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## Article

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Administrative Sciences

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*Suggested Citation:* Miedes-Ugarte, Blanca; Flores-Ruiz, David (2025) : Strategies for the promotion of regenerative tourism: Hospitality communities as niches for tourism innovation, Administrative Sciences, ISSN 2076-3387, MDPI, Basel, Vol. 15, Iss. 1, pp. 1-18,  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci15010010>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/321155>

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Article

# Strategies for the Promotion of Regenerative Tourism: Hospitality Communities as Niches for Tourism Innovation

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**Abstract:** Regenerative tourism has emerged as a critical evolution from traditional approaches to sustainable tourism, which have proven insufficient to address contemporary environmental, social, and economic challenges. This study examines the case of ‘Aves de la Sierra’ in Huelva, Spain, a pioneering initiative that integrates ecosystem regeneration and community revitalisation as the core of its regenerative tourism proposal. Through the analytical theoretical framework of the Multi-Level Change Perspective (MLP) and transformative innovation, it analyses how local communities consolidate themselves as niches of innovation in regenerative tourism, autonomously managing their resources and narrative. The results of this action research process reveal a number of findings that can serve as a starting point for the dynamisation and development of other regenerative tourism experiences. These include the need for public policies aimed at strengthening these innovation niches through collaborative networks, organisational learning, and adequate funding. This article also contributes to narrowing the gap between theory and experience in regenerative tourism.

**Keywords:** regenerative tourism; socio-technical innovation; multi-level change perspective; action research; eco-social transition in tourism; cooperative digital platforms



Received: 29 October 2024  
Revised: 19 December 2024  
Accepted: 21 December 2024  
Published: 27 December 2024

**Citation:** Miedes-Ugarte, B., & Flores-Ruiz, D. (2025). Strategies for the Promotion of Regenerative Tourism: Hospitality Communities as Niches for Tourism Innovation. *Administrative Sciences*, 15(1), 10. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci15010010>

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## 1. Introduction

Global tourism has experienced unprecedented growth in recent decades, generating both economic benefits and significant social and environmental side effects (Cave & Dredge, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic not only disrupted this growth, but also exposed the inherent vulnerabilities of the traditional demand-driven tourism model (Lew & Cheer, 2017). This context has highlighted the need for new approaches that transcend the limitations of conventional sustainable tourism.

Regenerative tourism emerges as a critical evolution that goes beyond the mere minimisation of the negative impacts characteristic of sustainable tourism (Bellato et al., 2023). This approach takes a proactive stance, seeking to restore degraded ecosystems and revitalise host communities. As Becken and Kaur (2021) point out, regenerative tourism proposes a balanced integration of cultural, social, and environmental aspects, empowering local communities to manage their own resources and tourism narratives.

However, the existing literature reveals significant gaps in understanding how local communities can develop and consolidate regenerative tourism initiatives (Ateljevic & Sheldon, 2022). Specifically, there is a lack of empirical studies on the development of local capacities, the use of cooperative digital tools, and on consolidation processes as innovation niches (Cave & Dredge, 2021; Bellato et al., 2023).

To address these gaps, this article examines the ‘Aves de la Sierra’ case in Huelva, Spain, a pioneering project that integrates ecosystem regeneration and community revitalisation as the core of its tourism proposal. The selection of this case is based on an analysis of the current literature on regenerative tourism, which allowed establishing its relevance as a practical example in this field. In particular, the characteristics of the project were compared with the principles and characteristics of regenerative tourism identified in the existing conceptual framework, which reinforces its relevance to the study.

The analysis is developed drawing on the theoretical framework of the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) on change and innovation (Geels, 2002, 2011; Geels & Schot, 2007), as well as on the approach to transformative innovation and impact (Schot & Steinmueller, 2018; Ghosh et al., 2021). This basis allows examining how local communities can be configured as niches for innovation in regenerative tourism. The main objectives include the following: (1) identifying the mechanisms that enable the emergence and development of such initiatives, with special emphasis on collaborative governance and the use of digital tools; (2) determining the key factors that contribute to their initial consolidation; and (3) obtaining relevant findings from the process that contribute to the design of public policies that can support these mechanisms.

The article is structured into six sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 provides the theoretical framework, conceptualising regenerative tourism and presenting the Multi-Level Perspective on change and innovation as an analytical framework to characterise change processes as well as the transformative innovation approach to design and evaluate strategies and policies with genuinely transformative outcomes. Section 3 describes the methodology followed in this article. Section 4 presents the ‘Aves de la Sierra’ case, analysing its development as a niche of regenerative tourism innovation. Section 5 discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the findings. Finally, Section 6 offers conclusions and recommendations for different actors involved in the development of regenerative tourism.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Conceptualization of Regenerative Tourism

Regenerative tourism has gained interest in the international scientific community since 2020, although the first article on the subject was published in 1996 (Corral-Gonzalez et al., 2023). Its relevance intensified with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the weaknesses of the dominant demand model in tourism since the middle of the last century. In 2020, based on UN Tourism (2021) data on the continued growth of demand, international tourism activity fell by 74%, highlighting the vulnerability of the sector.

Regenerative tourism is presented as an evolution of sustainable tourism. While the latter focuses on minimising negative impacts, regenerative tourism adopts a proactive approach, aimed at generating positive impacts on ecosystems and communities. Although the concept of sustainable tourism raised expectations in the 1990s, its implementation has been limited, partly because it has perpetuated harmful practices (Bellato et al., 2023) and has not promoted a true synergy between the economic, social, and environmental dimensions involved (Liu, 2003).

