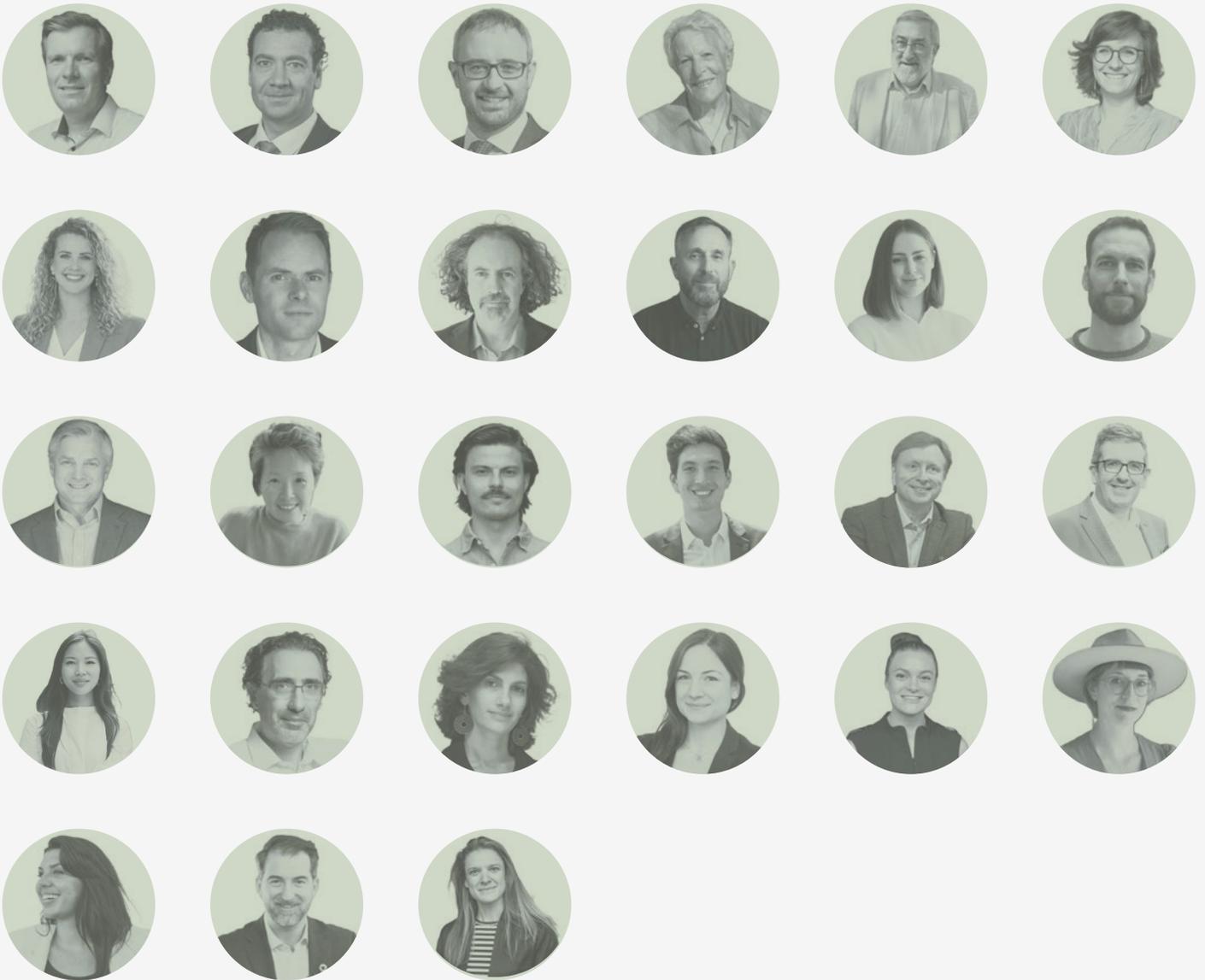


HYB26

Sustainability Edition

The Regenerative Question - What
Hospitality Must Become



The Hotel Yearbook

Foresight and innovation in the global hotel industry



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What Is This Place Asking of Us?

Sustainability vs regeneration

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Amanda Ho argues that sustainability, while valuable, is no longer enough for a hospitality industry facing climate instability, biodiversity loss, and social inequity. Regeneration is proposed as a deeper, place-based paradigm that asks a fundamental question: "What is this place asking of us?" Instead of treating hotels as isolated assets, it frames them as actors within living systems of community, culture, and ecology, illustrated through examples like Fogo Island Inn, Basata Eco-Lodge, and African Bush Camps.

The hospitality industry finds itself at a defining moment, one in which the pressures of climate instability, biodiversity loss, cultural homogenization, and widening social inequities are no longer distant projections but present realities that directly shape the landscapes, communities, and destinations upon which tourism depends.

For more than two decades, sustainability has served as the guiding framework through which hospitality leaders have attempted to respond to these pressures, resulting in important operational improvements such as reduced energy consumption, water conservation systems, elimination of single-use plastics, carbon measurement initiatives, and increasingly sophisticated ESG reporting standards. These efforts represent meaningful progress and signal an industry that is capable of adaptation. Yet despite these advancements, the larger trajectory of environmental and social degradation has not fundamentally shifted, prompting a deeper and more uncomfortable reflection: is incremental sustainability sufficient in an era that demands systemic change?

Regeneration invites us to consider that it may not be. While sustainability often seeks to minimize harm and maintain balance within existing systems, regeneration challenges us to restore, renew, and actively strengthen the ecological and social systems in which hospitality businesses operate. It calls for a transition from doing "less bad" toward creating measurable positive impact, and at the center of this shift lies a deceptively simple but profoundly transformative inquiry:

WHAT IS THIS PLACE ASKING OF US?

