SUSTAINABLE TOURISM STANDARDS

Applying Standards to Sustainable Tourism Programs and Policies

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Yellow Track: Sustainable Standards

Session 1

Introduction to Sustainable Standards and Guidelines

Introduction to key concepts and applications of standards

Session 2

Applying Standards to Sustainable Tourism Programs and Policies

Deeper dive into standards-based national programs and policies

Session 3

Promoting Sustainability in the Private Sector through Hotel and Tour Operator Standards

Explores how governments can promote private sector sustainability

Session 4

Promoting Sustainable Destination Management through Standards

Covers how destinations use standards to enhance tourism sustainability

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Overview of Sustainable Tourism and Standards

Session 1 recap: Understanding sustainable tourism

*"Tourism that takes full account of its current and future **economic**, **social** and **environmental** impacts, addressing the needs of **visitors**, **the industry**, **the environment** and **host communities**"*

— UN Tourism (formerly UNWTO)

"Sustainable Tourism" does not refer to a specific type of tourism.

"Sustainable Tourism" is an aspiration for the impacts of all forms of tourism.

How does sustainable tourism drive development?



A successful and sustainable tourism economy:

Requires developing:	*Generates:*
• Enabling policies, planning, and regulations • Coordination and collaboration • Skilled personnel • Entrepreneurs and businesses • Infrastructure, including digital infrastructure • Investment opportunities • Utilities • Sanitation • Healthy natural assets • Authentic cultural heritage • Healthcare • Safety and security • Connectivity • Climate risk and adaptation measures	• Revenues from tourism spending • New jobs and enterprises • Employment opportunities for women, youth, underserved communities • Foreign and domestic investments • Skills and capacity • Funding for environmental and cultural preservation • Climate co-benefits