Rojas and Guerrero (2021) point out that sustainable tourism adopts a fragmented approach, in which humans are placed above the system. In contrast, regenerative tourism proposes a holistic vision that integrates social, cultural, environmental, economic, political, and spiritual aspects, recognising humans as part of the system. According to Mang (2019), this model is based on rediscovering place and developing roots and community, contributing to improving the quality of life in a changing world.

Regenerative tourism promotes community-based tourism as a way to mitigate the negative impacts of climate change and to enhance the value of local heritage, managed by communities rather than driven by external demand. This approach implies a transition from a demand-driven model, where tourists' expectations dictate supply, to a supply-driven model, where local communities define and manage their own resources autonomously and in a sustainable way.

The demand model, configured at the global level, determines local dynamics, as tourism production is often beyond the control of destinations. In this model, tourism products are designed by tourists or tour operators with the support of capitalist digital platforms, the motivations of which are often external to the territories, thus generating negative impacts. [Perogil \(2018\)](#) notes that many classifications of responsible and solidarity-based tourism are based on tourist behaviour, demonstrating the primacy of demand in the conceptualisation of tourism.

The regenerative approach, on the other hand, focuses on strengthening local communities by creating symbiotic relationships between society and territory. These communities offer authentic experiences, responsibly integrating visitors and controlling the offer through tools such as cooperative digital platforms ([Miedes-Ugarte et al., 2020](#)).

The way in which the tourism value chain is analysed is key to destination development. While the demand approach produces 'for tourism'—infrastructure, hotels, and restaurants—the supply approach produces 'tourism'—designing community-centred hospitality experiences ([Muñoz de Escalona, 2003](#)). The supply-side approach allows for alternatives to the hegemonic demand-side model, enabling local communities to define tourism strategies in collaboration with visitors ([Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2019](#)), while also promoting cooperative and social economy approaches ([Wanner, 2023](#)). In this way, communities control tourism production and create true communities of hospitality by integrating tourism into their environment.

However, although there is consensus on the need for systematic tourism planning, its implementation by governments and businesses has been slow and partial due to the fragmentation of the sector ([Yunis, 2003](#)). This fragmentation is related to the multi-sectoral approach to demand ([Muñoz de Escalona, 2003](#)). Therefore, the proper development of regenerative tourism must be based on the supply-side approach, which allows for the integration and control of tourism activity in the local community ecosystem. The viability of these initiatives depends largely on their support by current technological tools, which facilitate cooperative organisation and management by these local communities ([Wanner, 2023](#)).

This last aspect is essential in a digital society, where regenerative tourism practices must be supported by digital platforms underpinned by cooperative and participatory principles ([Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015](#); [Miedes-Ugarte et al., 2020](#)). These platforms should reflect local needs, values, and expectations through participatory design, thus fostering collective ownership and engagement with the platform, as demonstrated by previous successful experiences of community-based tourism ([Paulauskaite et al., 2017](#)).

In addition, a democratic governance model is essential so that all members of the community—service providers, consumers, and other local stakeholders—can participate in decision-making in an equitable manner ([Prezenza et al., 2013](#)). Transparency in platform management and benefit sharing is also a key pillar for success which requires new forms of destination leadership ([Beritelli & Bieger, 2014](#)).

At the training level, it is vital to digitally empower the community, ensuring that all members can actively participate in the platform through training in content management, digital marketing, and online operations ([Minghetti & Buhalis, 2010](#)). This not only allows the improvement of digital competences, but also encourages the use of the platform to

improve relational intelligence, thus promoting collaboration, knowledge sharing, and networking between community members (Sigala & Marinidis, 2012).

This approach contrasts with capitalist platforms, which tend to focus on artificial intelligence and economic profit for the few (Srnicek, 2017). Instead, the analysed model aims to generate content that ensures the provision of unique and authentic tourism experiences that reflect local identity (Acquier et al., 2017), thus aligning with regeneration values. Furthermore, it is crucial to establish strategic partnerships with other cooperative platforms, non-governmental organisations, educational institutions, and government bodies to expand the reach and impact of the platform (Cave & Dredge, 2021).

Thus, regenerative tourism, rather than seeking to attract more tourists, strengthens local capacities to offer sustainable experiences that benefit both visitors and hosts, transforming the relationship between the two and fostering a deeper cultural connection (Ateljevic, 2020). In this way, tourists cease to be mere consumers and become active participants in the regeneration of the territories they visit.

Regenerative tourism goes beyond the idea of 'do no harm' by adopting a proactive stance in value creation. It represents a paradigm shift and a development model for the sector, based on the integration of humans and nature (Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2011). It is presented as a solution to the negative effects of mass tourism, improving the social and environmental conditions of destinations. Hospitality communities, as an articulating element of the local offer, thus emerge as niches for innovation and play a fundamental role in offering experiences that respect the environment and local culture while managing their resources autonomously and in a collaborative way (Hatipoglu et al., 2016).

## *2.2. The Multi-Level Perspective as an Analytical Framework for the Study of Innovation Niches in Regenerative Tourism*

The Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) on change and innovation offers a particularly valuable analytical framework for studying how innovative regenerative tourism initiatives emerge and consolidate. Developed by Geels and other researchers (Geels, 2002, 2011; Geels & Schot, 2007; Smith et al., 2010; Geels et al., 2023), this perspective allows the analysis of the dynamics of change in complex socio-technical systems, such as the tourism system, by identifying how different levels interact in transformation processes.

The MLP distinguishes three interconnected levels that have proven to be very useful for studying the development of innovations in the field of socio-technical systems, in general, and regenerative tourism, in particular: (a) The macro or landscape level comprises external factors such as growing environmental awareness, climate crises, or changes in cultural values. The analysis of these trends contributes to understanding the context that facilitates or hinders the development of regenerative initiatives. (b) The meso or regime level represents the dominant tourism system, characterised by mass tourism practices and corporate control. Regime analysis helps us to understand the pressures and structures against which regenerative tourism initiatives should be developed. (c) The micro or niche level represents protected spaces where communities experiment with regenerative tourism practices. Their study helps to identify the conditions that enable innovation and the development of alternatives to the dominant model.

