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Regenerating tourism and regenerating people: how tourism is achieving justice for Indigenous youths

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ABSTRACT

In 2023 a novel Indigenous tourism venture was launched. This initiative, Native Nations – Tracing Indigenous Footsteps, offers a culturally immersive overseas exchange programme for Indigenous youths. It seeks to build solidarity, uplift youths, offer emancipatory tourism experiences, heal injustice, and reconnect them to sources of their strength and identity. As such, it offers an alternative approach and ethos to dominant approaches to tourism development. This paper examines the experience and outcomes of the first Native Nations exchange which involved a group of Aotearoa New Zealand Māori youths and a group of Australian Aboriginal youths. It frames this in the context of literature on justice tourism, Indigenous tourism, and regenerative tourism. Advocates of these approaches, variously, aim to restore people and environments through tourism experiences, to build solidarity between visitors and the visited, and to uphold Indigenous cultures and values. The research finds, firstly, that we need more focus on Indigenous people as tourists, and secondly, that regenerative tourism could have more transformative impacts if it explicitly incorporated *tourism as justice*, focusing attention on regenerating people who are often excluded from tourism's benefits.

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Introduction

When a group of *rangatahi* [Māori youth] from around Murupara in the Bay of Plenty region of Aotearoa New Zealand boarded a Qantas flight in August 2023 headed for Gunditjmarra country in Australia, they were not 'just' being tourists: they were about to embark on a unique cultural exchange experience. This was as much about rebuilding their *mana* [sense of dignity] and restoring their *wairua* [spirit] as much as it was about learning about their different lives, cultures and histories. This article analyses the experiences and outcomes of the first Indigenous youth exchange programme organised under the programme, Native Nations: Tracing Indigenous Footsteps. Of

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note, the name of this programme was devised by the first group of *rangatahi* to take part in this exchange.

Tourism is often viewed as a frivolous or privileged industry (Hamilton, 2021; Thurlow & Jaworski, 2011). This might be why, in the field of Development Studies where addressing poverty and inequality are critical concerns, tourism does not warrant as much scholarly attention as, for example, agriculture, health or education. However, post-development scholars have also posited that "...it may be possible to reconstruct the modernist project of development in a more accountable, diverse, and just way" (Blaikie, 2000, p.1047). Furthermore, tourism also deserves attention because it can offer people who have faced structural disadvantages ways to self-represent themselves and their cultures to others, while achieving economic benefits (Aikau & Gonzalez, 2019; Carr et al., 2016).

The case study examined in this paper provides an alternative approach to contributing to development of Indigenous people and, further, it seeks to lead to development of more authentic Indigenous tourism trails that might also inform other tourists about social justice concerns. Before delving into this, however, we review literature on Indigenous tourism, justice tourism and regenerative tourism: this provides us with a framework within which we can examine the activities and outcomes of the inaugural Native Nations experience. This paper aims to show how an Indigenous tourism initiative is achieving transformative, justice-oriented outcomes from tourism, and to argue that the regenerative tourism movement could be enriched by devoting more attention to regenerating people in these ways.

Literature review

Tourism and justice

The negative impacts of tourism have been well documented, from stories of tourism development leading to the dispossession of local people to the exploitative practices of colonial forces: it is evident that injustice and tourism have a connection (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010; Trask, 1999). Justice, as Jamal and Higham (2021) suggest, is becoming an important part of tourism studies as it provides a way to understand harmful tourism practices and examine alternative forms of tourism. Justice tourism aims to promote understanding and mutual respect among visitors and those visited, support self-determination of local communities, and maximise economic, cultural, and social wellbeing for those visited (Scheyvens, 2002). As an alternative form of tourism it also seeks to provide meaningful experiences for tourists (Graburn, 1983) and as such, it is argued that this approach can guide a new way forward towards a more ethical form of tourism (Guia, 2021; Isaac & Farkic, 2024).

Understanding how young people approach tourism opportunities can also be considered an issue of justice. Although there is very little research exploring young people, their involvement in tourism and links to justice, it is clear that some young people look beyond tourism as leisure. Canosa's research (Canosa 2023) showed that the young care deeply about tourism development that is sustainable and considers environmental impacts, while others suggest that youth are motivated by tourism experiences that work to contribute to the betterment of spaces (Cavagnaro et al.,

2018; Han et al., 2019). In cases whereby young travellers are from disadvantaged or marginalised groups, issues of justice more overtly come to the fore. Judge's (2017) study on volunteer tourism shows the importance of making tourism accessible for marginalised youth, who often felt they were able to assert their identities and found their experiences transformational. Switching to understanding young people as hosts rather than visitors, in their article, (Dharug Ngurra, Dadd et al. 2024) centre children's perspectives of Indigenous-led tourism among an Aboriginal group who hosted 900 participants at 25 Darug culture camps in a reserve west of Sydney. Cognisant of the exclusion of children's voices from most tourism studies, they focus on voices of the children who accompanied their relatives while they ran the culture camps. An important finding is that the *gurung* (children/young people) learned a great deal by being on-Country, about their relationships to their Elders, their culture, and to Country itself. This suggests a strong contribution to justice as tourism in this case directly supports the cultural wellbeing and self-determination of the *gurung*.

Some authors have emphasised the importance of understanding justice tourism on a spectrum, with the moderate end focusing on more just outcomes in tourism and the more extreme seeing tourism as an opportunity for transnational solidarity activism, wherein tourists use their privilege to engage with local communities to achieve just and equitable outcomes (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010; Isaac & Farkic, 2024; Ngo & Pham, 2023; Scheyvens, 2002; Seyfi et al., 2023). This aligns with Guia's (2021) position, that tourism can be seen as an overtly political activity (Guia, 2021), whereby after visiting people facing injustice, tourists advocate for redress (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008; Isaac & Hodge, 2011; Jamal & Higham, 2021; Scheyvens, 2002).

Often justice tourism is used to refer to niche types of tourism that are informed by justice principles. For example, Scheyvens (2002) identifies that tours of slums that are controlled by local people and involve educational visits to sites of past oppression are examples of justice tourism. By contrast, rather than referring to a specific type of tourism, our article speaks to *tourism as justice*, through which tourism can be framed as a practice of justice: this means justice is the purpose and intended outcome of tourism, rather than a nice 'add on'. This is the case with some of the extreme forms of justice tourism mentioned above.

Of note, our understanding of tourism as justice is particularly influenced by ideas from development theorists Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2011), who argue that justice should be about helping people live lives that they consider worthwhile. Nussbaum (2011), in particular, prioritises respecting people's dignity and promoting human flourishing or well-being. This brings us to another distinction that is important for our analysis. While justice tourism is often built on an understanding that those visited are the ones seeking justice (Jamal and Higham 2021), we suggest that the dignity, flourishing and well-being of those doing the visiting should also be considered in tourism as justice. As Dillette (2021) explains, in cases such as roots/diaspora tourism (e.g. African-Americans visiting slave trade sites in Ghana), tourists themselves are the ones seeking justice (Dillette 2021). Consider also, for example, Indigenous Festivals which offer an empowering space in which marginalised communities can participate in tourism in new ways. The Festival of Pacific Arts and Culture (FestPAC), which occurs every four years, provides Pacific Island nations with the opportunity to not only proudly display their culture but

also experience the host nation's cultural offerings (Gilbert, 2020), thus building solidarity across Indigenous groups. Similarly, Sámi festivals, held in Norway, allow those part of the diaspora to reengage and connect with their Indigenous Sámi heritage (Skogvang, 2021). These festivals allow for an assertion of cultural identity outside the frameworks of oppressive or colonial structures, showing the importance of inclusive approaches to tourism.

