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Cannabis Agritourism and Local Pathways Toward Sustainable Development Goals in Northern California

Susan Dupej[1] ⓘ | Hwansuk Chris Choi[1] ⓘ | Jingen Liang[2]

[1]School of Hospitality, Food and Tourism Management, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, Canada | [2]McDougall Faculty of Business, University of Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Canada

Correspondence: Hwansuk Chris Choi (hwchoi@uoguelph.ca)

ABSTRACT

Recent acceleration in global cannabis legalization offers a new context for examining the multiscale links between agritourism, sustainability, and international policy frameworks. In this study, Responsible Tourism is used to conceptualize cannabis agritourism in Northern California's Emerald Triangle as a strategy that may advance targets of two United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, Goal 8—Decent Work and Economic Growth and Goal 12—Responsible Production and Consumption. The Emerald Triangle is historically world-renowned for cannabis cultivation and uniquely positioned to offer commercial cannabis farm tours. Using qualitative research centered on legacy producer perspectives, this study situates agritourism within debates of localization, regenerative tourism, and postprohibition economic restructuring. Drawing on participant observation across five farms and seven dispensaries, supplemented by interviews with 20 stakeholders including tour guides, small-scale farmers, and dispensary staff. Responsible Tourism analysis reveals four locally embedded pathways through which SDG targets may potentially be operationalized, preserving cultural heritage, creating conditions for regenerative farming practices, nurturing participatory governance among legacy producer networks, and encouraging sustainable consumption patterns. These findings demonstrate how locally practiced sustainability, as articulated by small-scale cultivators, aligns with calls to understand global goals from the bottom up, while highlighting the need for broader stakeholder inclusion in future research.

1 | Introduction

Although tourism contributes to multiple UN Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and Goal 12 (Responsible Production and Consumption) (UNWTO 2018), the processes through which global sustainability targets are translated into place-specific, community-driven practices remain undertheorized (Reed and Bruyneel 2010; Sever et al. 2025). This "localization" challenge is acute in rural agritourism, where evidence remains limited regarding capacity to reconcile competing stakeholder interests, manage resource pressures, and operate within multi-level governance systems (Sonnino 2004; Ammirato et al. 2020; Scheyvens and Cheer 2021). More fundamentally, scholarship has insufficiently examined how contested commodity sectors navigating postprohibition transitions can serve as vehicles for advancing the SDGs.

The recent acceleration in global cannabis legalization (Yousufzai et al. 2023) provides an unprecedented context for addressing these gaps. California's Proposition 64 (2016) legalized recreational cannabis, catalyzing tourism-driven farm diversification in Northern California's Emerald Triangle (Mendocino, Humboldt, and Trinity Counties), a historically renowned cannabis-producing region. Cannabis fields, once concealed to evade law enforcement, now serve as tourism resources. Since 2018, small-scale tour operators have collaborated with independent farmers to deliver immersive experiences integrating

farm visits, cultivation education, and supply chain transparency. Post-COVID-19, these tours gained prominence as alternatives to international travel (Rust and Cole 2020), yet critical examination of how such initiatives may operationalize sustainability goals within stigmatized, rapidly consolidating markets remains absent.

We deploy the Responsible Tourism framework as an analytical lens to examine how cannabis agritourism in the Emerald Triangle creates pathways potentially advancing SDG targets through locally embedded pathways. Responsible Tourism prioritizes creating "better places for people to live in, as well as to visit" (Goodwin 2016, 5) by "cultivating the local" (Goodwin 2011) over externally imposed growth logics. Although Responsible Tourism principles align conceptually with SDG objectives (Burrai et al. 2019; Maton 2024), empirical evidence substantiating its efficacy as a localization and delivery mechanism remains scarce (Fennell 2008). By integrating Responsible Tourism with regenerative tourism principles, this study investigates how cannabis agritourism translates global sustainability ambitions into practice through stakeholder narratives, governance arrangements, and place-based agricultural systems.

Drawing on participant observation across five farms and seven dispensaries, supplemented by 20 in-depth stakeholder interviews with tour guides, small-scale cannabis farmers, dispensary staff, tourism officials, and local entrepreneurs, abductive analysis reveals four locally embedded mechanisms through which cannabis agritourism demonstrates potential for advancing SDG 8 and 12 targets (heritage preservation through authentic storytelling), regenerative agricultural practices reflecting regional terroir, participatory governance enabling small producer resilience, and sustainable consumption education reconnecting producers and consumers. These pathways illustrate how contested commodities may advance global goals when development strategies cultivate rather than extract from local capacities. Importantly, these findings reflect legacy producer perspectives accessed through trust networks, highlighting the need for future research incorporating corporate cultivators and farmworker experiences to comprehensively assess equity dimensions of SDG localization.

The study makes three contributions. Empirically, it provides the first systematic examination of cannabis agritourism as a potential SDG delivery pathway, addressing calls for evidence-based investigations of how local agendas may advance global goals from the bottom up (Moallemi et al. 2020). Theoretically, it advances Responsible Tourism scholarship by demonstrating its utility as an analytical framework connecting micro-level farm practices to meso-level destination structures and macro-level policy frames, revealing the scalar politics of sustainability localization in emerging legal industries. Practically, it offers actionable insights for tourism practitioners, policymakers, and destination managers seeking to align tourism development with SDG achievement in contested commodity sectors. While sustainable tourism development has been critiqued for privileging economic growth over environmental and social equity (Bellato et al. 2022), this research demonstrates that small-scale producer-led sustainability, grounded in Responsible Tourism principles, may simultaneously protect heritage, regenerate ecosystems, and redistribute economic benefits, thus contributing to interdisciplinary approaches to advancing sustainable development in complex, transitioning contexts.

2 | Literature Review

2.1 | Agritourism, Sustainable Development, and Regenerative Agriculture

Agritourism encompasses educational and recreational activities within agricultural contexts that connect visitors to agrarian environments, products, and place-based experiences (Arroyo et al. 2013; Haugen and Vik 2008). Beyond economic diversification, agritourism contributes to sustainable rural development by preserving agricultural heritage, strengthening community bonds, expanding markets for local producers, and educating visitors about sustainable agriculture (Bhatta et al. 2025; Ghadiri-Masoum et al. 2020), enabling tourism planning alongside agricultural livelihoods (Kim et al. 2017; Ammirato et al. 2020). Although agritourism has been conceptualized primarily through food and wine sectors, recent frameworks emphasize regenerative agriculture as a strategic model (Baipai et al. 2023; Pearson et al. 2024).

Regenerative agriculture, long associated with ecological restoration (Mang and Reed 2020), aligns with living systems approaches that emphasize holistic, place-based strategies considering the interconnected nature of social-ecological systems (Farrell and Twining-Ward 2004; Pollock 2019; Dredge 2022). In tourism contexts, regenerative approaches embed local practices at the centre of human-nature relationships (Bellato and Cheer 2021; Bellato and Pollock 2023), challenging industrial tourism paradigms driven primarily by economic growth (Ateljevic 2020). Regenerative design entails developing community capabilities for contributing to healthy living systems (Bellato and Pollock 2023), positioning stakeholders as stewards rather than extractors. Wine tourism exemplifies this model, where regenerative viticulture creates conditions for mutually beneficial outcomes for agriculture, rural communities, and visitor experiences (Dietz and Neumayer 2007; Pearson et al. 2024).

Critically, aligning community-driven priorities with international sustainability agendas requires navigating scalar dimensions across local practices, regional governance, and global policy frameworks (Dredge 2022). This scalar negotiation remains unexamined in contested commodity sectors transitioning from illicit to legal economies. Cannabis cultivation presents a strategic case for investigating how regenerative agritourism principles are negotiated across local, state, and global scales, revealing opportunities and tensions within postprohibition contexts (Corva and Meisel 2021), yet its potential as an agritourism model remains unexplored despite structural similarities to wine.