## *2.3. A Transformative Innovation Approach*

This analytical framework is particularly useful not only for understanding change and innovation, but also for designing genuine transformation strategies that consider the complexity of the multi-stakeholder and multi-level contexts in which these interventions are implemented. The Multi-Level Perspective, combined with the transformative outcomes (TOs) (Ghosh et al., 2021) proposed by the transformative innovation policy approach (Schot & Steinmueller, 2018), allows for an analysis of how local initiatives can

become drivers of sustainable change, challenging dominant systems and responding to landscape pressures.

In this context, the transformative outcomes are a set of twelve interrelated objectives that guide the transformation of socio-technical systems towards sustainable models. They are organised into three key processes: (1) building and developing niches; (2) expanding and massifying niches; and (3) opening and unlocking regimes. Each of these processes addresses specific aspects of transformation:

1. **Niche building and development:** This focuses on creating protected spaces where innovations can thrive, challenging the status quo. This process is fundamental in the early stages and encompasses elements such as protecting initiatives, fostering deep learning, building networks, and articulating shared expectations.
2. **Expansion and massification of niches:** This seeks to ensure that innovations developed in niches are scaled up, replicated in other contexts, or institutionalised, and gradually integrated into wider systems.
3. **Opening and unlocking regimes:** This addresses the transformation of the dominant system, destabilising its rules, structures, and values to open space for new sustainable configurations.

For this study, we will focus on the first process, the construction and development of niches, recognising their importance as the basis for local transformation in the field of regenerative tourism. This approach considers four key dimensions (outcomes):

1. **Shielding:** This refers to mechanisms that provide support for emerging initiatives, such as funding, favourable regulation, technical assistance, or protected spaces for experimentation. These mechanisms are essential to prevent innovations from being absorbed or eliminated by the dominant dynamics.
2. **Learning:** This includes both technical learning (developing specific solutions) and transformative learning, which involves questioning existing practices and paradigms. This type of learning fosters profound changes in the way communities perceive and manage their tourism resources.
3. **Networking:** This emphasises the importance of connecting local, national, and international actors and support institutions to build a strong ecosystem that supports innovations. This includes the use of cooperative digital platforms and other collaborative mechanisms.
4. **Managing expectations (navigating expectations):** This involves aligning the visions and objectives of the different actors involved in the initiative, ensuring that expectations are realistic, consistent with regenerative principles, and sustainable in the long term.

This framework is applied to the analysis of the 'Aves de la Sierra' case in Huelva (Spain) as a regenerative tourism initiative. The article examines how these dimensions have contributed to consolidating this project as a niche of transformative innovation in the tourism sector. It will also explore how, as predicted by the outcomes, participatory processes and the use of digital tools for the creation and development of innovation niches have strengthened this capacity to transform the relationships between local communities, visitors, and ecosystems. By focusing the analysis on the development and consolidation of niches, we seek to provide practical and theoretical tools to replicate this model in other contexts, thus fostering significant transformations in local tourism.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Methodological Design of the Research

For this study, a single in-depth qualitative case study design was adopted (Yin, 2018; Stake, 2005), considered as an appropriate methodological strategy to address the emerging phenomenon of regenerative tourism. This approach supported by three main reasons:

1. Exploratory and emerging nature of the phenomenon: Regenerative tourism is a recent field where innovative practices are rare and still developing. This requires a holistic understanding of how communities design and adapt these practices in real contexts. According to Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007), the case study makes it possible to document social innovation processes as they are happening, capturing their richness and complexity.
2. Complex and multidimensional nature: Regenerative tourism hospitality communities integrate social, environmental, economic, and technological aspects. Moreover, collaborative governance involves complex interactions between multiple actors. As Flyvbjerg (2006) argues, the case study facilitates the examination of these relationships in their natural context, providing a rich and detailed understanding of transformation processes.
3. Relevance of the paradigmatic case: The selected case, 'Aves de la Sierra', was chosen for its relevance as a paradigmatic example (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of a niche of transformative innovation in regenerative tourism. This case meets three fundamental criteria:
  - Deviation from the dominant regime: It develops innovative community management practices aimed at revitalising the population in the face of a strong demographic decline and at regenerating a natural space that has partially deteriorated due to a lack of anthropic care through the use of innovative social technologies.
  - Collaborative governance model: It effectively integrates the quadruple helix (community, government, academia, and business) and fosters participatory decision-making processes with a holistic approach that integrates the social, cultural, environmental, and affective spheres (Rojas & Guerrero, 2021; Liu, 2003).
  - Traceable trajectory: In its 18 months of development, through an action research process, it has achieved tangible results and external recognition for its innovative character.

Furthermore, this study, as noted above, is framed within a participatory action research process (Lewin, 1946; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Greenwood & Levin, 2006), motivated by the fact that one of the authors, as a member of the Ibero-American Laboratory of Socio-Ecological Innovation Initiatives<sup>1</sup>, participated directly in the co-design and development of the local regenerative tourism offer. This initial partnership, consisting of 15 people (citizens, local businesses, and local government representatives), worked collaboratively during the first ten months of the project, until December 2023.

