
Sustainability standards in tourism

LABELSCAPE
Integration of sustainability labels into Mediterranean tourism policies

DELIVERABLE INFORMATION

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| Project acronym | LABELSCAPE |
| Project title | Integration of sustainability labels into Mediterranean tourism policies |
| Axis | 3 Protecting and promoting Mediterranean natural and cultural resources |
| Objective | 3.1 To enhance the development of a sustainable and responsible coastal and maritime tourism in the MED area |
| Project website | https://labelscape.interreg-med.eu |
| Deliverable number | 3.2.1. |
| Title of deliverable | Report on sustainability standards in tourism |
| WP | 3 Testing |
| Activity | 3.2 Building on existing practices and knowledge about sustainability labels in tourism |
| Partners in charge (authors) | ZRC SAZU (Tina Hedi Zakonjšek – ZAVOD NOVI TURIZEM) |
| Partners involved | / |
| Date | April 2020 |

Basic terms

Sustainable Tourism is 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.

Sustainable Tourism Criteria are the minimum, not the maximum, which businesses, governments, and destinations should achieve to approach social, environmental, cultural, and economic sustainability.

Sustainable Tourism Standard is a set of criteria and indicators certifying bodies use when assessing sustainability of destinations or tourism businesses.

Certification Body is an organization which owns the standard and has a certifying process in place to certify destinations and tourism businesses as sustainable.

Global Sustainable Tourism Council is an independent organization mandated to establish and manage global sustainable standards, known as the GSTC Criteria.

List of abbreviations

CB Certification Body

DMO Destination Management Organization

GSTC Global Sustainable Tourism Council

GD Green Destinations

UNEP United Nations' Environment Programme

UNWTO World Tourism Organization

WTTC World Travel & Tourism Council



Economic significance of tourism

Over the decades, tourism has experienced continued growth and deepening diversification to become one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world and one of the key drivers for socio-economic progress. Today, the business volume of tourism equals or even surpasses that of oil exports, food products or automobiles. Tourism has become one of the major players in international commerce, and represents at the same time one of the main income sources for many developing countries. This growth goes hand in hand with an increasing diversification and competition among destinations. Significance of tourism as an economic activity is illustrated below.

Picture 1: Why tourism matters? Source: WTTC and UNWTO

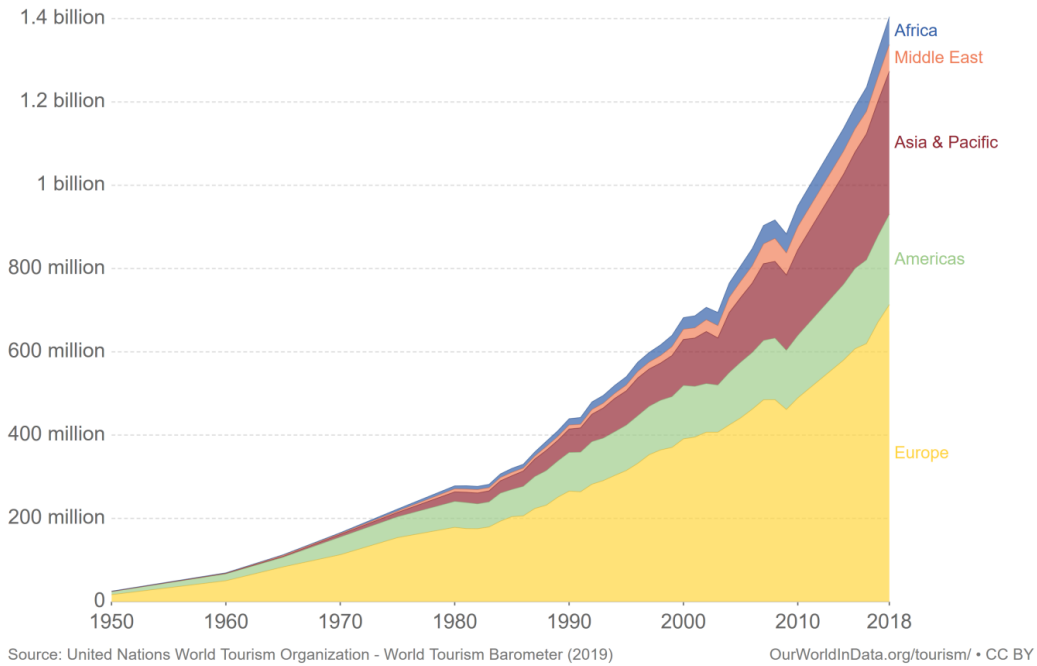


Growth of tourism arrivals and exports has been immense. In 1950, only 25 million people travelled abroad. In 2018, 1.4 billion total international tourist arrivals were recorded which is a 5 % increase compared to 2017. The most visited continent remains Europe which generates about one half of foreign arrivals, followed by Asia & the Pacific and the Americas. In 2018, total international tourism exports amounted to 1.7 trillion USD, a 4 % increase compared to 2017. One third of these exports were generated in Europe.