2.2 | Responsible Tourism as Framework for SDG Localization

Responsible Tourism, grounded in localism and prioritizing host community benefits (Burrai et al. 2019), rejects extractive

systems in favor of redistributing tourism benefits to strengthen local resilience (Mura and Wijesinghe 2023). It positions tourism development as a vehicle for social-environmental transformation (Goodwin 2016; Cheer et al. 2021), integrating community wellbeing with balanced host-guest relationships (Hanafiah et al. 2016). As a cross-cutting practice-based model (Burrai et al. 2019; Husbands and Harrison 1996), Responsible Tourism operationalizes sustainability principles across diverse sectors (Mihalic 2016), embodied in Goodwin's (2011) metaphor of "cultivating the local," wherein local-level strategies advance global sustainability agendas (Reddy 2016). Although Responsible Tourism principles align conceptually with SDG objectives (Maton 2024), empirical evidence substantiating its efficacy as a delivery mechanism remains limited (Fennell 2008; Burrai et al. 2019).

2.2.1 | SDG Localization, Debates, and Operational Challenges

Localization, the process of adapting global sustainability targets to subnational contexts while respecting local agency and priorities (Reddy 2016; Sachs et al. 2019), has emerged as a critical yet contested mechanism for SDG achievement. Current approaches reflect tensions between top-down government-led strategic planning (Guarini et al. 2022) and bottom-up, community-driven practice (Movono and Hughes 2020). Although the United Nations emphasizes localization as essential for contextualizing the 2030 Agenda, scholars argue the concept remains "politically contested, variably interpreted, and without coherent operational frameworks" (Sever et al. 2025, X), particularly regarding how nonstate actors translate universal goals into situated action (Moallemi et al. 2020). Tourism's role in SDG localization remains undertheorized (Scheyvens and Biddulph 2018), despite its multi-scalar nature and capacity to mediate between local livelihoods, regional governance, and global policy discourse (Hall 2011; Dredge 2022). Evidence-based investigations of how place-based tourism initiatives may advance SDGs from the bottom up are urgently needed (Jiménez-Aceituno et al. 2020).

Cannabis agritourism in postprohibition contexts exemplifies these localization challenges. Legalization creates opportunities for integrating stigmatized commodity production into sustainable development frameworks, yet regulatory flux, corporate consolidation, and cultural contestation complicate governance across scales. This study applies Responsible Tourism as an analytical lens to examine how locally embedded tourism practices may operationalize SDG targets through stakeholder narratives, governance arrangements, and agricultural systems, thereby revealing the scalar politics of sustainability localization in contested sectors. Such an approach extends localization scholarship beyond formal government plans (Reddy 2016; Guarini et al. 2022) to incorporate cultural norms, social values, and trust-based relationships underpinning community partnerships (Movono and Hughes 2020), addressing gaps in agritourism literature regarding sustainability as lived practice (Bellato et al. 2022). Table 1 synthesizes the conceptual logics of regenerative agritourism, Responsible Tourism, and SDGs

across definitions, stakeholders, spatial scales, and anticipated outcomes (Haugen and Vik 2008; Goodwin 2016; UN 2015; Scheyvens and Cheer 2021).

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework guiding this investigation. Cannabis agritourism practices at the micro scale generate four localized pathways that, when analyzed through the Responsible Tourism lens, reveal mechanisms through which SDG 8 and 12 targets may potentially be advanced. This bottom-up localization process demonstrates how contested commodity sectors may advance global sustainability goals through locally embedded tourism development strategies.

2.3 | Cannabis Tourism

Cannabis has emerged as a legitimate tourism research domain, with scholarship examining resident perceptions (Kang and Lee 2018), tourist motivations (Wen et al. 2018), and regulatory frameworks shaping industry growth (Dupej and Choi 2025). In legal contexts, the development of recreational products and place-based experiences (Kang and Lee 2021; Dupej and Nepal 2021) reflects cannabis integration into broader leisure economies (Kang et al. 2016), yet historically entrenched stigma remains a barrier to sustainable economic development (Kang and Lee 2018; Pachmayer et al. 2021). Tourism functions as a normalization vehicle by reinforcing nondeviant perceptions through interpretive, educational, and narrative-based engagements extending beyond consumption (Dupej and Nepal 2021). Guided tours and curated storytelling cultivate legitimacy, enabling visitors to challenge stigma (Keul and Eisenhauer 2019). As tolerance increases (Kang et al. 2016), conceptual frameworks must move beyond deviance models to account for regulated, postprohibition market dynamics.

Cannabis agritourism, positioned at the intersection of contested commodity production and sustainable tourism development, presents unique localization challenges. Postprohibition transitions create governance complexities that require navigating regulatory flux, corporate consolidation pressures, and cultural contestation across scales. Responsible cannabis consumption has emerged as a shared policy and industry priority (Dupej and Choi 2025). Yet, while tourism is recognized as strategically important for the cannabis sector's development (Claesgens and Kraft 2018), the potential of cannabis agritourism as a mechanism for advancing the SDGs through locally embedded, regenerative practices remains unexamined. This gap is particularly critical given cannabis cultivation's historical association with environmental stewardship in regions such as Northern California's Emerald Triangle, where legacy farmers have long practiced sustainable agriculture despite prohibition's constraints (Corva and Meisel 2021). Understanding how cannabis agritourism may operationalize Responsible Tourism principles and potentially translate global sustainability targets into place-based pathways, thus addressing empirical and theoretical gaps at the nexus of contested commodity transitions, agritourism scholarship, and SDG localization.

TABLE 1 | Comparative summary of regenerative agritourism, responsible tourism, and sustainable development goals.

Dimension	Regenerative agritourism	Responsible tourism	Sustainable development goals	Integration in cannabis agritourism
Core logic	Agriculture-based tourism promoting ecological regeneration and heritage preservation	Tourism prioritizing local well-being, benefit redistribution, and ethical stakeholder practices	Global framework targeting economic, social, and environmental sustainability across 17 goals and 169 targets	Localized pathways demonstrating potential mechanisms for advancing SDG 8 and 12 through place-based practices
Primary actors	Farmers, local producers, agritourism operators	Host communities, tourists, small-scale enterprises	International institutions, national/local governments, civil society	Legacy farmers, tour guides, dispensaries, tourism officials, small-scale producer networks
Spatial scale	Localized, farm-level	Community-level, destination-embedded	Global/national/local multi-scalar integration	Micro (farm practices) ↔ Meso (regional governance) ↔ Macro (SDG targets)
Localization mechanism	Terroir, place-based cultivation methods	"Cultivating the local" through community-driven development	Translating universal targets into context-specific strategies	Heritage storytelling, regenerative agriculture, participatory governance among legacy producers, consumer education
Sustainability contribution	Ecosystem restoration, agricultural heritage, producer livelihoods	Societal improvement, balanced host-guest relations, local capacity building	Comprehensive sectoral sustainability addressing poverty, inequality, climate action	SDG 8.3, 8.4, 8.9: Decent work, resource efficiency, cultural heritage tourism; SDG 12.2: Sustainable resource use

Note: This framework synthesizes three conceptual approaches guiding the analysis of cannabis agritourism as an SDG delivery mechanism. The rightmost column demonstrates how empirical findings operationalize theoretical principles through scalar integration and localized pathways.