There are strong synergies between tourism as justice and scholarship on decolonising tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022). Decolonising tourism emphasises the importance of centring local community needs, interests and perspectives as a way to address colonial histories and avoid tourism practices that perpetuate legacies of harm and exploitation. In doing so, decolonisation of tourism research and knowledge 'places silenced voices and populations, which usually are the objects of tourism, as the producers of knowledge' (Aquino, 2019, p. 75). Similarly, Indigenous tourism operates as a means to place Indigenous peoples at the forefront of tourism, as the next section shows.

Indigenous peoples and tourism as justice

Indigenous peoples have played an integral role in multiple facets of tourism, from hosts to porters, performers and artists, but have historically been exploited or marginalised by tourism activities, while missing out on a fair share of the economic benefits (Ngo & Pham, 2023; Whitford & Ruhanen, 2016). Undoubtedly the tourism industry has a shameful past, in many cases manipulating Indigenous people and their cultures for the sake of profits, and often denigrating sites of cultural significance, symbols and artifacts important to Indigenous people (Johnston, 2013; Nash, 1977). There have also been multiple concerns about cultural appropriation and the ways that tourism often continues a legacy of commodification of Indigenous peoples (Ngo & Pham, 2023; Weaver, 2010). As a consequence, Indigenous peoples are often understandably wary of engaging too closely with tourism.

Justice tourism is being increasingly utilised as a lens to explore and promote tourism practices that challenge the negative impacts and injustices Indigenous peoples have associated with past tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022). For example, Indigenous-led tourism, such as tours held in Aboriginal communities in Australia or Indigenous-run excursions in Peru, have been analysed from a justice tourism perspective (Hoffman et al., 2022). These types of Indigenous-led tourism, sometimes conducted in conjunction with government or nonprofit organisations, can empower marginalised communities and provide opportunities to represent themselves, on their own terms, to tourists (Scheyvens, 2002). As such, Indigenous-led tourism can lead to more ethical and just tourism practices that include Indigenous peoples in tourism in more meaningful ways, even though this might not ameliorate the pain of colonial histories (Jamal & Camargo, 2014). While there is a shift to looking at how Indigenous-led tourism works towards a form of justice tourism, tourism still operates largely within capitalist and neoliberal economic systems that can at times contradict Indigenous values (Puriri & McIntosh, 2019). Thus it is essential not to make assumptions about the supposed benefits of Indigenous people's involvement in tourism. Instead, researchers should ground their research in the perspectives of Indigenous stakeholders (Hutchison et al., 2021; Whitford & Ruhanen, 2016).

Scholars of Indigenous tourism, who examine how Indigenous peoples can have greater control over tourism (Carr et al., 2016; Scheyvens et al., 2021), and reap benefits from it e.g. language revitalisation, or food sovereignty (Santafe-Troncoso & Loring, 2021), have shown us how tourism might be transformational (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006; Scheyvens et al., 2020). This aligns with the extreme forms of justice tourism noted earlier. For example, in colonised countries globally there has been a shift towards developing Indigenous-led tourism that works to challenge colonial histories that underpin modern tourism practices (Ngo and Pham 2023). Examples include an Indigenous Australian cultural festival in the city of Adelaide (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2016) and, in Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori-led tourism ventures which work to centre Māori values and develop more just and sustainable Māori tourism businesses (Mika & Scheyvens, Puriri & McIntosh, 2019). Truthful re-telling of history is something that is important to many Indigenous peoples, and this is also being incorporated into some tourism experiences now rather than giving visitors a ‘sanitised’ or more palatable version of past events (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2003). Above, the example of Darug culture camps showed how Indigenous young people can gain an enhanced sense of cultural identity and responsibility to their people from observing and participating in camps on-Country (Dharug Ngurra, Dadd et al. 2024). When Indigenous people can tell their own stories on their own terms, it is more likely that this will lead to reconciliation and healing. For example, in Hawaii decolonial ‘detours’ can be booked as an alternative to the hyper-capitalised offerings of Waikiki (Aikau & Gonzalez, 2019). Those participating in these tours learn about how Native Hawaiians have been undermined politically and culturally, their environment denigrated and militarised (*Personal experience, Association of American Geographers Conference, April 2024*). These examples show clearly how,

Indigenous tourism is...not necessarily just an entrepreneurial activity intended for Indigenous economic wellbeing: it is often a multifaceted enterprise for the self-determined and sustainable development of Indigenous peoples, reflected in their intentions and efforts to preserve their culture and way of life and to share this with others on their terms (Scheyvens et al., 2021, p.3).

In tourism literature the subject of Indigenous tourism predominantly explores the impact and experience of Indigenous peoples as tourism providers (Butler & Hinch, 2007). Indigenous peoples *as tourists* is an underexplored area, yet Indigenous peoples have always travelled (Butler, 2021; Wei et al. 2021). Peters and Higgins-Desbiolles (2012) assert that the lack of focus on Indigenous peoples as tourists in tourism literature “highlights the problematic nature of contemporary tourism analysis... and thereby limits our understanding of the important phenomenon of Indigenous tourism” (p. 7). The literature that explores how Indigenous peoples travel emphasises that Indigenous communities, like the Mosuo peoples in Wei et al. (2021) case study, travel becomes a means to assert their cultural identity and foster connections with other communities that hold similar values. For example, diasporic Pacific Islanders who travel to their Indigenous homelands tend to review these trips as a critical way of reconnecting both socially and culturally with their community; as such they do not define their travel as ‘tourism’ (Cave & Hall, 2015; Gibson et al., 2022; Trupp et al., 2022). Instead, those outside of the community are defined as ‘tourist’. In the section

on tourism and justice, above, other examples of Indigenous people travelling for art and cultural festivals was also mentioned (Gilbert, 2020; Skogvang, 2021). These few examples highlight how the travel of Indigenous people might differ from conventional Western understandings of tourism. Specifically, conventional definitions of the tourist fail to capture the importance that culture, community and traditional obligations have on Indigenous people's motivations for travel (Butler, 2021; Gibson et al., 2022; Peters & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2012).

Regenerative tourism

The final part of our literature review considers regenerative tourism. Bellato and Pollock (2025) share a concern that because the concept of regenerative tourism is relatively new, it is not well understood. Thus they argue that what is perhaps the most important component of regenerative tourism, the goal of transforming tourism systems, gets reduced down to much more simple, reformist goals such as 'leaving places we visit better off'. While much easier for tourism practitioners such as tourism businesses and regional tourism authorities to then encourage and implement, such basic definitions could compromise the more radical, transformative aspirations of the regenerative tourism movement. A working definition thus proposes that, "Regenerative tourism is a transformational approach that aims to fulfil the potential of tourism places to flourish and create net positive effects through increasing the regenerative capacity of human societies and ecosystems" (Bellato et al., 2023, p.9).

When providing examples of what regenerative tourism looks like—or could look like—some scholars set aside the human flourishing component and instead focus mainly on the regeneration of nature. See, for example, Jitaksorn et al.'s (2024) case study on regenerative tourism development in Phuket centred around addressing the environmental degradation that tourism brings and how best to involve various stakeholders to better care for the environment. Regenerative tourism in Australia's wine regions also focuses on how to utilise regenerative agriculture practices to better the environment, which in turn can lend itself to regenerative tourism practices (Pearson et al., 2024). At its core much regenerative tourism practice appears to concentrate on healing local environments. While this is important work, we suggest that this focus undervalues the place of both hosts and guests in regenerative approaches to tourism, and limits the transformational possibilities of regenerative tourism.