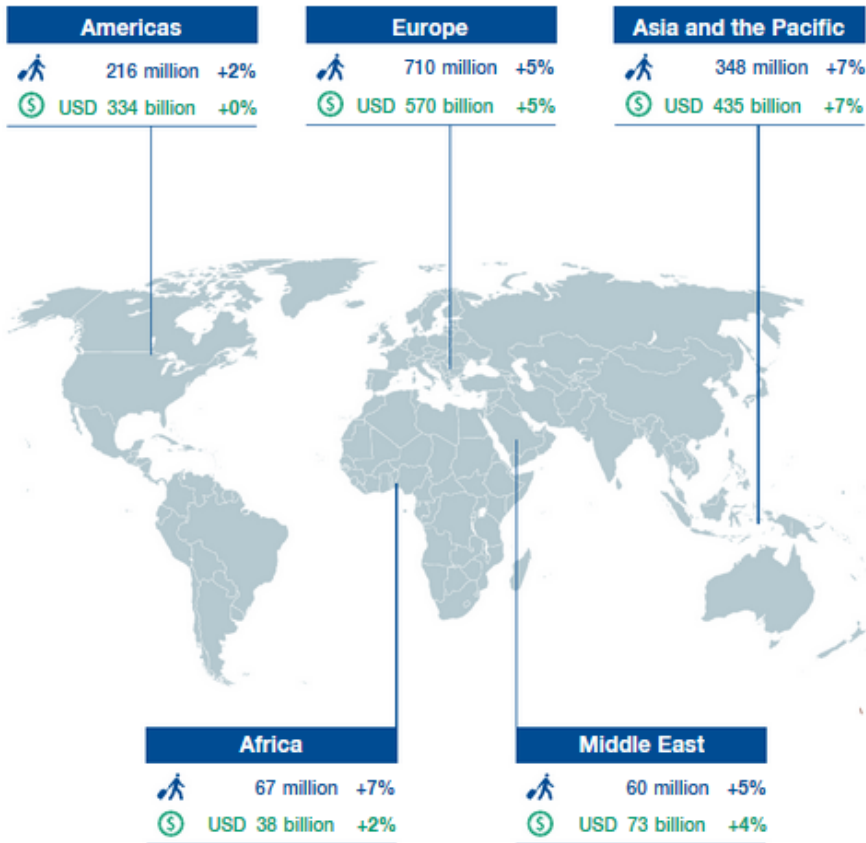


Picture 2: Growth in International Tourist Arrivals since 1950. Source: UNWTO

International Tourist Arrivals by World Region



Picture 3: International tourist arrivals and tourism receipts, 2018. Source: UNWTO.



Sustainable tourism development

Even though the roots of the sustainable development concept go back to the 1980s, it was in the early 2000s when organizations such as World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) noted that while tourism on one hand accounted for about 10 % of world economic activity and was one of the main generators of employment worldwide, it also had major impacts on the natural and built environment and on the well-being and culture of host populations. Hence tourism was beginning to be recognized as a positive as well as a negative force with both positive and negative impacts on the local communities and their environment.

In 2005, UNWTO and UNEP defined sustainable tourism as...

" ... 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."

This definition is still in use today.

In that same year, UNWTO and UNEP published a document *Making tourism more sustainable: A guide for policy makers* in which they examined ways towards strategies, policies and tools to maximize the tourism industry's positive effects and minimize negative ones. The document was primarily addressing national governments, but also other tourism stakeholders. It stressed what we still believe today:

"Making tourism more sustainable is not just about controlling and managing negative impacts of the industry. Tourism is in a very special position to benefit local communities, economically and socially, and to raise awareness and support for conservation of the environment. Within the tourism sector, economic development and environmental protection should not be seen as opposing forces - they should be pursued hand in hand as aspirations that can and should be mutually reinforcing. Policies and actions must aim to strengthen the benefits and reduce the costs of tourism."