Conceptual-Operational Framework for Cannabis Agritourism as SDG Localization Mechanism
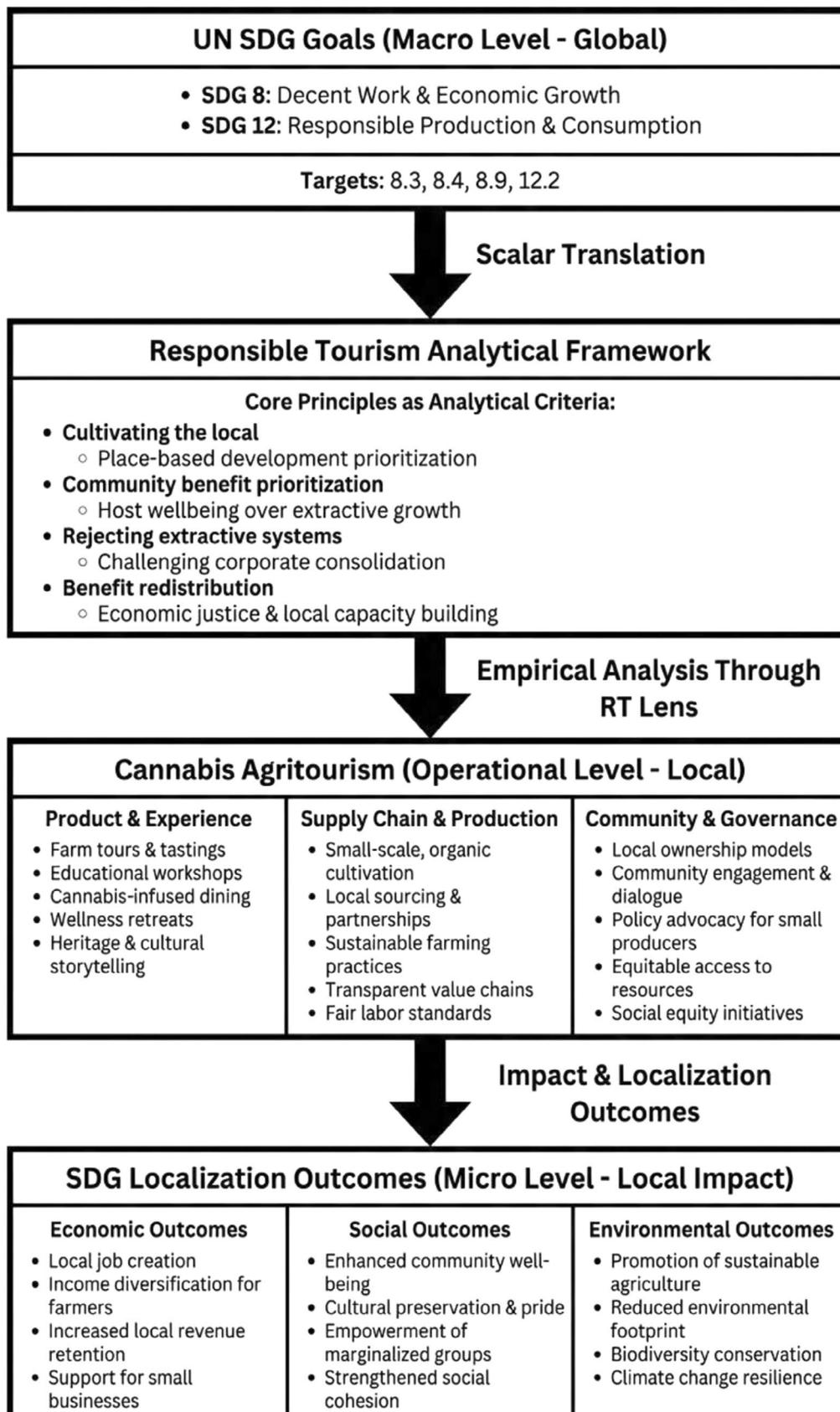
UN SDG Goals (Macro Level - Global)

- **SDG 8:** Decent Work & Economic Growth
- **SDG 12:** Responsible Production & Consumption

Targets: 8.3, 8.4, 8.9, 12.2

Scalar Translation

Responsible Tourism Analytical Framework

Core Principles as Analytical Criteria:

- **Cultivating the local**
  - Place-based development prioritization
- **Community benefit prioritization**
  - Host wellbeing over extractive growth
- **Rejecting extractive systems**
  - Challenging corporate consolidation
- **Benefit redistribution**
  - Economic justice & local capacity building

Empirical Analysis Through RT Lens

Cannabis Agritourism (Operational Level - Local)

Product & Experience	Supply Chain & Production	Community & Governance
• Farm tours & tastings • Educational workshops • Cannabis-infused dining • Wellness retreats • Heritage & cultural storytelling	• Small-scale, organic cultivation • Local sourcing & partnerships • Sustainable farming practices • Transparent value chains • Fair labor standards	• Local ownership models • Community engagement & dialogue • Policy advocacy for small producers • Equitable access to resources • Social equity initiatives

Impact & Localization Outcomes

SDG Localization Outcomes (Micro Level - Local Impact)

Economic Outcomes	Social Outcomes	Environmental Outcomes
• Local job creation • Income diversification for farmers • Increased local revenue retention • Support for small businesses	• Enhanced community well-being • Cultural preservation & pride • Empowerment of marginalized groups • Strengthened social cohesion	• Promotion of sustainable agriculture • Reduced environmental footprint • Biodiversity conservation • Climate change resilience

FIGURE 1 | Legend on next page.

FIGURE 1 | Conceptual framework for cannabis agritourism as a mechanism for SDG localization through responsible tourism. This framework synthesizes three conceptual approaches to guide the analysis of cannabis agritourism as a potential mechanism for advancing the SDGs. The four pathways reflect legacy producer perspectives and demonstrate mechanisms for operationalizing SDG principles through scalar integration and locally embedded practices. Future research should incorporate diverse stakeholder perspectives, including corporate cultivators and farmworkers, to comprehensively assess equity dimensions of SDG localization.
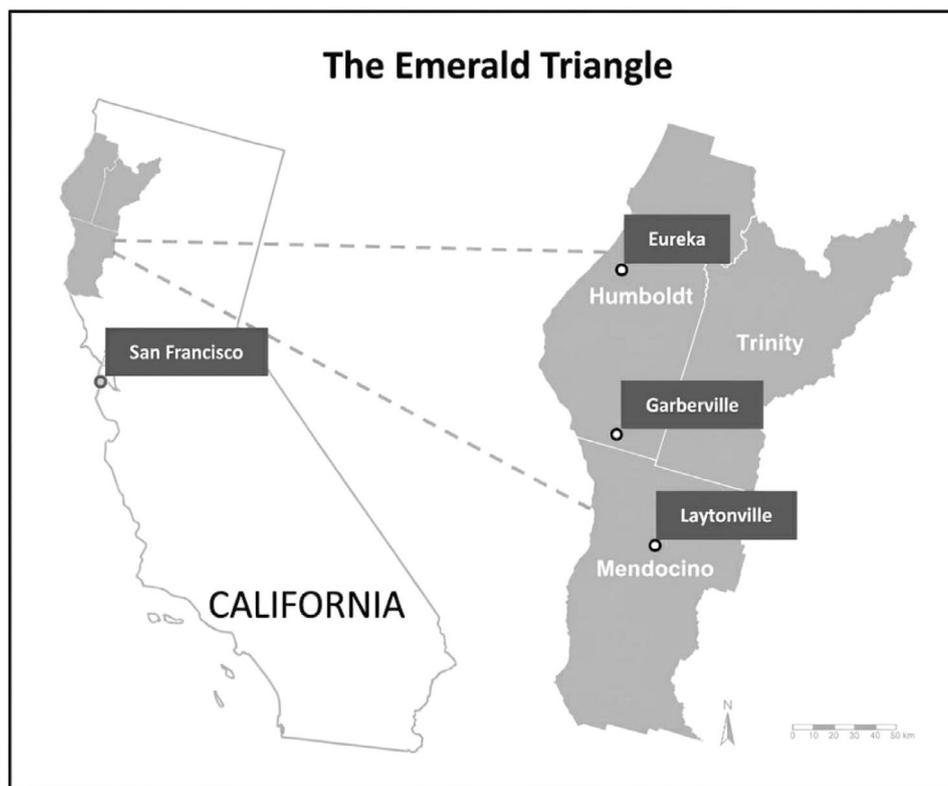
FIGURE 2 | Map of the Emerald Triangle in Northern California (author-generated map).

3 | Methods

3.1 | Location

Northern California's renowned legacy for outdoor cannabis cultivation (Meisel et al. 2023), combined with California's rare legal provision for commercial cannabis farm tours, positions the Emerald Triangle (Mendocino, Humboldt, Trinity Counties) as a strategically significant case for examining cannabis agritourism (Figure 2). This tri-county region has long been embedded in global cannabis narratives, where production systems intersect with countercultural traditions, environmental activism, and evolving regulatory frameworks.

The cannabis agritourism sector is small-scale and relationship-driven, reflecting independent cultivators and limited specialist tour operators. Typical group sizes range from two to six participants, with tours departing from San Francisco and Eureka. Itineraries combine exclusive farm access, facilitated through trust networks between guides and growers, with visits to artisanal wineries and locally distinctive attractions. Experiences range from single-day excursions into Mendocino's wine country to multi-day journeys through

Humboldt's Redwood forests and Pacific coastline. Tour guides function as gatekeepers connecting visitors to otherwise inaccessible production landscapes.