Discussions of regenerative tourism which do show due attention to people tend to focus on those living in tourism destinations. For example, Becken and Kaur (2022) note that regenerative tourism can support cultural revival, while Day (2023) describes regenerative tourism as intentionally contributing positively to destination communities by helping them to flourish environmentally and culturally, as well as economically. This is similar to Dredge (2022, p.269), who argues for regenerative tourism to be seen as "place-based, *community-centred* and environment-focused" (emphasis added). We concur with these points, but we argue that those residing in tourism destinations are just one part of the 'human' aspects of regenerative tourism that should be considered. We posit that those doing the touring could have a regenerative experience and contribute to more transformational tourism as well. This is particularly the case

when those doing the touring are from more disadvantaged sectors of society. The work of Native Nations, to be discussed below, aligns very strongly with the idea of providing transformational, regenerative tourism experiences for the people involved, both hosts and guests.

Analytical framework

There appears to be strong threads linking the literature discussed above on tourism as justice, Indigenous tourism, and regenerative tourism. For example, when Scheyvens et al. (2021) analysed several different Indigenous tourism enterprises across Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and Fiji, they discovered that all of them were strongly guided by Indigenous values such as care for culture, care for the natural environment, and ensuring broader community benefits. This aligns with fundamental principles of regenerative tourism. Proponents of regenerative tourism regularly point to the connections between a regenerative approach and the values of Indigenous cultures such as respecting the rights of nature and focusing on intergenerational wellbeing (Becken & Kaur, 2022; Boluk & Panse, 2022). These aspects of regenerative tourism also align with a tourism as justice lens. However, we suggest that by more explicitly bringing justice into regenerative tourism thinking, we would reduce the risk of it being reduced to a managerial practice (e.g. a resort that plants mangroves and claims to be regenerating nature, but does not address how local fishing communities were displaced when it was built), or becoming elitist (e.g. regenerative retreats targeting eco-conscious, wealthy travellers).

Figure 1 seeks to encapsulate the ways in which Indigenous tourism can align with aspects of regenerative tourism and tourism as justice. At the top, it shows how Indigenous tourism can mean either Indigenous people acting as tourism providers, or as tourists, the latter being a relatively under-studied area. Under both of these

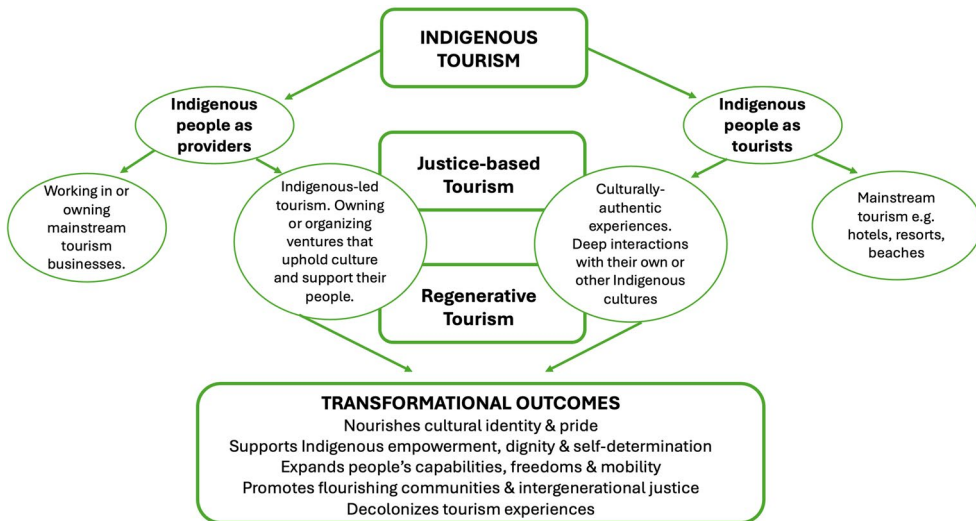


Figure 1. Linkages between Indigenous tourism, justice and regenerative tourism. Source: Author.

categories, they might be involved in mainstream tourism. However, towards the centre we see that there are also possibilities to engage with justice-based objectives and to be explicitly regenerative. This could occur in Indigenous tourism either when Indigenous people own or organise enterprises that uphold their culture and support their people, or, as tourists they engage in culturally authentic experiences and have deep interactions with their own or other Indigenous cultures. The transformational outcomes that can result from this for Indigenous people include strengthening of cultural identity, flourishing communities, support for empowerment and self-determination, as well as the decolonizing of tourism experiences. This framework will be used as a basis for analysing the activities of the Native Nations exchange that took place in 2023.

Material and methods

Research design

The Native Nations case study examined through this research is exceptional because it is rare to find examples of tourism which target Indigenous young people as participants in a cross-country Indigenous cultural exchange. In addition, it is worth examining because its purpose is to provide opportunities for these young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to engage in culturally meaningful international travel. Thus the key research questions explored herein are: what is the purpose behind Native Nations?; how does it operate in practice?; what are the outcomes for youth participants?; and more broadly, what can we learn from this case study of Indigenous tourism that could inform better understandings of regenerative tourism and tourism as justice?

Accordingly, in January 2024 the first author contacted Nadine ToeToe, director of an award-winning Māori tourism initiative, Kohutapu Lodge, and the key instigator of Native Nations, to appraise her interest in taking part in this study. The first author and Nadine already had a relationship based on previous research but as a non-Indigenous person, the first author needed to tread carefully and respectfully when proposing this research (Smith, 2021), rather than assuming she would be granted permission for it to go ahead. As it was, Nadine stressed that allies were needed to help them progress their *kaupapa* (mission/objectives), and she welcomed the chance to have independent research that examined the experience and outcomes of the first Native Nations exchange which took place in 2023.

The first author also suggested that Nadine and *rangatahi* who took part in the first Native Nations exchange should co-construct the methodology (Basile et al., 2017; Marina Apgar et al., 2016). Despite the clear benefits that can come from young people actively participating in research design (Schäfer & Yarwood, 2013), in practice, the co-construction of this research mainly occurred between Nadine and the first author, because the Native Nations *rangatahi* were mostly engaged in full time work or study, and were not available to take on this role. Nonetheless as part of the co-construction process, the first author and Nadine agreed that it would be ideal for a Native Nations *rangatahi* to conduct the interviews with other Māori and Aboriginal youths, to make the youths feel at ease during this process. This was an explicitly decolonising methodology (Smith, 2021), which is aligned with a Critical

Appreciative Inquiry approach (Ridley-Duff & Duncan, 2015). The intention was to focus on the strengths, capacities and knowledge of ‘what works’ in justice tourism, while upholding the mana and dignity of those in the research communities (Cram, 2001; Scheyvens et al., 2014).

Research ethics

Following Nadine’s approval and prior to data being collected, an ethics review process was undertaken through the researchers’ university and the research was peer reviewed as being of low risk.¹ All of those approached to take part in the research after this date were made fully aware that the research would only progress with their consent, that they had the right to withdraw at any time, and that they could review transcripts from their interviews prior to approval being granted for them to be used in the research. They were also told how the research data would be used, for articles, conference presentations and lectures. In addition, they had the opportunity to decide whether or not their name, or a descriptor, should be used in publications resulting from the research.

