ADB SUSTAINABLE TOURISM FORUM

Session 4:

Strengthening Destination Management

Applying the four pillars of the GSTC Destination Standard



Facilitated by:

Kingston Khoo · Randy Durband · Patricia Arrellano

GSTC
Global Sustainable Tourism Council

Session Agenda

0–10	Opening and context
10–20	Discussion 1: Destination challenges
20–30	Group report-back
30–40	The four GSTC pillars
40–50	Case study: Yancheng Wetlands Protection Project
50–65	Discussion 2: Action planning
65–80	Group presentations
80–90	Synthesis and takeaways

Presentation (35 min)

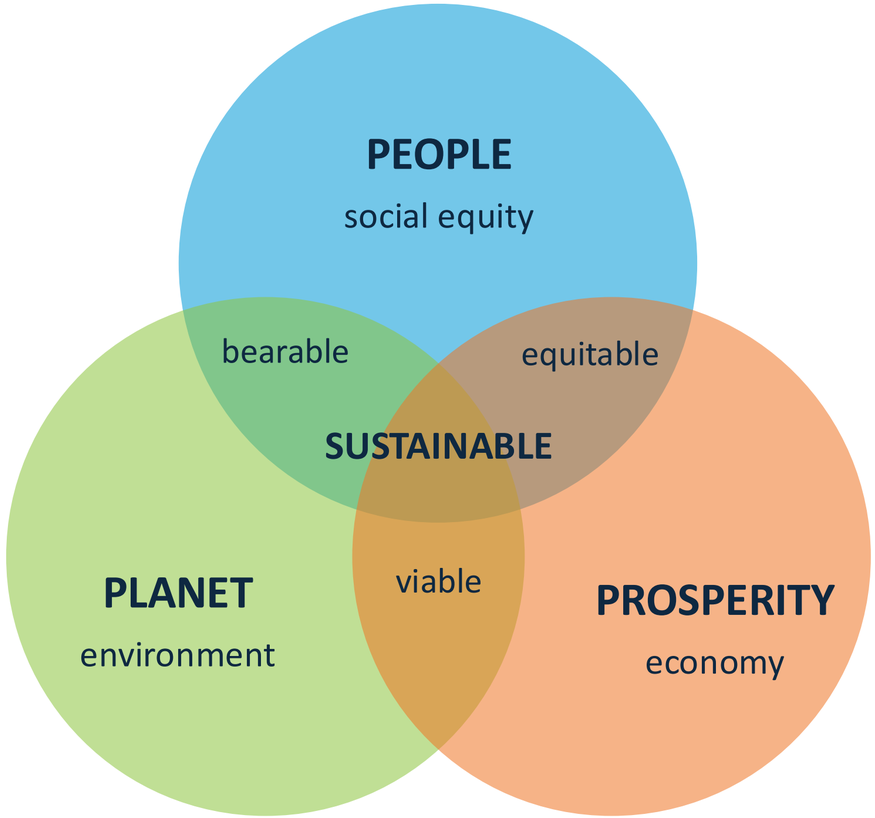
Group work (55 min)

Recap: 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)

People, Planet and Prosperity



About the GSTC

Global Sustainable Tourism Council: the leading global authority in setting and managing standards for sustainable travel and tourism

2007 **founded**

Founding organizations

- United Nations Foundation
- UNWTO (now UN Tourism)
- UNEP
- A coalition of 32 partners

600+ Members | 80+ Destination Members | 100+ Countries Represented

GSTC standards (year of each version)

Hotel Standard
2008, 2012, 2016, 2025

Tour Operator Standard
2008, 2012, 2016, 2025

Destination Standard
2013, 2019

MICE Standard
2024

Attractions Standard
2024

Food & beverage providers
In development

provides international accreditation for sustainable tourism Certification Bodies

Why destination management matters

A destination's tourism is only as sustainable as the way it is managed. Yet in many developing countries in Asia, destination management organizations (DMOs) are new or under-resourced.

