

# DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP

YEARBOOK

2024  
2025



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# ABOUT US

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The Global Sustainable Tourism Council® (GSTC®) establishes and manages global sustainable standards, the GSTC Standards, also known as the GSTC Criteria. The GSTC Destination Standard for public policy-makers and destination managers, GSTC Hotel Standard & GSTC Tour Operator Standard, GSTC MICE Standard for Venues, Event Organizers, and Events & Exhibitions, and the GSTC Attraction Standard for tourist attractions such as theme parks, museums, and national parks. These 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 GSTC Standards form the foundation for GSTC's assurance role for Certification Bodies that certify hotels/accommodations, tour operators, and destinations as having sustainable policies and practices in place. GSTC does not directly certify any products or services but provides accreditation to those that do.

GSTC is an independent and neutral USA-registered 501(c)3 non-profit organization that represents a diverse and global membership, including national and provincial governments, leading travel companies, hotels, tour operators, NGOs, individuals and communities - all striving to achieve best practices in sustainable tourism. The GSTC is an ISEAL Community Member, a global membership organization for ambitious, collaborative, and transparent sustainability systems.



The Center for Responsible Travel (CREST) is a globally recognized nonprofit organization dedicated to transforming the way the world travels. Based in Washington, DC but with an international scope, CREST provides solutions, resources, and support to governments, policymakers, tourism businesses, and nonprofit organizations to confront tourism's most pressing issues.

Founded in the wake of the UN's International Year of Ecotourism, CREST initially focused on the role of small-scale ecotourism in empowering communities and conserving precious resources. Over time, our work has evolved to consider how all tourism can be more responsibly planned, developed, and managed across all sectors and geographies. Through innovative field projects, research, consultancies, and advocacy, CREST is taking action to address our world's key threats to securing a sustainable future.



The nonprofit Destination Stewardship Center (DSC) is a growing community of people involved in the intersection between tourism and stewardship of places. Founded as a program at the National Geographic Society, the DSC gathers and provides information on how tourism can help and not harm the natural, cultural, and social quality of destinations around the world. We seek to build a global community and knowledge network for advancing this goal.

# INTRODUCTION

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The fifth annual *Destination Stewardship Yearbook* compiles articles from the 2024-2025 Destination Stewardship Report (DSR), co-produced by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), the Center for Responsible Travel (CREST), and the Destination Stewardship Center (DSC).

Each issue of the DSR highlights destinations that exemplify effective, holistic management, showcasing best practices in sustainable tourism and the lessons learned along the way. The *Destination Stewardship Yearbook* celebrates the commitment of leaders driving these efforts. Together, their stories illustrate how destination stewardship can create lasting, positive impact.

The opening chapter features San Vigilio (Italy), Aspen (USA), and Noosa Shire (Australia) – each recognized as a sustainable tourism destination by a GSTC-accredited certification body. Their unique sustainability journeys highlight diverse strategies and a strong, long-term commitment to responsible destination management.

Focusing on the essential role of local communities, Chapter 2 highlights stewardship initiatives involving deeply engaged residents and grassroots organizations. It emphasizes shared decision-making, community benefits, and the preservation of cultural identity. Featured stories include the Los Angeles DMO's adoption of destination stewardship, the cultural resilience in the Kasbah of Morocco, Nepal's

Community Homestay Network, and community-owned tourism in the Maldives.

Highlighting practical stewardship approaches, Chapter 3 showcases efforts to protect natural assets, manage visitor capacity, and preserve unique environmental features. Examples include an Indigenous model to park protection, Dark Sky initiatives, and the application of carrying capacity principles in marine protected areas.

Chapter 4 examines how destinations and organizations are adopting and adapting stewardship approaches, from innovative conference models that foster collaboration to practical self-assessment tools that guide progress. The chapter also explores the importance of engaging travelers in stewardship efforts and cultivating stewardship values across all stakeholders. Together, these elements highlight how measurement, collaboration, and shared responsibility are driving sustainable tourism forward.

The final chapter explores the complex pressures facing sustainable tourism, starting with UXUA's struggle against political hostility in Brazil. It then expands into highlighting uneven but encouraging destination stewardship progress and a critical perspective on cruising. The chapter underscores the ongoing challenges and opportunities in balancing tourism development with community well-being and environmental responsibility.





# TRAVEL REDEFINED: TOURISM FOR PEOPLE AND PLANET

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Faced with the urgent realities of climate change, nature loss, and the pressures of overtourism, there's a clear need to redefine how the tourism industry operates. At its best, the industry has enormous potential to drive positive social, cultural, environmental, and economic impacts.

It's this opportunity that underpins "Travel Redefined: Tourism for People and Planet," a film series developed by the GSTC in partnership with Content With Purpose (CWP). Filmed on six continents, it examines the role of tourism in promoting biodiversity conservation, carbon reductions, green mobility, responsible waste practices, equitable economic development, cultural preservation, and accessible experiences.

From forward-thinking initiatives that mitigate overtourism to practical steps taken to foster resilient communities and ecosystems, the series is designed to inspire change. It amplifies leading voices across the industry who are confronting the complexities of rethinking the industry for a rapidly changing world.

The series features films from a huge range of partners, including California State University Monterey Bay, Tahiti Tourisme, Innovation Norway, Visit Laguna Beach, Tourism New Zealand,

Mandai Wildlife Group, Destination Québec Cité, Visit Isle of Man, Visit Turku Archipelago, Intrepid Travel, Ascott, San Vigilio Dolomites, Eurail, Guyana Tourism Authority, The Bahamas Ministry of Tourism, Victoria University, Cook Islands Tourism Corporation, South Australia Tourism Commission, Visit Iceland, G Adventures, Visit Tallinn, University of Greenwich, Papua New Guinea Tourism Promotion Authority, Gardens by The Bay and more.

Additionally, industry leaders from organizations like GSTC, PATA, Airbnb, ITB Berlin, The European Cyclists' Federation, and GDS-Movement also join academics and business professionals from countries as diverse as Türkiye, Fiji, Sweden, and Pakistan in contributing interviews.

Ultimately, Travel Redefined underscores a fundamental truth: effective and sustainable tourism management isn't just a desirable outcome; it's the very foundation of an industry that thrives and endures.

Launching in August 2025 all the content will be available to view on a dedicated microsite: [contentwithpurpose.co.uk/gstc/travelredefined](https://contentwithpurpose.co.uk/gstc/travelredefined) - and across GSTC's digital channels.



# CHAPTER 1

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## FEATURED CERTIFIED DESTINATIONS



*Certified Destinations Refers to Destinations Certified as Sustainable by GSTC-accredited Certification Bodies*





# SAN VIGILIO, ITALY

CERTIFIED BY VIREO SRL

BY FILIPPO DE AGOSTINI  
SUSTAINABILITY MANAGER, SAN VIGILIO DOLOMITES

Nestled in the heart of the Italian Alps, San Vigilio Dolomites is a place where unspoiled nature, spectacular mountain landscapes, and a millennia-old culture come together in harmony. This destination, which includes the villages of San Vigilio di Marebbe and San Martino in Badia, lies within two vast Nature Parks, part of the Dolomites, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Here, life follows the rhythm of the mountains and centuries of Ladin heritage. The community has long lived in close contact with nature, cultivating deep respect for its beauty and strength. As tourism has grown—drawn by the area's remarkable landscapes—the people of San Vigilio Dolomites have taken on the shared responsibility of protecting both their environment and traditions.

## COMMUNITY-DRIVEN GOVERNANCE BASED ON SHARED VALUES

In 2021, San Vigilio Dolomites became the first GSTC-certified destination in South Tyrol, joining a global community committed to sustainable tourism. This milestone reflects a model of shared governance built from the ground up by locals. Tourism here is managed by a Cooperative founded over 50 years ago by a group of stakeholders. What started as an association of hospitality professionals eager to beautify their villages has evolved into a structure overseeing the full spectrum of tourism management.

Although it's a private enterprise, the Cooperative operates on principles rooted in mountain culture: collaboration, respect for the land, and care for the

community. These values, passed down through generations, guide not only how we work with each other, but how we welcome our guests.

The local tourism economy is deeply personal. There are no large, externally owned hotels. Most businesses are family-run, meaning economic benefits stay within the community. This fosters both prosperity and a stronger connection between residents and the tourism they sustain. People are more likely to support what they benefit from directly. And in a place so closely tied to tourism, maintaining this balance is essential. By staying true to our values and working together, tourism remains a source of enrichment for the economy, the culture, and the land.



The small mountain village of San Vigilio has to accommodate high numbers of visitors during the peaks of the touristic season.

## TOURISM ROOTED IN RESPECT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Tourism in San Vigilio isn't about chasing trends or boosting numbers—it's about making visitors part of the community, even if just for a short time. Here, guests are invited to live with respect and wonder for the mountains that embrace our valley. With fewer than 5,000 residents and nearly 900,000 overnight stays each year, managing this flow is a delicate balancing act that demands foresight and shared responsibility.

The GSTC certification, with its emphasis on continuous improvement, has been instrumental in guiding our destination's evolution. And our commitment goes beyond the tourism sector. Hospitality businesses, artisans, farmers, and volunteers all contribute to making sustainability a shared value—something not just practiced, but passed on to visitors. Guests are encouraged to travel mindfully: to tread gently on alpine trails, respect wildlife, and embrace local customs.

The Cooperative plays a key role in this ecosystem, identifying best practices and helping accommodations and businesses adopt them. From tracking emissions to reducing waste at fairs, the entire destination is moving in unison. These efforts are visible and appreciated. Refillable water stations replace plastic bottles, signs educate hikers on fragile alpine flora, and guided tours promote environmental awareness.

But perhaps more significant is the growing recognition within the community. At the latest general meeting, even the farmers' representative—traditionally skeptical of tourism—expressed satisfaction with the Cooperative's efforts to inform guests about the value of local agriculture and to enforce simple but essential rules of coexistence. It's a small but meaningful step toward lasting mutual respect between traditional livelihoods and modern tourism.

## PRESERVING LADIN CULTURE

Equally central to our mission is the preservation of Ladin culture. The Ladin people, who have inhabited this valley for millennia, carry a living heritage and language. Our tourism initiatives are designed to safeguard this identity—whether through architecture that respects the alpine character, support for artisans and local cuisine, or cultural events that celebrate Ladin music, stories, and language.

This respectful approach allows visitors to move beyond passive consumption. They become participants in a living culture—one that values depth over spectacle and tradition over novelty.



According to local legends, when the first and last rays of the sun strike the mountains, the petrified garden of roses of Laurino, King of the Dwarves, comes back to life, with all the shades of red and purple. It's the "Enrosadira"

## MEASURING WHAT MATTERS

The type of tourism we believe in is not a one-way transaction—it's a relationship. One built on mutual respect, shared responsibility, and real human connection. Visitors don't just pass through. They step into a living community. And with that comes the need to create the right conditions for responsible tourism to thrive.

Raising awareness is only the beginning. What truly makes a difference are tools and systems that help people make conscious choices easily, without effort or judgment. That's why we're building an environment where acting responsibly is the natural thing to do.

This commitment is grounded in observation and dialogue. We monitor sustainability indicators—environmental, social, economic—not just to gather data, but to understand where and how to act. Through participatory processes, we involve the local population to identify challenges and co-develop responses. Sustainability isn't something imposed from above—it's built through transparency, listening, and shared values.

Digital innovation is helping too. One of our most promising tools is a sustainability-focused chatbot: a smart, friendly extension of our front office. It offers real-time updates on mobility, suggests alternative routes to avoid congestion, and reminds users of small, meaningful actions that protect nature and local life. In this way, sustainability becomes woven into the journey itself—not an add-on, but part of the experience.

## A DIFFERENT RHYTHM OF TRAVEL

Our vision prioritizes quality over quantity. We promote longer stays and visits outside of high season, encouraging slower, more meaningful encounters with the land, the culture, and the people. This helps ease pressure on infrastructure and ecosystems, while ensuring tourism contributes to local vitality all year round.

In a world driven by social media and FOMO—the fear of missing out—we invite guests to embrace something different: the joy of slowing down. Not rushing from one attraction to the next but staying present. Because here, the most valuable moments aren't the ones you post—they're the ones you feel. The scent of the forest after rain, the quiet of cows grazing on alpine pastures, the way light hits a mountain ridge at dawn—these aren't things you can rush through.

## STEWARDSHIP AS A WAY OF LIFE

We don't see destination stewardship as a box to tick. It's an ongoing process, one that evolves, adapts, and

responds to the needs of both people and place. When tourism is guided by respect and long-term thinking, it becomes something powerful: a force that doesn't just generate income, but nurtures landscapes, protects traditions, and strengthens community ties.

In San Vigilio Dolomites, stewardship isn't a strategy. It's the way we live.



Not only skiing: between Snowshoes hikes, walking, skating and much more, we are trying to diversify as much as possible the activities available, considering a no-snow worst case scenario.

### San Vigilio Dolomites

*Living sustainability. Every step. Every season.*





# ASPEN, USA

## MOUNTAIN-IDEAL CERTIFIED BY GREEN DESTINATIONS

BY ELIZA VOSS

VICE PRESIDENT DESTINATION MARKETING, ASPEN CHAMBER RESORT ASSOCIATION

Aspen, Colorado is nestled in the heart of the White River National Forest, at the confluence of the Roaring Fork River, Hunter Creek, Maroon Creek, and Castle Creek, and is encircled by the peaks of the Elk Mountain Range in the central Rocky Mountains.