Since 2005, tourism volumes have almost doubled in numbers; if 800 million people travelled abroad in 2005, this number rose to 1,5 billion in 2019. Even though tourism has faced several challenges and disruptions during this period, such as sharing economy, world economic crisis, terrorism, overtourism, climate crisis and recently corona virus pandemic, it has always bounced back as an industry. While as a concept, sustainable tourism has since then proven not to be a branch or a type of tourism; **sustainable tourism is the main principle which must guide future tourism development, no matter what.**



Sustainable tourism certification

How does a destination or a tourism business implement sustainable tourism principles and guidelines and hence maximizes positive and minimizes negative effects of tourism? What does a destination management organization (DMO) have to do to develop tourism in a sustainable manner? How does a hotel or a tour operator adjust its operations to become more environmentally and socially friendly and responsible? These questions are often asked by tourism stakeholders when they are striving to follow the sustainable tourism development philosophy.

The answer lies in sustainable tourism criteria and sustainable tourism standards¹ and certificates which are based on these criteria.

Sustainable tourism criteria

Most relevant international sustainable tourism criteria are set by an organization called the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC). The GSTC is an independent and neutral organization, legally registered in the USA as a non-profit organization, that represents a diverse and global membership, including UN agencies, NGO's, national and provincial governments, leading travel companies, hotels, tour operators, individuals and communities – all striving to achieve best practices in sustainable tourism. The GSTC is mandated to establish and manage global sustainable standards, known as the GSTC Criteria.

There are two sets of the GSTC criteria: **destination criteria (GSTC-D)** for public policy-makers and destination managers, and **industry criteria (GSTC-I)** for hotels and tour operators. These criteria are the guiding principles and minimum requirements that any tourism business or destination should aspire to reach in order to protect and sustain the world's natural and cultural resources, while ensuring tourism meets its potential as a tool for conservation and poverty alleviation. The criteria can be used for education and awareness-raising, policy-making for businesses and government agencies and other organization types, measurement and evaluation, and as a basis for certification. (But note: **the criteria itself are not a certificate yet!**) The GSTC criteria are available free of charge for a non-commercial use.

The GSTC criteria are arranged in four sustainability pillars:

- Sustainable management
- Socioeconomic impacts
- Cultural impacts
- Environmental impacts (including consumption of resources, reducing pollution, and conserving biodiversity and landscapes)

¹ ISO defines standards as documents that provide rules, specifications, guidelines or characteristics for activities or for their results, aimed at achieving the optimum degree of order in a given context.

Since the LABELSCAPE project is primarily focused on sustainable tourism criteria for destinations, you will find the **GSTC-D criteria** explained in more detail below. (For more information on the GSTC-I criteria please visit <https://www.gstcouncil.org/gstc-criteria/gstc-industry-criteria/>.)

But first, how do we define a destination? According to GSTC, a destination is *"a physical space with or without administrative and/or analytical boundaries in which a visitor can spend an overnight. It is the cluster (co-location) of products and services, and of activities and experiences along the tourism value chain and a basic unit of analysis of tourism. A destination incorporates various stakeholders and can network to form larger destinations"*.

The GSTC-D criteria can be applied to a wide range of destinations. They may be in any part of the world and of any type (e.g. urban, rural, mountain, coastal or mixed). The criteria can relate to large destinations (e.g. sizeable cities or regions) and to small ones (e.g. national parks, clusters of local communities, etc.).



The first set of the GSTC-D criteria was published in 2013. In 2019, the list was revised and launched as [The GSTC Destination Criteria v2.0](#). This version is now to be used. It is in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the UN 17 Sustainable Development Goals, displaying tourism's contribution to sustainable development in a very transparent manner.

The 38 GSTC-D criteria are divided in four sections:









- A - Sustainable management (11 criteria)
- B - Socio-economic sustainability (8 criteria)
- C - Cultural sustainability (7 criteria)
- D - Environmental sustainability (12 criteria)

Each section has two or three sub-sections. The order of the sections, sub-sections and criteria in no way indicates the relative importance of each topic.










