SUSTAINABLE TOURISM STANDARDS

Introduction to Sustainable Tourism Standards and Guidelines

Applying Standards for Sustainable Development

Facilitated by:

Randy Durband

CEO, Global Sustainable Tourism Council

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Yellow Track: Sustainable Standards

Session 1

Introduction to Sustainable Tourism 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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Advancing Sustainable Development Through Tourism

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What is 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.

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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

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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

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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

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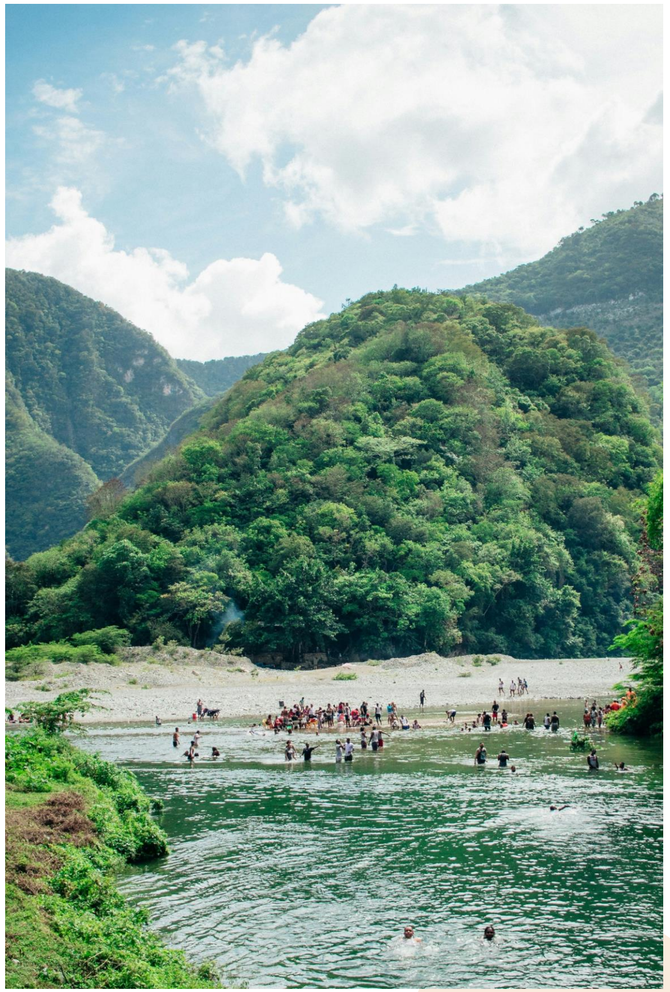
Overview of Global Sustainable Tourism Standards

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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.