Originally inhabited by the Ute Indian Tribe, Aspen became a mining town during the silver boom of the late 1800s. Today, Aspen is home to over 6,500 people and is known for its breathtaking natural beauty and world-class skiing.

### A MOUNTAIN TOWN FOR ALL SEASONS

While Aspen is famous for its winters, every season has an abundance of outdoor adventures, making it a year-round destination. In addition to outdoor recreation, Aspen's diverse array of arts and culture events make it a truly unique mountain town. Many local organizations are dedicated to hosting events, educational opportunities, and performances ranging from classical music to theatre. With a variety of enriching experiences and over 400+ miles of hiking and biking trails, the hardest part is deciding what to do first!

The emergence of skiing, and perhaps more importantly, Walter and Elizabeth Paepcke's arrival in Aspen, sparked the town's modern-day renaissance. The Paepcke's saw Aspen as a place where mind, body, and spirit could flourish. Ever since, Aspen has

been a tourist destination, attracting visitors from across the globe.



The Cliffhouse on top of Buttermilk Mountain

### RESPONSE TO TOURISM GROWTH

The summer of 2017 saw an unprecedented number of climbing tragedies on Aspen's local mountains. In addition, we were experiencing a statewide population boom with new residents (over 100,000 each year) looking to recreate outdoors. During this time the community realized it was necessary to launch a campaign educating enthusiastic newcomers about how to enjoy the town's beautiful natural resources in both a responsible and respectful

manner. These efforts included visitor dispersion tactics and visitor education, with campaigns such as “[How To Aspen](#)” and the creation of the [Aspen Pledge](#), but the tourism industry soon realized it had been neglecting its largest stakeholder: residents.

## ASPEN'S DESTINATION MANAGEMENT PLAN

In the spring of 2021, the Aspen Chamber Resort Association (ACRA) kicked off the destination management plan to expand on existing tactics and formalize them into a strategic plan. The plan prioritized Aspen's resilience by protecting quality of life for residents, while simultaneously preserving the visitor experience.

Sustainability in all forms – environmental, economic and social – served as motivation for the development of the destination management plan and are a constant theme throughout. The process involved deep engagement with Aspen's visitor economy stakeholders, including hoteliers, governmental entities, Aspen Skiing Company, business owners and board members as well as research, interviews, surveys, town halls and a co-creation lab with residents.

ACRA launched the Aspen Destination Management Plan in 2022 with three main pillars designed to address the challenges Aspen faces:

1. Address Visitor Pressure
2. Enhance the Aspen Experience
3. Preserve Small-Town Character

Each of these pillars has strategies to provide guidance towards actionable solutions to sustain and regenerate Aspen as both a destination and place to live.



Summertime in the heart of downtown Aspen

## CERTIFIED FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Another key milestone identified in the plan was the pursuit of Mountain IDEAL Certification through Green Destinations, accredited by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), to preserve and regenerate the natural environment. This served as the main strategy to track progress and measure the sustainability of the destination. While the pursuit of certification is a huge undertaking, it offers an incredible way to view the entirety of sustainability efforts occurring within the destination – from wastewater treatment to arts and cultural events.

During the certification process, the team occasionally encountered incredulous interviewees who would respond to the standard questions with, “Of course we are doing that, you can't be in this space in Colorado and not be doing that.” ACRA gained many insights from organizations that hadn't been interacted with in the past. Another important realization during this process was that Mountain IDEAL standards, recently rebranded to IDEAL, provide an excellent baseline while providing an opportunity to work within the community to improve existing efforts, push boundaries, and once again be recognized as leaders in the sustainability space.



A scenic shuttle ride to Aspen Highlands

## STRENGTHENING LOCAL BUSINESSES

In addition to environmental sustainability, ACRA continues to pursue social sustainability by sponsoring events that contribute to Aspen's small-town character, like the [Friday Uphill Breakfast Club](#), and engaging in 360-degree feedback through resident and visitor surveys that ultimately inform important initiatives.

Economic sustainability is dependent on our business community being able to house and provide essential

benefits to their employees. As a hybrid Chamber of Commerce and DMO, ACRA is well positioned to support the businesses not only with traditional member benefits, but also through a partnership with the City of Aspen and the Green Business Network of Colorado. This program provides technical assistance to local businesses looking to enhance or improve their sustainability practices. Simultaneously, ACRA is advocating for transportation and housing solutions for the backbone of the resort economy: employees.

## **BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE TOGETHER**

Sustainability has been the driving force behind the Aspen Chamber Resort Association's initiatives for many decades, long before 'destination management' became a buzzword in the industry. The development

and the deployment of the Aspen Destination Management Plan incorporated feedback from the residents and really gave permission to the organization to funnel work into the three pillars of the plan and ensure Aspen is a sustainable place to live, work and play for generations to come.







# NOOSA SHIRE, AUSTRALIA

## CERTIFIED BY EARTHCHECK

BY ANDREW SAUNDERS

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ADVISOR, DESTINATION MANAGEMENT, NOOSA SHIRE COUNCIL

Nestled on the subtropical coastline of Queensland, Australia – approximately 140 kilometres north of Brisbane – Noosa Shire is defined by its pristine beaches, healthy waterways, expansive hinterland wilderness, and vibrant local culture. It is not only one of Australia's premier visitor destinations, but also a place where long-term environmental and cultural sustainability is deeply embedded in the community's identity.

At the heart of Noosa's approach are long-standing community values that prioritise environmental protection and quality of life. These values are not only reflected in daily life but are also formally embedded in policies, planning frameworks, and partnerships. Together, they form the foundation of Noosa's destination and land management strategies, closely aligned with the GSTC Destination Standard.

### A LEGACY OF ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP

Noosa's commitment to environmental stewardship began in the 1960s when residents and Noosa Council united to protect the region's natural assets and put in place development restrictions. This led to the protection of natural zones and planning innovations that restricted high-rise developments and over-commercialisation – a stance that continues to define Noosa's identity.

Today, approximately 43% of Noosa is protected under conservation with a goal to increasing this to 50% by 2030. This long-term vision reflects a dedication to sustainable living and ecological integrity.



Noosa River Mouth. Photo courtesy of Visit Noosa

### CULTURAL STEWARDSHIP WITH THE KABI KABI PEOPLE

A cornerstone of Noosa's destination management is its partnership with the Traditional Custodians, the Kabi Kabi People. The region is situated on the ancestral lands of the Kabi Kabi, whose cultural knowledge, environmental practices, and spiritual connection to Country are foundational to sustainable management.

The Kabi Kabi Commitment is a partnership program developed by the Kabi Kabi People with Noosa Council that supports meaningful, long-term

collaboration in destination planning and management. This partnership ensures that First Nations values are embedded in how the destination is cared for and presented to the world.

Recently, Kabi Kabi Land and Sea Rangers began working alongside Council officers in environmental monitoring, cultural heritage protection, and landscape restoration. This respectful, hands-on collaboration supports intergenerational knowledge sharing and exemplifies the GSTC's emphasis on engaging Indigenous communities in destination planning and management.

## COMMUNITY AT THE CORE

One of Noosa's most distinctive strengths is its active and engaged community. Residents consistently champion environmental protection, lifestyle preservation, and a balanced approach to tourism growth. Public consultations, advisory panels, and widespread volunteerism reflect deep civic pride and a shared belief that tourism must serve the community – not the other way around.

A recent liveability survey confirmed this, with environmental protection ranked as the highest community value. This high level of local involvement reinforces that destination stewardship in Noosa is a shared responsibility.



Hastings Street. Photo by Amy Higg, courtesy of Visit Noosa

## ALIGNING WITH GLOBAL BEST PRACTICE

This strong foundation and leadership by the community and Noosa Council laid the groundwork for Noosa to become the first Local Government Area in Australia to achieve EarthCheck Silver Certification under the EarthCheck Destination Standard. As part of a five-year journey toward Gold Certification, this achievement places Noosa among a global network of destinations recognised for independently verified sustainability performance.

Noosa's alignment with the GSTC Destination Standard is evident across many fronts: participatory planning, biodiversity conservation, carbon and waste reduction, and a move towards a regenerative approach to tourism. The integration of the EarthCheck and GSTC frameworks reinforces the view that tourism should be a positive force – enhancing community well-being and protecting the natural and cultural assets that define Noosa.



Paddle boarders on the Noosa River. Photo courtesy of Visit Noosa

## UNESCO BIOSPHERE AND WORLD SURFING RESERVE

Noosa was designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2007, recognising its success in balancing conservation, economic development, and education. This designation supports community-led and research-backed initiatives, including habitat restoration, waterway monitoring, and promotion of Indigenous cultural heritage.

In 2020, Noosa was also recognised as a World Surfing Reserve, one of only a few globally. The title honours the region's exceptional surf breaks and the local community's commitment to coastal protection, marine biodiversity, and the celebration of surf culture as a key element of local identity.

## BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE DESTINATION BRAND

As Noosa's official destination marketing organisation, Tourism Noosa plays a vital role in positioning the region as a leader in sustainable and responsible tourism. In close collaboration with Noosa Council and the local community, Tourism Noosa has embedded sustainability into its brand narrative – promoting Noosa as a place where nature, culture, and lifestyle are deeply valued and carefully protected. but a defining feature of the destination's identity.



Tourism Noosa has introduced several award-winning initiatives under the Tread Lightly Noosa umbrella. Programs such as Plastic Free Noosa and Trees for Tourism links visitor activity with waste minimisation, local conservation, and habitat restoration. To further embed sustainability into the visitor economy, Tourism Noosa developed its innovative '50 Shades of Green' Event Sustainability Guidelines, which provide practical tools and standards for event organisers to minimise waste, emissions, and environmental harm. Aligning with a number of GSTC's Destination Standards, these initiatives, have reinforced Noosa's position as a truly sustainable destination.

## DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP IN ACTION

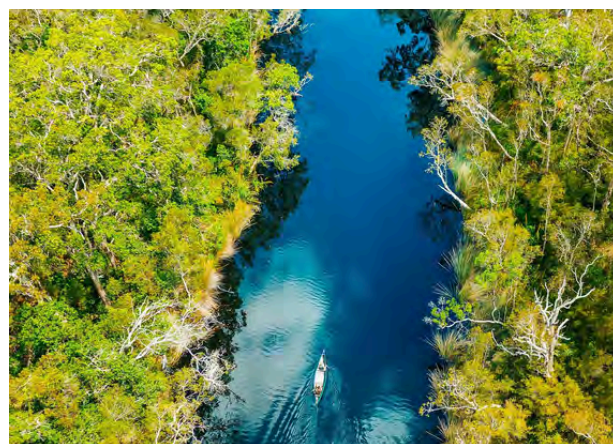
Noosa's story offers a compelling case study in the kind of integrated, locally led destination stewardship promoted by the GSTC. The alignment between Noosa Council's long-term planning, the EarthCheck benchmarking and certification process, the global frameworks of UNESCO, GSTC Standards, and active community participation forms an ecosystem that few destinations achieve.

Challenges do remain. Issues like, visitor pressures during peak seasons, housing affordability for local workers, and the pressures from regional growth all require ongoing management. However, Noosa's commitment to continual improvement, fact-based decision making, and transparent community engagement gives it a robust platform for navigating these complexities.

## NOOSA - A MODEL FOR OTHERS

Noosa's ongoing alignment with community values and the GSTC Destination Standard reflects a clear and deliberate roadmap for sustainable destination management. It recognises that true destination stewardship is not a one-time achievement, but a continuous process of reflection, adaptation, and collaboration.

At a time when destinations around the world face growing pressure to expand their visitor economies, Noosa stands apart by prioritising growth that enhances quality of life – for both residents and visitors. Its legacy lies not only in the beauty of its landscapes, but in the enduring strength of its community-led stewardship.



Noosa Everglades. Photo by Jesse Lindemann, courtesy of Visit Noosa

# CHAPTER 2

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## COMMUNITY-CENTERED STEWARDSHIP AND EMPOWERMENT



*Stewardship flourishes when local communities are at the center of leadership, ownership, and grassroots action.*



# THE LOS ANGELES DMO ADOPTS DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP

BY ADAM BURKE  
PRESIDENT & CEO OF LOS ANGELES TOURISM & CONVENTION BOARD

VOLUME 5, ISSUE 1

When a major city Destination Management Organization (DMO) starts getting hints that the old style of simply marketing major attractions isn't quite satisfactory, some soul-searching ensues. Los Angeles Tourism CEO Adam Burke explains why they had to change, and how they did it. A key step: Change the bylaws.

## TO BUILD AN EQUITABLE, SUSTAINABLE FUTURE, LOS ANGELES TOURISM RECASTS ITSELF A "DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP ORGANIZATION"

When the team at the Destination Stewardship Center asked if I could share some of the work we're doing in Los Angeles around equity and sustainability, I was somewhat reluctant since there is exceptional work being done by numerous DMOs around the world. There is no shortage of good ideas and best practices and, at Los Angeles Tourism, we're learning in real-time alongside our colleagues.

That said, after over 30 years in the industry, I remain as passionate as ever about the transformational power of travel and tourism. As Mark Twain famously observed, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness." By exploring other cultures and traditions, we see the world through a broader lens and realize that we have far more in common through our shared humanity than what divides us. In an increasingly polarized world, travel remains among the most effective forms of soft diplomacy - something that has never been more important.

Within that context - and recognizing that I am regularly inspired by the work of countless individuals and organizations across our industry - I humbly offer some insights into our journey at Los Angeles Tourism from being a traditional Destination Marketing Organization to transforming into a true Destination Stewardship Organization.