Within this framework, the objectives of the process were determined according to two dimensions:

1. From action: Designing and implementing a strategy to articulate a local regenerative tourism offer, ensuring the co-creation of solutions that involve local communities as protagonists. This included the use of a cooperative digital platform as a tool to strengthen collaborative management, promoting autonomy in the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of initiatives.
2. From the research: As explained in the introduction, and directly related to the objectives of this work, the aim was to explore and analyse the mechanisms that facilitate the emergence and consolidation of these initiatives, with special attention to collaborative governance, the use of digital tools, and the key factors that contribute

to their initial consolidation. In addition, the aim was to obtain relevant findings for the design of public policies that support similar processes.

### 3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

This process was documented by the following primary sources: minutes of bimonthly follow-up meetings; materials generated in two training workshops (initial and consolidation); content of the digital platform and the community social network (WhatsApp); and promotional materials and media coverage.

With regard to the secondary sources of information, the following stand out: (a) consultation of bibliographic databases to design the theoretical framework on regenerative tourism, as well as the analytical framework on which to base the processes of action research when dynamising the processes of transformative innovation; and (b) consultation of official statistics (National Institute of Statistics, INE) to gather socio-demographic information on the three municipalities involved in the transformative tourism innovation strategy.

The data analysis was conducted using the analytical framework of the Multi-Level Perspective and the key transformative outcomes (shielding, learning, networking, and navigation expectations). The validity of the analysis was ensured through triangulation of sources and participant verification (Miles et al., 2014). In addition, consultations with various stakeholders (2 local government representatives, 2 local entrepreneurs, 3 community members, and 1 tourism innovation specialist) were carried out in October 2024 to cross-check preliminary findings.

### Methodological Limitations

Among the limitations of this study are the relatively short period of analysis (18 months) and the focus on a single case. However, these limitations are partially compensated for by the in-depth analysis, the richness of the material obtained, and the relevance of the learnings. Future studies could contribute to the field through longitudinal and comparative analyses in other contexts.

## 4. Case Study: 'Aves de la Sierra' as a Regenerative Hospitality Community

### 4.1. Introduction to the Case

'Aves de la Sierra' represents an innovative regenerative tourism initiative starting in February 2023 in the Sierra de Huelva, Spain, the mountain area of the province. The project arises from the convergence of quadruple helix dynamics, integrating the collaboration between local communities, public administrations, universities, and small local businesses, with the main objective of revitalising rural populations at risk of depopulation through the development of a regenerative tourism offer based on their natural and cultural heritage.

The initiative is characterised by its integration into the French digital platform of heritage communities offering alternative travel, 'Les Oiseaux de Passage'<sup>2</sup>, which has enabled these villages to connect with a network of more than 300 locations in Europe. This connection facilitates contact with visitors who seek authentic experiences of hospitality, thereby transcending conventional tourism to create meaningful encounters between visitors and local communities.

The 'Aves de la Sierra' model differs from other tourism strategies in its collective approach to hospitality. Rather than facilitating only individual contacts between visitors and residents, it promotes a connection with the entire host community. This approach allows the traveller to access a holistic experience that includes not only accommodation and catering services, but also tourism resources, local stories, and accompaniment by members of the community who act as genuine hosts, beyond the role of cultural guides.

The result is an enriching tourism experience based on the genuine exchange of stories, local knowledge, and cultural values.

The location of the project in three municipalities of the Sierra de Huelva—Hinojales, La Nava, and Linares—is strategic because of their rich natural and cultural heritage, as well as the shared challenges of rural depopulation they face. These municipalities, although small in size and population, possess a valuable historical heritage, unique cultural traditions, and a privileged natural environment that combine to form the basis for the development of regenerative tourism experiences.

The three municipalities that make up ‘Aves de la Sierra’ are located in the ‘Sierra de Aracena y Picos de Aroche’ Natural Park, in the province of Huelva. Hinojales, with 305 inhabitants, La Nava, with 259 inhabitants, and Linares de la Sierra, with 263 inhabitants (INE, 2023), exemplify the reality of rural depopulation, having lost nearly 25% of their population in the last two decades. However, these municipalities possess a valuable heritage that underpins their regenerative potential (Garzón García, 2015). The natural environment is characterised by ancient holm and cork oaks groves, which are home to a rich biodiversity, including protected bird species such as the black vulture and the imperial eagle.

The connection between the three municipalities is made through a network of historical paths and cattle trails that today form part of hiking routes, allowing for immersive experiences in the cultural landscape of the natural area. This network of trails, together with the geographical proximity between the villages (distances of between 5 and 8 km from each other) (Turismo Andaluz, 2024), facilitates the development of integrated tourism proposals that allow visitors to experience the diversity of the territory’s heritage through routes on foot or by bicycle.

#### *4.2. Regenerative Tourism Development Process: Application of the Transformative Innovation Analytical Framework and Results*

##### *4.2.1. Creation Process and Key Actors*

‘Aves de la Sierra’ emerges as a result of a co-creation process initiated in February 2023, characterised by significant local leadership through the mayors of Hinojales, La Nava, and Linares, themselves members of the hospitality community. This initiative is part of the FOCOTUR Plan for the promotion of tourist destinations of the Huelva Provincial Council, which provided the institutional framework and small initial financial support necessary for its development. Collaboration with the University of Huelva, through the Ibero-American Laboratory for Socio-Ecological Innovation Initiatives, provided the research and technical advice component in regenerative tourism, while the French alternative travel cooperative platform ‘Les Oiseaux de Passage’ (Figure 1), a regular collaborator of the university in the framework of the Faro Convention on the social value of heritage<sup>3</sup>, provided the technological support and mentoring necessary to structure and promote the tourism offer. The initial budget was less than EUR 10,000.

The project is underpinned by the active participation of four key stakeholder groups, each with specific and complementary roles.