Interestingly, all youth participants asked for their full names to be used in any research reports or articles. When Nadine was reviewing the initial research findings we asked her to share her thoughts on whether or not it was appropriate to use the young people’s real names; we received a resounding ‘yes’ thus we decided to publish their names in our research outputs. There are three reasons for this: firstly, we want to respect the young people’s agency and their pride in their Indigenous names, which often connect them to their ancestors; secondly, as noted we took a strengths-based approach to this study which means the findings are focused on what worked well in the Native Nations exchange, which means our research participants are unlikely to be embarrassed or harmed by what has been shared; and thirdly, we want to challenge the current dominant social science practice of anonymising or disguising the identities of research participants when, arguably, there is little risk of harm coming to them from our research and they have a right to be acknowledged for the intellectual property they have shared. The latter is especially recommended when participants are given the opportunity to check and change their interview transcripts, as was the case with this research.

Participant selection

Eighteen young people took part in the first Native Nations exchange, and nine were interviewed for this research (six from Aotearoa New Zealand, and three from Australia) (Table 1). In order to honour the agency of the young participants and in line with ethical research principles—especially when working with members of Indigenous groups in settler-colonial societies—we did not want to put any pressure on them to be part of the study. Rather, the participants were self-selected. After talking with others and determining Saturdays were the time when most research participants were available, Nadine emailed all ten of the Māori *rangatahi* from the first Native Nations exchange to invite them to attend a research *hui* (a gathering of people involved with or impacted by Native Nations) held at Kohutapu Lodge in June 2024.

Table 1. Research participants.

Youth participants (16–24 years old) in the first Native Nations exchange:	
Māori	6
Aboriginal	3
Family and community members	7
Tourism industry representatives	2
Founder of Native Nations: Tracing Indigenous Footsteps (Nadine ToeToe)	1
Total	19

After the *hui* the Native Nations participant (Lahaina Keil) who conducted the interviews with other *rangatahi* at the *hui*, reached out to the Aboriginal participants to see who was interested and available to be interviewed online, and three of them put their names forward. Only those who were interested in doing so made themselves available for interviews, and all of those who came forward were interviewed.

In addition to the young people, whose experiences are the focus of this article, Nadine invited *whānau* (wider family) of the *rangatahi* and some community members to be interviewed, based on insights they had into how the Native Nations exchange had impacted on their wider families and communities. In order to gain insights into tourism industry perspectives on Native Nations, a member of the regional tourism organisation and a member of a Māori tourism adventure company in the area, both of whom collaborated with Nadine when hosting Aboriginal young people, were interviewed too.

Data collection and analysis

Most data was collected during the one day *hui*. The *hui* began with a cultural welcome and introductions by each participant, after which refreshments were shared. The group then broke up for interviews. Semi-structured interviews were the main method of data collection. They were used to probe both experiences of the first Native Nations exchange and the outcomes of this. Table 2 provides the guiding questions used for interviews with the youths who participated in the Native Nations exchange. Related questions were used for other research participants but are not included here as they are not as relevant to the focus of this article.

Interviews were conducted by the first author along with Lahaina Kiel (one of the *rangatahi* who had participated in Native Nations). As noted under the research design section, Lahaina focused on interviewing other *rangatahi*. Her training for this involved, firstly, meeting with Nadine and the first author to find out about the purpose of the research and to invite her to be directly involved in interviewing others who, like her, took part in the first Native Nations exchange. Secondly, it involved the first author and Lahaina meeting to discuss: a) ethical aspects of the research such as informed consent and looking through the information sheet; b) fine-tuning of the questions that would be asked; and c) qualitative research norms and processes such as building rapport with participants, semi-structured interviews, how to avoid leading questions and the importance of allowing sufficient time for interviewees to answer a question.

The first author interviewed some of the *kaumatua* and *kuia* (elders) present at the *hui*, a tourism industry representative, and late in the day she interviewed Lahaina along with one other *rangatahi* who could not attend in the morning due to work obligations. Nadine also organised for two community members who were deeply

Table 2. Guiding questions for interviews with Indigenous youths.

Key questions	Prompts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you had to sum up your Native Nations experience in a few words, what would you say? • Describe your experience of preparing for and travelling to visit Gunditjmarra country/Ngāti Manawa lands and interacting with rangatahi there. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • were you nervous beforehand? • what did you do to prepare? • what did you take part in when on Aboriginal tribal lands? • how did it make you feel? • what did you do when hosting them? • how did it make you feel?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe your experience of hosting Gunditjmarra/ Māori rangatahi. • What were some of the most memorable experiences you had during the Native Nations exchange? • Has that experience changed your attitude or the way in which you live your life in any way? • Has that experience changed your plans or aspirations for your future? • Do you think of the Native Nations experience as ‘tourism’, or something else? • Can you think of any ways in which the Native Nations experience could be improved in future? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If so, how so? • If so, how so? • Please elaborate • Please give examples

involved in community development in the region and thus known to those attending the *hui* to conduct some interviews with *whānau* (family members) and elders. In total, six youths, one tourism industry representative and seven community members (including elders and family members) attended the research *hui*. Participants at the *hui* were interviewed either individually, in pairs or threes, depending on their preference. In between interviews, a *hangi* (earth oven) lunch was served and, in the spirit of sharing the benefits of tourism, the leftover food was packaged up afterwards to be shared with others in the community. Interviews and reflections continued until late afternoon.

Over the following three weeks, Lahaina interviewed three Aboriginal youths online, and the first author interviewed one further tourism industry representative and the founder of Native Nations, Nadine. Thus in total, nineteen people were interviewed. During both in-person and online interviews, Lahaina reflected on her own experiences of the Native Nations exchange while engaging in interviews with other youth participants, in line with Kwame’s (2017) observations that Indigenous researchers also need to engage in reflexive practice. Lahaina was offered the opportunity to co-author research outputs, but chose not to do this.

All of the interviews were transcribed by the second author, who is Māori. Research participants were given the opportunity to check the transcripts for accuracy, or to ask for any information to be excluded from our write up. No changes were requested. Thematic coding then took place, adapting Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six step data analysis process. Firstly, the two authors familiarised ourselves with the data then, separately, the first and second authors generated initial codes and searched for themes. Next, we worked together to compare and review our themes, before deciding on the final themes we would use. Finally, we are working to produce a report and articles from this data.

Context

Before discussing the findings from this research, we will outline the origins of Native Nations: Tracing Indigenous Footsteps, and describe what took place on the first

cross-cultural exchange. As noted earlier, Nadine ToeToe is a director of Kohutapu Lodge. This Māori tourism business has won national awards for Māori tourism, community engagement, industry collaboration and alignment, regenerative tourism, and, in addition, it won the Supreme New Zealand Tourism Award in 2022. However beyond the accolades, to Nadine and husband Karl, tourism is centrally a vehicle which can be used to achieve a wide range of benefits for their people. They set up Kohutapu Lodge after moving from Rotorua back to Karl's tribal lands near Murupara in 2013, with a plan to 'save a town through tourism' (Hutchison, 2021). Murupara was a town that had struggled after the government privatised forestry operations in the 1980s, and there were a range of challenging socio-economic issues related to unemployment (Lockhart, 2023).