## BACKGROUND

As with all DMOs, the global pandemic forced us to step back and fundamentally reevaluate our business model. During that process, I was reminded of noted author Simon Sinek's exhortation to "[Start With Why.](#)" While our business may be travel and tourism, we realized our mission statement was focused more on WHAT we did than WHY we did it. Absent that foundational understanding, we believed that we lacked a core operating belief that could lend strategic clarity to our efforts.

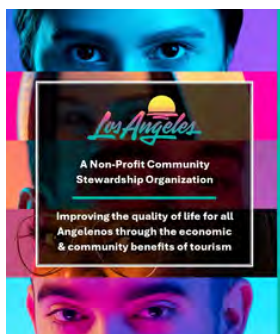
In reexamining our "why," many of the answers presented themselves in multiple iterations of the [DestinationNEXT Futures Study](#). Developed jointly by [Destinations International](#) and [MMGY NextFactor](#), this pivotal research provides ongoing insights into

the highly dynamic, constantly evolving relationship between tourism and the communities we serve. In reviewing the last several DestinationNEXT studies, we landed on three essential truths that informed our thinking:

(1) What's good for residents is also good for tourism – but the opposite does not always hold true. In fact, there are countless examples worldwide in which the unchecked growth of visitation has had significant negative impacts on communities. This, of course, gave rise to the notion of “overtourism.”

(2) Destination development must align around economic, social, and environmental sustainability. Gone are the days when the only essential Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) revolved around total visitation and direct visitor spending. While these metrics remain critically important, they must now be consistently viewed alongside considerations of equity, inclusion, and sustainability.

(3) Long-term success requires a shared vision for the future that is developed through a collaborative, iterative process. Given the above considerations, tourism must be viewed as something that is done FOR and not TO our communities, requiring ongoing engagement with a broader range of external stakeholders than ever before.



Los Angeles' Destination Stewardship model places the community at the center of everything they do. Photo courtesy of Adam Burke.



## DEFINING OUR WHY

Based on these insights, we realized that we needed to evolve into a “community-centric” organization – one where the needs of residents are viewed as foundational to our work. Through that lens, we also recognized that we have an incredibly powerful platform to elevate historically disadvantaged communities in a profoundly meaningful way. Finally, DestinationNext’s findings made it clear that we needed to put greater emphasis on how tourism impacts communities across Los Angeles.

Taking Simon Sinek’s cue, we sought to articulate a mission statement that encapsulated these core beliefs. These efforts yielded one simple (yet complex) concept that defines our “why” and serves as our fundamental guiding principle:

***Improve the quality of life for all Angelenos through the economic and community benefits of tourism.***

Dissecting this statement, it represents the three core concepts described above:

(1) “Improve the quality of life” – Just as the first tenet of the Hippocratic Oath is, “First, do no harm,” this speaks to the need to ensure that tourism consistently yields net positive impacts for our community.

(2) “For all Angelenos” – While Los Angeles remains one of the world’s most diverse communities, noted DEIA strategist Arthur Chan sagely advises us that, “Diversity is a fact. Equity is a choice. Inclusion is an action. Belonging is an outcome.” For us to truly fulfill our mission, we must ensure that our efforts serve the needs of those who have historically not had equitable access to opportunity.

(3) “Economic and community benefits” – Beyond all the things that residents are able to enjoy that were wholly or partially funded and developed to serve visitors – from local hotels, restaurants, and attractions – we have the opportunity to serve as a catalyst for workforce development, elevating small businesses, and even helping to address the needs of those experiencing homelessness.

Of paramount importance, it is essential to recognize that there is no “finish line” to destination stewardship. Rather, it is a foundational change in how we do business – one in which the guiding principles of our mission statement must be interwoven into the very fabric of what we do. It should not be seen as “one more thing to do” but, instead, become the lens through which we view every business decision.

## JOINING THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY

Beyond that, the very notion of stewardship is inextricably linked to a far broader definition of “sustainability.” Fortunately, rather than reinventing the wheel, that framework already exists as codified by the United Nations in their 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Encompassing everything from Sustainable Cities and Communities



to Decent Work and Economic Growth, Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, and Reduced Inequalities, the SDGs have become a globally accepted set of shared objectives that exemplify community stewardship.



LA Tourism's approach includes engagement at the global, national, and state level. Photo courtesy of Adam Burke.

Unfortunately, the SDGs remain far less known in the United States, and since global problems require global solutions, we believe that the U.S. travel and tourism industry must join our colleagues around the world in adopting this framework. That said, we also recognize that no single organization can effectively address all 17 SDGs.



LA Tourism's focus areas hone in on SDGs 8, 10, 11, and 17. Photo courtesy of Adam Burke.

To learn from organizations with extensive experience in this arena, we chose to become a member of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) – the first urban destination in the United States to do so. For more than a decade, GSTC has provided global standards for sustainability in travel and tourism that are directly linked to the UN SDGs, known as the GSTC Standards.

In addition, we completed GSTC's comprehensive destination assessment, which provided an in-depth analysis of where our community is excelling and where there are opportunities for improvement. This process was particularly helpful since it required close collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders including industry members, community leaders, and

city officials. The resulting "gap analysis" has proven invaluable in providing strategic clarity and a disciplined focus for our efforts.

## PUTTING WORDS INTO ACTION

As we transitioned from a traditional DMO to a true Destination Stewardship Organization, we recognized that – to create a sense of shared urgency and accountability – we had to develop substantive, meaningful goals that were fully integrated into our annual Strategic Plan and directly tied to team member compensation. Absent this level of focus – and based on key learnings from other industry colleagues – it was clear that initiatives around equity and sustainability have historically ebbed and flowed in favor of pursuing those objectives that were formally included in an organization's business plan.

While only scratching the surface, the following represent several tangible examples of how Los Angeles Tourism has pursued our mission with intentionality and a sense of purpose. And, as noted above, it's important to recognize that exceptional work is being done by DMOs across the industry and we learn from their work every day.

## BOARD GOVERNANCE - THE STARTING POINT

As a 501(c)6 membership-based, non-profit organization, our work is directly overseen by the Los Angeles Tourism Board of Directors, who generously volunteer their time and talents in support of our mission. As our primary governing body, we believed that the composition of our Board should reflect the incredibly rich diversity of our community – not on a performative basis, but because we passionately believe that hearing from a broad cross-section of Angelenos gives us access to a much wider range of perspectives, ideas, and lived experiences. That has been borne out by numerous studies showing that diverse teams consistently outperform homogenous ones and that inclusive teams outperform those organizations that are simply diverse.

Historically, since 90% of the organization's funding comes through taxes and assessments paid by hotel guests, our bylaws required that 51% of our Directors had to be hotel general managers or owners. While the hotel industry is making conscious efforts to address the issue, we had to acknowledge that this requirement impeded creating a truly diverse and inclusive Board, since the demographics of hotel



executives do not currently reflect the diversity of our community.

Working with our Governance and Nominating Committees, we amended our bylaws to require that any formal action of Board Governance require a 2/3 majority vote, rather than the simple 51% majority requirement that had been in place since the organization's founding. As a result, and in collaboration with our local hotel community, the number of Board seats for hotel general managers and owners was reduced by 30%, enabling us to increase the number of female directors by 58% and diverse Board members by 100%.

## ELEVATING SMALL, DIVERSE-OWNED BUSINESSES

While we have the privilege of representing more than 1,000 local businesses who depend on travel and tourism for their livelihoods, as we pursued more active outreach efforts to small businesses from historically disadvantaged communities, we learned several important things.



Bikes and Hikes is a local and diverse outdoor tour company which has become incredibly popular for visitors. Photo courtesy of Adam Burke.

First, the vast majority of these businesses didn't think of tourism as a potential means of growing their revenues. In addition, many weren't familiar with our organization or the resources available to support their companies. Finally, community leaders provided the critical insight that - while the City of Los Angeles has made significant strides in this area - most small, diverse business owners did not believe that they were likely to be selected through a competitive RFP process. As a result, we identified a significant need and opportunity to engage directly with these underserved organizations.

When Los Angeles hosted Super Bowl LVI in 2022, our partners at the Los Angeles Sports &

Entertainment Commission developed the Business Connect Program to provide an opportunity for small, diverse-owned business to become an official supplier for the event. Rather than limit our efforts to those companies that were officially selected, however, we reached out to every company that submitted a bid, offering to waive their Los Angeles Tourism Membership dues for a full year to remove any barrier to entry and empower these businesses to leverage the power of tourism.



Business Connect at Super Bowl LVI. Photo courtesy of Adam Burke.

Through those efforts, we onboarded over 140 new diverse-owned businesses. As we began working more closely with these Members, we recognized the need to help these companies better understand our industry and build long-term capacity to attract both leisure and group business. To enable this process, we subsequently waived Membership dues for a second year and collaborated with the Cultural Heritage Economic Alliance (CHEA) to provide formal "Tourism Readiness" training for these small businesses.

## PAID APPRENTICESHIPS - REBUILDING OUR TALENT PIPELINE

One of the most frequently discussed topics over the last 24 months has been our industry's urgent need to attract a new generation of talent. As has been cited by numerous sources, younger generations no longer see travel and tourism as an employer of choice. Two of the primary reasons identified include a lack of awareness regarding the breadth and depth of our industry and the belief that there is insufficient opportunity for upward mobility - particularly for communities of color.

So we partnered with the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation and Tourism Diversity Matters to launch a paid apprenticeship program focused on junior and community college



The first all-female mariachi band in Los Angeles. Photo courtesy of Adam Burke.

students from historically disadvantaged communities. Our approach was based on key insights from a host of local stakeholders engaged in workforce development.

First, these students are unable to take advantage of unpaid internships since many are already working full-time jobs while pursuing their education. Second, our industry has historically focused its efforts on four-year degree institutions with formal hospitality programs, thereby excluding a wide range of diverse candidates from consideration. Finally, as we developed the program curriculum, it became clear that we needed to provide hands-on experiences to help students better understand the full spectrum of tourism-related careers available to them.

As a result, we launched a 2024 pilot program in which six local travel and tourism organizations agreed to host a full-time, paid apprentice for one

year with the objective of securing long-term career opportunities for all apprentices at the conclusion of the program. Los Angeles Tourism is grateful to have hired two apprentices for year one, both of whom are working within our Membership team to give them the broadest possible exposure to every aspect of our local tourism community. In addition, the apprentices will be participating in a series of one-day immersion programs with a variety of our partners, giving them an in-depth, behind-the-scenes understanding of arts & cultural institutions, sports & entertainment venues, event planning & catering companies, and theme parks & attractions.

## THE ROAD AHEAD

As the philosopher Lao Tzu once said, “The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” While we are grateful to everyone involved in the steps we’ve already taken, we recognize that becoming a Destination Stewardship Organization is truly a lifetime commitment - that this vital work must outlive us and serve as the legacy that permanently transforms the nature of our work.

Similar to the Mark Twain quote cited above, I am reminded of St. Augustine’s poignant observation in the 5th Century that, “The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only one page.” I look forward to collectively writing the next chapter of our industry’s story with all of you, and to leaving the world a better place than we found it.



# SECRETS OF THE KASBAH

BY JONATHAN TOURTELLOT  
FOUNDER & CEO, DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP CENTER

VOLUME 5, ISSUE 3

Morocco's renowned Kasbah du Toubkal has racked up a three-decade record for good stewardship and community relations. Few lodges have had such a profound impact on their surrounding communities. During a visit, Jonathan Tourtellot learns how this came to be.

## MOUNTAIN LODGE SHOWS WHAT IT TAKES TO MARRY SUCCESS WITH GOOD STEWARDSHIP

December 2024, Morocco – In the dining room of the Kasbah du Toubkal, we guests have been alerted that there would be some kind of local celebration after dinner. The remnants of lamb and chicken tagine and vegetable couscous have been cleared from the knee-high tables, and now a ruckus arises out in the hallway. A sonorous masculine chant and a swelling of drums and tambourines heralds and a dozen or so men in djellabas who come trooping into the room. They form a circle, dancing, drumming, clapping, and singing away in the local Berber language. Now and then a different chant leader steps forward and starts a new round of chants.

We have no idea what is going on, but it sure is impressive.

The stone-walled Kasbah – the name means a small fortress or compound – grew from the remnants of a regional sultan's summer villa in Morocco's High Atlas Mountains during the days of French rule. Since its beginning as a trekking lodge back in 1995, the lodge



Afternoon sun lights the last village on the route up to snowy Jebel Toubkal. Photo courtesy of Jonathan Tourtellot.

has built a reputation for authenticity, sustainability, and excellent relations with the seven villages of the Imlil valley. Rarely has a tourism business done more for its locale. Each of us guests pays a 5% surcharge to benefit the communities. With most of the staff and guides recruited locally, the lodge can offer an authentic tourism experience.

Sometimes mysteriously authentic. Next morning, we learned that what we had seen was an *ahwach*, a kind of traditional dance and poetry slam. And, as we'll discover, it's also a mechanism of collaboration.

Can other entrepreneurs and destinations learn from the Kasbah's exemplary experience? After all, its



30-year success stems from an unusual set of circumstances:

- A foreign visionary,
- A trusted, hard-working local partner,
- A major motion picture production,
- And a local culture with a tradition of collaboration.
- Nevertheless, valuable lessons appear within each element of this story.

## THE VISIONARY EX-PAT

I asked cofounder Mike McHugo about each of these as we reviewed the Kasbah's history.