Sustainable tourism aims to…

Maximize the positive benefits of tourism



Social impacts

Provides skills, training, and capacity building, including to women and youth

Provides local employment to slow out-migration

Enhances pride in destination



Economic impacts

Creates jobs

Generates revenues

Diversifies economies

Supports micro, small, and medium enterprise growth

Attract investments



Environmental impacts

Generates funding for conservation & management

Increases economic & tourism value of nature



Cultural impacts

Generates funding for cultural preservation and management

Increases economic & tourism value of cultural heritage

Sustainable tourism aims to…

Minimize the negative impacts of tourism

Social impacts

Loss of local identify

Erodes quality of life

Increase costs of goods and services

Creates community tension and/or backlash

Economic impacts

Spending leaks out of local economy

Provides unstable or unfavorable employment

Pays low wages

Can cause over-dependency on one sector

Environmental impacts

Depletes natural resources

Pollutes destinations

Degrades environments

Generates GHG emissions

Cultural impacts

Degrades heritage sites & monuments

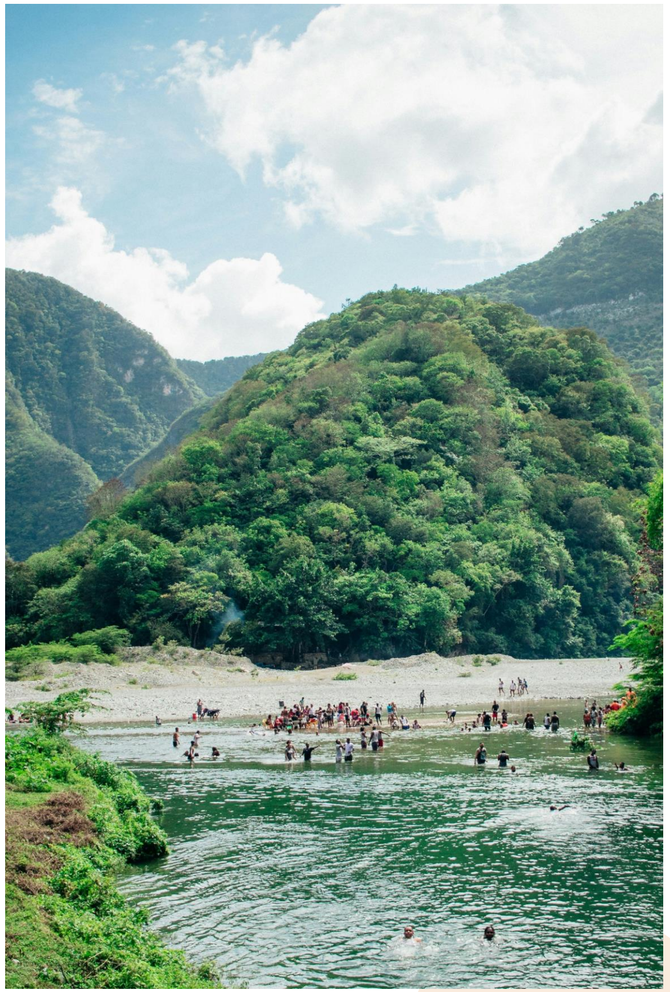
Overcrowding

Commodifies cultures

Standards guide the tourism sector toward sustainability

Global standards sets a common language for sustainability in travel and tourism.

They guide destinations, businesses, and travelers on what sustainability looks in practice, and serve as the basis for certification and verification.



Standards have wide applicability

Governments and businesses use sustainable tourism standards for:

Policy and Planning
- Inform tourism strategies and actions plans
- Guide national & subnational policy formation
- Assess and enhance sustainability of projects, plans, developments

Destination Management
- Guide destination governance & management
- Assess gaps in destination sustainability & identify priorities and plans

Private Sector Sustainability
- Guide tourism businesses on sustainability principles & practices
- Help businesses fulfill corporate sustainability requirements

Certification, Verification, & Compliance
- Basis for sustainability certifications
- Build capacity of assessors and auditors
- Comply with sustainability regulations (e.g., EU directives)

Marketing, Promotion, & Communication
- Raise awareness of sustainability
- Signal sustainable businesses & destinations to buyers
- Strengthen market position for sustainable offerings

GSTC Standards

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) is the leading global authority in setting and managing standards for sustainable travel and tourism

Founding organizations

2007

Coalition of 32 partners, including:
United Nations Foundation
UNWTO (now UN Tourism)
UN Environment Programme

GSTC Hotel Standard *(2008, 2012, 2016, 2025)*



GSTC Tour Operator Standard *(2008, 2012, 2016, 2025)*



GSTC Destination Standard *(2013, 2019)*



GSTC MICE Standard *(2024)*



GSTC Attraction Standard *(2024)*



GSTC Food & Beverage Standard (2026)



600+ members | 80+ destination members | 100+ countries represented

GSTC® Global Sustainable Tourism Council

Four pillars align the tourism sector with UN Sustainable Development Goals

A
Sustainable management

- Management structure and framework
- Stakeholder engagement
- Managing pressures, risk, and change

B
Socio-economic sustainability

- Delivering local economic benefits
- Protecting social wellbeing

C
Cultural sustainability

- Protecting cultural heritage
- Managing visitation at cultural sites

D
Environmental sustainability

- Conserving natural heritage
- Managing resources
- Managing waste and emissions



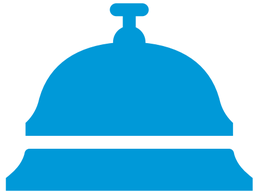
Key standards to know



Destination Standard

Guides destination managers and policymakers on sustainable management and governance, taking a whole-of-society approach

Provides reference for national- and destination-level tourism initiatives



Hotel, Tour Operator, MICE Standards

Guides private sector on practical sustainability measures

Can be used to develop national or subnational sustainable tourism programs for industry



Standard for Micro and Small Enterprises

World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) Hotel Sustainability Basics

Sustainability programs targeting micro and small tourism enterprises which are heavily represented in tourism

What's in a standard?

Example from GSTC's Destination Standard

1. Theme

Environmental sustainability

2. Subtheme

Conservation of natural heritage

3. Criteria

Protection of sensitive environments:
The destination has a system to monitor, measure, and respond to the impacts of tourism on the natural environment, conserve ecosystems, habitats and species, and prevent the introduction and spread of invasive species.

