and social limits as a starting point, yet introduces a higher ambition: the destination should not merely endure tourism with fewer losses, but should become ecologically healthier, socially stronger and territorially more resilient because of tourism. This makes the concept especially relevant for the blue economy, where the quality of marine and coastal systems is inseparable from long-term economic viability.

## 2. Regenerative tourism in the context of the blue economy: a Bulgarian Black Sea focus

The blue economy encompasses economic activities related to seas, coastal spaces and aquatic resources, while simultaneously placing emphasis on their long-term protection. OECD (2024) underlines that the blue economy should not be understood only as a field of maritime growth, but as a governance framework linking economic use to ecosystem resilience and territorial sustainability. Coastal

and maritime tourism occupies a central place within this framework because it generates substantial income and employment, but it also depends directly on environmental quality, coastal infrastructure and local community capacity.

For Bulgaria, this duality is particularly visible. Black Sea municipalities are among the most recognisable spaces of tourism specialisation, yet they are also among the most sensitive in terms of seasonality, land-use pressure and vulnerability to environmental degradation. The current model is strongly oriented towards summer concentration, intensive use of a limited coastal strip and the dominance of high-volume tourism. As a result, economic performance and structural fragility coexist in the same territorial system.

Official Bulgarian data confirm that tourism activity along the Black Sea coast remains highly concentrated in the summer season and in a limited number of municipalities and resorts. According to the Ministry of Tourism, in the period June–September 2024 the Northern Black Sea coast, especially Varna and Dobrich, recorded 1,241,949 tourist registrations, which was 4.0% above the same period of 2023. At the same time, the recovery compared with 2019 remained uneven: Varna reached 98% of its 2019 level, whereas Dobrich reached 89% (Ministry of Tourism, 2025). These figures point to continued dependence on a seasonal tourism product and to differentiated recovery trajectories within the northern coastal area.

The Southern Black Sea coast also exhibits a high degree of concentration, though with a stronger recovery dynamic in particular resort cores. Data for Sunny Beach show 942,820 registrations for June–September 2024, representing an increase of 12.9% compared with 2019. Bed occupancy rates reached 61% in June, 87% in July and 90.3% in August (Ministry of Tourism, 2025). This reveals an extremely pronounced peak-load pattern: a narrow temporal window generates the bulk of demand, while infrastructure, coastal land and local services are subjected to intense pressure within a short period.

The seasonal contrast can also be illustrated through National Statistical Institute data on accommodation establishments. In September 2024, Varna district had 331 operating establishments with 57.0 thousand bed-places, whereas in December 2024 Burgas district reported only 6.4 thousand bed-places in operation (National Statistical Institute, 2024a; 2025). Although these figures do not represent a direct month-to-month comparison within the same district, they are indicative of the broader seasonal contraction that characterises the Bulgarian Black Sea accommodation system outside the summer peak. From a territorial perspective, such seasonality creates discontinuity in employment, infrastructure utilisation and local income flows.

From the viewpoint of the regenerative approach, these data matter not only as a description of demand, but also as a signal of the limitations of the current model. When tourism value is produced primarily through short-term intensification in a narrow coastal zone, the result is a structurally unbalanced system. The economic gains of peak concentration are accompanied by pressure on beaches,

coastal ecosystems, water resources, waste systems, transport infrastructure and public spaces. European Environment Agency data also underline the growing importance of monitoring coastal and marine quality under climate and environmental change (Climate-ADAPT, 2025; European Environment Agency, 2025).