McHugo is the visionary Englishman who fell in love with the High Atlas. Climbing routes to Jebel Toubkal – at 13,671 feet, the tallest mountain in north Africa – begin down at about 5,700 feet in the Imlil valley. [4,167 and 1,737 meters respectively] When he first saw Imlil in 1978, the seven villages scattered along the steep slopes of the valley were impoverished, with no paved road access, no running water, no phones nor electricity – a realm for adventure travelers only.

An avid trekker, McHugo saw opportunity: Transform the chieftain's old place into a kasbah, a symbolic fortress protecting the trails into Toubkal National Park and its snow-capped peaks.

In a story now well documented in Derek Workman's booklet *Reasonable Plans*, McHugo joined with his brother, Chris, and other investors to begin work. They teamed up with a trusted local partner, a wiry bundle of controlled energy nicknamed Hajj Maurice from his fondness for the pilgrimage to Mecca. Well-respected locally, Omar Ait Bahmed (his real name) was known for getting things done. He served as a critical liaison with the local villages and took charge of transforming what was initially a trekking dorm into what would become an upscale mountain lodge.

The McHugo approach was to use local materials, hire local labor, reflect local culture. "Their ultimate goal," writes Workman, "was not just to make money, but to make the building as unique as possible, respecting tradition." (I recall the decorative carvings that enhanced the beams in our ceiling and the solid wooden door to my room.)

## THE MAJOR MOTION PICTURE

Then a catalytic event occurred: Disney's scouts for

the 1997 Martin Scorsese film *Kundun* – the story of the Dalai Lama's escape from Tibet – wanted the Kasbah to play the role of the monastery of Dunkar, where he found refuge.

McHugo agreed, subject to his rules of engagement during the six-week shoot: all local labor, all local materials, and, oh yes, a 5% surcharge to benefit the seven local communities. His rationale: "The tourist tax that the government collects goes too far away for local people to see the benefit of it."

Now locals had to decide how to spend their windfall. To do so, they formed the *Association Bassins d'Imlil*, (Association of Villages of the Imlil Valley), a remarkable example of tourism-driven collaboration. The first project was a massive, much-needed trash clean-up for the valley. Since then, the Association has funded more rubbish clean-ups, two ambulances, a boarding house for girls to attend school, a new road, an irrigation channel, and a community *hammam* – the Turkish-bath style facility central to Moroccan culture.

The movie shoot launched a community-surcharge policy that would stick with the Kasbah onward.



Funded by the Kasbah, valley trash collection relied on donkey power. Photo courtesy of Kasbah du Toubkal.

## THE VILLAGERS OF THE VALLEY

I ask assistant manager and Imlil native Lahcen Igdem how seven villages all agreed to create an umbrella organization? "We are used to cooperating with each other," he says, explaining that the villages traditionally pitch in to help each other whenever the need occurred, whether comfort of a bereft family, the celebration of a wedding, or the gathering of a harvest.

The lodge-valley relationship has stood the test of time. Recruiting staff locally has enriched the whole

destination. “All the guides who have worked here have been successful. They reached their dreams,” says Igdem. “This place is a school” – in effect, an on-the-job training center whose “graduates” have thriving guiding businesses, B&Bs, or good jobs elsewhere in Morocco. Among the large families typical of the valley, he says, almost every household will now have at least one person working in tourism.



A staffer pours mint tea on the dining terrace. Photo courtesy of Kasbah du Toubkal.

## CAN THE SAME APPROACH WORK ELSEWHERE?

Is the Kasbah du Toubkal a fluke, its success dependent on four lucky prerequisites? What if a place doesn’t have a visionary principled outsider (McHugo), a dedicated local partner (Hajj Maurice), a catalytic event (the movie shoot), or a collaborative, welcoming culture?

I offer my own thoughts about the first prerequisite. The world offers numerous examples of tourism businesses initiated by foreigners who fell in love with a place and wanted to do well by its people. While less frequent, the same has also been achieved by an entrepreneurial local with similar values, often one who has lived abroad long enough to bridge the cultural gap.

I put the remaining three prerequisites to Mchugo:

“Could you have done this without Hajj Maurice?”

“Not with my skill sets,” says Mchugo, “having someone with deep local contacts was very, very key to what we’ve done.” Not to mention being a skilled hard worker, Hajj Maurice has continued with the Kasbah since its founding, even overseeing reconstruction after the 2023 earthquake. “A local trusted partner is key.”

“Could you have done this without Kundun?”

Probably yes, suggests Mchugo. He cites the historic boutique hotels called riads in Marrakesh, which could team up to apply the community surcharge. “Two or three or four in a street could form their own association so that people can see where the money goes.”

I ask whether competing accommodations can undersell you by not charging the 5%? Mchugo calls this the “fallacy of the race to the bottom.” The Kasbah clientele is fairly affluent, and of the type likely to understand and approve the levy.

Ironically, Kundun was never widely seen. Bending to pressure from Beijing, Disney never distributed the movie widely and has since virtually suppressed it. Still, if you look hard online, you’ll find it.

“Could you have done this without the local Berber culture?”

Clearly, it helped. Mchugo calls the villagers “naturally hospitable.” Elsewhere, it would of course depend on the social attitudes of the locale. Many indigenous and some developed cultures have often welcomed and worked with lodges like the Kasbah. Still, the Imlil locals display especially well-honed ways of working together.

On my last day, I learn from the other assistant manager, Hassan Ait Lcaid, that one way the villages can iron out mutual problems is during an ahwach. He tells how one village’s chant leader will improvise a poetic problem statement, and his counterpart a possible solution.

I try to imagine how this would work in English: “We need more water downstream [drums, drums], but getting it seems just a dream.” And then the reply: “We’ll open our dam two days a week. [More drums.] Will that supply all that you seek?”

Maybe the United Nations should try the approach.





# NEPAL'S COMMUNITY HOMESTAY NETWORK

BY YVONNE MONTOYA  
INDEPENDENT FILMMAKER AND WRITER

VOLUME 5, ISSUE 1

Popular hiking trails around the world are prone to developing knots of overtourism at access points. With their multi-decade experience in trekking tourism, it's no surprise that the Nepalese have developed some innovative responses. Yvonne Montoya describes how one village takes tourism pressure off another.

## HOMESTAYS CAN REDUCE TREKKING CONGESTION, ENRICH VILLAGERS, AND DEEPEN TOURIST EXPERIENCES

In central Nepal, the village of Tatopani, known for its natural therapeutic hot springs and amazing views of the Himalayas is located along the Annapurna Circuit, one of the most popular trekking routes in Nepal.

And so Tatopani suffers from overtourism.

The nearby village of Narchyang does not. Nestled in the foothills of the Annapurna mountains, Narchyang is a small subsistence farming community with a beautiful waterfall and rich history.

Nepal's Community Homestay Network, based in Kathmandu, decided to help Narchyang create homestays, and so mitigate the overtourism problem while providing economic benefits to the local community. Now the Community Homestay Network is promoting Narchyang as an alternative trekking destination.



Narchyang, a farming village with a rich history, serves as an alternative trek through the Community Homestay Network.

Aayusha Prasain, CEO of the Community Homestay Network, explained, "It really works on the issue of overtourism that we're trying to mitigate through community tourism.... Only the well-marketed places get all the benefits, so we are trying to diversify the economic benefits and for that, we've been working very closely with the [Narchyang] community in terms of training and capacity building."

The Community Homestay Network started in 2012 with one home in the village of Panauti. Today they have homestays in 36 communities throughout Nepal. The idea is to benefit both the traveler, who has a unique experience by staying with a local Nepali

family and immersing themselves in a new culture and history, and the Nepali family, who gets an economic benefit from opening their home to visitors from around the world.

The Community Homestay Network uses an 80/20 business model with 80% of the money going directly to the host family and 20% being kept by the company for operational and marketing costs. They also encourage the homestays to use 20% of the money they earn to create a fund that can benefit the wider community.

To start out, at least five homestays in the community must be registered together. One of the benefits is they can use platforms like Booking.com to promote and market their homestays, and after they are legally registered, the homestays set up a committee with a chairperson, secretary, and treasurer. The Community Homestay Network also encourages the hosts to register in the local and provincial level government, so they can get access to training opportunities and peer-to-peer learning programs, which allow them to visit other established community homestays.

Sazza KC, Product Development Expert with the Community Homestay Network, said the first step in creating homestays in a community is to meet with the local people and see what programs and activities they can offer. “They provide different kinds of products to us and we let them know which product they can offer for the travelers. They give a timeline of how they can offer the product,” said KC.

The Community Homestay Network provided the Narchyang community with 6 days of training that included: community tourism, the basics of community homestay, housekeeping and cleanliness in a homestay, health hygiene, food safety, tourism product development, and Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI). Sustainability and responsible tourism are also important themes of the company, so participants are taught not to use single-use plastics. Instead of plastic water bottles they offer boiled or filtered water to their guests. They also customize their training according to the community’s needs.

There are also child protection policies in place. Communities can’t employ children under 18 to provide any kind of hospitality or tourism services such as welcoming guests or cultural performances. The children cannot be alone with travelers and permission is needed to take photos of any child.



The Community Homestay Network helps coordinate the logistics of the visit in the village.

The Community Homestay Network also teaches the hosts about storytelling and how to communicate their stories about their culture and traditions. They give lessons on how to use social media, such as how to click on a photo from their cell phone and post it with hashtags.

For the Community Homestay Network’s part, they handle all the marketing and promotion of the Narchyang village homestays. Their target markets are Europe and North America. They created an initiative called ‘Community Connect’ to help promote community-based tourism in Nepal. This past May, they invited journalists, influencers, travel writers, and tour operators to come and experience a homestay for themselves. According to the company’s website, “These exposure trips showcase alternative destinations beyond mainstream tourism, alleviating overtourism pressures and offering enriching community-based experiences. Additionally, Community Connect culminates in an event that brings together exposure trip participants, local communities, and stakeholders to communicate the values of CBT and foster sustainable employment opportunities.”

Right now agriculture is still the main source of income for the Narchyang community, but according to Prasain, it’s declining, with many fields left fallow. “They are traditionally agriculture-based, but that’s on a subsistence level, not a commercial level.” She hopes tourism can become the number one way the community makes a living. “We are trying to promote it in such a way that maybe in 5 years tourism will be the major source of income and agriculture will go side by side with that,” said Prasain.

The Community Homestay Network is especially beneficial to the women in Nepal. Women run most of the homestays, and this has given them access to financial benefits and opportunities to help their

families and their communities. Their kids can get a better education and they have more economic stability. The women also say they are becoming more self-sufficient and feel they now have a voice in their community.

With the boost in tourism has come an additional bonus. Young people who left to find opportunities in big cities are coming back, because they see the potential in tourism.

Narchyang hosted 200 travelers last year. Besides providing accommodations on the way to hiking the Annapurna Circuit Trail, villagers offer hands-on activities like helping work in the fields, cooking classes, short hiking trips, hot spring water sampling, and the chance to see wildlife like musk deer and snow leopards.

As for the future, the Community Homestay Network thinks their model can be replicated in other areas. Other countries have already contacted them to learn from their experience. Their short-term goal is to focus on promoting unique experiences for travelers in their 36 communities.

Prasain said these experiences help inspire travelers to stay longer and spend more money. She also doesn't want homestays to be thought of only as low-cost accommodations that only benefit residents. "We have come to realize that people really love to do hands-on experiences," she said. "It's a learning opportunity for the travelers, so hands-on experiences around that area would help to increase the length of stay, increase the spending, and, we hope, turn all our community hosts into entrepreneurs."







# PIONEERING COMMUNITY-OWNED TOURISM IN THE MALDIVES

BY SHANNON MCCARTHY & CHLOE KING (SOLIMAR),  
RAYYA HUSSAIN (HORSBURGH ATOLL TOURISM ALLIANCE)

VOLUME 5, ISSUE 1

The ritzy resorts of the Maldives, each perched on its own atoll, have left most islanders out of the tourism equation. Shannon McCarthy and Chloe King describe how a community-based guesthouse model may change things. Their first problem was how to convince the community.

## ONE RESORT PER ATOLL DID LITTLE FOR MALDIVE ISLANDERS. WAS THERE ANOTHER WAY?

For many, the Maldives is the ultimate tropical paradise with clear turquoise waters, white-sand beaches, swaying palm trees, and abundant marine life. In 2023, the Ministry of Tourism reported 1.88 million tourist arrivals, a 12.6% increase from 2022's 1.67 million. However, while tourism remains the backbone of the Maldives' economy, the benefits are not always reaching the local communities.

Since the 1970s, the Maldives has primarily adhered to the "one island, one resort" model, targeting foreign operators and tourists seeking luxury. Resorts continue to dominate the accommodation space, accounting for more than 71% of total bed capacity in 2020. Reporting by the World Bank (2015) notes that the "one island, one resort" model lacks inclusivity and threatens social, environmental, and fiscal sustainability due to the unequal and unshared benefits of the tourism industry.

In comparison, guesthouse tourism, which has grown in popularity since its introduction in 2009, currently

accounts for 19% of total bed capacity with 638 registered guesthouses in 2020, mainly on local inhabited islands (Sharmeela et al., 2021). These small-scale, family-owned accommodations provide culturally immersive experiences for various travelers and promise more benefits to local communities.

