

# Regenerative Tourism and Mental Health: The Clean Wave Foundation, Costa Rica



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**Abstract** Rising mental health needs combined with barriers in access to care has individuals seeking new approaches to accessing care and improving their overall sense of well-being. Intentional forms of tourism, particularly nature-based, and regenerative tourism may have a role to play as an opportunity to address this growing need in a way that traditional efforts to address mental health may be lacking. While studies have begun to document the physical health, mental health and perceptions of well-being impacts of nature-based, sustainable or ecotourism they are just beginning to explore this with regards to regenerative tourism. Regenerative tourism, is slightly more nuanced, and is described as “leaving the place behind better than before.” A hallmark of a sound regenerative tourism model, is that it emerges from within the community, and is often tied to a local community organization doing the ongoing work that spearheads the practice. This paper employs grounded theory to propose a new model linking regenerative tourism to well-being and documents a qualitative study conducted in the Spring of 2023 with a regenerative based organization (The Clean Wave Foundation)—that connects individuals with beach and underwater clean-up events across Costa Rica. Key participants ( $n = 12$ ) discuss their experiences, personal well-being and community impacts in a semi-structured interview format. Community organizations, economic development agencies, the tourism industry and scholars in marketing and public health will all find benefit in this work.

**Keywords** Regenerative tourism · Mental health tourism · Well-being

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# 1 Introduction

During and following the COVID-19 pandemic, the share of adults reporting symptoms related to anxiety and/or depressive disorder has been on the rise [1]. With incidence increasing and growing barriers in access to care, including demand exceeding provider supply—individuals are seeking new approaches to address their mental health needs and improve their general well-being. Intentional forms of tourism, particularly nature-based, and regenerative tourism may have a role to play as an opportunity to address this rising need in a way that traditional efforts to address mental health may be lacking [2]. While studies have begun to document the physical health, mental health and perceptions of well-being impacts of nature-based, sustainable or ecotourism [2–6], they are just beginning to explore this with regards to regenerative tourism. Regenerative tourism, is slightly more nuanced, and is described as “leaving the place behind better than before [7].

Regenerative Tourism is an innovative approach that proactively improves local economies and enriches visitor experiences while simultaneously safeguarding the natural environment and being responsive to residents’ concerns and desires. This approach integrates tourism practices within local communities and addresses multifaceted issues such as climate change, pollution, marine debris, urbanization, justice, and inequality. Regenerative Tourism specifically evolves from Indigenous perspectives and known ecological knowledge (as well as Western science), and in this way has emerged as a practice aiming to improve both the visitor experience and the social/ecological systems in areas where tourism is an economic driver [8]. A key feature of a robust Regenerative Tourism model, is its organic development within the community, often facilitated by local community organizations committed to guiding the practice.

This paper proposes a new model linking regenerative tourism to well-being and documents a qualitative study conducted in the Spring of 2023 with a regenerative based organization (The Clean Wave Foundation)—that connects individuals with clean-up events across Costa Rica. While The Clean Wave’s main base of volunteers are locally based, participation from tourists, students, and expats has expanded their reach and allowed the organization to evolve.

## 1.1 Setting

Costa Rica, long seen as a “green republic,” known for ecotourism, sustainable practices, is an optimal setting in which to explore the impacts of regenerative tourism [9]. Further, Costa Rica ranks within the top 10 destinations for medical tourism in the world for individuals seeking healing in a beautiful, tropical setting. Medical tourists who traveled to Costa Rica were also found to be more likely to maximize social and economic benefits to the local community and minimize negative impacts, than those who traveled elsewhere [10]. The Clean Wave was started in 2017, by a

small group of local volunteers committed to cleaning up plastic and debris along the beaches of Tamarindo in Costa Rica. Tamarindo is known as a top travel destination for surfing, beautiful beaches and a focus on eco-tourism. Today, The Clean Wave has the ambitious goal of cleaning all 600 beaches in Costa Rica every week. The scope of The Clean Wave has grown rapidly, with weekly activities drawing locals and visitors alike to participate in upbeat experiences that connect people to nature, provide community and leave a positive impact on the environment they live in or have called home temporarily. In addition to cleaning beaches, The Clean Wave also brings people together in urban settings, for underwater clean-up dives, and mangrove restoration.