Geographically and socially, the Emerald Triangle delineates a coherent spatial unit for analysis, functioning as both cultural landscape and policy-defined jurisdiction (Lune and Berg 2017). The region's blend of ecological assets, community identity, and regulatory allowances (Bogdan and Biklen 2003) provides a unique context for exploring tourism-agriculture linkages. Case study methodology's adaptability (Swanson and Holton 2005) enables contextually rich, theoretically informed examination. The in-depth focus on a single setting captures locally embedded practices while generating analytical insights informing broader debates on cannabis agritourism's potential contribution to sustainable and regenerative rural development.

3.2 | Data Collection

Fieldwork conducted over 2 weeks centered on participant observation to document the phenomenon in situ and

capture meanings embedded in everyday tourism-agriculture interactions (Burgess 2002). A supply-side perspective enabled the identification of legacy producer-defined priorities and strategies aligning with broader sustainability agendas.

The researcher adopted a dual role as agritourist and critical scholar, gaining experiential perspective while interrogating how experiences were curated (Lune and Berg 2017). This positionality facilitated observations of how service providers, particularly tour guides, mediate visitor access to cannabis farms and interpret cultural and regulatory narratives. Trust networks with local guides enabled access to otherwise inaccessible sites, shaping the breadth and depth. Access was mediated through tour operators and legacy farming networks established during Northern California's pre-legalization medical cannabis era, creating sampling conditions that privileged small-scale cultivator perspectives. Fieldwork encompassed five farms and seven dispensaries, offering direct insight into the constellation of social actors, networks, and material resources underpinning the regional agritourism product as experienced through legacy producer networks.

Twenty semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with key stakeholders—tour guides ($n = 3$), cannabis farmers ($n = 7$), dispensary staff ($n = 4$), lounge managers ($n = 2$), tourism officials ($n = 2$), and local entrepreneurs ($n = 2$). Conversations, lasting 1.5–3 h, were often embedded within tour experiences, integrating mobile methodologies (Hanna et al. 2021) that foreground movement through landscapes as both method and subject of inquiry. Geographical embeddedness enabled systematic documentation of spatial flows, routes, and place-based interactions (Jones et al. 2008).

Interviews followed a flexible conversational structure (Valentine 1997), activating participant knowledge through informal dialogue while ensuring thematic coverage (Squire 1994), accommodating variability in lived experiences and supporting the emergence of unanticipated insights (Berglund 2007). Data were recorded in a reflexive field journal, via voice recordings, and in verbatim transcripts, which informed subsequent analysis. Reflexive journaling mitigated bias and enhanced methodological transparency.

Researcher positionality shaped data access and interpretation. The research team, comprising Canadian scholars with expertise in sustainable tourism and agritourism, approached cannabis contexts using frameworks from conventional agritourism scholarship. Team composition (Caucasian female, 40s; Asian male, 50s; Asian female, 30s) likely facilitated rapport within predominantly white legacy producer networks while limiting access to corporate operators and racialized farmworkers (Hmong and Latinx agricultural laborers). Dual participant-observer roles required negotiating analytical distance and experiential immersion. Reflexive journaling documented how prolonged engagement with legacy producer narratives shaped interpretations. At the same time, peer debriefing among team members and with two external qualitative researchers addressed potential confirmation bias from extended immersion in small-scale cultivator perspectives.

3.3 | Analysis

Data analysis employed an abductive approach (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), integrating systematic inductive coding with theoretically informed interpretation. Abductive analysis acknowledges that researcher's approach data with existing conceptual sensitivities (Responsible Tourism principles and SDG frameworks) while remaining open to patterns that challenge initial assumptions. This approach addresses the study's dual objectives, understanding cannabis agritourism's distinctive characteristics (inductive) and assessing its relationships to established sustainability frameworks (deductive).

Analysis proceeded iteratively throughout the data collection period. Initial interviews were coded inductively, generating descriptive categories regarding tour content, participant motivations, sustainability practices, and governance challenges. Simultaneously, Responsible Tourism principles and SDG targets served as sensitizing concepts (Blumer 1954) alerting analytical attention to dimensions of localism, benefit distribution, heritage preservation, and resource stewardship. As patterns emerged suggesting connections between observed practices and SDG operationalization mechanisms, subsequent interviews specifically probed these dimensions through targeted questions while maintaining openness to disconfirming evidence and alternative interpretations.

Participant observations and 20 interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, yielding approximately 35 h of audio and 250 pages of text. The dataset was supplemented with field notes and spatially referenced observations situating findings within the Emerald Triangle's physical and socio-cultural landscapes. Transcripts were uploaded to NVivo 14 (QSR International) for systematic coding and retrieval.

Open coding of the first eight interviews generated 87 initial codes describing farm practices, heritage narratives, governance structures, market dynamics, regulatory challenges, and visitor experiences. Categorical labels remained sufficiently broad to accommodate diverse stakeholder perspectives while retaining thematic integrity and contextual specificity (Cresswell and Eklund 2007). Broad thematic domains emerged, including regenerative farming practices, storytelling as a legitimization mechanism, and tensions between legacy-oriented and corporate-oriented operators (Williams and Moser 2019), establishing foundations for subsequent refinement.

Iterative cross-case comparisons refined and merged categories into coherent themes, discovering crucial patterns (Lune and Berg 2017). Axial coding organized these initial codes into 23 categories examining relationships between tourism practices and sustainability outcomes, attentive to how these patterns resonated with or diverged from Responsible Tourism and SDG principles (Corbin and Strauss 2015). This process illuminated linkages between micro-level practices (farm cultivation methods), meso-level industry structures (supply chain configurations, tour operator networks), and macro-level regulatory and policy frameworks (state licensing, SDG targets) (Linneberg and Korsgaard 2019). For example, initial codes "terroir narratives," "legacy genetics,"

and "consumer education" were grouped under the category "Heritage and Place-Based Authenticity," which through axial coding revealed causal relationships wherein legalization functioned as a condition enabling corporate consolidation as a phenomenon, prompting heritage tourism to emerge as a potential preservation mechanism as a strategy, thereby creating potential pathways toward SDG 8.9 advancement as a consequence. Selective coding identified four core pathways that integrated empirical patterns with theoretical frameworks. Importantly, although these pathways demonstrated alignment with existing constructs, they also revealed context-specific mechanisms (particularly heritage narratives functioning as governance resources and terroir operating as legitimacy claims) not previously theorized in Responsible Tourism scholarship, demonstrating the abductive approach's capacity to generate novel insights through dialogue between data and theory.

Thematic saturation was evidenced by Interview 16, with the final four interviews confirming existing patterns without introducing substantively new dimensions. Themes were woven into thick, spatially anchored narratives capturing broader societal contexts, multi-scalar governance influences, and participant experience diversity (Uprichard and Byrne 2006). This approach enabled interpretation of legacy producer-driven agritourism practices while considering implications for sustainable rural development strategies in cannabis-producing regions globally.

To enhance credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba 1985), several strategies were employed. Prolonged engagement (2 weeks immersive fieldwork) enabled deep contextual understanding. Data triangulation across participant observation, interviews, and material artifacts (dispensary displays, tour marketing materials) strengthened interpretive validity. Member checking was conducted with three key participants (one tour guide, two farmers) 3 months postfieldwork via email and phone conversations. Participants confirmed interpretive accuracy and prompted two clarifications regarding living soil terminology and federal-state legal tensions. Triangulation patterns emerged. Farmer narratives regarding no-till cultivation were directly corroborated through field observation across five farms, and dispensary staff independently confirmed supply chain partnerships validating tour guide claims. This multi-method triangulation, combined with prolonged engagement and thematic saturation (evidenced by Interview 16), provides warrant for interpretive trustworthiness. Peer debriefing among research team members and with two external colleagues specializing in sustainable tourism and qualitative methods provided external audit of emerging interpretations. Detailed audit trails documenting coding decisions, analytic memos, and reflexive journals enable retrospective scrutiny. Thick description and verbatim quotes enable readers to assess transferability (Geertz 1973).

4 | Findings

Cannabis agritourism reveals four pathways through which SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 12 (Responsible Production and Consumption) targets may potentially be advanced via the Responsible Tourism lens. Goal

8 promotes employment-driven economic growth while safeguarding environmental integrity; Goal 12 emphasizes resource-efficient, ethical consumption and production practices (UNWTO 2018). The following analysis demonstrates how legacy producer-driven cannabis agritourism creates mechanisms potentially operationalizing these global targets through place-specific mechanisms.

