

Аграрен университет – Пловдив, Научни трудове, т. LXVII, кн. 1, 2025 г.

Юбилейна научна конференция „80 години Аграрен университет –

Пловдив: Традиции срещат иновации “

Anniversary Scientific Conference

“80 Years Agricultural University – Plovdiv: Traditions Meet Innovations”

Agricultural University – Plovdiv, Scientific Works, vol. LXVII, book 1, 2025

[DOI: 10.22620/sciworks.2025.03.012](https://doi.org/10.22620/sciworks.2025.03.012)

REGENERATIVE TOURISM BRANDING IN BULGARIA: INTEGRATING AGRICULTURAL HERITAGE AND LOCAL TRADITIONS

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Abstract

This study examines the potential of destination branding as a driver for regenerative tourism development in Bulgaria. Focusing on the interconnections between agricultural practices, local traditions, and cultural heritage, the research investigates how these elements can contribute to sustainable and community-centered tourism models. A mixed-methods approach combining document analysis, literature review, and stakeholder surveys was employed to identify key themes and strategic opportunities. The findings highlight the significance of integrating local identity, cultural storytelling, and collaborative practices in shaping regenerative tourism destinations. The study concludes that enhancing stakeholder cooperation, fostering innovation, and strengthening local support systems are essential for advancing Bulgaria's position as a regenerative tourism destination and for promoting long-term regional resilience.

Keywords: regenerative tourism, agricultural heritage, destination branding, storytelling, Bulgaria

INTRODUCTION

The global tourism industry is undergoing a paradigm shift from mass tourism models toward more sustainable and regenerative approaches that actively restore ecosystems, cultures, and local communities. This transformation responds to growing environmental concerns and changing traveller preferences for authentic, meaningful experiences. Within this context, Bulgaria's rich agricultural heritage, diverse landscapes, and preserved traditional practices present unique opportunities for regenerative tourism development. (Goodwin, 2017).

Current literature demonstrates increasing academic interest in regenerative tourism principles. (Hawkes & Williams, 2020) defines regenerative tourism as extending beyond sustainability to actively enhance natural and cultural systems. Meanwhile, the (ENFORCE Project, 2023) emphasizes storytelling as a mechanism for visitor engagement in regeneration processes. Despite these developments, limited research exists specifically addressing Bulgaria's potential in this emerging

tourism segment, particularly regarding the integration of agricultural heritage with destination branding strategies (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

The working hypothesis of this study proposes that Bulgaria can develop a distinctive regenerative tourism brand by strategically leveraging its agricultural practices, local traditions, and cultural storytelling. This research aims to: assess stakeholder perceptions of regenerative tourism potential in Bulgaria; identify key branding elements based on agricultural and cultural assets; analyse preferred storytelling approaches for destination marketing; and develop evidence-based recommendations for implementation (Pike & Page, 2014).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study utilized three categories of experimental material: Project documentation from the ENFORCE Initiative, including “The Storyteller’s Guide: Unleashing the Power of Stories for Regenerative Tourism” (2023); Academic literature on regenerative tourism, destination branding, and community-based tourism published between 2013-2023; Primary survey data collected from 20 stakeholders. The research employed a qualitative dominant mixed-methods approach. Document analysis followed a systematic review protocol to identify key themes in regenerative tourism implementation.

Thematic coding was applied to project documentation and academic literature to extract recurrent patterns and strategic frameworks. Survey data collection utilized structured questionnaires administered to a purposive sample representing key stakeholder groups: farmers (25%), artisans (20%), residents (20%), tourists (15%), local authority representatives (10%), and NGO representatives (10%). Data analysis incorporated descriptive statistics for quantitative survey items and content analysis for open-ended responses. The research was conducted between January and June 2025.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis yielded significant findings regarding Bulgaria's potential for regenerative tourism branding. Stakeholder perception data revealed strong consensus on the importance of agricultural heritage, with an average agreement rating of 4.8/5.

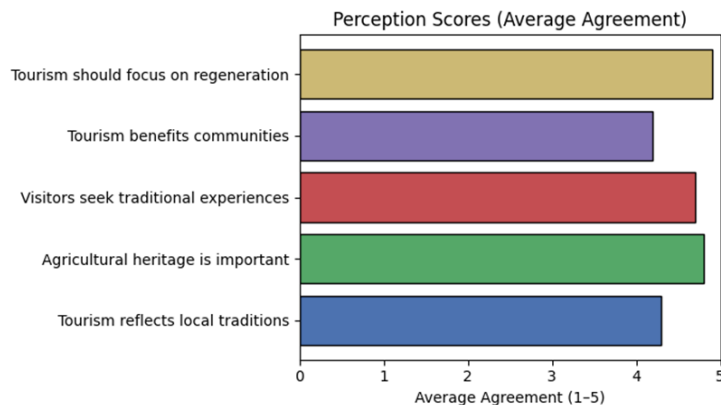


Figure 1. Perception Scores (Average Agreement)

The proposition that tourism should focus on regeneration rather than mass tourism received the highest support (4.9/5), indicating normative alignment with regenerative principles. Identification of key branding elements showed agriculture and food as the most frequently mentioned identity components (17 mentions), followed by folklore and festivals (15 mentions) and crafts and artisanship (14 mentions)