Native Nations emerged a few years after the successful development of Kohutapu Lodge. This was driven by Nadine's express aim to provide opportunities for Indigenous youths to engage in meaningful international travel:

... Native Nations was always bubbling in the back of my head and in the middle of my heart, it just didn't have a name. So pre-COVID, obviously, with Kohutapu Lodge, we'd always harness tourism, to give back to our community, to make positive change and work with our youth in our community. And I had always aspired to take a group of rangatahi overseas for international travel. The reality is a lot of our kids, particularly our Indigenous youth from remote communities, do not get the chance to travel the world like other people do. It is just simply not a level playing field. And I've always wanted to level it out (Nadine ToeToe, Native Nations founder).

Nadine explains how Native Nations was actually initiated, and launched very quickly, after she and other Indigenous tourism operators connected during the World Indigenous Tourism Summit (WITS) in Perth in March 2023: "...it was just a bunch of small indigenous operators in the middle of nowhere, joining forces for good and creating this beautiful plan, and then going out and inspiring the industry to get them behind us...". Industry sponsorship from airlines, hotels, regional tourism authorities and more, enabled Nadine and her Māori and Aboriginal collaborators to design a cross-cultural exchange programme which would not cost the youth participants any money, but which would focus on pride in their cultural identity and healing.

Thus in mid-August 2023, nine Māori *rangatahi* were selected to participate in the inaugural 'Native Nations—Tracing Indigenous Footsteps' cross-cultural exchange between Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. These *rangatahi* took part in several *wānanga* (on site learning experiences at Kohutapu Lodge) to prepare them for their trip, then spent eight days travelling across Victoria, Australia visiting sites like the Narana Aboriginal Cultural Centre where they had the opportunity to try Aboriginal cuisine, and Lake Condah Mission, the site of one of the first massacres of Indigenous people by colonial forces on Australian soil. The *rangatahi* were joined on the trip by ten Aboriginal youths who were also provided with an opportunity to learn about their culture through this cross-cultural exchange.

In early September 2023, the Aboriginal youths who hosted *rangatahi* in Australia visited Aotearoa New Zealand as part of this cross-cultural exchange. They came to the Bay of Plenty area, visiting sites like the renowned cultural and geothermal attraction of Te Puia, Wai Ariki Hot Springs and Spa, a local

marae, and Kohutapu Lodge. The *rangatahi* joined their Aboriginal whanau on this portion of the trip, enabling some of the *rangatahi* to visit their *whānau* (family) lands, like the Whirinaki Forest, for the first time. This gives some indication that many Indigenous youths have not been brought up in environments where they are enmeshed in their culture and raised to be proud of their identities. Next, experiences of youths who took part in the first Native Nations exchange are documented.

Results

The results section presents evidence of what taking part in the Native Nations experience meant to participants, including the significance of the welcome, the cultural exchange, sharing truths through stories and spiritual aspects of the exchange. It then shares some of the broader outcomes of the experience.

Being welcomed

When the Aotearoa *rangatahi* landed in Melbourne and came into the city late in the evening, a very special welcome was awaiting them. Johnny, one of the Aboriginal youths who were waiting in a central city park surrounded by skyscrapers to perform a traditional welcome, reflected that it meant so much to him that the ceremony was respected and understood by their Indigenous neighbours from across the ocean:

I felt very honored to be able to be the one to welcome you [rangatahi from Aotearoa New Zealand] on to the Country² of my beautiful people, my beautiful ancestors that we've cared for, for so long. To share abundances with you...you really did take it in and really feel it and feel all the spirits and feel the ancestors gather and just welcome you into Country, and [we could] do what we could do to cleanse you. It's just a great honour (Johnny Terrick, Aboriginal youth).

Furthermore, another of the Aboriginal youths welcoming *rangatahi* onto Country, poignantly shared that there seemed to almost be a familial bond between the two Indigenous groups: "It was like welcoming people that had already been walking there... It wasn't like meeting strangers, it's like meeting family, you know?" (Elvis Carter, Aboriginal youth). Elvis' sentiments were shared by Madeleine Luez, who was from another part of Australia and travelled to Melbourne to join the exchange, so she also had to be welcomed onto Country. She reflected that, "There was, like, magic in the air... It's almost like our two cultures, or the essence of our two cultures, combined when we [were] welcomed".

The *rangatahi* from Aotearoa, in turn, felt at peace after their welcome:

[They were] just all waiting for us in this park. With their gears, with their gum tree, their didgeridoos, their clapping sticks... [They had] this wooden bark, and they put it inside gum tree, and they lit it up and...they got the smoke going. And they brought it around to us. And one by one, we lathered ourselves with the smoke. And this ceremony is so you're welcoming your physical form. But you actually leave the smell of it on you so that the elders and the ancestors know that you'd been welcomed to that territory.... And we felt welcomed...we felt at home, at peace (Lahaina Kiel, rangatahi).

Meanwhile, when the Aboriginal youths visited Aotearoa they felt honoured to take part in *pōhiri* (traditional welcome ceremony) from another culture. This had a profound impact on some of them:

[I'd] never experienced [the pōhiri] before and getting to experience it first hand, [I] can't write that into words.... I think that was special for all of us. Going through someone else's traditions... (Elvis Carter, Aboriginal youth).

Exchange of cultural traditions and practices

Exchanging Indigenous knowledge and cultural traditions was an important part of Native Nations. Elvis Carter said that “teaching the [Māori] boys how to dance... teaching all the boys how to play didgeridoo” was one of his most memorable experiences, because “everyone [was] being so open minded to learning each other's culture!”. The young people were clearly energised by these experiences of sharing their language, dance and music: “The Aussie boys...came out with their clap sticks and the didgeridoo and just danced. It was buzzy” (Hunter-lushanye Mellon, rangatahi). From the explanations of the young people, this was not the equivalent of a non-Indigenous person taking part in a cultural tour and being excited to learn a few dance moves. There was something much more meaningful taking place in these encounters and cross-cultural learnings. Lahaina Kiel explained that when they placed Māori cultural artifacts in the hands of Aboriginal youths and shared with them about their use and significance, “...it impacted all of us... The Elders told us that we woke up the Ancestors in that moment”.

On both sides, it appears that the experience of hosting was just as meaningful to the young people as the visiting. Welcoming the Aboriginal youth contingent had a profound impact on the *rangatahi* as they were excited to show off their native lands, culture and their special places to their newfound kin from abroad.

I was excited to come home, show them our beautiful country, [show] our rohe [territory], show them what I get to see every day when I wake up. I felt proud to be from here (Kiritahanga Mierriman-Mitai, rangatahi).

I just felt stoked [deeply satisfied]... to be part of the wero [challenge during traditional welcome] and bring them onto our marae... to show them how we are and how proud we are to be who we are (Hunter-lushanye Mellon, rangatahi).

It was beautiful hosting them back at home and watching them buzz out at how much we [Māori] actually had—buzzing out that our McDonald's had [Māori] carvings inside of there. Buzzing out at Māori street names (Lahaina Kiel, rangatahi).

Similarly, it meant a great deal to the young people when their visitors showed genuine interest in hearing the background, stories and significance of the things they were experiencing for the first time. This includes Elvis' experience of learning the *haka* [traditional, vigorous dance] for the first time:

I think that was like—you know—you're always watching it on [TV] rugby and you know I've ever learned the story behind it. But I reckon, like, learning that story behind that—I think that makes it just little bit more special. Learning the language and you know, learning it there [in their place] too (Elvis Carter, Aboriginal youth).