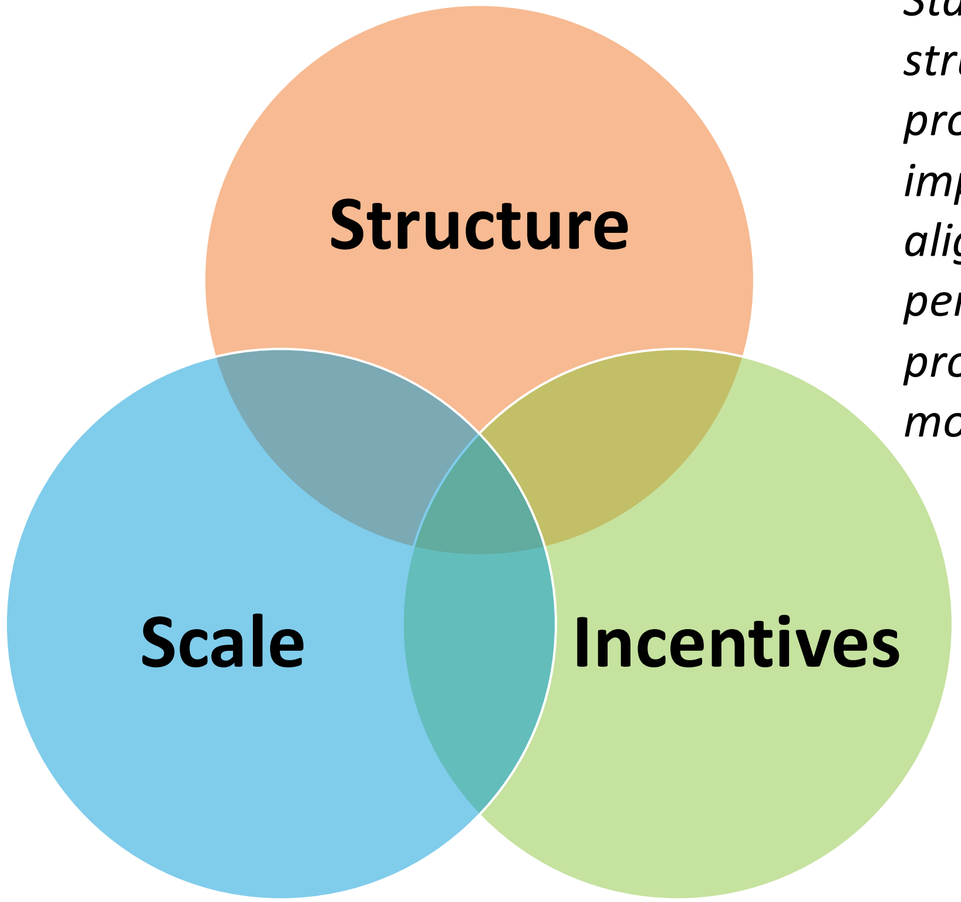
4. Suggested Indicators

- List of natural heritage sites and assets, indicating type, conservation status, and vulnerability
- Programs to conserve biodiversity and natural heritage
- Programs to eradicate and control invasive species
- Action to identify, monitor, and mitigate tourism impacts on biodiversity and natural heritage
- Mechanisms for using income from tourism to support conservation of natural assets
- Communications with visitors and enterprises on reducing spread of alien species

Integrating Standards into National Programs and Policies

Value of national sustainable tourism programs

Government-led or government-supported programs can help destinations and businesses advance at different stages of sustainability through training, technical guidance, benchmarking, recognition, knowledge exchange, and certification pathways.



Standards provide a holistic, overarching structure to tourism programs and projects, and can be used for design, implementation, and monitoring. By aligning sustainability expectations, performance indicators, and verification processes, governments can encourage more consistent implementation.

Through public programs, authorities can provide incentives, rewards, marketing support, promotion, guidance, and training to businesses and destinations to scale up sustainable practices

Example: Norway Sustainable Destination Program

Model: National, voluntary sustainable destination program.

Standard used: Destination (aligned with GSTC Standard)

Goal: To support destinations to sustainably manage tourism while improving quality of life.

About: Innovation Norway initiated its Sustainable Destination Program in 2013 to support destinations to work systematically on sustainable tourism. Indicators are measured, registered, and monitored. Destinations are evaluated every three years and must show documented improvement. Government offers generous grants for certification and recertification.

Today: 48 destinations and counting across Norway now hold the Sustainable Destination mark.