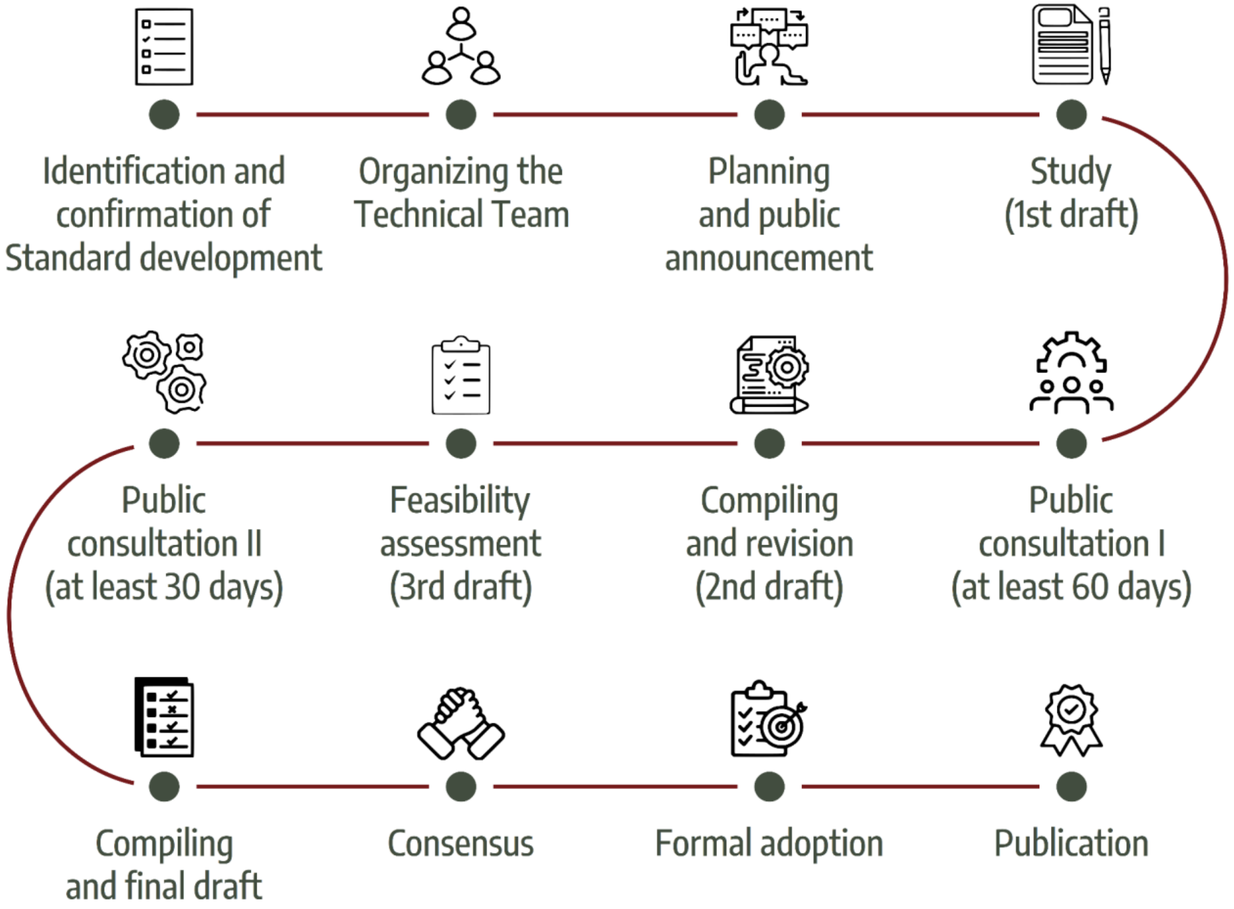


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Consensus-based and globally relevant

Standards:

- Are consensus-based documents developed according to international standard-setting principles (e.g., ISEAL)
- Draw from international guidelines, best practices and experiences in sustainable tourism
- Reflect extensive consultations in developing and developed countries, including from underrepresented groups
- Include practical, relevant indicators to support implementation and monitoring
- Apply across diverse destination types and contexts
- Receive regular and transparent review and revision



Transparent standard development process

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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

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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

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Discussion

Group Discussion

1. Break into four groups, one at each whiteboard
2. Choose a notetaker and a rapporteur to report back
3. Share your thoughts on your group's main questions (see list on right) – 15 minutes
4. Report back and discuss in plenary

In your group, consider the following questions. You can apply them to your own destination or projects, or more broadly:

Group A

- What does sustainable destination management look like?
- What kind of policies, regulations, and practices should be in place?
- What are gaps or opportunities you see to improve in your destination or project?

Group B

- How can we maximize the social and economic benefits of tourism? What policies, measures, programs should be in place?
- How can we minimize the negative social and economic impacts?

Group C

- How can we maximize the benefits to cultural heritage? What policies, measures, programs should be in place?
- How can we minimize the negative impacts to cultural heritage?

Group D

- How can we maximize the environmental benefits of tourism? What policies, measures, programs should be in place?
- How can we minimize its negative environmental impacts?

Report back: Each group shares a high-level summary of their discussion (3 minutes)

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Applying Standards in Destinations and Projects

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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

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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



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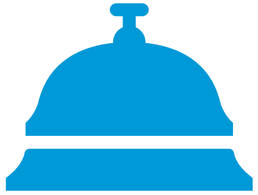
Key standards to know



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

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A closer look at the the Destination Standard

GSTC Destination Standard establishes the baseline for destination sustainability, covering functions such as management, governance, coordination, collaboration, engagement planning, monitoring, reporting, and more.

4 pillars

38 criteria

174 indicators

How destination management organizations and governments use the destination criteria and indicators:

1

Self-assessment

Benchmark destination sustainability performance and find gaps

2

Strategy & policy

Shape destination plans, policies, and regulations

3

Project design

Set baselines, targets, and indicators for investments

4

Certification

Independent audit by GSTC-accredited certification bodies

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Destination Standard
Pillar A: Sustainable management

1. **Destination management body**
   Clear mandate, funding, and staff
2. **Strategy and action plan**
   Public, stakeholder-backed and sustainability-led
3. **Monitoring and reporting**
   Indicators on visitors, impacts, and progress
4. **Business engagement**
   Support for enterprises to adopt sustainability
5. **Resident and visitor feedback**
   Regular engagement, information, and accurate promotion
6. **Managing visitor volumes**
   Proactive management of crowding and seasonality
7. **Planning and development control**
   Regulations that protect land and assets
8. **Climate and crisis readiness**
   Adaptation, risk, and crisis management