The Horsburgh Atoll, also known as the Goidhoo Atoll, is a sub-atoll within the Baa Atoll, is known for its UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. The Horsburgh Atoll includes the islands of Goidhoo, Fehendhoo, and Fulhadhoo, with populations of approximately 835, 318, and 391, respectively. Goidhoo, the largest island, thrives on agriculture, including watermelon farming, fishing, rope making, and thatch weaving. Fehendhoo and Fulhadhoo rely mainly on fisheries. The tourism economy in Horsburgh Atoll is growing, with 17 registered guesthouses and an increasing number of restaurants and tour operators.

## CREATING THE HORSBURGH ATOLL TOURISM ALLIANCE: A NEW VISION FOR TOURISM IN THE MALDIVES

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Maldivian government allowed foreign resort owners to accept

tourists but indefinitely delayed the reopening of local guesthouses. In response, tourism business owners in Horsburgh Atoll organized. When the Ministry of Tourism permitted the slow reopening of guesthouses starting October 15th, 2020, the informal coalition called the Horsburgh Atoll Tourism Alliance (HATA) saw smaller communities reopening while theirs remained closed. A founding member stated, "We were in a great loss at the time, so we gathered and fought for this right." HATA won the right to reopen their guesthouses.

Following their victory, the founding members of HATA set their eyes on their next goal: developing a tourism model that prioritizes community resilience and promotes environmental stewardship. They began collaborating on managing and marketing the destination, establishing HATA as the first community-led Destination Management Organization in the Maldives. In January of 2023, the USAID Climate Adaptation Project and Solimar International began supporting this initiative as an avenue for strengthening destination resilience in the face of climate adaptation challenges.

## DMO AS COMMUNITY COOPERATIVE

Though the support of USAID and Solimar, and the help of HATA Coordinator Rayya Hussain, HATA has structured their organization in an innovative way – as a cooperative, whereby community members have voting rights in the organization and receive dividends from future tourism development.

Additionally, as explained below, HATA's collaboration with these international development organizations has yielded a sustainable-tourism plan that entails strategies to ensure that tourism in the atoll contributes positively to both the preservation of natural resources and the well-being of its inhabitants.

While this first-of-its-kind initiative is still in its early stages, the lessons learned so far can be instructive for other destinations around the world seeking to decentralize the management of tourism and ensure local stakeholders can meaningfully shape its future development.

## COMMUNITIES GAIN A ROLE

Horsburgh Atoll is emerging as a beacon for sustainable tourism development, thanks to its rich biodiversity and the dedication of its community. The atoll presents a unique opportunity to blend

conservation with tourism, creating a model for responsible travel. Back in 2011, the United Nations recognized the exceptional natural value of this region by designating Baa Atoll as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. This honorable status protects the northern part of Goidhoo. The area is home to the highest biodiversity and the largest mangrove forest in Baa Atoll. It also acts as a popular roosting site for various migratory bird species.



Community members play volleyball at sunset in the Horsburgh Atoll. Photo courtesy of Chloe King.

Additionally, there's a fresh wave of opportunity in the Maldives, riding on the crest of community-based tourism that capitalizes on an already thriving network of guesthouses.

Yet Horsburgh's traditional island councils were skeptical. Guesthouse tourism facilitates greater access to more affordable travel for more visitors, but increasing visitor numbers also result in greater resource use in islands that often do not have access to fresh water or waste management centers. Additionally, locals in the Horsburgh Atoll discussed challenges in educating guests about Muslim beliefs or appropriate dress, increasing potential for cultural conflicts with guests accustomed to resort-style travel.

Horsburgh Atoll communities addressed these challenges by creating a common forum to discuss them with HATA. That paved the way for a revolutionary collaboration, as HATA invited public sector partners to join them. For the first time, three island councils have come together in a united forum to chart the future of sustainable tourism development in the atoll. At a management meeting in April 2024, HATA Coordinator and atoll resident Rayya Hussain noted: "This is the first time in the years I have lived here where I have seen all three of the Island Councils in the atoll sitting together in a public forum and discussing common issues. The council members also said this is the first time they are seeing real community benefits from a development project."



Horsburgh Atoll Sustainable Tourism Management Planning Workshop in June 2023. Photo courtesy of USAID CAP.

This alliance serves as a powerful engine for local engagement and ensures that the economic benefits of tourism are spread more equitably among residents. By fostering a sense of ownership and active participation in the tourism sector, this initiative aims to transform the way tourists experience the Maldives, and how Maldivians themselves benefit from their country's tourism sector.

In June 2023, HATA held a workshop with the community to address common challenges and to create a shared vision and identify strategic approaches for achieving a resilient destination. The collaboration between HATA, USAID, Solimar, key stakeholders, and local communities yielded the Sustainable Tourism Destination Management Plan, outlining everything from future mangrove restoration efforts to visitor education campaigns. The sections below present the strategies HATA will be employing.

## GOVERNANCE, DECENTRALIZATION, AND COLLABORATIVE MANAGEMENT

Over the past decade, the Maldives has tried to give local councils and governments more control over managing natural resources. However, this process has faced many challenges. Local councils and authorities still lack significant control and access to these resources, while there are no formal mechanisms that promote the collaboration between the public and private sectors.

Additionally, several public, private, and non-governmental organizations operate within the Atoll, but they lack coordination and often are unaware of each other's projects. Local Councils and Women's Development Committees (WDCs) have little power over tourism matters, while tourism actors work independently from these formal organizations. This lack of coordination limits power-sharing and co-management, weakening overall destination resilience.

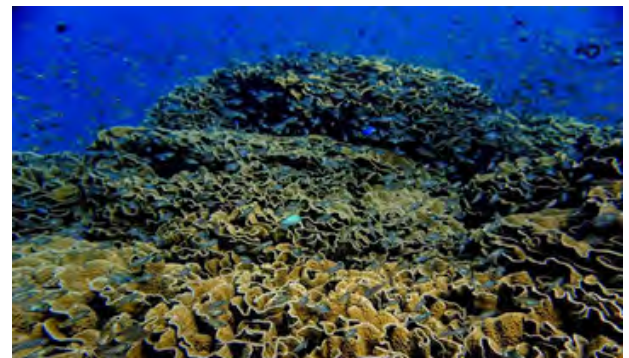
To enhance governance and ensure effective management of tourism, HATA proposes defining clear roles for local councils and stakeholders to streamline decision-making and foster collaboration among tour operators, NGOs, and community members to share best practices. Additionally, implementing regulations on building height, waste management, and environmental conservation will help preserve the atoll's natural beauty.

## ADDRESSING ECOLOGICAL CHALLENGES AND SUSTAINABILITY

Despite Horsburgh Atoll's untapped beauty and biodiversity, it faces challenges that threaten the atoll's ecological sustainability. Projections show that by 2100, rising sea levels will submerge 1,190 islands across the Maldives. Additionally, rising ocean temperatures result in coral bleaching, posing existential threats to livelihoods, land, and resources.

Coastal erosion and waste management stand out as pressing concerns. A lack of consensus on responsibility for cleanliness and waste management has led to tensions between tour operators and community members. Furthermore, many households and guesthouses dispose of food waste in the water or near beaches, where it often washes ashore, exacerbating the problem.

Biodiversity is crucial for maintaining healthy ecosystems and providing essential services for human well-being. In the Maldives, biodiversity underpins the economy, especially through tourism, which relies heavily on natural attractions like coral reefs. However, reef biodiversity is declining, with coral bleaching posing a significant threat. This decline worries tourism operators, who fear losing key attractions.



A huge lettuce-leaf coral in the Horsburgh Atoll, a diver and snorkeler paradise. Photo courtesy of Chloe King.

Part of HATA's planning efforts have included supporting a Visitor Voluntary Contribution Fee, where guests pay a small optional fee to go towards conservation efforts. This fee helps HATA support



initiatives such as beach clean-ups and coral restoration work; the island of Fulhadhoo, with the help of organizations such as the Maldives Coral Institute and Reefscapers, has been a laboratory of cutting-edge coral restoration technology, that has successfully revived a local house reef.

Key strategies guiding HATA's future tourism efforts include restoring mangroves and seagrass beds, and setting guidelines to prevent harmful activities like fish feeding and improper anchoring. Additionally, HATA plans to involve the community and visitors in restoration efforts such as planting native vegetation and participating in beach clean-ups.



A successfully revived house reef thanks to HATA's restoration initiatives. Photo courtesy of Chloe King.

## BALANCING INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT AND ECOLOGICAL RESILIENCE

Horsburgh Atoll's land use includes community facilities, recreational areas, industrial zones, agricultural lands, and waste management facilities. However, the uncertainty surrounding future tourism development poses significant challenges. Many guesthouses lack proper water, sewage, and waste disposal systems, leading to ecological impacts like untreated sewage being piped directly into the sea.

While new roads and jetties aren't seen as high priorities, there's a strong need for improved transportation infrastructure between islands, with only one speed boat company currently operating.

Affordable energy access is another obstacle, with high electricity costs due to the absence of a national grid and reliance on imported fossil fuels. Guesthouses also face additional financial burdens with higher business rates for electricity.

Most of the new infrastructure development focuses on building guesthouses. Despite this, both tourism operators and community members prefer keeping infrastructure development at a low level to preserve the Atoll's pristine environment. Balancing the need for proper infrastructure with ecological protection is crucial for ensuring sustainable growth and maintaining the Atoll's natural beauty.

To address these challenges, HATA is planning to pool its resources to invest in more transportation options for the islands, better coordinating its efforts to improve access. Recently, a seaplane service began frequenting the atoll in a positive step forward for HATA members and guests. Looking ahead, HATA plans to promote cooperation among tour operators and transportation providers to create affordable travel options.

## ENGAGING COMMUNITIES IN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Among the many challenges discussed during the Sustainable Tourism Management Planning Workshop, community engagement in tourism was the most prominent. Increased community involvement was a priority for many stakeholders. Historically, however, business operators found it difficult to find and retain qualified staff for tourism operations. A standout example is HATA member Island Luxury in Fulhadhoo, which successfully provided tourism-related training to over 30 locals in the islands. This commitment to community inclusiveness won them awards at the Maldives Tourism Awards 2022. This model has the potential to be shared with other HATA members.

Another challenge is the self-sufficiency of guesthouses in restricting local food provision to guests, as reported by Women's Development Committee (WDC) members from Fulhadhoo. The tourism experience for most visitors, consequently, revolves solely around guesthouses, providing minimal opportunities for non-tourism community members to reap benefits from the sector. A community member aptly termed this situation a "hangover" from the "one island, one resort" tourism model.

HATA aims to open collaboration in tourism to community members both directly and indirectly.

Directly, they will enable training opportunities to be tour guides, guesthouse staff, activity providers, and more; WDC members also plan to revive traditional weaving practices as guest experiences. Indirectly, any community member can become a member of HATA, buying into the cooperative and ensuring that they have a say in decision making while gaining direct financial dividends from tourism. Other HATA strategies include promoting the use of local products and services to boost community revenue, and organizing cultural events and establishing museum spaces to showcase Horsburgh Atoll's heritage and traditions.



Community members in the Horsburgh Atoll engaged in native tree planting efforts as part of World Environment Day 2024. Photo courtesy of Rayya Hussain.

## CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

HATA has become the first community-led Destination Management Organization in the Maldives, setting a new standard for sustainable and inclusive tourism development. When HATA formally organized and invited the local councils to participate in the tourism sector, it initiated a way for the community to have a direct voice in shaping tourism initiatives.

While the project is still in its infancy, a lot of hard work was put into developing the organizational structure and the guiding Sustainable Tourism Destination Management Plan. Through the power of collaboration with the public sector, the private sector, the community, and international entities, the Horsburgh Atoll Tourism Alliance was able to create innovative strategies intended to transform the atoll into a resilient destination.

Going forward, HATA hopes to strike a balance between preserving the natural beauty of the atoll with tourism and development. The atoll's rich biodiversity will serve as an educational resource for both locals and visitors. Through locally driven initiatives and diverse experiences, HATA plans for the community to be deeply involved in tourism, with 90% of the workforce comprising local residents. This harmonious coexistence of culture and environmental stewardship will make Horsburgh Atoll a shining example of sustainable living and a true reflection of the Maldivian way of life. As Horsburgh Atoll continues to evolve, it sets a new benchmark for resilience and sustainable prosperity in the Maldives and beyond.

To learn more about Horsburgh Atoll and HATA, or plan your next sustainable visit to the Maldives, visit their website at [www.horsburgh-atoll.com](http://www.horsburgh-atoll.com).

# CHAPTER 3

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## SAFEGUARDING NATURAL PLACES THROUGH STEWARDSHIP PRACTICES



*Stewardship in action, from managing visitor impacts to  
safeguarding unique environments and resources.*





# PARK PROTECTION THE INDIGENOUS WAY

BY COLOMBIA'S TAYRONA PARK TEAM  
TAYRONA NATIONAL NATURAL PARK

VOLUME 5, ISSUE 2

It is still unusual for a national government to make a conservation deal with indigenous groups, even more so when it means repeatedly shutting down a heavily visited national park. The team from Colombia's Tayrona park explains this successful agreement.

## IN TAYRONA, COLOMBIA, INDIGENOUS VALUES GIVE A NATIONAL PARK TIME TO "BREATHE"

"The Law of Origin is embedded within the ancestral territory itself—in every sacred space, in the sound of the wind, in the song of the birds, in the water, in the animals, in the lands, and in their arrangement and interconnections. It forms the foundation of our worldview." In keeping with this description,\* the four groups of Indigenous peoples of Colombia's Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta consider it their duty to grasp and embody this law.