Sustainable Destination
Local engagement in a long perspective

Innovation Norway

Example: Japan Sustainable Tourism Standard for Destinations (JSTS-D)

Model: National destination guidelines, support local policy adoption and implementation.

Standard used: Destination (aligned with GSTC Standard)

Goal: To support the development of local DMOs as part of Japan's tourism policy framework.

About: Japan Tourism Authority adopted national guidelines based on the GSTC Destination Standard in 2020. JTA delivered pilot projects, self-assessment materials, and GSTC trainings to local governments, training 2,000 stakeholders so far.

Today: 115 local governments or DMOs across Japan have received the official mark for promoting sustainable tourism in line with the JSTS-D. Many formulate tourism strategies and plans based on the JSTS-D.





Teshikaga, Hokkaido Tourism Promotion Plan based on JSTS-D

Example: Türkiye Sustainable Tourism Program

Stage 1	30% (14 criteria)	Verification by Cappadocia University	end of 2023
Stage 2	70% (29 criteria)	Verified by Accredited Certification Bodies	end of 2025
Stage 3	100% (42 criteria)	Full certification by a GSTC-Accredited Certification Body	end of 2030



TÜRKİYE ENVIRONMENTAL AND CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY PROGRAM GSTC

Model: National, mandatory sustainable hotel certification program.

Standard: Hotel (adopted GSTC Standard)

Goal: Ensure sustainable growth of tourism and advance toward international climate and environmental goals (Paris Agreement, European Green Deal, etc.).

About: Türkiye's Tourism Promotion and Development Agency developed the world's first mandatory government program based on the GSTC Standard. It is a multistage initiative covering 22,000 hotels culminating in certification of all properties by 2030.

Today: 2,800+ hotels are GSTC-certified as of mid-2026. Hotels report positive benefits from pursuing certification(see next slide).

Photo: TUI Blue Sarigerme Park, Turkey, Credit: TUI

Benefits of certification for Türkiye hotels



Increased **sustainability awareness** among management, staff, & guests



Improvements in **internal management systems**, documentation, and risk management practices



Greater **cross-departmental collaboration**



Greater **integration of sustainability** into hotels' organizational structure



Stronger engagement with local suppliers and communities



Enhanced competitiveness and reputation in international markets

Source: Impact Evaluation of GSTC Certification: Insights from the Türkiye Environmental and Cultural Sustainability Program

Example: Singapore Hotel Sustainability Roadmap

Model: Voluntary sustainable hotel certification roadmap, jointly developed by public and private sector.

Standard: Hotel

Goal: For hotels to track and achieve net-zero emissions by 2050; strengthen Singapore's standing as a sustainability leader

About: In line with the Singapore Green Plan 2030, the Singapore Hotel Association and Singapore Tourism Board rolled out a hotel sustainability roadmap in 2022. Targets include achieving 60% certified hotel room stock by 2025. The government supports with subsidies for certification and knowledge and training resources.

Today: As of 2026, more than 70% of hotel rooms in Singapore obtained sustainability certification, with 90% choosing GSTC certification.



Example: Malta Eco-Certification Program





Model: Promotion of voluntary eco-certification and adoption of sustainable standards, including GSTC

Standard: Hotel

Goal: Promote the environmental, socioeconomic and cultural sustainability of tourist accommodations across Maltese Islands.

About: In 2023, Malta Tourism Authority signed an MOU with GSTC to relaunch its national sustainable accommodations program. MTA provides trainings, awareness raising, and facilitation to certification. They work directly with accommodation providers, industry associations, and government partners to support hotels throughout the certification process, with particular attention to smaller properties.

Today: About 50 accommodations have received certification (including GSTC). MTA is now providing training for MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences/conventions, and exhibitions).

Example: Aseer (Saudi Arabia) Incentive Program

Model: Incentivize voluntary certification

Standard: Hotel, tour operator, attractions

Goal: To develop a unique and sustainable tourism model, aligned with Saudi Vision 2030 goals for tourism development

About: In 2025, Aseer Development Authority began collaborating with the GSTC on sustainable tourism workshops and training on sustainable standards. They developed a certification incentive program in which hotels, tour operators, and attractions are encouraged to achieve GSTC certification. Certified businesses are rewarded with free attendance and exhibition at up to three international trade shows a year.