GSTC-Destination Criteria version 2.0 (with link to UN Sustainable development goals)

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| Section A | Sustainable Management | |
| A (a) | Management Structure and Framework | |
| A 1 | Destination Management Responsibility |   |
| | <p>The destination has an effective organization, department, group, or committee responsible for a coordinated approach to sustainable tourism, with involvement by the private sector, public sector and civil society. This group has defined responsibilities, oversight, and implementation capability for the management of socio- economic, cultural and environmental issues. The group is adequately funded, works with a range of bodies in delivering destination management, has access to sufficient staffing (including personnel with experience in sustainability)</p> | |







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| | and follows principles of sustainability and transparency in its operations and transactions. | |
| A 2 | Destination Management Strategy and Action Plan |  |
| | The destination has established and is implementing a multi-year destination management strategy and action plan that is publicly available, is suited to its scale, was developed with stakeholder engagement and is based on sustainability principles. The strategy includes an identification and assessment of tourism assets and considers socio-economic, cultural and environmental issues and risks. The strategy relates to and influences wider sustainable development policy and action in the destination. | |
| A 3 | Monitoring and Reporting |  |
| | The destination is implementing a system to monitor and respond to socio-economic, cultural and environmental issues and impacts arising from tourism. Actions and outcomes are regularly monitored, evaluated and publicly reported. The monitoring system is periodically reviewed. | |
| A (b) | Stakeholder Engagement | |
| A 4 | Enterprise Engagement and Sustainability Standards |   |
| | The destination regularly informs tourism-related enterprises about sustainability issues and encourages and supports them in making their operations more sustainable. The destination promotes the adoption of sustainability standards, promoting the application of GSTC-I Recognized standards and GSTC-I Accredited certification schemes for tourism enterprises, where available. The destination publicizes a list of sustainability certified enterprises. | |
| A 5 | Resident Engagement and Feedback |   |
| | The destination enables and promotes public participation in sustainable destination planning and management. Local communities' aspirations, concerns and satisfaction with tourism sustainability and destination management are regularly monitored and publicly reported, and action is taken in response to them. The destination has a system to enhance local understanding of sustainable tourism opportunities and challenges and to build the capacity of communities to respond. | |
| A 6 | Visitor Engagement and Feedback |   |
| | The destination has a system to monitor and publicly report visitor satisfaction with the quality and sustainability of the destination experience and, if necessary, to take action in response. Visitors are informed about sustainability issues in the destination and the part that they can play in addressing them. | |







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| <p>A 7</p> | <p>Promotion and Information</p> |   |
| | <p>Promotion and visitor information material about the destination is accurate with regard to its products, services, and sustainability claims. Marketing messages and other communications reflect the destination’s values and approach to sustainability and treat local communities and natural and cultural assets with respect.</p> | |
| <p>A (c)</p> | <p>Managing Pressure and Change</p> | |
| <p>A 8</p> | <p>Managing Visitor Volumes and Activities</p> |   |
| | <p>The destination has a system for visitor management which is regularly reviewed. Action is taken to monitor and manage the volume and activities of visitors, and to reduce or increase them as necessary at certain times and in certain locations, working to balance the needs of the local economy, community, cultural heritage and environment.</p> | |
| <p>A 9</p> | <p>Planning Regulations and Development Control</p> |   |
| | <p>The destination has planning guidelines, regulations and/or policies which control the location and nature of development, require environmental, economic, and socio-cultural impact assessment and integrate sustainable land use, design, construction, and demolition. Regulations also apply to operations, including property rental and concessions for tourism purposes. The guidelines, regulations and policies were created with public participation and are widely communicated and enforced.</p> | |
| <p>A 10</p> | <p>Climate Change Adaptation</p> |  |
| | <p>The destination identifies risks and opportunities associated with climate change. Climate change adaptation strategies are pursued for the siting, design, development and management of tourism facilities. Information on predicted climate change, associated risks and future conditions is provided for residents, businesses and visitors.</p> | |
| <p>A 11</p> | <p>Risk and Crisis Management</p> |   |
| | <p>The destination has a risk reduction, crisis management and emergency response plan that is appropriate to the destination. Key elements are communicated to residents, visitors, and enterprises. Procedures and resources are established for implementing the plan and it is regularly updated.</p> | |













