



From Sustainability to Regeneration

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The Portuguese version of this document is the binding version.

It begins with potential, not with problems

What we mean when we say regeneration, where the idea comes from, and why it begins with potential rather than problems

1. What Regeneration Is

Regeneration is the recovery of a place's own capacity to produce life.

Not life delivered to it, and not damage held at the door: the capacity itself, working again, and continuing after the people who set it going are no longer there.

This is not the Foundation's definition. It is the settled reading in a tradition of work some forty years old, whose provenance is set out at the end of this document. The Foundation works inside that tradition rather than alongside it.¹

It is worth separating this from three things it gets confused with. Restoration puts back something that was there. Conservation holds something where it is. Sustainability slows the rate at which something is lost. Regeneration is none of the three.

2. Potential, Not Problems

The starting point is the whole difference

Almost all environmental work begins with a problem. Something is wrong, it is measured, a target is set, and progress is the distance travelled away from the problem. It is a reasonable way to work. It is not what regeneration does.

Regenerative work begins instead from potential: what this place, with this history and these people, is uniquely capable of becoming. The problem is not ignored. It is simply not the thing being worked from.²

The difference is practical, and it shows in what gets asked. The problem-based question is: what is wrong here and how do we reduce it. The potential-based question is: what is this place capable of, what already works in it, and what would have to become possible for that to grow.

This is the focus Terra Agora Foundation intends to keep, in every conversation about land.

It carries a consequence worth stating plainly, because at first sight it looks like the opposite. The condition of a place is a fact the Foundation needs to know precisely: contamination, exhausted soil, unresolved legal history and everything else. Damaged land is not refused. But the damage is information, not the frame. What the work is built from is what the place could become.

¹The word regenerative applied to land comes from Robert Rodale in the 1980s. Regenerative development, and the method of working from Place, were originated by Regeneration, founded in 1995 in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Full references in the closing section.

²This is the sharpest distinction in the regenerative development tradition and the point at which it separates from the sustainability frame. See Mang and Haggard (2016) and Mang and Reed (2012), cited at the end.

And it changes who has to be in the room. A problem can be fixed for people. A potential can only be realised with them, because the potential is theirs as well.

3. What Sustainability Did Well, and Where It Stops

Sustainability asked the right question for its time: how do we reduce harm. Real gains came from it, in regulation, in measurement, and in what is now considered acceptable. None of that is to be thrown away, and the Foundation does not throw it away.

But there is a limit inside the question itself. A system doing 30% less harm is still losing. Where a landscape is already degraded, doing less harm holds it where it is. Portugal's uplands do not need to be held where they are.

4. It Is Not Ecology, and It Is Not Agriculture

Regeneration is often taken for a farming method or a habitat technique. Those are means, and good ones, but they are not the thing itself.

Soil recovers when the people working it can make a living from it. They can make a living when there is a route to market, a road, and somebody to sell to. There is a route to market when families stay, and families stay when there is a school, work, and a reason to be there. Work on one of these fronts alone and the others pull it back.

This is why regeneration is holistic by nature and not by philosophical preference. Every piece of work sits inside a larger one and has to serve it in order to last: a holding inside a valley, a valley inside a region, a region inside the water and fire behaviour of a whole country.³

5. It Begins When a Region's Practice Begins to Change

There is a threshold, and it is worth saying where it lies. A well tended parcel is a well tended parcel. Regeneration begins at the point where the way things have been done starts to change, and to change in a direction that produces more life than it consumes.

That is a change of practice, and practice is collective. It involves the people who work the land, the people who buy what comes off it, the people who decide how it is zoned, the people who teach in the school, the people who lend money, and the people who simply live there. None of them changes alone, and none of them changes by being told.

The Foundation does not regenerate land. It holds the land and the standard to which the land is cared for, so that the people doing the work can go on doing it. If the capability does not sit with the people in the place, the work does not outlast whoever started it.

6. Four Ways of Working, and How to Tell Which One You Are In

There is a useful distinction between four ways of working on a place: extract value; arrest disorder; do good; regenerate life.⁴

³The idea of nested wholes, and of Place as a socio-ecological whole with a history, belong to the same tradition cited at the end of this document.

⁴The levels of work come from Charles Krone, in organisational development. The levels of paradigm in the same lineage reached wide circulation through Carol Sanford.

The value of the list is not that it is a ladder of virtue. It is that it is a diagnostic. Any project can describe itself at one of these levels and work at another, and the difference shows on the ground long before it shows in the report.

The honest question to put to a project, the Foundation's own included, is not which level it says it is at. It is what would happen to the place if the project ended tomorrow.

7. Why Regeneration Requires Different Structures

If regeneration takes generations, then the structure carrying it has to outlast a contract, a funding cycle, and the people who began it. That is the problem the Foundation exists to solve, and it is a problem of ownership and governance before it is an ecological one.

Hence the distinction running through all of the Foundation's work: the Foundation cares for the ownership of the land; the Guardian cares for the land. Protected land with nobody caring for it degrades all the same; care without protected land is lost at the first sale.

A loss of natural capital in the Strategic Assets is not compensable by financial gain.

The Foundation's published horizon is seven generations.

Where This Thinking Comes From

The Foundation did not invent this definition and does not claim it

Regeneration has a lineage, and it is worth setting out: first because the Foundation works inside it, and second because a reader is entitled to check.

- The word regenerative applied to land comes from Robert Rodale, in the 1980s, arguing for going beyond sustaining agricultural resources to renewing them.
- Regenerative design comes from John Tillman Lyle, used from the 1970s and set out in *Regenerative Design for Sustainable Development*, Wiley, 1994.
- Regenerative development, and the body of method for working from Place, were originated by Regenesys, founded in 1995 in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The reference work is Mang, P., Haggard, B. and Regenesys, *Regenerative Development and Design: A Framework for Evolving Sustainability*, Wiley, 2016; see also Mang, P. and Reed, B., «Designing from place: a regenerative framework and methodology», *Building Research and Information*, volume 40, number 1, 2012.
- The levels of work come from Charles Krone, in organisational development; the levels of paradigm in the same lineage reached wide circulation through Carol Sanford.
- The Five Capitals, referred to in other Foundation material, come from Forum for the Future, with Paul Ekins as technical antecedent. They are not a Regenesys framework.
- The Four Returns, inspirational, social, natural and financial, are the work of Willem Ferwerda, developed by Commonland.

The Foundation's contribution is not to this body of thought. It is to a different question: what has to be true in law and in ownership for such work to continue across generations. That is a Portuguese question, and it has a Portuguese answer.

Closing

Sustainability asked how to lose less. Regeneration asks what this place is capable of, and who has to be involved for that to happen.

The second question is harder, slower and less easily measured in a year. It is also the only one whose answer holds after we are gone.

Invitation

If you would like to understand how this distinction turns into concrete decisions about land, the invitation is to a conversation.

Terra Agora Foundation