4.1 | Heritage Narratives as Governance Claims and Resistance to Corporate Consolidation

Heritage narratives in cannabis agritourism function as more than cultural assets; they operate as governance resources through which legacy stakeholders assert legitimacy and resist marginalization within rapidly consolidating markets. Storytelling becomes a mechanism for preserving the Emerald Triangle's cannabis heritage while creating conditions potentially supporting Target 8.9, which promotes sustainable tourism, creating jobs while fostering local culture and products. In contexts of contested commodity transitions, whose stories are told, through what channels, and with what authority shapes not only tourist experiences but also the distribution of symbolic and economic capital across scales.

California's legalization triggered a shift from small-scale craft cultivation to large corporate entry, threatening heritage survival. Stakeholders frame corporate expansion as incompatible with authenticity. "Big cannabis corporations have come into the region [Humboldt] and are more concerned about pound per square footage [than heritage]." (Farmer C); "Cookies dispensaries are in all the hottest spots, even in Thailand, but it has no roots here. It is a total mismatch to the living history." (Tour Guide A).

These statements reveal underlying tensions between production logics. Corporate actors prioritize yield efficiency and brand scalability, whereas legacy operators embed cultivation within place-based identities and multigenerational knowledge systems. Tourism emerges as a preservation mechanism countering homogenization. "Stories are being preserved; a legacy is being preserved; a way of life." (Tourism Official D).

Cannabis cultivation in the Emerald Triangle connects to San Francisco's countercultural movement (1960s) and LGBTQ+ medical cannabis advocacy (1980s–1990s). Proposition 215 (1996) made San Francisco the epicenter of national drug policy reform, ushering in statewide medical cannabis legalization (Gieringer 1999). This urban–rural symbiosis is materially inscribed in Flore Dispensary's mural in the Castro District, locally termed "birthplace of legal cannabis." "None of what happened in San Francisco could have happened without what was going on up in Humboldt for the past 70–80 years." (Tour Guide A).

The back-to-the-land movement (1960s–1970s) saw urban migrants seeking communal, sustainable lifestyles in rural Northern California. Although initially unrelated to cannabis, returning Vietnam War soldiers brought seeds that thrived in the region's mountains. Despite illegality, cannabis sustained livelihoods and local development (Meisel et al. 2023).

> Humboldt was where people came to get lost, on purpose. There is a whole lot of nothing out here. Humboldt is a pretty good place to disappear.
>
> (Tour Guide A)

Highway 101 (Redwood Highway) functions as both material infrastructure and symbolic connector, linking San Francisco to the Emerald Triangle. For tourists, the journey evokes back-to-the-land migration and prohibition-era commutes.

> Driving up this road tells a story of the outlaw. It captures the spirit of a unique community and counterculture.
>
> (Tour Guide A)

The "outlaw" narrative is not mere nostalgia; it functions as a legitimacy claim asserting that risk-taking under prohibition justifies continued market participation postlegalization. Remote terrain and Redwood canopy concealed crops from The Campaign Against Marijuana Planting (CAMP) in the 1980s. "There are relics of old grows up here; back from the CAMP days; helicopter enforcement was so strong that grows were eventually pushed to indoor situations. Indoor grows in California in this area are a product of prohibition." (Farmer E).

Farms visited on tours are directly connected to this heritage. Personal resonance with urban activism or rural cultivation forms a shared identity (Schofield 2014), conveying knowledge of interdependent living systems consistent with regenerative tourism paradigms (Bellato 2024).

This pathway demonstrates potential mechanisms for advancing SDG 8.9 by creating employment through culturally embedded tourism while fostering local products and heritage. Theoretically, it reveals heritage storytelling as a governance mechanism. Narratives become claims to legitimacy, market access, and participatory rights within postprohibition regulatory arrangements. However, heritage claims can be exclusionary. Tour access mediated through trust networks may privilege established (predominantly white, male) growers while marginalizing newer entrants or non-English-speaking cultivators (Hmong, Latinx farmworkers). Future research should interrogate whose heritage is preserved and whose remains invisible within "legacy producer-led" tourism development.

4.2 | Regenerative Agriculture as Terroir-Based Stewardship in Tourism Product Identity

Regenerative agricultural practices function as both an ecological strategy and a market differentiation mechanism, offering pathways potentially supporting Target 12.2 on sustainable resource use. In cannabis agritourism, regenerative farming transcends technical cultivation methods to become a core element of place-based product identity, what farmers term "terroir." This pathway reveals how environmental stewardship practices are made visible and marketable through tourism, positioning farmers as regenerative system stewards rather than extractive producers. The visibility of cultivation methods through farm tours creates accountability mechanisms linking consumer education to sustainable purchasing patterns, thus illustrating how SDG 12.2 principles might be operationalized across production and consumption dimensions.

Farmers in Humboldt County embody a cultural economy linking cannabis livelihoods to environmental and local sustainability (Meisel et al. 2023). Although farm styles vary, cannabis cultivation is historically defined by regenerative practices central to regional identity.

> Regenerative agriculture is part of this place. We rebuild the soil with cannabis. I think we are creating models here for what regenerative farming can look like.
>
> (Farmer F)

This statement positions regenerative agriculture not as an imported best practice but as a place-embedded tradition. Similar to wine (LaCanne and Lundgren 2018; Dias et al. 2023), cannabis cultivation reflects local ecosystems, representing sustainable practices that connect consumers to source. Specific techniques include no-till cultivation improving topsoil (Kaur and Kander 2023), carbon sequestration (Raihan 2023), and living soil systems. "No till is a big part of living soils. Tilling contributes to climate change, but the earth needs to be covered at all times. We are constantly sequestering carbon. We leave all the old stumps in the ground so that the new plants can retrace the biology of past plants; there is memory there. The polyculture of native plants nurtures the environment, too; the leaves drop and go back into feeding the soil biology." (Farmer E).

This quote reveals ecological knowledge extending beyond instrumental rationality toward relational understanding of soil as a living system possessing "memory." The retention of root systems, polyculture integration, and soil coverage reflect principles of regenerative design that align cultivation with ecosystem health rather than maximizing short-term yields (Dredge 2022). Such practices contrast sharply with industrial cultivation models prioritizing efficiency over ecological integrity.

Terroir, the concept linking geographic specificity to product character, emerges as central organizing logic. "Terroir is the flavor of the region. Native plants love the native environment; the Redwoods, the ocean, the onsite composting, and the native soil. It is regenerative soil. The plant is an expression of the soil." (Farmer G).

Terroir functions as more than marketing language; it embeds environmental conditions, cultural practices, and place identity into product valuation (Paquette and Zhou 2021). By framing cannabis as "expression of soil," farmers position their product within broader ecological assemblages, rendering environmental practices legible and valuable to consumers. This agricultural philosophy translates effectively for tourism. "We use local soil, local water, local pollination; these are the resources of the region that are preserved in the product." (Farmer C).

Local resource use becomes a product feature rather than a production constraint, reframing sustainability as a quality marker.

Legacy genetics preservation further strengthens this positioning. "You cannot get these genetics anywhere else. If these farms disappear, so will their genetics. It's troubling because we might miss an opportunity to find cures." (Farmer G).

This statement connects agrobiodiversity conservation to potential medical applications, elevating legacy genetics from niche interest to public good. Farm tours render these cultivation philosophies and techniques visible, enabling visitors to witness regenerative practices firsthand. Educational encounters reduce stigma while connecting consumers directly to farmers and sustainable methods (Petroman et al. 2016; Rong-Da Liang 2017), positioning tourism hosts as stewards of regenerative systems (Bellato et al. 2022).

This pathway offers mechanisms that could support SDG 12.2 by improving resource efficiency in both production (regenerative cultivation that reduces environmental footprints) and consumption (educated consumers who value sustainability-embedded products). Theoretically, it demonstrates how agritourism makes environmental practices visible and accountable, creating market incentives for continued ecological stewardship. The terroir concept bridges local ecological knowledge and global sustainability discourse, enabling place-specific practices to potentially advance universal targets. However, "regenerative" risks becoming diluted through marketing appropriation without verification mechanisms. Future research should examine how regenerative claims are substantiated, who certifies practices, and whether tourism-driven visibility genuinely incentivizes ecological outcomes or merely performs sustainability for consumption.