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| Section B | | Socio-Economic Sustainability | | | |
| B (a) | | Delivering Local Economic Benefits | | | |
| B 1 | Measuring the Economic Contribution of Tourism |  9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE |  8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH |  11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES | |
| | The direct and indirect economic contribution of tourism to the destination's economy is monitored and publicly reported. Appropriate measures may include levels of visitor volume, visitor expenditure, employment and investment and evidence on the distribution of economic benefits. | | | | |
| B 2 | Decent Work and Career Opportunities |  8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH |  4 QUALITY EDUCATION |  5 GENDER EQUALITY |  10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES |
| | The destination encourages and supports career opportunities and training in tourism. The destination's tourism enterprises commit to providing equality of opportunity for local employment, training and advancement, a safe and secure working environment, and a living wage for all. | | | | |
| B 3 | Supporting Local Entrepreneurs and Fair Trade |  8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH |  12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION |  2 ZERO HUNGER | |
| | The destination encourages the retention of tourism spending in the local economy through supporting local enterprises, supply chains and sustainable investment. It promotes the development and purchase of local sustainable products based on fair trade principles and that reflect the area's nature and culture. These may include food and beverages, crafts, performance arts, agricultural products, etc. | | | | |
| B (b) | | Social Wellbeing and Impacts | | | |
| B 4 | Support for Community |  3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING |  4 QUALITY EDUCATION | | |
| | The destination has a system to enable and encourage enterprises, visitors, and the public to contribute to community and sustainability initiatives in a responsible manner. | | | | |
| B 5 | Preventing Exploitation and Discrimination |  10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES |  16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS | | |
| | The destination upholds international standards on human rights. It has laws, practices and an established code of conduct to prevent and report on human trafficking, modern slavery and commercial, sexual, or any other form of exploitation, discrimination and harassment of or against anyone, particularly children, adolescents, women, LGBT and other minorities. The laws and established practices are publicly communicated and enforced. | | | | |
| B 6 | Property and User Rights |  11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES |  16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS | | |
| | Laws and regulations regarding property rights and acquisitions are documented and enforced. They comply with communal and indigenous rights, ensure public | | | | |

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| | consultation and do not authorize resettlement without free prior and informed consent and fair and just compensation. Laws and regulations also protect user and access rights to key resources. |
| B 7 | Safety and Security   |
| | The destination has a system to monitor, prevent, publicly report, and respond to crime, safety, and health hazards that addresses the needs of both visitors and residents. |
| B 8 | Access for All   |
| | Where practical, sites, facilities and services, including those of natural and cultural importance, are accessible to all, including persons with disabilities and others who have specific access requirements or other special needs. Where sites and facilities are not immediately accessible, access is afforded through the design and implementation of solutions that consider both the integrity of the site and such reasonable accommodations for persons with access requirements as can be achieved. Information is made available on the accessibility of sites, facilities and services |











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| Section C | Cultural Sustainability |
| C (a) | Protecting Cultural Heritage |
| C 1 | Protection of Cultural Assets  |
| | The destination has a policy and system to evaluate, rehabilitate, and conserve cultural assets, including built heritage and cultural landscapes. |
| C 2 | Cultural Artefacts  |
| | The destination has laws governing the proper sale, trade, display, or gifting of historical and archaeological artefacts. The laws are enforced and publicly communicated, including to tourism enterprises and visitors. |
| C 3 | Intangible Heritage   |
| | The destination supports the celebration and protection of intangible cultural heritage, including local traditions, arts, music, language, gastronomy and other aspects of local identity and distinctiveness. The presentation, replication and interpretation of living culture and traditions is sensitive and respectful, seeks to involve and benefit local communities, and provides visitors with an authentic and genuine experience. |











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| C 4 | Traditional Access |  |
| | The destination monitors, protects, and when necessary rehabilitates or restores local community access to natural and cultural sites. | |
| C 5 | Intellectual Property |  |
| | The destination has a system to contribute to the protection and preservation of intellectual property rights of communities and individuals. | |
| C (b) | Visiting Cultural Sites | |
| C 6 | Visitor Management at Cultural Sites |   |
| | The destination has a system for the management of visitors within and around cultural sites, which takes account of their characteristics, capacity and sensitivity and seeks to optimize visitor flow and minimize adverse impacts. Guidelines for visitor behaviour at sensitive sites and cultural events are made available to visitors, tour operators and guides before and at the time of the visit. | |
| C 7 | Site Interpretation |   |
| | Accurate interpretative material is provided which informs visitors of the significance of the cultural and natural aspects of the sites they visit. The information is culturally appropriate, developed with host community collaboration, and clearly communicated in languages pertinent to visitors and residents. | |

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| Section D | Environmental Sustainability | |
| D (a) | Conservation of Natural Heritage | |
| D 1 | 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. | |
| D 2 | Visitor Management at Natural Sites |   |
| | The destination has a system for the management of visitors within and around natural sites, which takes account of their characteristics, capacity and sensitivity and seeks to optimize visitor flow and minimize adverse impacts. Guidelines for visitor behaviour at sensitive sites are made available to visitors, tour operators and guides before and at the time of the visit. | |



