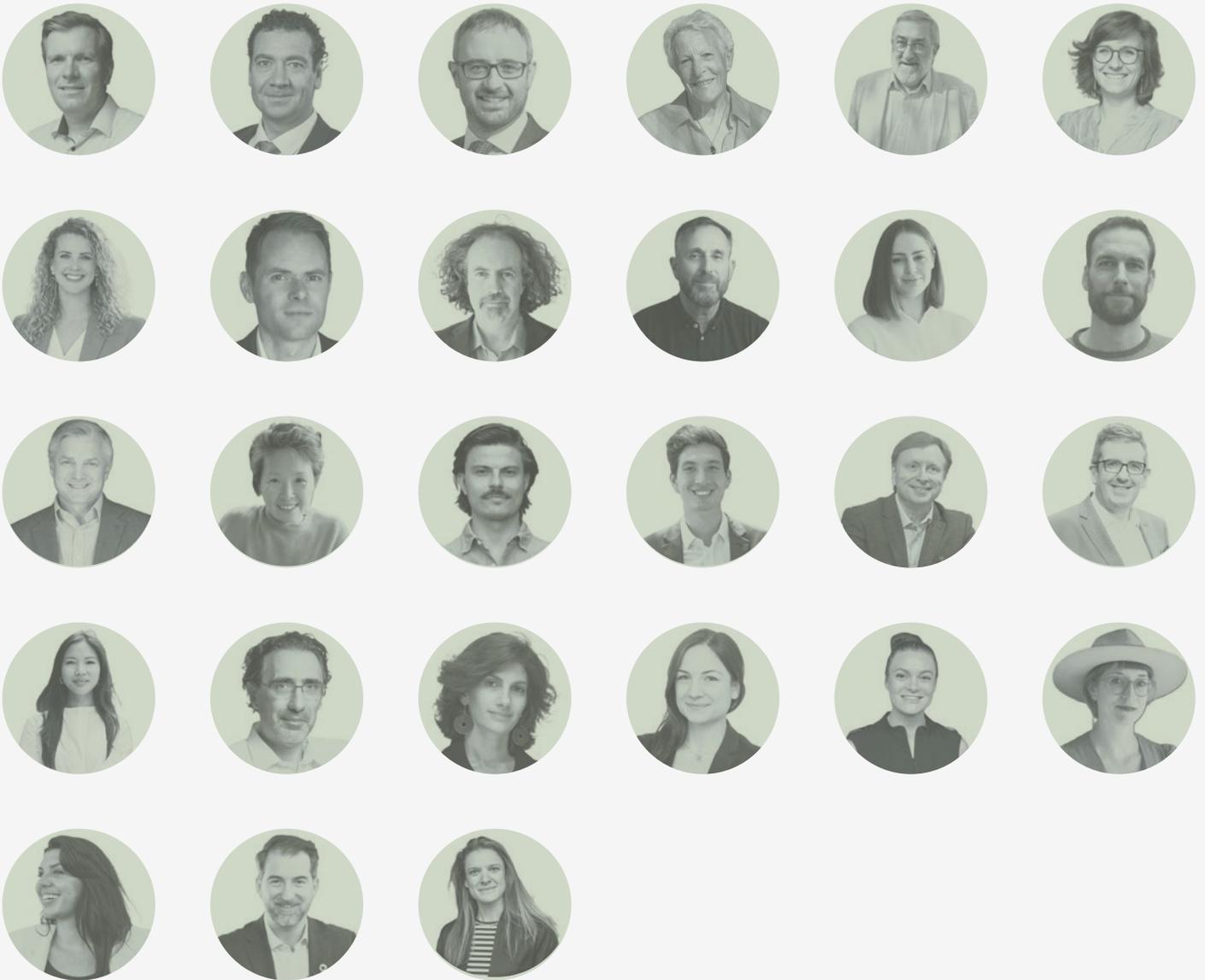


# HYB26

## Sustainability Edition

The Regenerative Question - What Hospitality Must Become



**The Hotel Yearbook**

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HY8



# On the peril of wasting a metacrisis

System collapse

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*Anna Pollock warns that tourism has already “wasted” one historic crisis (Covid-19) and is in danger of wasting a much bigger one: the current metacrisis of ecological collapse, geopolitical instability, and social rupture. She argues that mainstream tourism is still clinging to volume-driven, extractive growth and cosmetic “net positive” claims, while true regeneration requires a 100% shift in purpose – from mass industrial tourism to hospitality that helps hospice the dying system and midwife new, life-aligned ways of travelling, hosting and relating to place.*

During the financial crisis of 2008, Barack Obama’s policy advisor observed, “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste, because you miss the opportunity to do the things you could not do before.” I have been reminded of that while writing this article because, exactly seven years ago (9 February 2019), I suggested that Europe’s tourism leadership might need to heed these wise words. I had been invited to speak to the Directors of the European Travel Commission’s annual meeting in Krakow. It would be my first attempt at expressing to such a senior audience my concerns about the industry’s vulnerability and to share my early understanding of the potential of an emerging concept called “regeneration.” While I am a habitual trend-watcher, I have never professed clairvoyance, but I did sense something was profoundly wrong. Fortunately, my host had given me the injunction to “shake things up,” so I did as I was told, took a very deep breath, and opened with the following statement:

“

*Global tourism, as currently practiced, is underperforming, highly vulnerable and heading towards breakdown. Its operating model is no longer fit for purpose and needs to be replaced.*

As European tourism had just had another bumper year, with numbers up by 5%, I clearly was not trying to win my audience over with flattery. Nor did I have any clear idea as to what might precipitate the breakdown of an entire sector. But I was aware of the seeming addiction to growth in volume, the consequences of overtourism, and the challenges of living in a VUCA world defined as one of enormous volatility, complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity. Nevertheless, as it happens, I was right about vulnerability – caused then not by too many human visitors but by the undetected arrival of a minuscule bat-borne virus called SARS-CoV-2 that had taken a free ride from a meat market in the backstreets of Wuhan, China. With the onset of the COVID pandemic, Mother Nature was about to teach us a very expensive lesson. A tiny microbe was able to stop not just the juggernaut known as tourism but the global economy in its tracks.