- The local communities, represented by inhabitants of the three municipalities, constitute the core of the project, actively participating in the creation and management of tourism experiences, from the identification of heritage resources to the design of local narratives.
- The public administration, through the Huelva Provincial Council and the town councils, provides the institutional support and the necessary funding framework for the development of the initiative.

- The University of Huelva, represented by one of the authors and an interdisciplinary team, including experts in heritage education, provides the action research component, as well as technical support in the development of the regenerative model.
- Finally, small local businesses, including accommodation, catering establishments, and local producers, are integrated into the collective hospitality offer, providing essential services and traditional know-how.

The articulation of these actors has materialised through a collaborative governance structure that includes regular face-to-face and online coordination meetings, thematic working groups and training, and co-creation spaces. This structure has allowed the development of a shared vision of the project and the establishment of working protocols that respect the capacities and rhythms of each actor, while maintaining the regenerative approach as the central axis of tourism development.



**Figure 1.** The ‘Aves de la Sierra’ community on the ‘Oiseaux de Passage’ webpage. Source: <https://lesoiseauxdepassage.coop/communities/> (accessed on 12 February 2024).

#### 4.2.2. Activation and Development Strategy of ‘Aves de la Sierra’

The strategy for the activation and development of ‘Aves de la Sierra’ as a hospitality community was co-designed and facilitated by one of the authors following a participatory action research approach, based on the characteristics of regenerative tourism, the Multi-Level Perspective, and the transformative innovation approach described in the theoretical framework, while considering the local community as a potential innovation niche for the development of regenerative tourism. The process was structured in four main phases, each with specific objectives and outcomes (Figure 2).

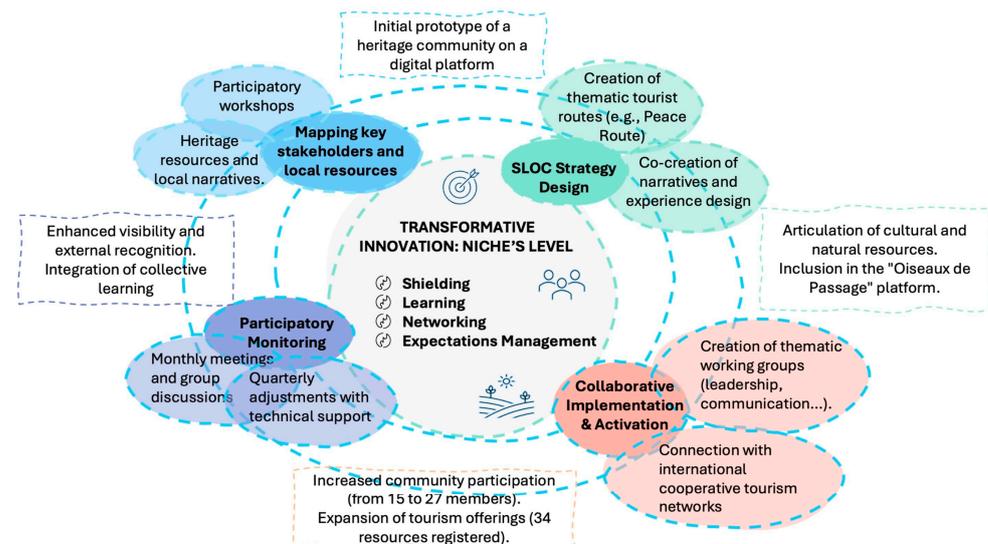
1. The initial diagnosis and assessment phase (February–March 2023) focused on establishing the foundations of the project through a comprehensive stakeholder mapping. A participatory workshop was held with a total of seventeen participants, including three representatives of the municipalities, two local associations, two entrepreneurs, one public official, three researchers, one representative of the French cooperative digital platform ‘Les Oiseaux de Passage’, and five interested residents. The workshop facilitated the identification of significant heritage resources, an assessment of existing community capacities, the formulation of shared narratives, and the establishment of

realistic expectations. The collective analysis of the socio-environmental and cultural contexts revealed both shared challenges (depopulation and lack of economic opportunities) and valuable assets (natural heritage, cultural traditions, and social cohesion). This process resulted in the first prototype of the heritage community installed on the digital platform.

One of the most significant results of this phase was the recovery of the ‘Hinojales as a village of peace’ narrative, which emerged from a process of community reflection and historical research on the history of the municipality with the support of researchers from the University of Huelva. From oral testimonies of previous generations, it was possible to credibly document that during the Spanish Civil War in the early twentieth century, Hinojales was one of the few villages in the region where no violent deaths were recorded in any phase of the conflict, neither during the war nor during the phase of reprisals of the Franco dictatorship, because the neighbours of all sides protected each other. This narrative of peace and reconciliation, practically forgotten and ignored but highlighted in this process, has become a key axis for the identity of the village and for the configuration of its tourist offer, allowing the community to reconnect with its history and to offer a powerful and unique narrative to visitors through the platform<sup>4</sup>.

2. The Strategy Design Phase (March–September 2023) applied Manzini’s (2015) SLOC (Small, Local, Open, Connected) model of social innovation design. This is a social innovation approach aimed at sustainability and community resilience. This model fosters small-scale solutions, tailored to the needs and characteristics of the local context, open to inclusive participation, and connected to wider networks. The principles of this strategy—small, local, open, and connected—seek to balance endogenous community resources with global opportunities, promoting initiatives that strengthen local capacity for action while integrating them into wider dynamics.

In this case, the principles of the SLOC strategy were fully applied to structure and guide the regenerative tourism model in the three municipalities.