Storytelling as truth-telling

While superficially Native Nations involved touring a new place and sharing fun activities with other young people, there was something much more meaningful that was central to this. Thus when asked how would you sum up Native Nations in a few words, Elvis Carter and Lahaina Kiel both agreed that “storytelling, truth telling” encapsulate the experience. Johnny concurs: “In those two, three weeks...I feel like it was also like the time of truth. Now I feel like that was the beginning to the time of truth” (Johnny Terrick, Aboriginal youth). Native Nations founder, Nadine ToeToe, articulated that authentic sharing of history was always going to be central to the Native Nations experience.

It was really important for us to include that in our itineraries, wherever we go globally, to absolutely share the truthful history with our Indigenous kids from the Indigenous people of the lands that that history belongs to. So, we’re not going to go into the library and read it out of the book, we’re not going to try and tell those stories, or we don’t want to hear it from anybody else. So that we find the truth and the honesty and integrity of that history. And some of it is really traumatic throughout colonization...by sharing those truthful stories, it brings a sense of, of healing...and in that safe space, it provides a place where our Indigenous people and youths are able to mourn. It also provides a space of really gentle conversation and connection and synergy and collectiveness and wraparound and awhi [embrace] and tautoko [support] and healing... (Nadine ToeToe, Native Nations founder).

Thus the first Native Nations exchange was not at all focused on ‘mainstream’ tourist experiences in Melbourne city or the state of Victoria, Australia. Rather, as noted earlier for part of it they stayed at Lake Condah mission, a site associated with trauma for some Indigenous Australians, and visited the location of the first massacre of Aboriginal people on Victorian soil. As Nadine ToeToe continues,

We went to loads of loads of places with history and some of it pretty traumatic, and [we] sat in those spaces of *mamae* [hurt] and healing with our indigenous youth and wrapped around them and came out the other side, into the light, *Te Ao Marama* [the world of light] (Nadine ToeToe, Native Nations founder).

In reference to visiting Lake Condah mission in Gunditjmarra Country, two of the *rangatahi* explained their sadness at hearing about how Mission stations were the only place Aboriginal people were safe from being hunted down like animals—“that’s your spot; we’ll have the rest of your country” (Mainaia Hall, *rangatahi*). As Lahaina noted, when they heard these stories, “the spirits were heavy”:

Yeah, so [outside the Mission they were treated] the same as a pig. Yeah, they could be hunted, they could be enslaved. Inside the Mission, though, is where they were safe. [But] They were not allowed to speak [their own] language, practice songs, practice any traditions, dance. But [if] they jumped over the fence. Boom [they were shot].... (Lahaina Kiel, *rangatahi*).

The authentic cultural sharing and hearing stories of past trauma did not leave the Indigenous youths bereft, however. Rather, some of them reflected that this allowed for deeper understanding, and a sense of reconciliation:

There’s a lot of young crime, there’s this dense layer of negative energy over the town and it’s all because of all of this intergenerational trauma. I feel like we broke a part of that trauma. I feel like Native Nations broke that cycle for me. Native Nations broke, generational, intergenerational trauma (Madeleine Luez, Aboriginal youth).

Spiritual experiences

A particularly pertinent aspect of the first Native Nations exchange was the sacred or spiritual experiences which were raised by many of the interviewees. Both rain and rainbows featured strongly in stories the young people recounted. Before they left Aotearoa to travel to Australia, the *rangatahi* recalled hearing that a message had been sent to them from Australia about the Rainbow Serpent which, as the protector of life and giver of water, has great significance as part of Aboriginal creation stories:

It was our last wānanga (educational seminar) the week before we went [to Australia]... Aunty Nads [Nadine] and Uncle were telling us that we've been contacted by some of our whānau over there—some of the elders are telling them the Rainbow Serpent—I'm getting chills!—is going to guide, guide you and guide us throughout this whole journey (Kiritahanga Mierriman-Mitai, rangatahi).

When they then arrived at Auckland airport, cleared immigration and were looking out for their plane, they were moved to see a rainbow curved over it. They recounted how rainbows then appeared at significant times during their trip. To Madeleine, the rainbows were yet another sign of a higher force supporting the objective of this Indigenous youth exchange: "Little rainbows that, we got little signs that we got along the way, that just—yeah, there was just a lot of magic..." (Madeleine Luez, Aboriginal youth).

Rain was another important element of their experience which took on great significance: it was seen as intentional, rather than mere coincidence, noting that water is associated with cleansing in Māori culture. After being welcomed onto Country by the Indigenous youth during the smoking ceremony in the centre of Melbourne, it started to rain and this felt spiritual and transformational to *rangatahi*:

I just felt...all of the different energies all at once. And I stood there and sang, and everyone else came in for our waiata [song] and the rain just started falling. I think that was the most memorable thing, especially when the rain came.... We just continued, we just kept going, because we're Native Nations, we don't care. Rain is a part of cleansing for us (Lahaina Keil, Rangatahi).

The sky—even though there was a lot of light pollution [in Melbourne city]—still looked beautiful, just welcoming. And then it started to rain, but it wasn't rain that made you feel wet and yuck. It was quite a welcoming rain... (Hunter-lushanye Mellon, Rangatahi).

Several of the young women, both Māori and Aboriginal, felt the presence of ancestors after hearing noises one night when no one was up and about, as Kiritahanga recounts:

Me, Manaia and one of the Gunditjmara girls, Jessie, we could hear the sound of clap sticks and chants... [Jessie] said to us "no one else was awake... [but] those are my ancestors [in] a cemetery over there". We didn't feel scared, we just felt honoured to be able to hear that and experience it (Kiritahanga Mierriman-Mitai, rangatahi).

The above results reveal the significance of the Native Nations exchange to those young people who took part in it. While it was very exciting for them to travel overseas—many of them getting passports for the first time in the weeks prior to this occurring—of much greater importance than taking an international flight and seeing new places were the following experiences: the sense of greater connection with and

pride in their own culture; the strong and often immediate bonds they felt with other Indigenous youth even though they followed very different cultural practices and traditions to their own; the chance to speak their truth and to hear stories of past events which had been devastating for different cultural groups but which had not stopped them from wanting to move forward; and having spiritual experiences as well as feeling that their ancestors were present, and always there to guide them. This was, thus, far from a mainstream tourism experience. The final part of the results section will examine some outcomes of Native Nations for the youth participants and their communities.

Outcomes of participation in native nations for Indigenous youths

Those taking part in Native Nations did not necessarily have a great sense of confidence in their cultural skills or knowledge prior to this exchange. So it was significant that many of the Indigenous youths stated how proud they had become of their cultural identity, both because Native Nations encouraged them to reconnect with their culture, history, protocols and values, and because they were expected to practice or perform their culture for others:

...it helped me to realise... how proud I am to be Māori. Helped me pretty much revitalize the Māori in myself, brought about by me speaking the reo [language] more often (Hunter-lushanye Mellon, rangatahi).

Similarly, the Native Nations experience helped Johnny to feel passionate about moving forward with living his culture in Australia in future. Johnny reflected that it was interactions with *rangatahi* who performed *waiata* [songs], *haka* [a vigorous dance] and other Māori rituals proudly in public on the Native Nations exchange, which helped to bring this about:

... you [rangatahi] opened our eyes up to realise, we're not as strong as we really need to be.... We need to be a lot stronger, look stauncher and a lot more proud in everything that we do. Before that trip, we would have never got up in public and just danced for the fun of ourselves and that was something very wrong.... And then ever since that trip, you inspired us to do that (Johnny Terrick, Aboriginal youth).