This question moves us beyond standardized certifications and universal checklists and directs our attention instead toward context, relationship, and responsibility. Every hotel, lodge, resort, and tourism enterprise exists within a living web of relationships that includes watersheds, food systems, labor markets, local histories, cultural identities, and governance structures. A property is never an isolated economic unit; it is embedded within a dynamic and interdependent system whose health ultimately determines the long-term viability of the business itself.

Traditional sustainability metrics frequently prioritize efficiency by asking how energy use can be reduced, how waste can be diverted, or how emissions can be offset. Regeneration, however, begins with a different orientation, one rooted in relationship rather than reduction. It requires leaders to shift from asking how a destination can serve guests toward asking how a business can meaningfully serve the destination, thereby aligning commercial success with place-based vitality.

This reframing strategic foresight in a world where destinations under strain from overtourism, resource depletion, housing pressures, and ecological degradation are becoming increasingly fragile. Hospitality brands that fail to account for these realities risk reputational erosion, operational instability, and long-term financial vulnerability. By contrast, those that intentionally align their operations with local regeneration build resilience, deepen community trust, and position themselves as long-term partners in the wellbeing of the places they inhabit.

Across the globe, a growing number of pioneers demonstrate that regeneration is not theoretical but operationally achievable when leadership is willing to think beyond conventional models of growth.

On Fogo Island in Canada, for example, Zita Cobb designed Fogo Island Inn not merely as a luxury property but as part of a broader economic and cultural strategy intended to revitalize the island's community. The inn reinvests profits locally, supports traditional boatbuilding and crafts, and integrates architecture that reflects vernacular heritage rather than imposing external aesthetics. In this model, the hotel functions as an anchor institution for place-based renewal rather than as a stand-alone commercial entity.

In Egypt, Sherif and Maria El-Ghamrawy established Basata Eco-Lodge decades before sustainability entered mainstream hospitality discourse, grounding their approach in simplicity, ecological sensitivity, and respectful integration with the surrounding Bedouin community. Their long-term presence illustrates how regenerative principles often emerge from humility and attentiveness to local context rather than from global branding strategies.

In Botswana, African Bush Camps has demonstrated how conservation, community ownership, and hospitality can reinforce one another by investing in locally owned lodges, education initiatives, and wildlife protection programs that ensure economic benefit and ecological stewardship advance together.

These examples, spanning continents and cultural contexts, underscore that regeneration is not a singular formula but a mindset that reshapes ownership structures, supply chains, hiring practices, guest engagement, and governance frameworks. They also demonstrate that regeneration can strengthen brand equity and guest loyalty precisely because it delivers authenticity and meaning, qualities increasingly sought by travelers who wish their journeys to contribute positively rather than extractively.

While much of the current industry dialogue focuses on achieving net zero emissions, an essential and urgent goal, regeneration encourages leaders to widen their perspective beyond carbon accounting alone. Carbon reduction is necessary, but it represents only one dimension of systemic health. A regenerative lens asks whether a property can contribute to biodiversity corridors, restore degraded soil, revive traditional crafts, support youth employment, or protect marine ecosystems, recognizing that environmental, cultural, and economic vitality are deeply intertwined.

Crucially, regeneration is inherently place-specific. The needs of a water-stressed Mediterranean island differ profoundly from those of a rainforest lodge in Costa Rica, a desert retreat in Namibia, or an urban heritage hotel in Southeast Asia. This reality requires leaders to engage in listening processes with communities, scientists, local governments, and Indigenous knowledge holders before determining strategy. Regeneration begins not with solutions but with understanding.

Because tourism intersects with transportation, agriculture, housing markets, infrastructure development, and governance systems, regenerative strategies must extend beyond property boundaries. They demand cross-sector collaboration and long-term commitments that transcend annual budget cycles. For executives accustomed to linear planning models, this systems-oriented approach may initially feel complex, yet complexity reflects the reality of the ecosystems and communities upon which hospitality depends. Ignoring that complexity does not reduce risk; it amplifies it.

Embedding regeneration into governance therefore becomes essential. This involves integrating place-based impact into board-level strategy, aligning performance indicators with long-term community and ecological outcomes, incentivizing leadership for enduring value creation rather than short-term extraction, and cultivating partnerships that expand influence beyond traditional hospitality silos.

Such integration also calls for a new leadership posture characterized by humility, curiosity, and the courage to question inherited assumptions about growth. Regenerative leadership acknowledges that scale without stewardship erodes the very foundations upon which hospitality is built, and it reframes profitability not as an isolated objective but as an outcome of alignment between business success and ecosystem health.

As regeneration gains visibility within industry discourse, there is, however, a growing risk that the term becomes diluted through superficial adoption. When regeneration is reduced to marketing language without structural change, it not only fails to deliver meaningful outcomes but also undermines trust among increasingly informed travelers and stakeholders. Authentic regeneration requires measurable commitments, transparent reporting, and a willingness to confront trade-offs honestly.

Ultimately, the regenerative question invites the hospitality industry into a more mature phase of evolution, one that recognizes tourism not merely as an economic driver but as a powerful force capable of shaping landscapes, livelihoods, and cultural narratives for generations. The question is not whether change is coming; it is whether the industry will lead that change intentionally.

If we are willing to ask what each place truly needs, and to align our operations accordingly, hospitality can become a force for healing rather than harm, resilience rather than depletion, and partnership rather than extraction.

The future of hospitality will not be defined solely by luxury standards, occupancy rates, or brand expansion strategies. It will be defined by whether we have the courage to embed regeneration at the heart of how we design, govern, and measure success, and whether we are prepared to listen when a place tells us what it is asking for.



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



What becomes searchable
becomes bookable.