4.3 | Participatory Governance as Postlegalization Resilience Strategy

Network governance functions as a resilience mechanism enabling legacy producer networks to navigate economic disruption following contested commodity legalization. This pathway offers mechanisms that could advance Target 8.3, which promotes policies that support productive activities, decent work, entrepreneurship, and innovation while encouraging the growth of micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises. Although formal governance structures (e.g., cooperative boards, producer associations) were not directly observed, coordination mechanisms emerged through informal trust networks connecting tour operators, legacy farmers, and dispensaries. These networks enable collaborative development of tour itineraries, shared branding strategies emphasizing regional heritage, and mutual referral systems linking farms to urban retail partners. Cannabis agritourism emerges not merely as economic diversification but as a governance strategy through which marginalized legacy producers assert participatory rights within postprohibition market restructuring.

Northern California's rural economy was historically dominated by cannabis production. Recreational legalization (2016), however, triggered market collapse, profoundly disrupting local livelihoods. "It is so different now from when everyone had money, but the community collapsed with [recreational] regulation

[2016]. The price of weed bottomed out. It went from $1500 a pound to just under $200 in two years. Since legalization, so many businesses have shut down. Downtown Garberville is a ghost town. Now there are only remnants of a counterculture." (Farmer E).

Garberville, the symbolic heart of Humboldt County's cannabis industry, encapsulates this "boom and bust" narrative. Medical cannabis legalization (1996) sparked a "green rush" as growers converged on the Emerald Triangle, transforming cannabis from countercultural cash crop into a lucrative commodity. Recreational legalization, however, intensified market competition, undermining local livelihoods and reshaping power dynamics (Meisel et al. 2023). This economic disruption reveals scalar governance tensions whereby state-level regulatory frameworks designed to formalize cannabis markets paradoxically destabilized the very communities sustaining cultivation under prohibition.

Tourism emerges as a diversification strategy enabling cultivators to navigate regulatory volatility. Guided tours and curated experiences function as cultural assets embedding heritage narratives into place-making. "With the tour, I am trying to create assets inside of Humboldt. History and culture are huge assets to the story. There is a lot in Humboldt to showcase." (Tour Guide A).

Cultural asset creation transcends economic function to foster network linkages and open participation pathways. "Farm tours open up channels for small-scale producers to better understand tourism in their own community and the role they can play in it." (Tourism Official B).

This statement reveals tourism's capacity to redistribute knowledge and agency, enabling producers historically excluded from formal tourism planning to recognize their potential roles. Local ownership and leadership emerge as prerequisites for governance.

> The community creates the vision for the community. It's part of coming together as an 'agro-hood' that supports one another.
>
> (Farmer D)

The "agro-hood" represents network governance arrangements wherein participants negotiate collective priorities through relational trust rather than formal authority. Tour guides mediate farm access by vouching for visitor legitimacy, farmers collectively determine which heritage narratives to foreground, and dispensaries curate product displays, privileging small-batch legacy genetics over corporate brands. These practices constitute governance mechanisms, albeit informal, through which legacy stakeholders assert market legitimacy and resist marginalization.

The "agro-hood" articulated by legacy producers positions their networks not as passive beneficiaries but as active agents shaping development trajectories. Within the Emerald Triangle, legacy producer networks function as both cultural core and primary decision-making arena. Environmental stewardship forms network formation logic, while tourism development, when grounded in producer voices and collaborative processes,

offers opportunities to regenerate place and shape legalization outcomes. Producer-level partnerships ensure local priorities guide SDG implementation (Movono and Hughes 2020), particularly amid tensions between legacy small-scale growers and industrial-scale cultivators.

This pathway demonstrates potential mechanisms for advancing SDG 8.3 among legacy producer-owners by fostering decent work through tourism employment, stimulating innovative small-scale ventures, and embedding shared heritage into visitor experiences, thus creating platforms for producer network empowerment and resilience (Pollock 2019; Graci 2025), though labor equity dimensions require further investigation. Cannabis agritourism offers alternatives to extractive systems that neglect local values (Mura and Wijesinghe 2021), illustrating how participatory governance may redirect postprohibition economic restructuring toward legacy producer benefit rather than corporate capture. Theoretically, this reveals tourism's potential as governance infrastructure enabling marginalized actors to assert legitimacy and negotiate scalar power imbalances between local priorities and state regulatory frameworks. However, "community" itself is not monolithic. Power asymmetries based on race, gender, land tenure, and cultivation scale shape whose voices dominate participatory processes. Future research should examine how participatory governance mechanisms address or reproduce inequalities within ostensibly community-led tourism development.

4.4 | Consumer Education and Supply Chain Transparency as Market Correction Mechanisms

Cannabis agritourism functions as an educational intervention addressing information asymmetries and market distortions within fragmented supply chains. This pathway offers mechanisms potentially advancing Target 8.4 (improving resource efficiency in consumption and production while decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation) and Target 12.2 (removing market distortions incentivizing wasteful consumption). By rendering production processes visible and reconnecting consumers to source, tourism operates as what Hanna et al. (2019) term a "spatial assembler," linking disparate supply chain sites into coherent narratives that enable informed purchasing decisions. This mechanism reveals tourism's capacity to correct market failures where consumers lack knowledge to evaluate environmental and social impacts, thereby incentivizing sustainable production practices through demand-side transformation.

Although not all itineraries traverse San Francisco, dispensary visits define many experiences, reinforcing urban–rural linkages. "There are several stores in San Francisco with special ties to farmers in the Emerald Triangle. They find small batch, legacy farmers that have been doing cannabis for 30 or 40 years." (Tour Guide A).

Contemporary supply chains sustain historical connections established under prohibition, when rural cultivation supported urban medical advocacy. Dispensaries like Solful partner with regenerative, producer-focused farmers, displaying maps above products communicating geographic origins. These visual cues

function as educational infrastructure paying homage to producing communities while narrating small-scale grower stories. Supply chains become interpretive resources. "Guests experience the place of source. They are shown the journey from seed to sale. They just spoke with Farmer C and now when they walk into the dispensary, they are excited to see Farmer C's cannabis on the shelf. They look for products based on who grew it and where it was grown. It is a 'reveal' for the guest, which could potentially change the consumer's relationship with the cannabis they are purchasing." (Tour Guide B).

The "reveal" moment functions as a pedagogical intervention, transforming abstract products into place-embedded artifacts connected to known producers and witnessed practices. This process reduces information asymmetries characterizing conventional retail environments where consumers lack the knowledge to evaluate production methods or environmental impacts. By rendering production visible, tourism enables consumers to situate products within broader socio-environmental systems (Volpentesta and Ammirato 2008), creating accountability mechanisms linking purchasing decisions to farm-level practices.

Tour participants return as transformed consumers knowledgeable about cultivation processes and motivated to support regenerative practices. "I think an educated consumer base makes for the strongest cannabis industry. That's what will sustain the industry. And where are they [customers] going to learn about it? From experts who know things." (Tour Guide A).

This statement positions education as an industry sustainability prerequisite, not supplementary marketing. Cannabis agritourism contributes to SDG objectives by helping consumers understand the environmental and social impacts of their purchases, making subsequent transactions more meaningful through connections that celebrate cannabis heritage. Similar patterns emerge in food tourism, where education strengthens local economies by encouraging purchases from small-scale producers practicing sustainability (Chen and Huang 2016; Ammirato et al. 2020). By shortening physical and relational distances between producers and consumers, cannabis agritourism minimizes supply chain intermediaries, reinforcing trust, quality assurance, and place-based identity. Tourist encounters become "nudging" mechanisms (Dolnicar 2023) orienting consumers toward locally sourced, regeneratively produced goods, extending sustainability benefits beyond tours. Such experiences contribute to cannabis normalization, aligning with broader legalization trends.

This pathway offers mechanisms potentially supporting SDG 8.4 and 12.2 by correcting market failures through consumer education, reducing information asymmetries that prevent informed decision-making. Theoretically, it demonstrates tourism's capacity to function as a market governance mechanism where regulatory frameworks prove insufficient. By creating direct producer-consumer relationships, agritourism generates demand-side incentives for sustainable practices, complementing supply-side regulations. However, this model privileges consumers with economic and cultural capital to participate in premium tourism experiences. Educational benefits accrue primarily to those already inclined toward sustainable

consumption, potentially reinforcing rather than challenging existing market segmentation. Future research should examine whether tourism-mediated education influences mainstream consumer behavior or remains confined to niche markets and how accessibility barriers shape who benefits from these transformative encounters.