## ***1.2 Theoretical Framework***

Recent models of creating healthy individuals and communities focus on the social determinants of health including environmental conditions, economic policies, and societal barriers and structures. While these models understand that health extends beyond medical and genetic factors, they fall short in effectively describing the dynamic relationship that exists between them, when individuals are empowered and engaged to participate in activities to positively revive the community. Particularly thinking about the context of travel we are called to return to its original purpose “as a journey of purpose, meaning, adventure and exploration... the nurturing bedrock for human health rather than a commercial commodity [11]. We propose a model of Active Regeneration of Health describes the interconnectedness of the relationship between individuals, their community, and the world. We connect with nature, promote nurturing behaviors that improve our global environment, and simultaneously impact one’s health and the health of their community. We suggest that this is achieved through the mechanisms of connection, belonging, and purpose—driven by attention, action, and agency.

## **2 Data and Methods**

This project sought to address the following objectives: (a) to differentiate traditional ecotourism/eco-impact models of volunteerism from regenerative tourism and (b) to explore the impact at the individual and community level. The interview guide that was created included five open ended questions, and a series of closed questions. Table 1 has a selection of the questions used.

Following the interview guide, and the expected areas of application from the theoretical framework a codebook was developed. Each interview transcript was uploaded, coded, and analyzed was conducted using DeDoose online software, a

**Table 1** Selected interview questions

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1. What makes The Clean Wave unique or different from other organizations?
  2. How does The Clean Wave build community?
  3. What benefits do you personally get from working with The Clean Wave?
  4. How do you feel following a Clean Wave event?
  5. What challenges has The Clean Wave faced in its work? What opportunities do you see for growth and greater impact?
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password protected qualitative research tool [12]. Grounded theory and content analysis were employed to identify emergent themes and quotes were highlighted to illustrate important findings, taking the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of these human subjects into account [13]. Then, theory could be presented based on respondents' ideas and thoughts.

Subjects were recruited through a snowball sampling methodology via the local partner organization, The Clean Wave. The Clean Wave identified key volunteers and community stakeholders to participate in the interview process ( $n = 12$ ). The study was submitted to and approved by the SUNY Oswego Human Subjects Committee on May 30, 2023. Table 2 showcases their gender, age, country of origin and residence, and role with the organization. The gender makeup is balanced and ages of the sample range from 24 to 48. The majority (67%) are currently living in Costa Rica, and the remaining in the U.S.

**Table 2** Interview participants

Gender	Age	Country of origin	Country of residence	Role
F	33	Costa Rica	Costa Rica	Organizer
M	41	Netherlands	Costa Rica	Volunteer
M	43	United States	Costa Rica	Volunteer
F	42	Chile	Costa Rica	Volunteer
M	31	Costa Rica	Costa Rica	Founder
F	24	United States	United States	Volunteer
M	25	Costa Rica	Costa Rica	Volunteer
M	42	United States	United States	Funder
M	32	Costa Rica	Costa Rica	Organizer
F	48	United States	United States	Volunteer
F	35	Costa Rica	Costa Rica	Organizer

### 3 Results

This project captured the impressions and stories of a sample of The Clean Wave founders, organizers and volunteers. All report a variety of positive influences that The Clean Wave has had on them personally. Here we document the impact of these types of regenerative activities through The Clean Wave.

#### 3.1 Individual Impacts

In the Active Regeneration of Health model, we examine three fundamental drivers of change: Connection, Belonging and Purpose with selected examples below.

**Connection.** Participants recognize the need for community and connectedness and the challenge in finding it, particularly if you aren't originally local to the region. "Community is really hard to gain when you're traveling all over the place. So volunteering is a direct access to community." This is especially accessible if the events appear exciting and well attended... "people want to be a part of that community, because there's such a strong connection there and connection for a purpose."

"And there's so much drive in there and immediate action, that being part of something that is growing and healthy, isn't amazing for you... it's expanding, and everybody wants to join, because it's, it makes so much sense."

For travelers to the region, the opportunity to plug into fun events with a purpose, allows visitors to experience the country and community in a deeper, "more real" way. A vacation becomes "less touristy, more meaningful and gives you the ability to grow global friendships and build lasting connections over time."

**Belonging.** While the initial step focuses on connecting to a community, finding belonging is a deeper bond within that group and work. Belonging connects to shared values and aligned world views... "people who were looking to live their values create meaning and coming from different and interesting backgrounds."

"I love how The Clean Wave is really... clear <with its> mission and purpose. So, the entry level activity is do the beach cleanup, it takes two hours, we'll feed you water and fruit afterwards, with a group photo."

Participants are clear that this experience of belonging has had an impact on their lives—helping them to become healthier.