That ancestral territory, home to the Kogui, Wiwa, Arhuaco, and Kankuamo people, is also home to the popular Tayrona National Natural Park. Now, in a notable agreement between a national state and Indigenous citizens, the Law of Origin is at work in a place with a unique mix of nature and culture.

### DRAMATIC TOPOGRAPHY

The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta towers above the Colombian Caribbean, one of the highest coastal mountain ranges in the world. The altitudinal



gradient fosters extraordinary ecological diversity and rich ecosystems, ranging from its submerged foothills in the Caribbean Sea to the perpetual snow of its peaks. This territory is a designated biosphere reserve, including two protected areas within Colombia's National Natural Parks System: Tayrona and the less-visited Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta National Natural Park. The mission of these parks is to conserve the ecosystems within their boundaries.

The richness of this place is amplified not only by its biodiversity but also by the living culture of the four Indigenous Peoples native to it. Through their ancestral knowledge, recognized by UNESCO as

Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, these peoples contribute to safeguarding their ancestral territory, bounded by the Black Line or *Séshizha* in the Kogui language.

For Colombia's National Natural Parks, joint management with the Indigenous Peoples of the Sierra represents an important opportunity to advance the mission of conserving protected areas; and for the Indigenous Peoples, this collaboration ensures the principles of territorial protection established in their *Law of Origin* are fully respected and implemented.

This interaction and intercultural dialogue have resulted in a management plan that was jointly developed with a vision of environmental, cultural, and spiritual interconnectedness in the territory. The plan provides a guiding framework for action around conservation management in both protected areas.

Tayrona National Natural Park, situated in the department of Magdalena in the lower foothills of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, was designated as a protected area in 1964. Over time, the introduction of environmental legislation combined with the natural beauty and biodiversity of the territory, led to the development of recreational, leisure, and educational activities within the framework of ecotourism as a conservation strategy. This has resulted in Tayrona Park being the second most visited protected area in the country, with sustained growth in visitor numbers since 2005. In 2024, the park recorded 615,731 visitors, both domestic and international.

\* "Law of Origin, or Own Law, refers to the knowledge that regulates the order and function of the entire Universe, the territory, and natural systems. This knowledge is reflected in the social, political, economic, and cultural organization of our people to ensure the permanence and harmony of all that exists." —Mestre Yanelia, Rawitscher Adams, Peter. 2018. *Shikwakaka: The Cracking of Mother Earth*. Santa Marta, Colombia. Kogui-Malayo-Arhuaco Reserve, p. 14.

## THE RESPIRA TAYRONA STRATEGY

Given the dynamics of tourism in the region, which has even bolstered the local and regional economies, a measure was established under "Prior Consultation" agreements to protect and restore the environmental,

cultural, and spiritual balance of the territory. This measure involves temporarily closing Tayrona Park three times a year for 15 days, each time in accordance with the cultural and ecological calendar managed by the Indigenous Peoples.



This strategy, *Respira Tayrona* (literally, "Breathe Tayrona") began in 2015 with a single annual closure lasting 30 days. The success of these temporary closures has relied heavily on the support and involvement of the local community. Initially, the initiative was met with resistance from stakeholders whose economic livelihoods depend on tourism. However, the initiative has gained acceptance over time through dialogue, educational efforts, and the promotion of cultural and historical exchanges with the communities of Tayrona National Natural Park. In 2024, the sixth edition of these exchanges was held, fostering reconciliation between the conservation goals of the environmental authority (National Parks), the ethnic authorities of the territory, and the participation of the local community.

As a result of this process, Colombia's National Natural Parks permanently adopted the temporary closures through Resolution 005 of January 2024. It established the following closure dates:

### Kugkui Shikasa Season

*Closure Period:* February 1-15

*Meaning:* A time of purification and renewal.

*Activities:* Rituals to cleanse the spirit and environment, reflecting on the past, and renewing commitments to nature and the community.

*Environmental Importance:* February is the driest month of the year, resulting in a water deficit. During this time, water resources are prioritized for sustaining the ecosystem rather than tourism activities.

### Saka Juso Season

*Closure Period:* June 1-15

*Cultural Meaning:* A time for planting and fertility

*Activities:* Rituals to ensure a bountiful harvest, harmonizing the relationship between humans and the land.

*Environmental Importance:* Transition period with some rainfall, though dry conditions still prevail.

### Nabbatashi Season

*Closure Period:* October 19–November 2

*Meaning:* Time of connection with the ancestors.

*Activities:* Ceremonies and rituals to honor ancestors, strengthening familial and community bonds.

*Environmental Importance:* This peak rainy season is crucial for replenishing the park's water systems. The focus is on ensuring the natural functioning of the ecosystem and maintaining sufficient water reserves for tourism use.

During these closures, ecotourism activities in the protected area are suspended to allow the territory to rest and to facilitate environmental, cultural, spiritual, traditional, and territorial strengthening activities. While a complete recovery from the impacts of tourism cannot be achieved during in 15 days, the strategy does allow nature and its ecosystems to "breathe," to take a break from the constant strain caused by human activities.

To do so, the Respira Tayrona (Breathe Tayrona) agreement integrates various components into a comprehensive strategy for territorial protection:

- A holistic vision (connecting the spiritual and material aspects of the land)
- Water as the essential principle of life
- Governance
- Territorial education
- Intercultural relationships
- Monitoring and research
- Restoration

The Respira Tayrona strategy has provided numerous lessons and insights. It highlights the importance of balancing conservation with tourism development, demonstrating that reducing the human footprint on nature is possible. Implementing it has strengthened the cultural practices of the Indigenous Peoples by ensuring access to their ancestral lands. Equally important, it promotes sustainable and responsible tourism in Colombia's second most visited protected area.



On May 29th, 2024, National Natural Parks of Colombia agreed that Tayrona would join the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) Early Adopter Program in implementing the GSTC Attractions Criteria with continued support and monitoring. The aim is to further enhance sustainable practices within the park.

Basically, the Breathe agreement aims to create a harmonious and understanding relationship between nature and humans. It stands as an inspiration not only for other protected areas within Colombia but also for those across Latin America, the Caribbean, and the world. It calls for respectful behavior toward all of nature, building integrated awareness of the importance of protecting water and biodiversity.

Let's allow the planet to breathe.

For more information on the Respira Tayrona strategy, watch the presentation by Juan Carlos Rodríguez Aguiar, Social Professional at Tayrona National Natural Park, in the GSTC webinar 'National Parks of Latin America and the Caribbean: Planning Biodiversity Conservation through Sustainable and Regenerative Tourism'; available on YouTube (GSTC, 2024, August 22nd).





# MILKY WHAT?

BY IAN VORSTER  
MANAGING EDITOR OF THE DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP REPORT  
VOLUME 5, ISSUE 3

Worldwide, destinations still graced with brilliantly starry skies are discovering they have an increasingly rare tourism asset, one that can draw stargazers, boost ecotourism, and even enhance spiritual travel. A great way to advertise and protect that asset is to obtain an international Dark Sky certification. Ian Vorster explains the process.

## DARK SKY INTERNATIONAL SHINES THE LIGHT ON DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP PRINCIPLES

If you have ever seen a night satellite photo of the eastern seaboard of the United States, you will understand the term 'light pollution.' Globally it saw a 50% increase from 1992 to 2017. The concept is simple: Poorly designed lights shine upward instead of downward. They contaminate the sky with unnecessary light. Thanks to this there are people alive today who have never seen the Milky Way. Let that sink in for a moment.

Besides having the potential to alter sleeping patterns of humans, light pollution interferes with bird migration, sea turtle reproduction and mammal feeding habits. More than 450 bird species migrate at night, and according to a National Geographic article, 50,000 birds died over a period of two days at Warner Robins Air Force Base, Georgia, in 1954, when they flew directly into lights on the ground.

This is where Dark Sky International steps in.

Dark Sky Sanctuary is a certification given by Dark

Sky International to public or private land that has an exceptional or distinguished quality of starry nights and a nocturnal environment that is protected for its scientific, natural, or educational value, its cultural heritage, and public enjoyment.

To qualify as a Dark Sky Sanctuary, the area must meet strict criteria for sky quality, and commit to protecting the night sky through responsible lighting practices and provide public outreach. Perhaps most importantly, the cities in each designated area sign what amounts to a legal agreement to maintain the standard. These sanctuaries provide opportunities for stargazing, astrophotography, and other nighttime activities that benefit from minimal light pollution. Dark sky tourism meets destination stewardship.

Dark sky tourism checks all the geotourism boxes. The geotourism approach is a form of travel that aims to sustain or enhance the geographical character of a place – its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage and the well-being of local communities. Dark Sky tourism can help disperse visitors geographically, seasonally, and over the course of a 24-hour period as different galaxies or stars become more evident.

## LOSS OF NIGHT

Humanity has been losing access to the night sky for a long time. As early as 1887, Harvard astronomer Arthur Searle noted that artificial lighting in Boston prevented adequate observations of the zodiacal light – that faint glow just before sunrise or after sunset caused by sunlight reflecting off space dust. By 2023 it was so bad that astronomers invented a new term to describe the pain associated with this loss: “noctalgia,” meaning “night grief.”

Dark Sky International is stewarding numerous regions and cities around the globe to heal that grief.

## LOSS OF LIGHT

In 2024, the Oregon Outback – in the south-central part of the state – earned the prestigious Dark Sky International certification, becoming the largest officially designated dark sky place on the planet. (There are other areas that are larger but uncertified.)

The Outback is located within the largest, contiguous, pristine dark sky area of the lower 48 states, and this certification helps to protect a large portion of it. Within the Oregon Outback International Dark Sky Sanctuary, are the unincorporated communities of Adel, Plush, and Summer Lake, the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge, a portion of the Fremont-Winema National Forest, nearly 1.7 million acres of land managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife’s Summer Lake Wildlife Area, nearly 80,000 acres of state-owned rangeland, and the Oregon Outback Scenic Byway.

The intent behind the pursuit of a large-scale sanctuary is to protect the unique, pristine, dark sky zone, to keep any additional dark sky recreation dispersed, to allow incorporated gateway communities to economically benefit from the project, and to more effectively and efficiently manage a certification within a remote area. In other words, not only to limit light, but to steward its use.

“As the population of Oregon and the trend of light pollution continue to rise, the unparalleled scale and quality of the Outback’s dark skies will long serve as a starry refuge to people and wildlife alike,” said Dark Sky Delegate Dawn Nilson, the environmental consultant who managed and authored the application. “Adherence to the Lighting Management

Plan will allow this large expanse of land to serve as a demonstration site of sustainable lighting principles not only within southeastern Oregon, but possibly the Pacific Northwest Region.”

“This four-year collaboration brings together so many of the elements we try to achieve in regenerative tourism,” said Bob Hackett, Executive Director of Travel Southern Oregon. “It not only elevates the destination experience for visitors to Lake County and opens up opportunities for local businesses, but it also helps agencies and residents steward their lands in ways that celebrate a legacy of starry night skies for generations to come.” That’s true for every other Dark Sky certified locale.



## EXAMPLES OF RESPONSIBLE ASTROTOURISM

The Dark Sky International monthly magazine, *Nightscape* in December 2024, noted the following principles.

- *Use light responsibly:* Ensure outdoor lighting is purposeful, targeted, low-level, controlled and warm colored. Turn it off when not needed. Case study: Fulda, Germany was designated as a Dark Sky Community in 2019 when the city enacted a progressive outdoor lighting policy that respects both central European lighting traditions in light consumption and reasonable controls on outdoor lighting. Fulda also formed partnerships to educate the public about the value of dark skies and how city dweller’s choices impact the nearby Rhön International Dark Sky Reserve.
- *Protect the natural environment:* Ensure that tourism activities and operations do not disrupt wildlife or the natural environment. With 69% of mammals being nocturnal, many species rely on natural darkness for survival. Case study: Kaikōura, New Zealand is a newly designated Dark Sky Sanctuary that protects the world’s last two wild breeding colonies of the Hutton’s shearwater. The bird is highly endangered and drawn to city lights at night, where they crash land and often die.

- *Support the well-being of residents:* Consider the needs and activities of residents, aiming to enhance their experience of the nighttime environment while minimizing any negative impacts on the community. Case study: Mayo, Ireland Dark Sky Park sees significant community involvement in environmental preservation. Its annual dark sky festival is attended and staffed by residents and showcases local musicians and artists. A lighting retrofit at the Newport church has made the building safer and more beautiful, while saving two metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub>e per year.
- *Honor local and Indigenous cultures:* Respectfully and collaboratively integrate local and Indigenous people, their traditions, and their knowledge, where possible, with free, prior, and informed consent, recognizing their cultural significance and ensuring sensitivity in its application. Case Study: Cielo Guaraní, Misiones, Argentina is an astro-tour that connects visitors with the cosmology and culture of Guaraní communities through nighttime excursions into the jungle of Misiones. Indigenous sky knowledge is shared by a Guaraní guide in partnership with a western science by an astronomer.
- *Adhere to local regulations:* Comply with all relevant local regulations in the areas where you operate, ensuring responsible and legal practices. Support and promote regulations protecting natural darkness, ensuring future generations enjoy the night sky. Case Study: Adjacent to the popular Zion Dark Sky Park, the town of Springdale, Utah, enacted regulations to preserve the night sky and improve safety, quality of life, and national parkland. Its municipal code requires businesses and residents to limit outdoor lighting and ensure that it is downward-facing and shielded.