5 | Discussion

Cannabis agritourism in the Emerald Triangle demonstrates four localized pathways through which SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 12 (Responsible Production and Consumption) targets may potentially be advanced, translating global sustainability targets into situated practices. Using Responsible Tourism as an analytical lens, this study reveals how heritage storytelling, regenerative agriculture, participatory governance, and consumer education function as mechanisms linking legacy producer agency with state regulatory frameworks and global policy agendas. These pathways illustrate bottom-up SDG localization in a contested commodity sector transitioning from prohibition to legalization, showing tourism's capacity to advance sustainability goals through small-scale producer-led development rather than externally imposed growth logics (Table 2).

California's regulatory framework creates meso-level structures shaping farm-level practices observed in this study. Proposition 64 (2016) legalized recreational cannabis while establishing licensing requirements ($10,000–$75,000 annually depending on cultivation size), track-and-trace systems, and local municipal opt-in provisions. These regulations disproportionately burden small-scale operators lacking capital reserves, creating barriers that agritourism revenue partially mitigates. State regulations permitting commercial farm tours (Business and Professions Code §26200) distinguish California from other legal jurisdictions, enabling the visibility mechanisms documented here. This regulatory architecture demonstrates how meso-level policy decisions enable or constrain micro-level SDG operationalization pathways.

Federal-state legal dissonance creates macro-level constraints fundamentally shaping localization dynamics. Cannabis remains Schedule I federally under the Controlled Substances Act, prohibiting interstate commerce, restricting banking access, and preventing federal tax deductions for business expenses (Corva and Meisel 2021). This scalar tension reinforces localization as both a strategic choice and a structural necessity. Tours

become platforms for articulating local legitimacy claims amid federal prohibition, while legacy producers leverage place-based heritage narratives to differentiate products within markets fragmented by federal-state legal incongruence. These findings demonstrate how contested legal geographies shape SDG operationalization pathways, revealing the scalar politics of sustainability localization in federally prohibited yet state-legal industries.

Although qualitative data reveal mechanisms for advancing SDG targets, operationalization requires context-specific metrics. Drawing on observed practices, we propose preliminary indicators. For SDG 8.3 (entrepreneurship), metrics include micro-enterprise network formation, revenue diversification ratios, and employment stability. For SDG 8.9 (cultural tourism), indicators include the preservation of heritage narratives in tour itineraries and tourist engagement rates. For SDG 12.2 (resource management), measures include regenerative practice adoption rates, supply chain efficiency, and consumer behavior change tracking posttour purchasing patterns. Baseline establishment requires longitudinal data collection comparing agritourism-engaged farms with control groups. Future studies should employ mixed-methods designs integrating qualitative pathway documentation with quantitative impact assessment.

Heritage storytelling functions as cultural infrastructure protecting legacy producer identity and small producer legitimacy amid market restructurings. Tours render regenerative practices visible, linking terroir, legacy genetics, and soil health in ways positioning farms as stewards rather than extractive suppliers (Bellato and Pollock 2023; Dredge 2022). Narratives connecting counterculture histories, medical activism, and contemporary production preserve cannabis heritage, which would otherwise be vulnerable to consolidation by actors lacking place-based ties (Meisel et al. 2023). Agritourism rebuilds local assets, opens participation channels for small producers, and prioritizes the needs of producer networks. Immersive educational experiences make visible product origins, production processes, and network embeddedness, fostering intentional purchasing patterns supporting environmental objectives and local economic resilience.

These pathways involve important trade-offs. Although storytelling can create conditions that support Target 8.9 by sustaining culture and local products through tourism, it raises questions about gatekeeping and whose histories are curated as authentic (Scheyvens and Cheer 2021). Heritage claims can

TABLE 2 | Scalar dynamics in cannabis agritourism SDG pathways.

Scale	Institutional context	Mechanism observed	SDG linkage	Tensions/Constraints
Micro	Farm-level regenerative practices	Terroir-based cultivation, heritage storytelling	SDG 12.2, 8.9	Limited scalability, resource constraints
Meso	California licensing, tour regulations	Legal enablement of farm tour visibility	SDG 8.3	Licensing costs exclude marginalized producers
Macro	Federal Schedule I prohibition	Localization as resistance strategy, place-based differentiation	SDG 8.4, 12.2	Banking restrictions, interstate commerce barriers

     Sustainable Development, 2026

marginalize newer entrants or neighboring producer networks if authenticity is narrowly defined (Dredge 2022). Regenerative agriculture language requires verification mechanisms preventing dilution through branding strategies detached from ecological practice. Increased visitation can strain rural infrastructure and commodify culture, offsetting regenerative gains with travel footprints if logistics are poorly designed. Responsible Tourism provides a critical test, asking whether observed initiatives redistribute benefits, protect environments, and strengthen local capabilities, rather than reproducing extractive growth logics (Dolnicar 2023). Cannabis agritourism offers a compelling yet contingent localization pathway that requires deliberate governance, credible standards, and ongoing negotiation between local priorities and global expectations.

Cannabis agritourism emerges amid economic precarity following market collapse ($1500–$200/pound). Evidence suggests it functions simultaneously as a survival strategy and a sustainability pathway. As a survival strategy, tourism provides revenue diversification, enabling producers to remain viable, yet cannot reverse structural inequities from licensing costs and banking restrictions. As a sustainability pathway, it generates capacities for heritage preservation and collective governance (Bellato and Pollock 2023; Dredge 2022). Critical tradeoffs include tourism dependence vulnerabilities, commodification risks, limited scalability (2–6 participant tours), potential labor inequities, and infrastructure strain. Agritourism thus represents a necessary but insufficient condition, requiring complementary policy supports beyond tourism's remedial capacity.

As a sustainability pathway, agritourism generates long-term capacities for resilience, heritage preservation, and collective governance aligned with regenerative tourism principles (Bellato and Pollock 2023; Dredge 2022). Yet critical tradeoffs emerge. Tourism dependence creates vulnerabilities to demand volatility; heritage narratives risk commodification if authenticity becomes performative; small-group tours (2–6 participants) benefit only network subsets rather than broader cultivator populations; producer-owner benefits may not extend to farmworkers; and increased visitation may strain infrastructure and contradict regenerative principles. Agritourism thus functions as a necessary but insufficient condition for sustainable transitions, requiring complementary policy supports addressing structural barriers beyond tourism's remedial capacity.

Findings illuminate producer-owner experiences but cannot substantiate claims regarding equitable labor practices across the cannabis agritourism supply chain. SDG 8 contributions documented here represent partial pathways centered on entrepreneurial dimensions rather than comprehensive assessments encompassing worker welfare.

These findings reflect legacy producer perspectives accessed through trust networks, creating sampling conditions that privilege small-scale cultivator voices while marginalizing other stakeholders. Corporate cultivators, who constitute growing market segments, remain absent despite potentially advancing different sustainability dimensions including standardized labor protections and technological innovations. Similarly, Latinx and Hmong farmworkers who constitute substantial portions of the agricultural labor force experience tourism economies differently than proprietors featured on tours, with their labor and contributions remaining largely invisible within tourism narratives that center farm ownership and entrepreneurship. Heritage narratives, while reflecting genuine ecological commitments, simultaneously function as strategic market positioning within competitive markets. Agritourism creates visibility for specific producer identities and sustainability claims while others remain peripheral, raising critical questions about whose sustainability work gains recognition and compensation. Future research must incorporate corporate perspectives, farmworker experiences, and analysis of racialized power structures shaping sustainability recognition to comprehensively assess cannabis agritourism's contributions to inclusive and equitable SDG achievement.

5.1 | Theoretical Implications

This study advances theory at the intersection of agritourism, Responsible Tourism, and SDG localization by demonstrating how contested commodities transitioning from prohibition to legalization can be integrated into place-based sustainability frameworks. The findings extend agritourism scholarship beyond food and wine to regulated cannabis contexts, revealing that agritourism can protect community identity while mediating market restructuring. Heritage storytelling functions not only as interpretation but as a governance resource shaping legitimacy and participation, adding precision to claims that tourism sustains culture and local products under Target 8.9. Regenerative narratives demonstrate sustainable agriculture's environmental importance, aligning with Target 12.2 on resource efficiency (LaCanne and Lundgren 2018; Dredge 2022; Bellato and Pollock 2023).