**Figure 2.** Activation and development strategy of ‘Aves de la Sierra’. Source: Own elaboration.

As regards the ‘Small’ principle, the intervention focused on a small and manageable community, allowing the proposed projects to be adapted to local dynamics and not the other way around. In this phase, specific initiatives were designed, such as the ‘Hinojales

Peace Route', a tourist experience based on the local narrative of reconciliation and historical memory identified in the previous stage, which made it possible to articulate an initial model of low risk and high representativeness, as well as to provide a model for the other two municipalities to follow.

Following the configuration of the 'Local' principle, priority was given to making the most of endogenous resources, both cultural and natural, such as the ancient holm and cork oaks groves, local cuisine, and the specific histories and traditions of each municipality. The community was actively involved in identifying these resources and in devising tourism experiences, ensuring that the initiatives reflected their values and identities. This approach ensured that the projects were deeply rooted in the characteristics of the territory and that the community could engage as a main agent behind the proposals.

The 'Open' principle was implemented through the inclusive participatory process, which involved citizens, small local entrepreneurs, and public administrations in collaborative working sessions. These sessions allowed them to further co-create the narratives and to start designing the tourism activities (such as the Water Route, common to all three villages), ensuring an equitable representation of local perspectives and promoting collective learning. The thematic working groups served as spaces to foster collaboration and build trust between the different actors involved.

Finally, the 'Connected' principle was reflected in the integration of 'Aves de la Sierra' into the French cooperative platform 'Oiseaux de Passage', connecting the municipalities with a European network of communities that promotes heritage tourism. This connection not only increased the visibility of the project, but also enabled the exchange of best practices with other international communities. In addition, local connections were strengthened through collaboration between municipalities and the coordination of joint activities at the provincial level, broadening the impact of the initiatives in a wider territorial framework.

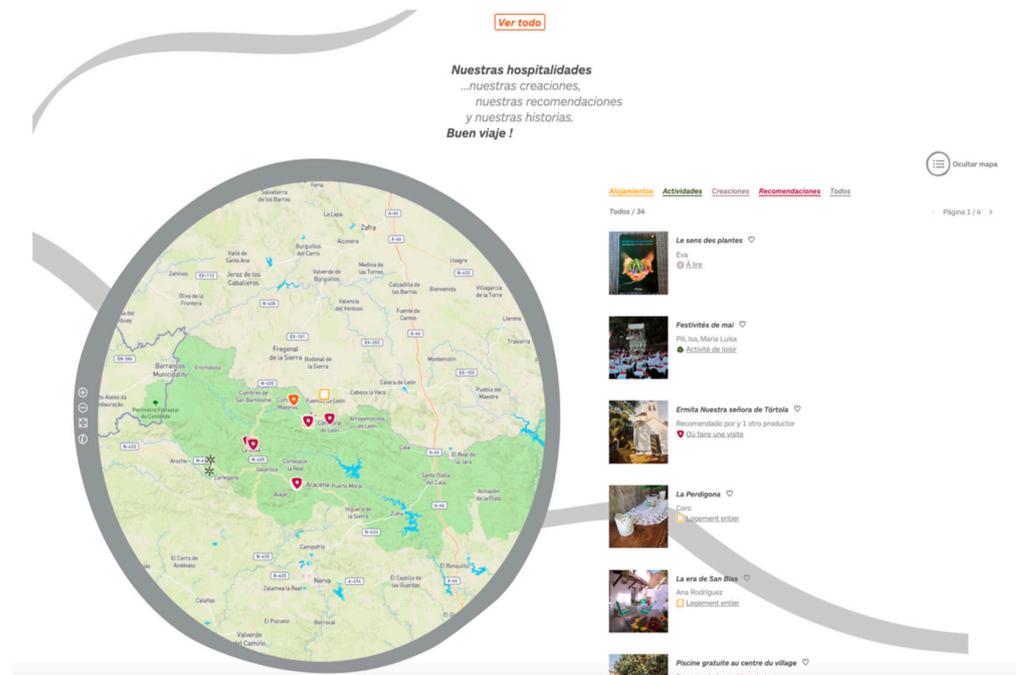
3. The Collaborative Implementation Phase (September 2023–October 2024) resumed after a few months' hiatus due to local electoral processes in Spain and the usual crises that may arise in these processes when it comes to moving from network building to effective networking, and it was still supported by the SLOC strategy.

The stage was characterised by further strengthening community meeting spaces and processes to incorporate new members. The articulation of the tourism offer through the 'Oiseaux de Passage' platform made it possible to connect with an international network while maintaining local control over the narrative and services. The promotion of inclusive participation materialised in the specialisation of thematic working groups to further foster collective learning. Thus, a Leadership group (aimed at institutional relations and external fundraising), a Synergies group (for the articulation of local resources and the expansion of the area of influence), a Communication group (for the production of audiovisual resources), and an Experience Creation group (to continue designing tourism offers adapted to local possibilities) were created. At the same time, connections were established with provincial and international networks through the visibility offered by integration into the 'Oiseaux de Passage' platform. In this phase, the participation reached 27 people.

4. The participatory monitoring phase (February 2023–present) is still being developed in an informal, unstructured way, through continuous feedback channels (WhatsApp groups) and monthly coordination meetings. The adaptive adjustment of strategies is carried out on a quarterly basis with the support of the technical staff of the Provincial Council, allowing for a response to emerging challenges and the seizing of new opportunities.

This strategy facilitated the emergence and initial consolidation of 'Aves de la Sierra' as a niche of innovation in regenerative tourism, with an integral approach that allowed the

community to develop significant capacities and establish effective control over its tourism offer aimed at social, cultural, and natural space regeneration (Rojas & Guerrero, 2021). Results include the growth of active participation from 15 to 27 members, the adhesion of four new accommodations to the hospitality community, the inclusion of 34 resources in the platform (activities, products, and creations), and external recognition through its participation in various regional awards (for tourism innovation in 2024) and presentations in international forums (Córdoba in 2023 and San José, Uruguay in 2024) (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Products and creations. Source: <https://lesoiseauxdepasseage.coop/communities/772-oiseaux-de-la-sierra> (accessed on 12 February 2024).