- *Foster sustainable economic growth:* Contribute to the local economy by generating meaningful direct and indirect economic benefits for local people and communities. Case Study: Northumberland Dark Sky Park, England has seen steady economic success from dark sky tourism. In 2015-16, 63% of its visitors came specifically for dark skies, and in 2017, Northumberland saw £25 million in economic benefits – 13% of investments were due to dark skies, and there was a 15% increase in business performance, with dark sky tourism supporting 450 local jobs.

## PENDING APPLICATIONS

South Africa and Scotland are among the other nations with active Dark Sky International Certification applications filed. South Africa is a recognized leader in the Dark Sky community – and it's not thanks to Stage 6 loadshedding, the nationwide power cuts caused by corruption and the decrepit failing generators. The country has a large collection of private game reserves that are collaborating to earn their certification. Several of the reserves now incorporate dark sky safaris and dark sky education programs into their offerings.

Scotland has seven Dark Sky Parks, with one of them, the Isle of Rum, now applying for Dark Sky International status. The Isle of Rum, in the Inner Hebrides off Scotland's West Coast, is part of a National Nature Reserve managed by NatureScot.

The island offers spectacular birdlife and geology in a natural landscape, typifying the kind of appeal that draws scientists and researchers from all over the world – a fast-growing trend as the world's sprawling cities continue to grow to accommodate their population, as they continue to outstrip the night.

And that sounds pretty rum to us.





# HOW MARINE PROTECTED AREAS ADDRESS OVERTOURISM

BY SARAH CARR  
OPEN COMMUNICATIONS FOR THE OCEAN (OCTO)

VOLUME 5, ISSUE 3

When shorelines, coral reefs, and small islands are involved, tourism can both support and interfere with conservation. When visitation gets out of hand, stewards of these places need guidance. When asked for help, a unique network of researchers, managers, and others – the membership of OCTO – volunteered some responses and examples. Here is what they came up with, summarized by AI and humans, in that order.

## A NETWORK OF MARINE EXPERTS OFFERS VARIOUS SOLUTIONS FOR SETTING TOURISM LIMITS

Open Communications for the Ocean (OCTO) is a US-based NGO that connects thousands of ocean professionals to the knowledge and networks they need, empowering conservationists and resource managers to apply best practices worldwide. OCTO's online communities share practical "how-to" knowledge in response to member questions. Learn more about OCTO at the end of this article.

A member recently asked a question pertinent to marine destination stewardship:

*What are examples of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), coastal regions adjacent to MPAs, and islands that have limited the number of visitors to their area, and how have they determined and implemented those limits?*

In response, members of OCTO's MPA Help community sent in over 40 examples of MPAs, coastal regions, and islands that have limited visitor numbers.

Here is a selection:

### **Hanauma Bay, Hawaii**

Based on a 2020 biological carrying capacity study, popular Hanauma Bay closes every Monday and Tuesday to provide the ecosystem with relief from tourism pressure, helping to preserve marine life and coral health. The bay is also closed to fishing. Reports from ongoing monitoring inform management decisions. [Read more.](#)

### **Manuel Antonio National Park, Costa Rica**

The Constitutional Court of Costa Rica recently ordered reduction of daily visitors from 3,000 to 1,120 in this park spanning marine, coastal, and terrestrial ecosystems. The goal is to enhance ecological connectivity and reduce wildlife stress. Park fees support its ongoing management and maintenance. [Read more.](#)

### **Sipadan Island Park, Malaysia**

This marine park off the coast of Sabah, northern Borneo, enforces detailed diving restrictions, requiring advanced certification and limiting participants to two dives daily, between 7:00am to 4:30pm. Each

dive site accommodates a maximum of 50 divers per day, with each dive master restricted to leading no more than four divers simultaneously. Malaysian nationals pay discounted conservation fees compared to international visitors. [Read more.](#)



Snorkels at hand, a squadron of tourists wades toward a patch of coral near Managaha Island, Saipan. Photo by Jonathan Tourtellot.

### **Port Cros/Porquerolles National Park, France**

This Mediterranean marine park regulates visitor frequency and density during peak summer seasons. Rather than simple numerical caps, the park uses a coordinated transportation system to manage visitor flow. The approach has become a case study in effective tourism governance, demonstrating how historic Mediterranean marine ecosystems can remain accessible while preventing ecological degradation. [Read more.](#)

### **Calanques National Park, France**

This park near Marseille requires advance reservations for accessing specific areas, particularly the sensitive coastal inlets popular with tourists. The park addresses overtourism publicly and explicitly, creating public awareness about the relationship between visitation limits and ecological health. Their website directly acknowledges tourism carrying capacity as a central management challenge. [Read more.](#)

### **Galápagos National Park, Ecuador**

In 1998, Galápagos set occupancy limits of 1,660 people on boats and 180 on day cruises. These limits have helped protect the archipelago's environment, although land-based tourism has soared from 5,000 visitors in 1970 to 276,000 in 2018. All tourists must be accompanied by accredited Naturalist Guides, with no more than 16 passengers per guide at visitor sites. International visitors pay a \$100 entrance fee. Read more: "Rethink and reset tourism in the Galapagos Islands: Stakeholders' views on the sustainability of tourism development," Burbano et al. [Read more.](#)

### **Fernando de Noronha National Marine Park, Brazil**

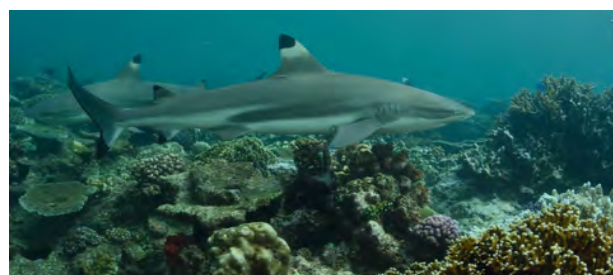
This remote Brazilian archipelago limits tourist arrivals by air to three commercial flights daily with a maximum 340 passengers. For cruise tourism, the park caps passengers at 750 people, with no more than 350 allowed ashore and 350 permitted to engage in water activities at any one time. If cruise passengers stay overnight, their numbers count against the air arrival limitations. [Read more.](#)

### **Whitsunday Islands, Great Barrier Reef**

The Whitsundays employ a "recreational settings" system where vessel size and group numbers determine which areas visitors can access. This creates graduated zones of impact, with pristine areas limited to smaller vessels and groups. The system designates specific mooring points and no-anchoring areas to protect seafloor habitats, all established through a statutory management plan with detailed guides for both recreational and commercial operators. [Read more.](#)

### **Shark Reef Marine Reserve, Fiji**

Fiji has delegated management of this reserve to a local PADI dive center rather than government authorities. The dive center regulates daily boat entries and maximum diver capacity per vessel. This public-private partnership ensures both environmental protection and sustainable local economic benefits. [Read more.](#)



Shark Reef, Beqa Lagoon, Fiji. Photo by Nigel Marsh.

### **Sept-Îles Natural Nature Reserve, France**

This Brittany seabird sanctuary prohibits landing on six of seven islands, with only one island open to summer tourists. Even there, beach access is restricted to low tide during July and August. Reserve managers conduct daily monitoring, counting boats and tracking activities such as diving, kayaking, and shellfish harvesting. Managers can issue warnings for trespassing, backed up by local police for continued violations. [Read more.](#)

### Also, From a Network Member

Insights from the Resilient Reefs Initiative's 2021 Solution Exchange on sustainable tourism: "We ran a whole workshop on this late last year and there's a great round-up including presentations from our guest speakers [here](#)."

### ABOUT TERMINOLOGY

During the Resilient Reefs Initiative Solution Exchange the term "carrying capacity" was often discussed in the context of monitoring ecological, social, and economic impacts of tourist numbers in order to improve management. That term often receives criticism because of a historic association with the notion of setting a single, maximum number of tourists at a given site. In reality, such simple limit is at odds with tourism behavior (i.e., not all tourists act the same) and the resilience of the environment to tourism impacts, which also varies

depending on such circumstances as location, ecosystem health, season, and resource durability. Nonetheless, the readily understandable purpose behind the term makes it easy for lay people to understand and for many marine managers to use when discussing tourist numbers at reef sites. Carrying capacity may vary with conditions, but sometimes there is no administrative flexibility to employ it effectively.

*This article was compiled under the guidance of OCTO's Chief Knowledge Broker, Sarah Carr. OCTO's global online communities - MPA Help , EBM Help, and OceanPlastic List - share "how-to" knowledge in response to member questions to support the planning and management of marine protected areas (MPAs), improving ocean ecosystem management and conservation, and preventing ocean plastic pollution respectively. Collectively these lists have over 55 thousand members worldwide.*



# CHAPTER 4

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## EVOLVING MODELS OF STEWARDSHIP



*Discover how stewardship is implemented through evolving tools,  
practices, and value-driven approaches.*



# CONFERENCE AS A STEWARDSHIP MODEL

BY WES ESPINOSA  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CREST

VOLUME 5, ISSUE 2

Wes Espinosa, Executive Director of CREST, explains why the structure of the innovative 2024 two-day meeting he organized in Atlanta models the collaborative principles of good destination stewardship, up close and personal.

## A TOURISM EVENT CAN DEMONSTRATE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR DESTINATIONS

In September 2024, CREST held its annual World Tourism Day Forum, but this time we tried something new. In addition to convening it in Atlanta, GA, we designed the two-day Forum to break traditional molds of tourism conferences, challenge conventional thinking, and, perhaps most importantly, push attendees toward productive discomfort.

Why did we do this?

Over the last half-decade, the team at the Center for Responsible Travel (CREST) has worked on a wide range of destination stewardship initiatives, encompassing thought leadership, planning, and on-the-ground implementation. Whether working in rural communities with nascent visitor economies or in regions grappling with overtourism, we've consistently found that meaningful community engagement and active listening are universal foundations for successful destination stewardship.

These lessons inspired us to embed similar principles into the design of our Forum.

We convened it under the theme *Tourism, Justice, and Peace: Bridging Barriers and Amplifying the Voices of the Unheard*. Drawing from our experience, we sought—both deliberately and somewhat unintentionally—to recreate the engagement process that guides our destination stewardship work. Why? Because addressing complex, sensitive themes like justice and peace requires fostering cross-sector, cross-cultural, and (for our Forum) cross-continental engagement.

*"Community engagement and active listening are universal foundations for successful destination stewardship."*

At CREST, we believe that successful destination stewardship results in clear, prescriptive actions. However, it is essential that these actions are developed through an engagement process within an enabling environment—one that fosters collaboration, bold thinking, and mutual understanding. How did we develop the WTD Forum to reflect this approach?

## THE VENUE

As a resident of the sprawling metropolis of Atlanta, I often see the typical business traveler's experience



confined to a handful of well-trodden neighborhoods and venues. For this Forum, we instead chose to hold the event in Atlanta's historic West End, a neighborhood that embodies the city's layered culture, civil rights history, development narratives, and ongoing challenges. An apt setting for discussions around justice and peace in tourism.

What's more, we chose a venue that offered a refreshing departure from the sterile and formal environments typical of tourism conferences: A brewery known as Monday Night Garage, located on Atlanta's Beltline Trail. Breweries are inherently welcoming, fostering open and candid conversations, and we saw their roomy adjunct space as a place where participants could relax and engage in meaningful dialogue.



A breakout session on the brewery terrace. Photo courtesy of CREST.

Similarly, setting matters for effective community engagement in destination stewardship planning and implementation processes. Since destinations are made up of different stakeholder groups and communities, it's critical for stewardship practitioners and leaders to "meet residents where they are," holding engagement sessions, meetings, and workshops in settings where residents feel comfortable and open. Just as the Forum's venue shaped the tone of the event, choosing the right spaces for community engagement is critical to fostering collaboration and achieving meaningful outcomes.

## LISTEN WITH OPEN EARS

Many tourism conferences solely spotlight industry experts for panels, keynotes, and sessions. While valuable, this approach results in circular dialogue, exacerbating a tourism echo chamber. At the 2024 WTD Forum, we intentionally expanded beyond tourism, drawing inspiration from our destination stewardship work by bringing in a diverse array of voices—many from outside the tourism sector.

Why? Because addressing themes as intricate as justice and peace requires tourism professionals to listen to perspectives outside of their immediate expertise. For this reason, one of the key "rules" for conference-goers was simple: **Listen with Open Ears.**

We did this by bringing in diverse voices, offering insights from leaders working in such places as Ukraine, Colombia, Tanzania, Alaska, Brazil, and the US South. Speakers also represented institutions beyond tourism – the Martin Luther King Jr Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Partnership for Southern Equity, Love Without Borders for Refugees in Need, and others. These speakers presented difficult truths about tourism's impacts on communities. From Aziz Abu Sarah's keynote presentation on Tourism & Peace that touched on the Israel-Palestine conflict, to Dr. Vincie Ho and Bobbie Chew Bigby's fireside chat on decolonizing travel, no topic was off the table.

Indeed, a seat at that table is paramount to successful stewardship in a destination. The process requires that practitioners and residents commit to intentional listening, which ensures engagement with a multitude of nonindustry stakeholders such as nonprofits, advocates for marginalized workers, and those advancing policies for sustainability in tourism. These stakeholders represent the broader social and economic realities that tourism must respect and support. True stewardship knits the fabric of community.



Bob Shevlin recounts the evolution of his Uxua resort. Photo courtesy of Jonathan Tourtellot.