**Table 2**
**Selected indicators of seasonal concentration and spatial pressure along the Bulgarian Black Sea coast**

| Indicator | Period | Value | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Tourist registrations, Northern Black Sea coast (Varna and Dobrich) | June-September 2024 | 1,241,949; +4.0% vs. 2023 | Strong summer flow and dependence on the seasonal product |
| Recovery compared with 2019 | June-September 2024 | Varna - 98%; Dobrich - 89% | Uneven recovery of the northern section |
| Sunny Beach - registrations | June-September 2024 | 942,820; +12.9% vs. 2019 | High concentration in a single resort core |
| Sunny Beach - bed occupancy | June / July / August 2024 | 61% / 87% / 90.3% | Pronounced peak loading in the summer months |
| Varna district - bed-places in accommodation establishments | September 2024 | 57.0 thousand bed-places | Large capacity at the end of the active season |
| Burgas district - bed-places in accommodation establishments | December 2024 | 6.4 thousand bed-places | Sharp contraction outside the summer peak |

*Source: Ministry of Tourism (2025); National Statistical Institute (2024a); National Statistical Institute (2025).*

The regenerative model implies a different logic. First, it requires that the coastal zone should not be viewed merely as a resource for seasonal exploitation, but as a complex living system. This means that tourism development must be aligned with dune protection, habitat restoration, better water-quality management and the reduction of cumulative ecological pressure. Secondly, the model calls for extending tourism value chains beyond the narrow peak-season package. Instead of concentrating benefits in a few weeks and in a few resort centres, regenerative tourism seeks stronger links with local food systems, cultural heritage, small-scale entrepreneurship and community-led initiatives (Aquino et al., 2024).

Thirdly, the regenerative approach has a clear territorial dimension. Instead of allowing revenues to be concentrated mainly in narrow tourism cores and in chains with high external dependence, the goal is to broaden local embeddedness and retention of value. For Bulgarian Black Sea municipalities, this would imply stronger integration between coastal tourism and local agriculture, fisheries, crafts, cultural events and ecosystem restoration projects. In this way, tourism

would support not only seasonal consumption, but also the long-term social and economic resilience of municipalities.

For Bulgarian Black Sea municipalities, this also implies a change in the metrics of success. If the dominant logic remains limited to tourist numbers, overnight stays and revenues, the most overloaded territories may continue to appear as the most successful ones. A regenerative approach requires a broader set of indicators: pressure per unit of coastal space, ecological restoration outcomes, seasonality reduction, retention of local value added, community participation and the quality of the living environment. Such a shift is particularly important in municipalities where tourism growth may coexist with increased territorial fragility.

Consequently, the need for a new model for the Bulgarian Black Sea coast arises not only from environmental concerns, but from the economic logic of long-term competitiveness itself. A destination that exhausts its coastal assets, produces sharp seasonal instability and externalises a large share of its costs cannot remain competitive indefinitely. In this sense, regenerative tourism should be seen not as a purely normative ideal, but as a strategic framework for preserving destination quality, territorial resilience and future development potential within the broader context of the blue economy.

For policy purposes, this implies that Bulgarian Black Sea municipalities should gradually complement conventional tourism indicators with indicators of ecological restoration, seasonality reduction, local value retention and coastal pressure. Such a shift would allow municipal and national tourism strategies to move beyond the measurement of visitor volume and towards the assessment of long-term destination resilience.

## Conclusion

The transition from sustainable to regenerative tourism reflects a deeper change in the understanding of tourism's role in coastal spaces. If sustainable tourism is primarily oriented towards balancing economic, social and environmental objectives and limiting damage, regenerative tourism moves further by framing tourism as a possible contributor to ecological recovery, local resilience and long-term territorial vitality. This makes the concept especially relevant in the context of the blue economy, where economic use and ecosystem health are inseparable.

The Bulgarian Black Sea case shows that the current model remains highly concentrated - spatially in a limited number of municipalities and resorts, and temporally in a few summer months. This concentration generates economic benefits, but also creates pressure on the coastal zone, sharp seasonal asymmetries and structural vulnerabilities for local development. Official data on tourist registrations, occupancy and accommodation capacity confirm that the dominant

pattern is still one of intensive summer exploitation rather than balanced territorial regeneration.

For this reason, the future of tourism on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast should be sought not only in the more efficient management of the existing model, but in a gradual transition towards a regenerative logic of development. Such a transition would connect tourism more closely with ecosystem restoration, diversified local value creation, reduced seasonality and stronger municipal resilience. Within the framework of the blue economy, this would mean moving beyond a model centred predominantly on extraction and volume towards one centred on restoration, place quality and long-term territorial sustainability.

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