There was a certain freedom that some young people spoke of that came from feeling they could be their authentic selves. As Madeleine explains,

[Native Nations was] completely life changing.... And I do see a lot of great things coming out of the whole exchange.... Most memorable was definitely just when we were being unapologetically us and just...being so strong in our culture, and just showing pride, and it was those moments where, you know, we danced together, and it was just free.... I feel like Native Nations brought out a side of me that allowed me to be my true self. And like, just 100% true (Madeleine Luez, Aboriginal youth).

Associated with the growth of pride in themselves and confidence in their cultural identities, as discussed above, many of the youth participants in Native Nations felt empowered to go on and make significant changes in their lives which would enable them to serve their people better in future. For some, this involved a mindset shift whereby they realized their future was not pre-determined, that they could direct the next phase of their lives:

Having Native Nations proved to me that anything's possible...showing me that I'm not just small and insignificant...it opened my eyes so much, and showed me different possibilities—a way to break out the cycle (Madeleine Leuz, Aboriginal youth).

Relatives of the *rangatahi* who took part in the cultural exchange also noticed this:

[Native Nations has] helped them...widen their horizons to who they want to be and what they want to do in the future. And it's made them realize that they can do anything they put their mind to, given the time and focus... I guess, it just made the fire inside of them burn stronger (Mother of a Native Nations participant).

Rangatahi undertaking the Native Nations exchange said that they returned home feeling a strong calling to work in roles that would make a difference to their people or the natural environment, for example, in social or cultural development (especially, working with young people within their communities), or in environmental protection. For some of the *rangatahi*, Native Nations did not change their life goals. Instead, it confirmed the direction they wanted their lives to take: "Native Nations helped me find my purpose... My biggest goal life since I can remember has always been to give back to my whanau, to my people, to my community" (Kiritahanga Mierriman-Mitai, *rangatahi*). She now works as a youth facilitator for a counselling service provided in her home town. Native Nations did not change Elvis's goals to work with his community either, rather, it clarified them for him so that he thought, "I may as well just drive this, dive in [for] the foreseeable future" (Elvis Carter, Aboriginal youth). For him this meant forgoing potentially more financially lucrative roles and instead being there to help to educate youngsters from his community.

Building on the growth in confidence, the strong sense of cultural identity and the commitment to leading futures based around giving back to their people and/or their ancestral lands, the possibility for the youths to be leaders within their cultural spaces emerged as another outcome of the Native Nations exchange. As Madeleine Leuz observed, "When you think about it, it's like we're building an army of, like, truth-seekers and, like, freedom walkers, and like, leaders...young indigenous leaders..." (Madeleine Leuz, Aboriginal youth). The young people started to see their chiefs or other great leaders as role models who they could emulate:

It instilled a lot of strength and a lot of pride that I didn't even know that I needed within myself.... The trip really inspired me to learn my chiefs, learn our chiefs' customs, and I really found true conviction in myself now to carry myself with that always, as I've always envisioned, as I want to use this to make myself a strong, great man, like the men that I look up to (Johnny Terrick, Aboriginal).

Empowerment of Indigenous youths so they are ready to step up as leaders, whether in their communities or in the tourism sector or beyond, is the ultimate outcome the founder wanted from Native Nations:

Our kids... have important things to say, they are our future leaders, but in some instances, they are our leaders now. And it's our job to build them a stage and flip the lights on and hand them the microphone...

These extraordinary outcomes for young people engaged in Native Nations were reflected upon by one of the research participants, an industry representative who has long supported Māori tourism in Aotearoa New Zealand. Realising that talk of regenerative

tourism had escalated in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand, Mary Tolley noted that while the industry in this country was seemingly committed to delivering a better form of tourism, the focus had been mainly on regenerating nature. What she believes Native Nations does very well is that it regenerates people:

...from an industry perspective, everybody talks about regenerative tourism, everyone talks about sustainability, everyone talks about all of these things that are going on, but you'll find very little content or initiatives out there that focus on people (Mary, Head of Destination Management, Bay of Plenty Tourism).

Outcomes of native nations for Indigenous tourism providers

As some of the young people indicate in their quotes, hosting Indigenous people from another country was a significant part of their Native Nations experience. When in Aotearoa New Zealand, for example, the Aboriginal youth engaged in traditional cultural ceremonies as well as visiting tourism enterprises owned and operated by Māori providers. Native Nations is utilising the cultural exchange experiences to identify and connect Indigenous tourism operators in particular regions, and is using this information to develop authentic, Indigenous-led tourism trails. This is elevating the voices of Indigenous tourism business leaders, and ensuring there are more authentic Indigenous tourism offerings that can provide educational and entertaining experiences to visitors in future. Part of the Native Nations agenda is that the mainstream tourism players who sponsor the cultural exchanges will go on to promote and sell unique Indigenous tourism trails to national and international travellers, helping visitors to develop greater cross-cultural understanding and to practice reciprocity through their travels (Nadine ToeToe, Native Nations founder).

Both the young Indigenous people and tourism operators interviewed for this study, including some who offered their services free to Native Nations participants, prioritised Indigenous-led tourism. This includes Jason Wright, a Director of Kaitiaki Adventures (whitewater rafting and hiking experiences), who reflects on why Indigenous tourism operators have so much to offer the tourism sector:

So, when we talk about positive change, we're [Māori tourism operators] the perfect vehicle for change for tourism operators, and I guess for Māori tourism operators that's who we are, that's our pou [pillar], that's what stands us up: manaakitanga [kindness/care for others], kaitiakitanga [guardianship], whakawhanaungatanga [relating well to others]... that's already woven into our business structure and the foundation of our business.... So, I guess we strive every day to live up to the [Māori tourism] name...not only to ourselves, but to our wider community and... I think a lot of the answers in terms of tourism lie within the Māori operators, for us to stand up and take the lead and others will follow.

Discussion

Despite the plea of Peters and Higgins-Desbiolles (2012) over a decade ago, urging researchers not to ignore the roles of Indigenous people as tourists, there is very little research that has delved into this subject. This research is hopefully helping to fill this void as it provides a powerful example of what can be achieved by an initiative aimed at Indigenous tourists, especially when exploring issues of justice.

The current research clearly finds that Native Nations: Tracing Indigenous Footsteps, a culturally immersive overseas exchange programme for Indigenous youths, takes a unique approach to tourism. While in some ways what was experienced during the Native Nations exchange is what you might expect from bringing young people from different places together anywhere in the world—a mix of nervousness, then sharing, cross-cultural learning and fun—it is apparent that there was a particularly deep level of connection and associated meaningful outcomes from this exchange. For many, it was transformational. Taking part in Native Nations encouraged greater connection with and pride in the young people's own cultures, encouraged them to share their cultural identities with others, and enhanced their awareness of some of the injustice and violence faced by their people in the past and intergenerational impacts of this. The Native Nations experience was also deeply emancipatory, providing opportunities for the Indigenous youths to share their own stories, to reflect, to heal, and to reconnect with sources of their strength and identity. Particularly pertinent were the sacred or spiritual experiences which were raised by many of the interviewees. As a result, the young people emerged from this experience feeling empowered and determined to make a positive difference for themselves, their *whānau* (families), their communities and/or the natural environment to which they were integrally connected. This research thus supports the notion that Indigenous-led, tourism as justice offers far more than commercial returns (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006; Scheyvens et al., 2020).