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| D 3 | Wildlife Interaction |   |
| | <p>The destination has a system to ensure compliance with local, national, and international laws and standards for wildlife interactions. Interactions with free roaming wildlife, taking into account cumulative impacts, are non-invasive and responsibly managed to avoid adverse impacts on the animals concerned and on the viability and behaviour of populations in the wild.</p> | |
| D 4 | Species Exploitation and Animal Welfare |   |
| | <p>The destination has a system to ensure compliance with local, national, and international laws and standards that seek to ensure animal welfare and conservation of species (animals, plants and all living organisms). This includes the harvesting or capture, trade, display, and sale of wildlife species and their products. No species of wild animal is acquired, bred or held captive, except by authorized and suitably equipped persons and for properly regulated activities. Housing, care and handling of all wild and domestic animals meets the highest standards of animal welfare.</p> | |
| D (b) | Resource Management | |
| D 5 | Energy Conservation |  |
| | <p>The destination has targets to reduce energy consumption, improve efficiency in its use, as well as increase the use of renewable energy. The destination has a system to encourage enterprises to measure, monitor, reduce, and publicly report their contribution to these targets.</p> | |
| D 6 | Water Stewardship |  |
| | <p>The destination encourages enterprises to measure, monitor, publicly report and manage water usage. Water risk in the destination is assessed and documented. In cases of high-water risk, water stewardship goals are identified and actively pursued with enterprises, to ensure that tourism use does not conflict with the needs of local communities and ecosystems.</p> | |
| D 7 | Water Quality |   |
| | <p>The destination monitors water quality for drinking, recreational and ecological purposes using quality standards. The monitoring results are publicly available, and the destination has a system to respond in a timely manner to water quality issues.</p> | |
| D (c) | Management of Waste and Emissions | |
| D 8 | Wastewater |   |



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| | <p>The destination has clear and enforced guidelines in place for the siting, maintenance and testing of discharge from septic tanks and wastewater treatment systems. The destination ensures that wastes are properly treated and reused or released safely without adverse impacts on the local population and the environment.</p> |
| D 9 | <p>Solid Waste</p>    |
| | <p>The destination measures and reports on its generation of waste and sets targets for its reduction. It ensures solid waste is properly treated and diverted from landfill, with provision of a multiple-stream collection and recycling system which effectively separates waste by type. The destination encourages enterprises to avoid, reduce, reuse, and recycle solid waste, including food waste. Action is taken to eliminate or reduce single-use items, especially plastics. Any residual solid waste that is not reused or recycled is disposed of safely and sustainably.</p> |
| D 10 | <p>GHG Emissions and Climate Change Mitigation</p>  |
| | <p>The destination has targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and implements and reports on mitigation policies and actions. Enterprises are encouraged to measure, monitor, reduce or minimise, publicly report and mitigate greenhouse gas emissions from all aspects of their operation (including from suppliers and service providers). Offsetting of any remaining emissions is encouraged.</p> |
| D 11 | <p>Low-impact Transportation</p>   |
| | <p>The destination has targets to reduce transport emissions from travel to and within the destination. An increase in the use of sustainable, low-emissions vehicles and public transport and active travel (e.g., walking and cycling) is sought in order to reduce the contribution of tourism to air pollution, congestion and climate change.</p> |
| D 12 | <p>Light and Noise Pollution</p>   |
| | <p>The destination has guidelines and regulations to minimize light and noise pollution. The destination encourages enterprises to follow these guidelines and regulations.</p> |



It is important to understand that GSTC does not directly certify any products or services. Certification is done by Certification Bodies (CBs). Each CB develops its own standard and its own process of certification. Those CBs who want to display a certain level of alignment of their standard with the GSTC criteria which are listed above opt for either **accreditation by the GSTC** (higher level) or **recognition by the GSTC** (lower level). Some CBs however never send their "sustainable tourism" standards to the GSTC to obtain either the accredited or recognized status. In this case CBs **self-proclaim** their standards as sustainable tourism standards. Without verification, their quality and credibility are often questionable.

For better understanding, different levels of assurance are explained below.

Picture 4: Different levels of assurance. Source: GSTC and own.



Zero verification

Zero verification = neither criteria (standard) nor processes have been internally or externally verified; level of assurance is extremely low.

1st party assessment = criteria (standard) and processes are set by the company itself. Audits are internal and are intended for the company to make sure its own procedures are met. This is also called self-evaluation. An example is Hilton's internal *LightStay* sustainability measurement system.