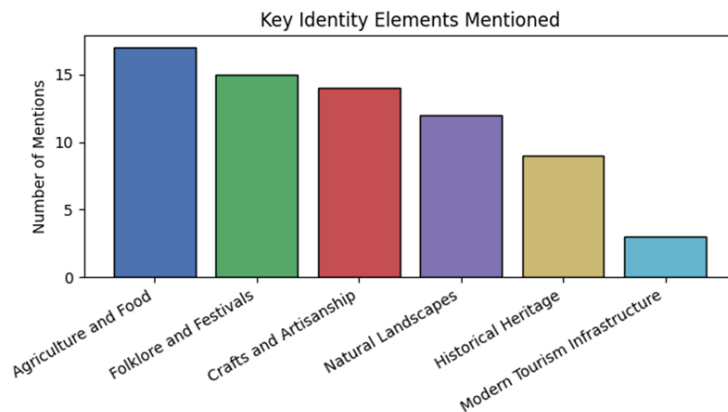


Figure 2. Key Identity Elements Mentioned

Natural landscapes received 12 mentions, while historical heritage was noted 9 times. Modern tourism infrastructure was significantly less prominent (3 mentions), reinforcing the relevance of traditional and natural assets for regenerative branding. Analysis of storytelling approaches identified personal stories as the preferred method (10 mentions), closely followed by digital storytelling (9 mentions).

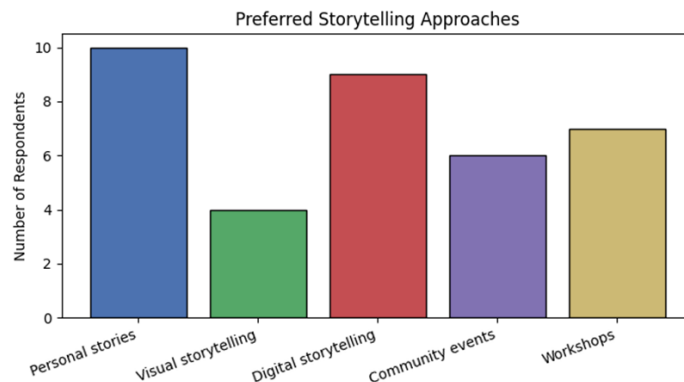


Figure 3. Preferred Storytelling Approaches. (Richards, 2018)

Workshops and community events received moderate support (7 and 6 mentions respectively), while visual storytelling was less frequently selected (4 mentions). The benefit-barrier analysis demonstrated that stakeholders perceive cultural heritage preservation as the primary benefit of regenerative tourism (18 mentions), followed by economic diversification (14 mentions) and youth employment (13 mentions).

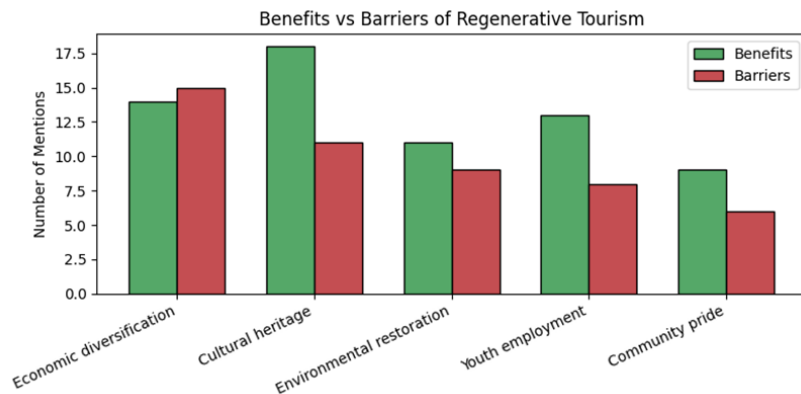


Figure 4. Benefits vs Barriers of Regenerative Tourism

Conversely, funding limitations emerged as the most significant barrier (15 mentions), with cooperation challenges also prominently identified (11 mentions). Marketing and training gaps were noted as secondary constraints (9 and 8 mentions respectively).

CONCLUSIONS

Bulgaria possesses significant potential for regenerative tourism development, with stakeholder consensus strongly supporting the transition from mass tourism models toward regenerative approaches. Agricultural heritage forms the cornerstone of Bulgaria's distinctive regenerative brand, receiving both the highest importance ratings and the most frequent identity mentions among surveyed stakeholders. Traditional crafts, folklore, and gastronomy provide complementary branding elements that enhance the authentic character of regenerative tourism experiences while supporting cultural preservation.

Storytelling strategies, particularly personal narratives and digital dissemination, represent critical mechanisms for translating physical assets into compelling visitor experiences and emotional engagement. Implementation requires addressing significant barriers, primarily funding limitations and cooperation challenges, through targeted policy interventions and multi-stakeholder collaboration frameworks.

The findings confirm the working hypothesis that Bulgaria can develop a distinctive regenerative tourism brand through strategic integration of agricultural heritage, traditional practices, and storytelling approaches. Future research should explore specific implementation models and quantitatively measure regeneration impacts on local communities and ecosystems.

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