Today: New program, results to be monitored.





Key considerations for national programs

- Which is most suitable: voluntary, mandatory, incentives?
- Should a phased approach be taken? *E.g., Turkiye program*
- Which sectors to prioritize? *Destination, hotels, tour operators, attractions, MICE*
- Can adopting national standards provide a "north star" for destinations and businesses to follow? *See box*
- Which agency will lead, implement, and monitor?
- Who will verify and certify claims? *GSTC accredits certification bodies; it does not certify*

National standards can help governments and businesses to:

- Establish clear expectations and guidance for sustainable practices
- Implement national tourism strategies, programs, and sustainability initiatives
- Improve the quality and credibility of tourism services
- Protect natural resources, cultural heritage, and residents
- Create a consistent approach for multiplicity of certification schemes
- Strengthen competitive market positioning and stand out to consumers
- Build credibility among tourists, investors, and partners

Group Discussion

Consider this scenario

- A hypothetical developing country with a population of 10 million people has ambitions to embark on more sustainable development and believes that focusing on sustainable tourism will help it do so.
- The country has a long coastline, several national parks, and 8 UNESCO World Heritage Sites. It receives about 2 million international visitors a year who come for nature, coastal, and heritage. About 10% are luxury tourists using high-end accommodations and tour operators.
- There is a ministry of tourism, a promotional board, DMOs at key destinations, and several tourism associations. However, there is no sustainable tourism strategy or action plan at national or destination levels.
- The country faces risks from coastal erosion, climate impacts, pollution, and waste management, as well as overcrowding and degradation at main destinations and sites during tourism season. There is little tourism dispersal outside of the main destinations.
- Due to seasonal rains, its nature-based tourism season is 6 months of the year.
- Tourism businesses are mostly MSMEs. About half are registered with the government. They would need training, funding, and other support to adopt sustainable tourism practices.

- How can this country accelerate the green transition through tourism?
- What potential tourism initiatives, programs, and/or projects should be prioritized?
- What kind of measures can be put in place by public authorities to incentivize private sector sustainability?

Developing National Programs: How-To

Principal steps for developing national programs

Assess tourism sustainability	Use standards as a reference for sustainability performance Evaluate the sustainability and relevance of existing tourism policies, plans, strategies, projects Provide training to fill in the gaps and raise awareness
Agree on strategy and vision	Consult private sector, destination managers, residents, and visitors on risks and priorities Identify priorities and action plan Choose organization to lead the action plan
Design program	Evaluate the key considerations for national programs (see previous slides) Develop program for each participating tourism sector (see next slide)

Example of a phased sustainable hotel program

Based on Türkiye's national hotel program. For more information, see their website.

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Target set for hotels	Hotel managers and staff receive training on the GSTC Hotel Standard	Hotels meet minimum standards (e.g., at least 30% of the GSTC Hotel Standard)	Hotels meet additional standards and get closer to full certification (e.g., at least 70% of the GSTC Hotel Standard)	Hotels meet 100% of the GSTC Hotel Standard and are fully certified
Verification method	Self-assessment (online checklist)	Self-assessment (online checklist) or Assessment by local auditor (non-accredited)	Verified by accredited certification body	Verified by accredited certification body
Timeframe for implementation	First 6 months	Year 1	Year 3	Year 5

Principal steps for developing national programs, continued

Build ecosystem for accredited certification	Identify and partner with accredited certification bodies Train assessors and auditors Facilitate certification (negotiate fees, local office or presence, etc.)
Encourage private sector participation	Develop incentives for private sector participation These can include grants, subsidies, rewards, market recognition and promotion, training, networks, etc. Consider special programs for micro and small enterprises, such as World Travel & Tourism Council Hotel Basics
Implement, monitor, and evaluate	Monitor program implementation and results Provide ongoing self-assessment resources and training to stakeholders Publicly report on program progress

Lessons and recommendations

- Targeted programs help micro and small tourism businesses, who may need more support to adopt sustainability and pursue certification
- Self-assessment tools save time and money, and can be provided to destinations and businesses for free or low-cost to support their gradual improvements
- Training and awareness raising are key to effective implementation
- Be creative and responsive with incentives for private sector engagement

Questions and Wrap-up

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Thank you!