2nd party verification = criteria (standard) and processes are set by the company for its suppliers. An example is tour operator TUI. They require each of the hotels they work with to implement TUI's standards, followed by an on-site audit which is conducted by a representative of TUI. This representative is not employed by the hotel, but it is employed by the client; and due to this client - supplier relationship, the level of assurance is still uncertain.

3rd party certification = criteria (standard) and processes are set by an independent certification body which hires (not employs!) independent auditors who have been sufficiently train to perform on-line

and on-site audits on behalf of the CB. There is no commercial relationship between the auditor and the audited property. The level of assurance in this case is very high. Examples include standards, such as Green Key, EU Ecolabel, Travelife, Green Globe.

3rd party certification by an accredited certification body = the highest level of assurance is guaranteed by accredited CBs. In this case, CB does not only work with independent auditors to assure 3rd party audits but has had its own standard and certification processes accredited by an independent party, such as eg. the Global Sustainable Tourism Council. More about this is explained in the following chapter.

GSTC accredited and GSTC recognized status

GSTC accredits certification bodies and recognizes sustainability standards.

For the **GSTC accredited** status of a certification body, GSTC provides an accreditation program through its partner ASI/Assurance Services International. Accreditation of a CB means not only do they use the GSTC criteria listed above as the foundation of their standards but also that their certification process is competent and neutral. This always necessarily includes an adequately trained 3rd party independent auditor who visits the applicant on-site.

For destinations, GSTC has so far accredited three international CBs: EarthCheck, Green Destinations and Vireo. These CBs operate world-wide.



Some certifications bodies have been accredited for businesses (eg. Control Union, Travelife for tour operators).

Although the GSTC accredited status is the most reliable way to ensure confidence and credibility of sustainable tourism certification, and worldwide acceptance, many certification bodies opt for a slightly lower status, ie. **GSTC recognized**. In this case GSTC recognizes that the standard a certification body uses complies with and/or includes the GSTC Criteria. With other words, all GSTC recognized standards are based on the four pillars of the GSTC Criteria: Environment, Social, Cultural, and Management principles. Certification process is not assessed in this case.



For destinations, the GSTC recognized status is automatically awarded to the three previously mentioned accredited CBs, as well as to Biosphere Responsible Tourism, Mountain IDEAL destinations standard, and several national standards, such as Thailand's, Norwegian, Korean and Indonesian.

Since it is easier, faster and cheaper to achieve the recognized status than the accredited one, **national** schemes mostly opt for the first. In this way they get an independent proof that their standard is of a high quality in regards to sustainability and they find that sufficient. On the other hand, **international** certification bodies compete on a larger market where they try to increase their visibility and credibility by achieving the accredited status.

Certification standards and processes

As already mentioned, in order to certify a destination or a business as a sustainable destination or a sustainable business, certifying bodies need to develop their own standards and their own certification processes. On top, each certifying body has a logo they award to the certified party.

Sustainable standards and certification processes differ among certification bodies. However, as long as they have been accredited or recognized by the GSTC, they are deemed credible. Had they not been, they still might be of a very high quality and reliable, but it just has not been verified by anybody. In the latter case it is up to the business, DMO, decision-maker or final user to decide whether they will recognize the certificate as trustworthy.

GSTC recognized standards for sustainable destinations are based on GSTC criteria for destinations. That does not imply that the certification bodies copy GSTC criteria word by word. It is important however that their standards cover all four aspects of sustainability (management, socio-economic, culture and environment). Some criteria might be left out and additional criteria added. A lot of re-wording and re-organizing also takes place in this process. Some standards will still focus on one or two of the four pillars, but that is not a problem, as long as they sufficiently cover all four aspects of sustainability. (Green Key certificate is an example of a sustainable tourism certificate strongly focused on the environmental and managerial aspects of sustainability and less on the other two).

Once the certification body has set up their organizational structure and developed their standard, they also need a certification process put in place. Below you will find a summarized certification process used by Green Destinations, a GSTC accredited certification body. This is to show how complex these processes are and what it takes to run a certification scheme. The whole process, including auditor selection, is described [here](#).

Picture below illustrates the Green Destinations certification process.



Picture 5: Green Destinations certification process. Source: own.



Upon signing a Certification Agreement, applicant destinations receive login details for the GD Assessment & Reporting System, a manual to guide the applicant around the platform, and shall proceed through the following steps of the assessment and certification procedure:



The destination coordinator completes the online Green Destinations Standard and Indicator reports. Assessment is done according to the reporting instructions and Guidance provided at each individual criterion or indicator, including the explanation of compliance and upload of supporting documentation. After the destination coordinator has completed all criteria and reviewable indicators, they notify GD Secretariat and request a verification.