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Destination Standard
Pillars B–D: Key criteria at a glance

B Socio-economic

- Measuring tourism's economic contribution
- Decent work and career opportunities
- Local entrepreneurship and fair trade
- Supporting communities and preventing exploitation
- Safety, security, and access for all

C Cultural

- Protecting cultural assets and artefacts
- Safeguarding intangible heritage
- Respecting traditional access and intellectual property
- Visitor management and interpretation at cultural sites

D Environmental

- Protecting sensitive environments and wildlife
- Visitor management at natural sites
- Energy and water stewardship and water quality
- Wastewater and solid waste
- Greenhouse gas emissions and low-impact transport
- Light and noise pollution

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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

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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 such increase in sustainability awareness among hotel staff and guests, stronger integration of local supply chains, and improved risk management practices.

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

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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.

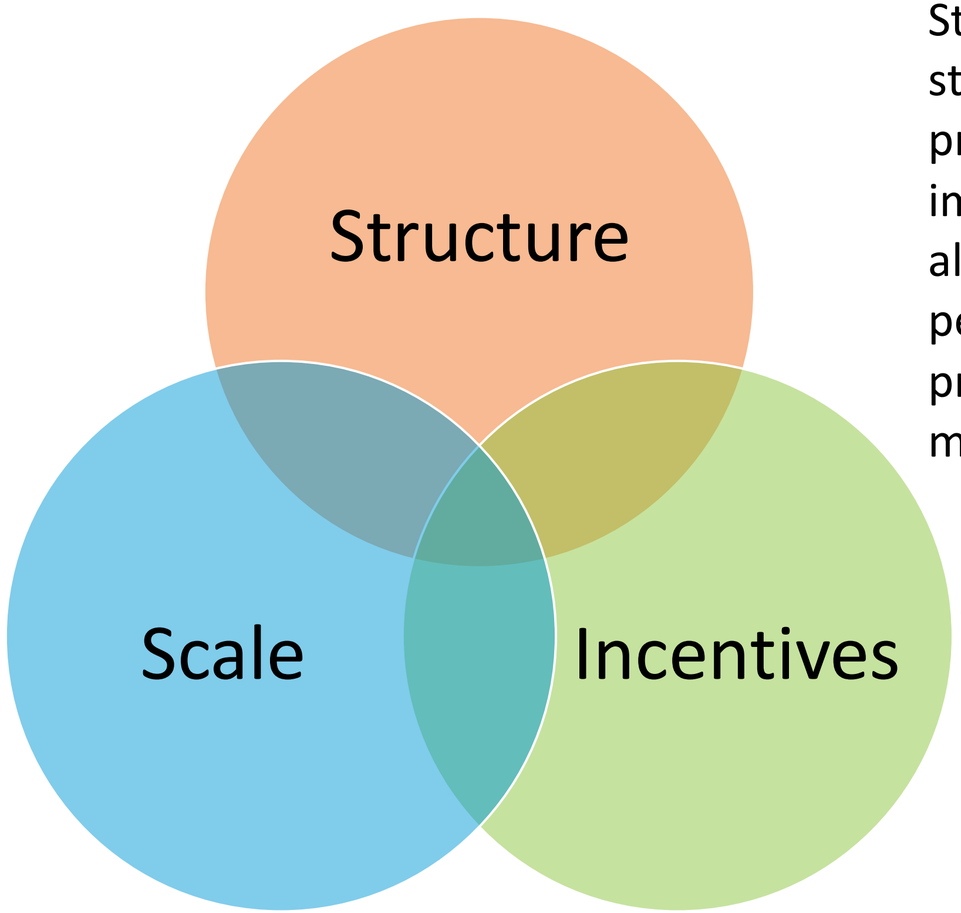
Today: As of 2026, more than 70% of hotel rooms in Singapore obtained sustainability certification, with 90% choosing GSTC certification.



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Value of national sustainable tourism programs

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.



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.

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

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Key messages and discussion

- Tourism is a complex and cross-cutting sector. Integrating sustainability into tourism yields benefits for priorities such as climate, gender, biodiversity, economic growth, infrastructure development, etc.

- Standards provide a common language to define sustainable tourism. Their uses include policymaking, planning, project design and implementation, destination management, monitoring and reporting.

- Governments can strategically use standards to engage private sector to advance sustainability objectives.

Is your destination or tourism project using standards?

Where are there opportunities to do so? Where are there challenges?

How engaged is your destination with tourism businesses?

What programs or policies can be put in place to encourage private sector participation in sustainability?

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Thank you!

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