How and why Indigenous people travel sometimes differs from western conceptions of tourism. Their journeys are not necessarily based around leisure, rather, community and culture often guide the journeys that Indigenous tourists take (Peters & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2012; Wei et al. 2021). Native Nations supports this reality and also challenges the notion that justice-inspired Indigenous tourism is all about Indigenous communities becoming key stakeholders in tourism ventures (Whitford & Ruhanen, 2016). Tourism as justice need not be limited to the communities that are visited: rather, tourists themselves can and do seek justice in order to redress past harms (Dillette, 2021; Jamal & Higham, 2021). With Native Nations, justice is sought through providing *rangatahi* with the opportunity to travel in a way that was otherwise inaccessible for the youth involved. It also allows for the development of relationships amongst historically colonised youth from Australia and Aotearoa, showing that Indigenous-led tourism and just tourism practices can work to empower and support Indigenous peoples. When Indigenous peoples set their terms of why they travel how they travel, as is the case with Native Nations, it is a step towards developing tourism as justice that not only centres Indigenous communities as stakeholders in tourism but Indigenous peoples as tourists, ready to explore and engage with the wider world on their own terms. Moreso, it can be a means for decolonising tourism places and experiences (Aquino, 2019; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022), due to elements such as the stories that are told, sacred places that are visited, and the 'truth-telling' histories that are revealed.

These results can also help to expand our understandings of regenerative tourism. As noted in the earlier literature review, while on paper regenerative tourism should transform systems (Bellato & Pollock, 2025), and regenerate people (Ngo & Pham, 2023), too often both policy makers and researchers overlook systems change and they also focus on regeneration of nature alone. If they do focus on people, it is on those living in destination communities. Indeed, a number of researchers who support

the notion of regenerative tourism have argued for greater attention to the wellbeing of local people living in tourism destinations (Becken & Kaur, 2022; Dredge, 2022), and we support this notion. These are people who often bear the brunt of the negative impacts of tourism without necessarily capturing its benefits (Ngo & Pham, 2023; Trask, 1999). However, the current research offers a novel contribution in showing how regenerative tourism can be transformational in terms of the wellbeing of tourists as well, not only benefiting those residing in the places they visit. This was clear in the quote in the findings from Mary Tolley, Head of Destination Management at Bay of Plenty Tourism, who noted how exemplary Native Nations was in regenerating people.

Regenerative tourism framing should thus focus more on opportunities for tourism experiences to regenerate *tourists*, particularly those who are from a marginalized or disadvantaged community (whether in terms of ethnicity, gender, social class, or physical mobility) which has in the past faced numerous barriers to travel. This would align with inclusive tourism framing which emphasises how marginalised people can be both *producers* and *consumers* of tourism, thus transforming inequitable power relations (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). In regenerating tourists, children and other young people must not be forgotten either. We know that many young travellers are motivated by concerns for environmental sustainability or social justice (Judge, 2017), and that for Indigenous children and youths, culturally-immersive tourism can also contribute to their cultural identities and wellbeing (Dharug Ngurra et al., 2024).

In terms of the other key aspect of a regenerative approach to tourism, systems change (Day, 2023; Dredge, 2022), Native Nations contributes directly to this. It presents a new form of Indigenous tourism, whereby groups of socio-economically challenged Indigenous people are the travellers. Indigenous tourism is usually associated with people from outside an area, typically non-Indigenous, engaging in tourism experiences which offer an insight into Indigenous cultures. Ideally, it is suggested, these experiences should be Indigenous-owned and run (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2003; Puriri & McIntosh, 2019), offering authenticity to tourists and authentic insights to visitors. Native Nations offers something unique in this respect because Indigenous peoples, representing different ethnic groups, are both the tourists and the hosts. This is only possible in this case because mainstream industry stakeholders such as hotels and airlines were encouraged to come on board as sponsors. This has contributed to systems change also as these industry players are having their eyes opened to new understandings of tourists or travellers, and seeing the value of supporting Indigenous-Indigenous exchanges in countries where Indigenous peoples have faced considerable oppression and continue to struggle against racist systems and behaviours.

Limitations

One limitation of this research is that it focuses on a relatively small number of young people who participated in the first Native Nations exchange. Following this, a recommendation is that more research is required to explore the under-researched Indigenous tourist, and, in particular, Indigenous youth and Indigenous people engaging in culturally-immersive tourism experiences. There is a gap in the literature in understanding Indigenous peoples as tourists, especially when it comes to their motivations for non-mainstream, culturally-based travel or social justice, and the

outcomes from this. This could take some work, as such tourists might be hard to locate if they eschew hotels and resorts, stay with family or in cultural spaces (such as meeting houses on Māori land in the Aotearoa New Zealand case), and if they do not call themselves tourists. Research in this space could help us to develop a more comprehensive understanding of what constitutes Indigenous tourism, especially if our goal is to decolonise this academic space which for too long focused mostly on Indigenous people as hosts serving non-Indigenous guests.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this article has made a theoretical contribution by discussing *tourism as justice*, whereby tourism is not just as an economic or leisure activity with justice “add-ons”, but it is a social and economic practice that can embody and enact justice in its design, processes, and outcomes. With relation to Indigenous tourism in particular, tourism as justice could mean seeing tourism as a way to restore recognition and respect to Indigenous peoples and to elevate Indigenous people’s stories of past experiences as a central part of the tourism offer. It could also require fair distribution of the benefits of tourism in support of Indigenous self-determination.

The Indigenous youth cultural exchange that is Native Nations was shown to provide a transformational approach to tourism practice that moves beyond tourism aimed simply at capitalist accumulation (Fletcher et al., 2023), and it did this by pursuing tourism as justice in a way that combines Indigenous tourism with elements of regenerative tourism. Figure 1 conceptualised the linkages at play among these different elements, and showed both how Indigenous peoples as tourists, and as providers of cultural tourism experiences, can contribute to just and regenerative outcomes.

A key implication from this research for regenerative tourism scholarship and practice is that we need more attention to how people can be regenerated through tourism, rather than focusing primarily on nature. A tourism as justice approach would shift the dial from focusing largely on restoring damaged ecosystems, and ensure that it also seeks to heal social relations and injustices through tourism practices. Thus advocates of regenerative tourism could move beyond just acknowledging Indigenous values and concepts, and instead be inspired by these values to focus attention on people who are often excluded from tourism’s benefits, or those who historically or currently face injustice, seeking explicitly to achieve justice. As such, researchers interested in the transformational potential of tourism should consider the ‘tourism as justice’ framing. This is relevant both for those people who live in areas visited by tourists, and for those who want the opportunity to be consumers of more just forms of tourism. It is especially relevant for Indigenous people directing or running tourism businesses, and for Indigenous people as tourists. Such an approach need not detract from the fundamental commitment of regenerative tourism approaches to support and nurture nature; rather, it would encourage a more balanced approach to regenerating humans and nature together.

The fact that most tourism studies have overlooked Indigenous people’s roles as tourists, and what their aspirations and experiences are in this space, shows how far we as scholars still need to go to promote tourism as justice.

Notes

1. Massey University ethics notification 4000028815 for the project, 'Just' tourism, or Justice Tourism? Understanding tourism's role in achieving emancipatory development.
2. "Country is the term often used by Aboriginal peoples to describe the lands, waterways and seas to which they are connected. The term contains complex ideas about law, place, custom, language, spiritual belief, cultural practice, material sustenance, family and identity" (<https://aiatsis.gov.au/2024>).

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Author contributions

CRedit: **Regina Scheyvens**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Terina Kaire Gataulu**: Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

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