#### 4.2.3. Analysis of the Results by Dimensions of the Transformative Outcomes for the Construction and Development of Niches

As justified in the theoretical framework, the strategy for the promotion and development of the 'Aves de la Sierra' hospitality community as an innovation niche can be analysed through the transformative innovation approach and the transformative outcomes, referring to the construction and development of niches to identify learning and challenges corresponding to each dimension, with the aim of transferring the experience to other contexts.

##### Shielding

In the shielding dimension, the most relevant results included obtaining a small amount of initial funding of around EUR 10,000 through the FOCOTUR Plan, which allowed for the development of the digital platform and the initial training of 15 participants. Framework agreements were established with the three local administrations and the Provincial Council, creating a technical support team which included a part-time staff member.

The main related challenges included, on the one hand, the high dependence on these public funds for start-up; the community has therefore created a non-profit association in order to have a legal instrument that allows them to formalise their own agreements and raise their own funds. On the other hand, there is the need for administrations to be involved in promoting the process and to be present in it, while leaving space for the

community to define the collaborative dynamics, at its own pace, and to establish its own work channels, even if they are more informal and unstructured than the methods and rhythms of the administration.

The learning objective for this criterion is, on the part of the administrations involved, to know how to keep a balance between the protection of the niche and its management. Also, on the part of the community, it is about feeling supported and being able to assume leadership of the process.

### Learning

In the learning dimension, the following elements stand out: (a) digital skills development for the 27 currently active members, with the dynamising and facilitating support of the community; (b) the collective creation of the Peace Route in Hinojales, which involved 15 neighbours in the recovery of historical memory. Since then, other significant local stories have continued to be documented and are being incorporated into the platform; and (c) the second training, received in addition by the community, in innovation and the creation of tourism products, which allowed them to organise themselves into autonomous but coordinated work groups (leadership, synergies, communication, and creation of experiences).

The most significant challenges included digital divides (40% of participants required additional support to be able to operate on the platforms) and the difficulty in maintaining a steady pace of learning due to participants' main occupations. The learnings emphasise the importance of adaptive methodologies and the value of autonomous peer-to-peer learning.

### Networking

The networking dimension includes the following aspects: (a) the successful integration in the 'Oiseaux de Passage' European network, which has enabled the connection of these relatively isolated municipalities with a European network of 300 initiatives; (b) the collaboration between the three municipalities, materialised in six joint events; now in process is the creation of two shared routes; (c) the creation of the community has also resulted in increased participation in meetings on sustainable tourism along with other actors in the sector, highlighting the uniqueness of the model and its strengths in terms of adaptation to the context. This has led to external recognition, including the 2024 Provincial Tourism Award and participation in two international events.

The main challenges have been coordination between multiple actors (average of two meetings per month), matching rhythms, different levels of involvement, and maintaining effective communication across the different levels of governance. Lessons learned highlight the importance of clear coordination structures and the value of networks for the external legitimisation of the project.

### Navigating Expectations

In managing expectations, a shared vision of the project has been built through the two participatory workshops, setting realistic short-term (doubling the number of accommodations in 18 months) and medium-term (reaching financial sustainability in three years) objectives. Challenges include managing different visions of tourism development among stakeholders and balancing ambition and real capacities.

The learnings underline the importance of celebrating small achievements (e.g., the 80% increase in community participation and the progressive increase in available offers) and maintaining transparent communication on progress and difficulties.

#### 4.2.4. Critical Factors Identified

The accompaniment and longitudinal analysis of the development process of 'Aves de la Sierra' during its first 18 months allowed for the identification of critical factors that have influenced its evolution as a niche of innovation in regenerative tourism.

Critical success factors include, firstly, the aforementioned sustained institutional support materialised in the continuity of the FOCOTUR Plan and the active commitment of the three municipalities, which held regular coordination meetings and provided complementary resources. Secondly, the active community commitment stands out, as evidenced by the growth in participation from 15 to 27 members and the average dedication of 4–5 h per month per participant to project activities. The third key factor is the effective technical mediation provided by the university team, the 'Oiseaux de Passage' platform, and the Huelva Provincial Council, which contributed more than 40 h of technical support and training.

The aspects to be strengthened are mainly related to three areas. Financial sustainability emerges as a priority, as dependence on public funding poses a risk to the autonomy and continuity of the project. Autonomous management capacities thus need to be further developed, especially as regards aspects such as fundraising, the design of communication strategies, and digital promotion, where participants report not feeling fully competent. Documentation mechanisms also need to be improved, as learning is currently not systematically recorded.

Regarding opportunities for improvement, four priority lines of action have been identified. Diversifying support, including exploring partnerships with the private sector and organisations, could reduce dependence on public funding. Strengthening local leadership is crucial, as only four community members currently assume 70% of management responsibilities. Particular attention needs to be paid to systematising learning, with the development of more effective protocols for capturing and sharing the knowledge generated. Finally, the project's impact and sustainability could be improved by building on existing collaborative networks in the province with similar initiatives.

These critical factors provide a basis for developing specific strategies for consolidation and the eventual scalability of the model. Their identification and analysis are fundamental for guiding both the future development of 'Aves de la Sierra' and the implementation of similar initiatives in other contexts.