"Yeah, 100%, my entire life has changed. I mean, I changed my address. I changed my immediate circle of friends. I changed my work. I have changed a lot of habits, personal habits, you know, unhealthy habits."

"Time is the most precious thing that we have. And to do something good for the environment says a lot about the person... you make really healthy connections."

**Purpose.** Once participants experience the belonging, their sense of purpose and ownership in the efforts is further enhanced with broader alignment of the mission

into other areas of their life, and deepening of their commitment to the lifestyle and mission where “everybody kind of takes their own agency and action and whatever they’re doing”.

“Everywhere I go ... I like to also just pick up the trash of the mountains, or whatever I go is just something in me that wants to help them the world to make it a better place. And I feel like it belongs to everyone... It’s just like, if you can make it better, why not to and doesn’t take that much time.”

Travelers leave these activities and trips with a modified, uplifted sense of self. The power of the events and activities extend beyond the moment during the travel or vacation. The participation is “healing and regenerative, not just to the beach or the local area... but to the spirit and deeper sense of well-being.”

### **3.2 Community Impacts**

Impacts of regenerative activities impact the community in both tangible and intangible ways. Tangibly, communities benefit from cleaner beaches, waterways and urban areas. “What we do is to create the opportunity to have this clean environment where we enjoy all this stuff.” However, participants in this study tended to focus on the more intangible, such as the influence on economic development and policy-making.

“All these other activities are weaved into an incredibly cool network. If I’m gonna start this new business idea where <will I > find the people who process coffee grounds into mushroom so that when you have your new beach gig going on in your pop-up restaurant, you have all the resources, you need to just pull it off.”

“On a higher level, that will be political influence, and things like having a sit down with the President and then coming out with negotiated that all the beaches of Costa Rica will be enforced smoking-free Right?”

Beyond large scale change, it’s also a built a model for a foundation of inclusiveness, which will have further downstream impacts. “Everyone is included, like no stakeholders are left out in the conversation. Whether they’re a kid, or a gang-banger or a policymaker, older retiree or a Tico, it’s like you’re in this town, your stakeholders you belong in this community to work together.”

## **4 Discussion and Recommendations**

There is preliminary evidence that regenerative approaches to health, and related tourism has the ability to impact the planet and our environment, but also the communities and individuals that are connected to them. For organizations or groups of individuals that are seeking to employ this model, we propose the following set of key takeaways:

1. Many people are active and desire to do something, but they lack clear channels of action. To harness the activated members of a community you must get their attention with events coordinated around meaningful actions. Those actions need to be clear and simple to execute. These activated members help build a critical mass that becomes more attractive to those in the community that may need to be activated by others in the community demonstrating those actions consistently. 2. Spend time and get help crafting a clear and action-oriented narrative. The narrative should position the volunteers and participating community members as the hero of their healing journey. Be value centered and demonstrate those values through examples of the impacts the community member is contributing to. 3. Consistent communication is key to build trust. Set expectations, meet or exceed expectations, be procedural to create a consistent experience. Leverage technology and consistently send your community updates, opportunities to participate, and clear instructions on how to have a meaningful experience. As seen in other cases, an online social presence can help communities build robust tourism networks [14]. 4. Local community organizations need to prioritize cooperation over competition. 5. Regenerate community by making sure events build connection, have purposeful and impactful actions with real time feedback loops (they can feel the meaning in the actions), be inclusive, non-discriminatory, and safety and belonging.

Connection, purpose, and belonging are commonly lacking as community is more separate and divided. Creating events that consistently bring together, mix, and have something meaningful to do together creates the conditions that help heal people's connections to their environment, to themselves, to each other, and to the community at large. There are a few important limitations of this study, beginning with its' generalizability. It should be considered exploratory in nature. We are concerned with first-person narratives that may have modified their answers in response to the awareness of being observed. Due to our non-random sampling approach, there may be bias. Additional research is needed to document and further the phenomenon observed here within The Clean Wave in Costa Rica to more broadly understand the impacts of Regenerative Tourism. We encourage scholars and practitioners to evaluate other similar projects through the lens of the Active Regeneration of Health model.

## 5 Conclusion

Regenerative tourism has the ability to build lasting, sustainable, healthy impacts when communities are empowered and engaged. In a short period of time, The Clean Wave has demonstrated this in Tamarindo, Costa Rica and beyond. When you harness the power of connection, belonging and purpose, local communities and travelers may find the collective healing and well-being they are seeking. Investments in organizations and destinations that prioritize this approach can yield a compounding effect that builds a legacy for a healthier future.

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