Responsible Tourism operates as an analytical lens linking micro-level farm practices to meso-level destination structures and macro-level policy frameworks, extending beyond prescriptive practitioner guidelines to reveal scalar politics of sustainability governance. Cannabis agritourism serves as a test case for bottom-up SDG translation (Moallemi et al. 2020; Sever et al. 2025), demonstrating how four place-based pathways may jointly translate global targets into situated action tailored to legacy producer network needs. This contribution addresses calls for evidence-based investigations of how local agendas advance global goals through small-scale producer-led processes rather than top-down governmental planning.

By aligning local Responsible Tourism practices with SDG targets, this research illustrates the synergistic potential between tourism's normative responsibilities (Mura and Wijesinghe 2021) and global sustainability frameworks (Dolnicar 2023). The SDGs function as "cultural cognitive systems" (Grainger-Brown et al. 2022) generating meanings around legitimacy, offering alternative avenues for assessing legal cannabis realities and accommodating cultural understandings of normality. Cannabis normalization through tourism becomes part of sustainable economic development agendas (Meisel et al. 2023), whereby association with globally recognized goals employs nonthreatening language, breaking stigma in legal contexts.

Shifting cannabis perceptions are linked to producer-consumer reconnections, revealing tourism's capacity to promote

sustainable consumption. Connecting consumers to source supports reciprocal human-nature relationships underpinning regenerative tourism. Learning product origins enables consumers to connect farm narratives to retail choices, consistent with food tourism evidence that education reorients demand toward small producers and sustainable methods (Chen and Huang 2015; Ammirato et al. 2020; Dolnicar 2023). Potentially transformative consumer mindsets around purchasing represent important sustainable tourism outcomes.

Methodologically, combining participant observation, mobile methods, and in situ interviewing anchors analysis in landscapes and supply chains, enabling theory building linking practices and places across farms, tours, and retail contexts (Hanna et al. 2019). Spatially grounded approaches reveal how narratives, infrastructures, and regulations co-produce Responsible Tourism outcomes in emerging legal industries, offering methodological insights for scholars examining sustainability transitions in contested sectors.

5.2 | Practical Implications

This study offers actionable insights for tourism practitioners, cannabis industry stakeholders, and policymakers, aligning destination development with sustainability goals.

First, cannabis agritourism can function as an educational platform building informed consumer bases. Tour operators and dispensaries should design visitor experiences tracing seed-to-sale journeys, integrating farm narratives, cultivation methods, and sustainability practices into interpretive materials. As demonstrated in food and wine tourism, experiential learning encourages consumers to value quality, provenance, and ecological responsibility, increasing willingness to pay for regenerative, producer-led products.

Second, farmer-retailer partnerships require active cultivation and communication. Retail outlets can emulate Solful's model by mapping product origins, featuring farmer profiles, and linking purchases to legacy producer benefits. This shortens supply chains, reduces market distortions, and fosters economic resilience through direct producer-consumer relationships.

Third, sustainability-guided producer network tourism planning enables rural regions to diversify income while safeguarding heritage and environmental assets. Farmers can integrate low-impact visitor infrastructure (guided tours, workshops, farm stays) without compromising cultivation practices. Embedding regenerative methods within visitor experiences transforms sustainability from background feature into marketable asset potentially supporting Targets 8.4 and 12.2.

Fourth, destination management organizations and tourism boards should recognize cannabis agritourism within broader Responsible Tourism portfolios. Including cannabis operators in sustainability certification programs, marketing initiatives, and capacity-building workshops aligns industry growth with producer network values and environmental goals. Supporting farm-led governance councils or cooperative marketing groups maintains quality standards while preventing corporate consolidation from displacing small producers.

Fifth, policymakers can refine emerging industry regulations using cannabis agritourism models. Flexible licensing for on-farm experiences, combined with sustainability incentives (tax credits for regenerative farming, reduced compliance fees for certified operators), lowers barriers for small-scale farmers. Regulations should safeguard legacy genetics and cultural knowledge as intellectual property, recognizing potential medical and economic value.

Finally, lessons from cannabis agritourism transfer to sectors where contested commodities intersect with sustainability and heritage. Whether in specialty agriculture, craft beverage production, or indigenous food systems, combining heritage storytelling, regenerative practice, consumer education, and supply chain transparency strengthens destination competitiveness while supporting local producer networks.

6 | Conclusion

This study illustrates how cannabis agritourism in Northern California's Emerald Triangle creates pathways potentially advancing SDG 8 and SDG 12 targets through four locally embedded pathways: heritage storytelling, regenerative agriculture, participatory governance, and consumer education. Using Responsible Tourism as an analytical lens, the research reveals how contested commodity sectors transitioning from prohibition may advance global sustainability goals through bottom-up localization processes that prioritize legacy producer agency over extractive growth logics. Cannabis agritourism functions as cultural infrastructure, a market correction mechanism, and a governance platform, demonstrating how abstract sustainability targets can be operationalized through situated practices that reflect local ecological knowledge, social values, and economic priorities.

However, several limitations temper these findings. The single-region focus on the Emerald Triangle restricts transferability to destinations with different ecologies, governance structures, and market dynamics. Data collection during August 2023 captures a temporal snapshot within volatile regulatory and market contexts subject to change. Access mediated through tour operators and legacy farming networks underrepresents larger corporate actors and racialized farmworkers, reflecting particular stakeholder positions within contested sustainability politics rather than comprehensive assessments. Although this study identifies mechanisms through which agritourism may influence consumer behavior, demonstrating measurable changes in purchasing patterns requires longitudinal research tracking post-tour behavior over extended periods.

Future research should employ longitudinal consumer studies on consumer behavior to explore how cannabis agritourism influences long-term habits and sustainability attitudes, and clarify sustained market impacts (Dolnicar 2023). Comparative multi-region studies could extend the investigation to other cannabis-producing regions, comparing governance regimes and socio-cultural contexts while verifying sustainability claims through independent environmental and economic assessments. Critical inquiry should interrogate whose voices dominate participatory governance, how race, gender, and land tenure shape

heritage claims, and whether tourism-driven localization genuinely redistributes benefits or reproduces inequalities from legacy producer-led development. Future research should examine formalized governance arrangements, including cooperative structures and participatory planning processes, to substantiate claims regarding democratic decision-making (Ostrom 2010).

This study adopts a supply-side perspective, centering legacy producer experiences and farm-level practices. Consequently, tourist motivations, post-tour behavioral changes, and sustained purchasing patterns remain unexamined. Demand-side perspectives are critical for assessing whether consumer education mechanisms translate into long-term purchasing behavior that supports regenerative agriculture, or whether tourism primarily functions as experiential consumption detached from market transformation. Without demand-side validation, claims regarding sustainable consumption pattern shifts (SDG 12.2 pathway) remain speculative. Future research should employ visitor surveys at multiple intervals (pre-tour, post-tour, 3-, 6-, 12-month follow-ups) and experimental designs comparing purchasing patterns between tour participants and control groups to substantiate the consumer education pathway's efficacy.

Future research should also incorporate corporate cultivator perspectives and farmworker experiences to comprehensively assess whether the identified pathways advance inclusive and equitable SDG outcomes across diverse positionalities. In addition, sample composition (predominantly white, male legacy producer-owners) limits the capacity to assess SDG 8.3 (decent work) contributions comprehensively. Absent are perspectives of racialized farmworkers (Hmong and Latinx agricultural laborers) whose labor conditions remain undocumented. Trust network-mediated access privileged grower-owners over farm employees, creating analytical blind spots regarding whether agritourism advances decent work across the supply chain or concentrates benefits among property owners. Future research employing multilingual data collection and farmworker-centered sampling should investigate whether tourism revenue translates into improved wages and working conditions for agricultural laborers.

Cannabis agritourism represents a promising but contingent pathway toward achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals, requiring careful attention to local contexts, deliberate governance frameworks, credible verification mechanisms, and continual empirical scrutiny. This research demonstrates that sustainability transitions in contested sectors demand not only regulatory reform but also community-driven innovation, translating global aspirations into lived practice.

Ethics Statement

Ethics approval for human participants was obtained from the University of Guelph's Research Ethics Board REB# 21-09-014.

Consent

Informed consent from participants was obtained verbally.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Due to the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data are not available.

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