Sadly, in my opinion, that crisis was indeed wasted at an enormous cost to human life and financial security. We humans did not realise that we had been given the chance to understand our true nature. The crisis had positive repercussions, too. The non-human members of the natural world took advantage of the cessation of economic activity and reminded us of the beauty and sounds we had drowned out with our busyness. Nature also showed just how quickly she could recover if given just a little breathing room.

Some tourism professionals spoke sincerely about the need for a “Tourism Reset” and later, in 2019, the first tentative recognition that some form of regeneration would be required began to circulate within the sustainability community. The good news was that support for “sustainable” actions intensified with the offering of sustainability courses, certification programmes, and a focus on measurement. The less good news was that the regenerative message of systemic change was diluted to mean improvement, giving back, making a place better, and being able to generate “net positive” scores on a sustainability balance sheet. The old system was working for tourism, so why change it?

Fast forward to the end of 2025, and tourism was once again striding forth as one engine of the global economy. Trip numbers and spending statistics have exceeded pre-pandemic levels while showing signs of robust annual growth for the rest of the decade and beyond. Rising incomes in much of the developing world are up; a very large and growing middle class, particularly within the developing world, is keen to explore and experience other countries; artificial intelligence is expected to reduce costs, increase efficiency, and improve traveller experience. Curiosity about “regeneration” is increasing – partly as enterprises and destinations see it as providing another point of differentiation. But the concept is still seen as hard to understand and a little too theoretical for many. As a consequence, we are in grave danger of missing the opportunity for deep change as the crises, which we have pushed into our peripheral vision, now demand our full attention.

I confess I am feeling very much as I did in February seven years ago, even though the context is very different. Back then, talk about system change was an uphill battle as “the system” was working for so many. In 2019, no one could have imagined “normal life” could be shut down within weeks without warning. The COVID pandemic was essentially an unknown risk. The same cannot be said of the multiple risks that we face today. They are so numerous and diverse that we have had to lump them under two labels – polycrisis, meaning many, and metacrisis, meaning the many combined and originating from one root cause. If there is another word that characterises the state of human affairs in 2026, then surely it has to be “rupture”. With these seven letters alone, Canada’s Prime Minister, Mark Carney, confirmed an unwelcome truth – any assumptions underpinning “normality” are cracking open like the ice of the Arctic Sea. According to the World Economic Forum, uncertainty is the defining theme of their global risks outlook: *‘Declining trust, diminishing transparency and respect for the rule of law, along with heightened protectionism, are threatening longstanding international relations, trade and investment and increasing the propensity for conflict.’*

While geo-economic and social conditions are the concern of WEF, the UK Government has highlighted nature as the greatest risk to national security. In a report released in January 2026, titled *Global Biodiversity Loss, Ecosystem Collapse and National Security*, the authors state: *‘If current rates of biodiversity loss continue, every critical ecosystem is on a pathway to collapse, thereby impairing its ability to provide vital services including clean water, food production, and climate regulation.’*

The report goes on to list nine national security risks and devotes a whole page to the serious challenge not just to the UK's food security, but to the security of the country as a whole.

This profoundly sobering start to this brief essay is for a reason. For the first time in human history, we are knowingly, individually, and collectively having to deal with a system-wide collapse. It is not about patching up a broken system. The living system that is life on this planet is collapsing from the inside. That is what living systems do in order to make room for other living systems that are better equipped to survive and thrive in the changing circumstances. Every human being has done this before when their mother's body signalled it was time for them to leave her womb. Rupture can be the precedent for transformation. In nature, it is a normal stage in the emergence of new life. We can dig in our heels and resist, curl up in a ball and complain, or choose to participate.

But that is enough metaphor; back to tourism. I am writing this essay in this way to invite colleagues to join me and the many fellow travellers already on the journey of discovery associated with the emergence of regeneration as a new way of seeing, being, and behaving that is in service of and in alignment with Life. Readers might think I am ignoring the growing number of "regenerative" consultancies, papers, and toolkits designed to enable destinations and enterprises to enhance their competitive edge by demonstrating how they are improving communities and landscapes. Net positive tourism is a well-intended step in the right direction but obscures the fact that it can never be achieved within the current model that prizes volume growth.

Should just a few of the projections identified in the two risk reports mentioned above be realised, we can expect tourism to drop off the agenda of many governments and investors. To regenerate is not synonymous with to improve or "make better". It describes a core process of life and involves a 100% change in purpose and approach, i.e., a complete systems change. So-called "mass industrial tourism" (an abstract term for the mechanised movement of bodies between two places) has become a manifestation of a dying extractive system.

The focus now is sustaining life together by investigating how humans can contribute to life's evolution and flourishing and, yes, if you wish, how the movement of people from home to destination and the switching of roles between guest and host can contribute to that endeavour. It may not be about tourism any more, but it is most certainly about hosting and hospitality – hospicing the passing of an old form and midwifing the emergence of something new. The challenge of our time is to respect the sanctity and power of this role and create the conditions for it to contribute to life's flourishing and evolution.



“Show me only chemical-free,  
bed bug-safe hotels.”



What becomes searchable  
becomes bookable.