The Operating Organisation performs a technical check to see a) whether the self-assessment has been performed at sufficient detailed level to request verification; and b) to see whether the assessment has the potential of leading to an Award level. If this is the case, the Verification procedure starts within 10 working days after submission of the self-assessment. If this is not the case, the destination shall be notified via e-mail within 10 working days after submission of the self-assessment, including details of any omissions.





“Green Destinations Certified” status is the ultimate type of recognition and is awarded to destinations who comply with all mandatory Green Destinations Standard (policy) criteria. In order to assure the independent nature of the Green Destinations Certified status, this status will only be assigned after an on-site audit by an independent 3rd party Auditor. This on-site audit will be repeated every 2nd year. The audit shall be communicated by e-mail to the destinations at least 3 months prior to the planned audit performance, allowing both applicant and auditor to prepare for the audit. “Certification” and associated license to use the ‘GSTC Certified’ logo can only be issued by Green Destinations as the Certification Body.



Applicants that have been granted an Award or Certification status shall receive a certificate and a flag/banner. The Certification document shall identify the name and address of Green Destinations, the name and address of the certified Destination, the scope and services covered by the certification, the GSTC-Recognized Standard to which the services complies, a unique record number or code, and the dates of granting and of expiry of the certification. The successful applicant shall be consulted about the presentation of their Certificate and an Award Flag at a local, national or international Award ceremony. Award presentations can also take place at an appropriate tourism fair (e.g. Vakantiebeurs Utrecht, FITUR Madrid, ITB Berlin, WTM London). Awarded destinations can order extra flags and banners (at a cost basis), which can be displayed throughout the destination’s territory during a 24-months period, until renewal of the Award or Certification status is required. Upon issuing the Award, the Destination shall be featured on at least the following channels: destination page on the CB’s website, including a brief description of the destination and sustainability achievements and assessment results, map and table of Green Destinations ratings (www.greendestinations.info) and in the Travelife database of Sustainable destinations used by Travelife Member Tour Operators and Travel Agents.



Green Destinations certification is valid for 3 years, but the first recertification shall take place within 2 years after the initial certification is granted. 18 Months after application the Awarded destination shall be encouraged to thoroughly update the information and evidence on the Green Destinations online platform. The assessment of the re-application shall follow the same procedure as outlined above and take into consideration the coherence between the improvements indicated in the previous one and the integration of the suggestions and the recommendations made by the Operating Organisation on behalf of the CB. When a Member is due for re-verification, the Operating Organisation ensures that the Member’s membership is up-to-date, where they have paid their subscription and re-verification fee, following receipt of an invoice outlining these costs; and sends out a renewal email. All Members will receive a renewals email when their membership fees are due with sufficient time for a re-certification process to be carried out prior to the end of the current validity period.



Sustainable certificates vs. environmental (eco) certificates

The difference between a sustainable certificate and an environmental (eco) certificate is sometimes unclear to users.

- If a certificate is recognized by the GSTC, it is a sustainable certificate, covering all four areas of sustainability.
- If a certificate is not recognized by the GSTC, it still might be a sustainable certificate (covering all four areas of sustainability), but the certification body has not opted for the GSTC recognition. The standard and process have not been verified by an independent body.
- If a certificate is not recognized by the GSTC, it might be because the standard is not covering all four areas of sustainability. This is the case with eco certificates.

One of the best known environmental certificates in Europe is the EU Ecolabel. It was established in 1992 and is promoted by the European Commission. Although it does not certify destinations, it certifies tourism accommodations and is in this sense relevant for tourism industry. A quick look at the EU Ecolabel standard shows that the majority of criteria are related to environmental sustainability and some to management, while cultural sustainability and socio-economic sustainability are left out. This is typical of all environmental certificates, also EMAS and ISO 14001.



Sources and useful reading

Global Sustainable Tourism Council.

<https://www.gstcouncil.org/>

Green Destinations

<https://greendestinations.org/>

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GSTC Destination Criteria, v. 2. 2019.

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GSTC Industry Criteria, v.3, for hotels and accommodations. 2016.

<https://www.gstcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/GSTC-Industry-Criteria-for-Hotels-with-indicators-Dec-2016.pdf>

GSTC Industry Criteria, v.3, for tour operators. 2016.

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Making tourism more sustainable: A Guide for Policy Makers, 2005. UNWTO and UNEP.

<https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284408214>

Sustainable Development Goals.

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>

World Tourism Organization.

<https://www.unwto.org/>