## 5. Discussion

The 'Aves de la Sierra' case illustrates how local communities can become niches of innovation in regenerative tourism, demonstrating that the theoretical principles of this approach are translated into tangible actions. In line with authors such as [Rojas and Guerrero \(2021\)](#), who underline the holistic approach underpinning regenerative tourism, this experience highlights the integration of the social, cultural, environmental, and spiritual spheres into tourism dynamics. This approach demonstrates how local communities can design and control their tourism offer, promoting practices that not only minimise negative impacts, but also generate positive benefits for ecosystems, communities, and visitors.

This project serves as an example of the implementation of place rediscovery as outlined by [Mang \(2019\)](#). The 'Peace Route' in Hinojales, for example, connects the community to local history, revitalising narratives of reconciliation and strengthening cultural identity. This model is consistent with the supply-driven, community-controlled tourism paradigm, as argued by authors such as [Ruiz-Ballesteros \(2019\)](#), [Muñoz de Escalona \(2003\)](#), and [Wanner \(2023\)](#), among others. Indeed, initiatives such as this one highlight the role of regenerative tourism as a tool to revitalise local economies and strengthen social ties, while preserving natural and cultural heritage.

The integration of cooperative digital platforms, such as 'Oiseaux de Passage', reinforces community control over the tourism offer, allowing communities to manage their resources and create authentic experiences that foster deep relationships between visitors and territories. This approach, as highlighted by [Miedes-Ugarte et al. \(2020\)](#), demonstrates that digital tools can be an effective means to facilitate autonomous resource management and connect local communities with global collaborative networks.

The 'Aves de la Sierra' experience also demonstrates how regenerative principles translate into practice. Social and cultural regeneration is reflected in the revitalisation of local heritage and the reconnection of communities with their historical identity. This process fosters sustainable tourism that respects and strengthens the cultural and environmental dimensions of the territory. It also illustrates how local control of tourism supply can counteract the negative dynamics of global demand-driven models, as pointed out by [Ruiz-Ballesteros \(2019\)](#) and [Muñoz de Escalona \(2003\)](#).

The results of this case confirm the importance of transformative outcomes in strengthening regenerative tourism niches, in particular shielding, learning, and networking. These processes have enabled 'Aves de la Sierra' to develop technical and organisational capacities, connect local communities with global networks, and generate resistance to the pressures of the dominant tourism regime. Learning, both technical and transformative, has been fundamental to strengthening local capacities and ensuring the sustainability of the model.

In terms of practical implications, this case highlights the need for initial financial support, ongoing technical training, and the creation of local and international networks in order to ensure long-term sustainability. This model proves that, with the adequate combination of institutional support, technical mediation, and local control, communities can be transformed into active agents of regeneration, as argued by [Liu \(2003\)](#) and [Bellato et al. \(2023\)](#).

Ultimately, the creation and development of 'Aves de la Sierra' through an action research process not only contributes to the promotion of sustainable tourism, but also helps to bridge the gap between theory and practice identified through the analysis of the current situation in the field of sustainable tourism ([Ateljevic & Sheldon, 2022](#); [Cave & Dredge, 2021](#); [Bellato et al., 2023](#)).

## 6. Conclusions, Recommendations, and Limitations of the Study

The analysis of 'Aves de la Sierra' through the Multi-Level Perspective and transformative outcomes framework illuminates how local communities can develop as innovation niches in regenerative tourism.

This case study demonstrates that successful regenerative tourism initiatives can emerge from modest resources (EUR 10,000) when leveraging local assets. In 'Aves de la Sierra', the quadruple helix collaboration enabled the recovery of significant local narratives, such as Hinojales' 'peace story', which became a cornerstone of their distinctive tourism offering. The integration with the 'Oiseaux de Passage' cooperative platform proved essential for connecting these small rural communities (Hinojales, La Nava, and Linares) to a broader European network while maintaining local control over their narrative and resources.

The action research process revealed that consolidating such initiatives requires 18–24 months of sustained support to achieve meaningful community engagement, growing from 15 to 27 active participants in this case. The four transformative outcomes manifested specifically through the following: protective frameworks provided by the FOCOTUR Plan, learning processes combining digital platform management with local heritage recovery, networking through both local coordination (six joint events) and inter-

national connections, and careful expectation management balancing preservation goals with tourism development.

The experience generated concrete policy recommendations: flexible funding mechanisms exemplified by the Provincial Council's approach, technical support teams that respect community rhythms as demonstrated in the monthly coordination meetings, and evaluation systems that capture both social and ecological regeneration impacts.

Despite the temporal and contextual limitations of this single case study, the documented transformation of these rural communities from isolated villages to an innovative regenerative tourism destination provides valuable insights for future research on community-led tourism initiatives in similar contexts.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, B.M.-U. and D.F.-R.; methodology, B.M.-U.; validation, B.M.-U. and D.F.-R.; investigation, B.M.-U. and D.F.-R.; resources, B.M.-U.; data curation, B.M.-U. and D.F.-R.; writing—original draft preparation, B.M.-U. and D.F.-R.; writing—review and editing, B.M.-U. and D.F.-R.; visualization, B.M.-U.; supervision, B.M.-U. and D.F.-R.; project administration, B.M.-U.; funding acquisition, B.M.-U. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** Provincial Council of Huelva and Latin-American Laboratory of Socioecological Innovation and Center for Research in Contemporary Thought and Innovation and Social Development. Number: 20-2023-ID 1895.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author(s).

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> [www.liiise.org](http://www.liiise.org). accessed on 12 February 2024.

<sup>2</sup> <https://lesoiseauxdepassage.coop/>. accessed on 12 February 2024.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/culture-and-heritage/faro-convention>. accessed on 12 February 2024.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.hinojales.es/es/municipio/patrimonio/.detalle/Hinojales-espacio-de-paz/>. accessed on 12 February 2024.

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