Common challenges DMOs face



Unclear mandate

No clear legal role or authority to lead



Limited funding

Short-term budgets, no stable revenue



Little reliable data

Few indicators on visitors and impacts



Weak coordination

Many agencies, businesses and communities



Skills gaps

Few staff trained in destination management

Discussion 1: Destination challenges

Group work

10 minutes discussion

Groups of 5–6

In your group, discuss destinations in your countries:

1. **What are the main sustainability challenges facing these destinations?**
2. **Who is currently responsible for addressing them?**

Think about, for example:

- Overcrowding
- Seasonality
- Waste and water pressures
- Impact on cultural heritage
- Limited local benefits
- Impact on biodiversity

Report-back (10 min): each group shares its top 3 challenges and who owns them

The GSTC Destination Standard

4 pillars

38 criteria

174 performance indicators

How DMOs and governments use them:

1

Self-assessment

Benchmark the destination 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

The four pillars of the Standard

A
Sustainable management

- Management structure and framework
- Stakeholder engagement
- Managing pressure and change

B
Socio-economic sustainability

- Delivering local economic benefits
- Social wellbeing and impacts

C
Cultural sustainability

- Protecting cultural heritage
- Visiting cultural sites

D
Environmental sustainability

- Conservation of natural heritage
- Resource management
- Management of waste and emissions

Pillar A underpins the rest: without effective management, pillars B–D cannot be delivered.

Pillar A: sustainable management

1. **Destination management body**
   Clear mandate, funding and staff (A1)
2. **Strategy and action plan**
   Public, stakeholder-backed and sustainability-led (A2)
3. **Monitoring and reporting**
   Indicators on visitors, impacts and progress (A3)
4. **Business engagement**
   Support for enterprises to adopt standards (A4)
5. **Resident and visitor feedback**
   Regular engagement, information and promotion (A5–A7)
6. **Managing visitor volumes**
   Responding to crowding and seasonality (A8)
7. **Planning and development control**
   Regulations that protect land and assets (A9)
8. **Climate and crisis readiness**
   Adaptation, risk and crisis management (A10–A11)

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 & water stewardship and water quality
- Wastewater and solid waste
- Greenhouse gas emissions and low-impact transport
- Light and noise pollution

GSTC Certified Destination Example: Singapore

A national approach to destination certification

- First country to apply the GSTC destination certification process at national level
- Certified in February 2023 against the GSTC Destination Criteria by a GSTC-accredited body
- Tourism Sustainability Strategy (2022), with Hotel and MICE Sustainability Roadmaps
- Linked to national commitments under the Singapore Green Plan 2030

Lesson: a national strategy can turn the Standard into clear targets for industry.

2023 certified as a sustainable destination

60% of hotel room stock targeted for recognised sustainability certification by 2025

6 purpose-built MICE venues targeted for certification by 2025

Case study: Yancheng Wetlands Protection Project

By Mr. Zhang

Discussion 2: Action planning



Group work

15 minutes planning

Groups of 5–6

Your group is assigned one pillar. Choose a destination and use that pillar's criteria to answer:

1. **Where does the destination's management fall short?**
2. **What prevents the DMO from acting (funding, skills, data, coordination, framework)?**
3. **What could a government program or an ADB project do to help?**

Prepare a 3-minute pitch covering:

- Your destination
- Top 2 gaps
- Proposed actions
- Who leads

How governments and ADB can help

Governance frameworks

A clear mandate and multi-stakeholder governance

Sustainable funding

Tourism levies, fees and earmarked budgets

Staff training

Destination management and certification skills

Visitor and impact monitoring

Data systems, indicators and reporting

Stakeholder engagement

Platforms for residents, businesses and NGOs

Infrastructure

Waste, water, clean energy, transport and visitor facilities

GSTC destination assessments & certifications

Baseline, gap analysis, destination stewardship, industry compliance

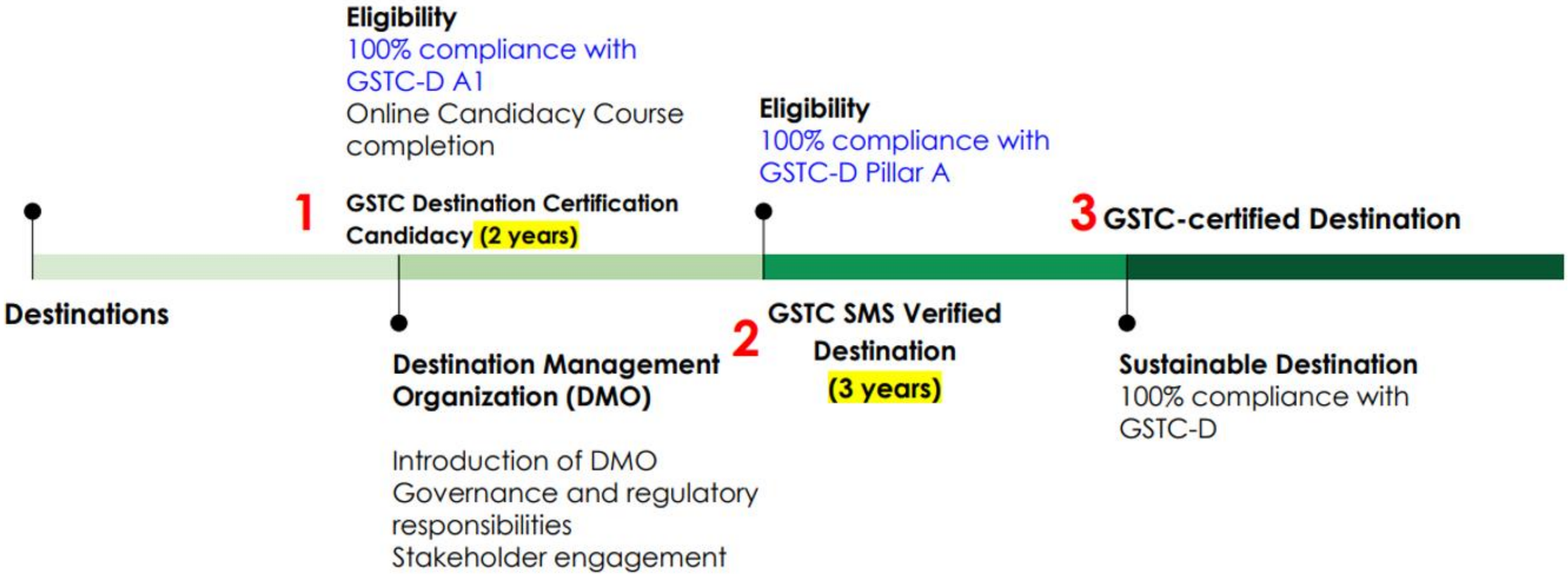
GSTC Destination Stewardship Starter Kit

Ten practical steps for destinations, which need not be followed in a fixed order

1. **Build a team and identify leaders**
2. **Identify key stakeholders**
3. **Define goals and vision**
4. **Engage the community and stakeholders**
5. **Develop a strategy and action plan**
6. **Provide education and training**
7. **Communicate progress**
8. **Monitor and measure progress**
9. **Complete a self-assessment**
10. **Adhere to the GSTC criteria**

Also see: GSTC's Destination Stewardship Reports for real stories of stewardship in practice.

Pathway: GSTC Destination Certification



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Pathways to Certification		Inclusion of Candidacy Status	Inclusion of GSTC SMS-verified	Online Candidacy Course
Step-by-Step Pathways	**Three-step approach:** Candidacy → GSTC SMS-verified → GSTC-certified	✅ Yes	✅ Yes	✅ Yes
	Two-step approach: Candidacy → GSTC-certified	✅ Yes	❌ No	✅ Yes
	Two-step approach: GSTC SMS-verified → GSTC-certified	❌ No	✅ Yes	✅ Yes
Direct to Certification	Fully direct to GSTC-certified	❌ No	❌ No	❌ No

Key takeaways

Supporting DMOs can strengthen wider sustainable development programs

Management is the foundation

A mandated, funded DMO with monitoring makes progress on every other pillar possible

Climate action

Climate-risk planning and emissions cuts, link tourism to national climate goals

Gender equality and inclusion

Inclusive governance and women's participation spread tourism's benefits

Culture and heritage

Protecting sites and intangible heritage keeps destinations authentic

Biodiversity and resilience

Protecting nature and sharing benefits locally help destinations withstand shocks

Investing in DMO capacity

Capacity built alongside infrastructure keeps assets well managed

Thank you!

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