## EXTENSIVE CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

The 2024 WTD Forum was designed to be a collaborative gathering, encouraging stakeholders to co-create solutions to tourism's most pressing



In addition to learning and listening, participants were strategically divided into multi-sector stakeholder groups for the event's "Mock Scenarios" sessions. Each group was responsible for coming up with solutions to a mock scenario related to one of the following topics: Gentrification, exploitation of labor, climate change, inequality, and tourism and war. These sessions mirrored the collaborative governance models and engagement we champion in destination stewardship.

Whether at an event or as a part of destination stewardship, active collaboration requires us to invite diverse perspectives and challenge entrenched norms and beliefs. This is not always comfortable, but it is necessary. At CREST's Forum, this principle was not just a concept – it was the practice.

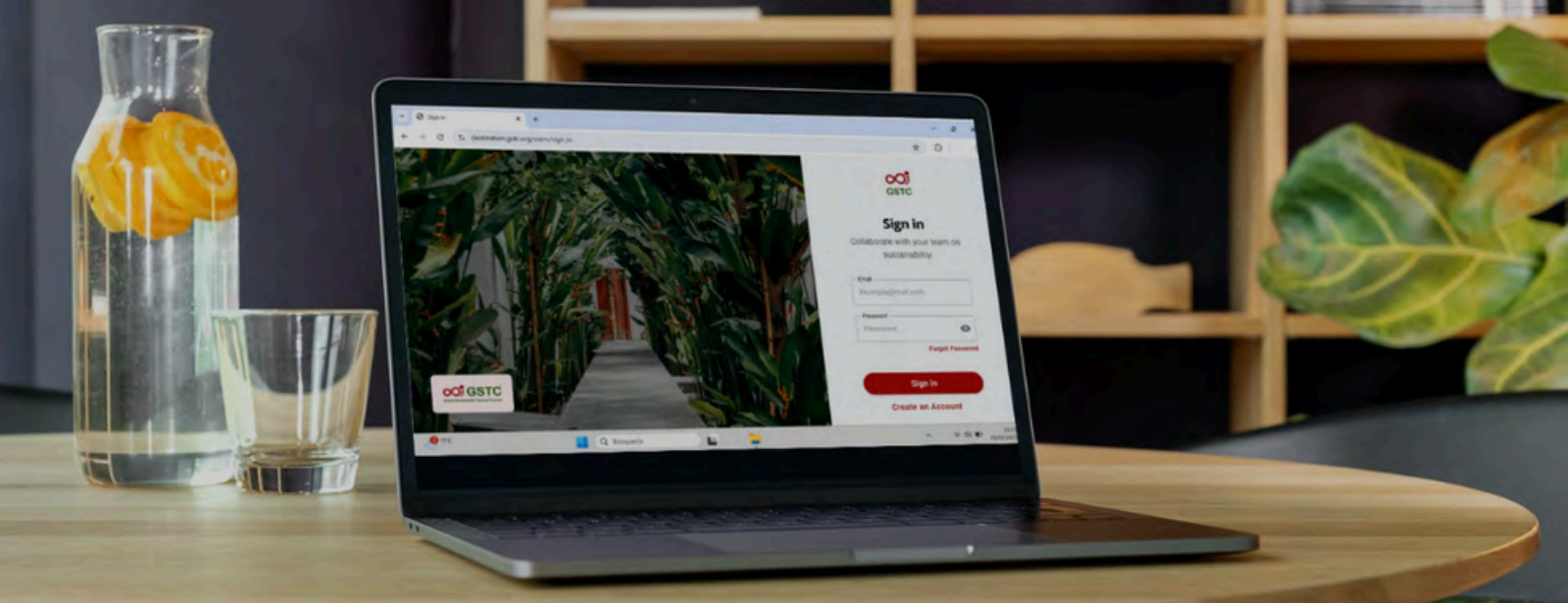


Academic posters add thought-provoking findings. Photo by CREST.

## NOW, IT'S YOUR TURN

The lessons from our Forum are not just theoretical—they're steps that you can implement in your work, whether you're a tourism practitioner, policymaker, proactive citizen, or industry leader. Here's how you can drive meaningful change at the next event you're organizing or through your destination stewardship initiatives:

- 1. Choose Spaces where Honest Conversations are Easy:** Be intentional about where and how you engage with others. Whether it's a community meeting or an industry roundtable, choose venues that encourage open dialogue and collaboration. A familiar setting can break down barriers, build trust, and spark bold ideas.
- 2. Listen with an Open Mind to Voices Beyond Tourism:** Engage with stakeholders who operate outside the tourism sector. Community advocates, urban planners, environmental scientists, social equity leaders, and numerous others often have a deeper understanding of local challenges. Their insights foster more holistic, community-driven strategies.
- 3. Dare to be Collaborative:** The challenges tourism destinations face—climate change, inequality, and cultural preservation—are daunting. Boldness and cross-sector collaboration is required for destination stewardship efforts to achieve their intended impacts.



# SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL EMPOWERS DESTINATIONS

BY TIFFANY CHAN  
DESTINATIONS PROGRAM MANAGER, GSTC

VOLUME 5, ISSUE 3

A new user-friendly self-assessment tool is making it easier for destinations to evaluate and improve the resilience of their tourism practices. Developed by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), this resource provides a structured approach for all who are committed to destination stewardship to measure progress across four pillars of sustainability. Tiffany Chan explains.

## IS YOUR DESTINATION ON THE RIGHT TRACK?

Based on the GSTC Destination Standard (formerly GSTC Destination Criteria), this tool is designed to support a wide range of stakeholders, including but not limited to destination management organizations, policy-makers, tourism businesses, NGOs, educational institutions, and certification bodies.

Like the standard itself, the tool is free to use and universally applicable, making it relevant and practical for destinations of any size, type, or location. It is designed to support every stage of a destination's sustainability journey, from initial planning and policy development to preparing for certification.

Whether a destination is just beginning its journey or refining long-standing sustainability efforts, assessing progress can be complex. It requires a clear understanding of governance, community impact, cultural preservation, and environmental responsibility. The GSTC Destination Self-Assessment

Tool simplifies this process by providing a structured framework that highlights areas for improvement and tracks progress over time. Users assess whether their practices are well in place, in progress, or in need of improvement.

The tool evaluates destinations based on the following four cornerstones:

- Sustainable Management - Encourages destinations to assess governance, stakeholder engagement, visitor management, and risk preparedness.
- Socioeconomic Impacts - Measures how tourism benefits local communities and economies, ensuring that growth translates into tangible advantages for residents.
- Cultural Impacts - Focuses on the preservation and promotion of local heritage and identity, and helps destinations safeguard cultural assets while welcoming visitors.
- Environmental Impacts - Examines resource consumption, pollution reduction, and biodiversity conservation, which empowers destinations to enhance environmental stewardship.

By regularly revisiting the assessment, destinations can measure improvements, identify new opportunities, and ensure their tourism practices align with global standards.

## GETTING STARTED WITH THE SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL

The tool is designed for ease of use. After creating an account, destinations complete a self-assessment across four sections. The tool uses a simple “yes,” “no,” or “in progress” response format, making it accessible even for destinations with limited sustainability expertise.

The screenshot displays the 'Criterion A1: Destination Management Responsibility' section of the self-assessment tool. It contains three questions, each with three response options: 'Yes' (green checkmark), 'In progress' (orange circle with a refresh icon), and 'No' (red X).

- Q1. Does the destination have an effective organization, group, or committee responsible for coordinating sustainable tourism efforts?** The 'Yes' option is selected.
- Q2. Is the group engaged with the private sector, public sector, and civil society?** The 'No' option is selected.
- Q3. Does the group have clear responsibilities and the capability to manage social, cultural, and environmental issues?** The 'In progress' option is selected.

By completing all sections, destinations receive a percentage score (from 0% to 100%) based on the number of criteria completed. This allows users to identify strengths, recognize areas needing improvement, and retake the assessment over time to track progress.



## WHY GLOBAL STANDARDS MATTER

The GSTC Standards serve as a common language for understanding and communicating sustainability in tourism. It offers a foundation for policy development, helps consumers identify responsible tourism options, supports certification programs, guides education and training institutions, and provides a starting point for developing sustainable tourism requirements.

Available in [30 languages](#), the GSTC Standards are based on decades of global experience and incorporate sustainable tourism guidelines from every continent.

Developed through extensive international consultation, they reflect certification standards and best practices globally. Indicators were evaluated for relevance and practicality, as well as their applicability to a broad range of destination types. The process of developing the Standards was designed to adhere to ISO codes of conduct and take reference from the standards-setting code of the [ISEAL Alliance](#), the international body providing guidance for the development and management of sustainability standards for all sectors.

As sustainability becomes a key priority in the travel industry, aligning with global standards helps destinations enhance their reputation, attract responsible travelers, and future-proof their tourism sectors.

Log in and find out how your destination measures up: <https://destination.gstc.org/>

The GSTC does not endorse specific destinations or results from the self-assessment tool. Instead, the tool is designed to help destinations evaluate their sustainability efforts based on global standards. Completing the assessment does not imply certification or official approval but serves as a guide for continuous improvement.





# ENGAGING TRAVELERS IN DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP

BY DR. JONATHON DAY  
PURDUE UNIVERSITY'S SUSTAINABLE TOURISM & RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL LAB

VOLUME 5, ISSUE 1

The stream of tourists who visit a destination become part of that destination. What they say, what they do, how they spend, how they behave – as guests or invaders? – makes a difference. Increasingly, destination organizations want to brief their visitors on doing no harm, even doing some good. Purdue's Dr. Jonathon Day explains how the Travel with Care initiative aims to help DMOs accustomed to marketing the place learn how to market good behavior.

## HOW CAN DESTINATIONS HELP CLUELESS VISITORS BECOME THOUGHTFUL GUESTS?

At a time when tourists are being vilified, it is important to remember that travelers can play a key role in destination stewardship.

The Sustainable Tourism and Responsible Travel Lab, together with Miles Partnership, has launched a new program – Travel with Care – designed to support destinations working to encourage better travel behaviors. The program brings together current research, examples of what is working, and tools that can be easily adopted to create a comprehensive resource for destinations and tourism organizations looking to encourage responsible travel. Our platform spotlights what is working in destinations around the world – from Palau to Wyoming, Quebec to Jordan. We also have the latest research from academics and the industry on improving traveler behavior.

Encouraging responsible travel has never been more important. Destinations seeking to improve the quality of life in their communities must engage travelers as

partners to ensure tourism has a positive impact. The Travel with Care resources are designed to support destinations in making this happen.



Programs such as Indiana Dunes, provide visitors with an opportunity to give back to the community through volunteering and education. Photo courtesy of Travel with Care.

## REASONS TO SUPPORT RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL PROGRAMS

Destinations should be encouraging responsible travel for three key reasons.

### 1. Travelers need - and want - help to travel responsibly.

Travelers want to travel more sustainably, but they need local help.

Two recent studies emphasize the important role DMOs and tourism businesses play in encouraging responsible travel. The 2023 Booking.com [Sustainable Travel Report](#) found that two-thirds (66%) of people want to leave the destination better than when they arrived, but 40% don't know how to find activities that ensure they are giving back to the community.

The Expedia Group's 2022 [Sustainable Travel Report](#) found that 7 in 10 consumers feel overwhelmed by starting the process of being a more sustainable traveler. The respondents to this study are looking for sustainable travel information from trusted travel resources. 50% of respondents would like to see more information on how to be a more sustainable traveler from local destination, tourism, or visitor resource groups.

### 2. Destination communities want tourists to behave better

Destination communities are demanding that visitors behave better. As visitor numbers increase, communities are more aware of the negative impacts of travelers. As a result, in some communities there is a growing chorus of calls for travelers to behave better when they visit - or stay away if they can't be more responsible guests. Responsible traveler programs are a terrific way to show that the tourism industry is committed to ensuring the best outcomes from tourism and help visitors contribute positively to the places they visit.

### 3. Every traveler has an impact

Every traveler makes an impact. The tourism industry has been criticized for being too focused on the positives while overlooking the negative impacts of travelers and tourism. For a long time, our industry has taken credit for the positives but has taken no responsibility for the negatives of tourism. Responsible traveler programs recognize that if tourism is going

to improve the quality of life in our communities, we must work to ensure that we maximize the benefits of tourism while minimizing and even eliminating the negatives.

## HOW DO WE GET BETTER BEHAVIOR?

It is not enough to say, "travelers should behave better." Destinations must work to help travelers behave in ways that benefit the destination community.

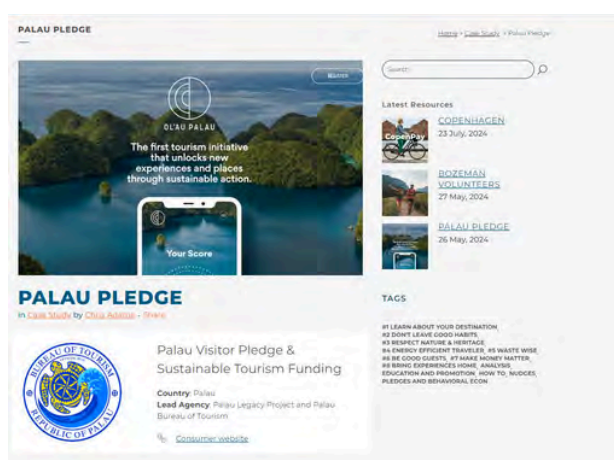
Destinations are using a sophisticated set of tools to help travelers do the right thing. DMOs are important in promoting responsible travel behaviors from the people they encourage to visit. Some of the ways DMOs they can support responsible travel include:

- **Education and Guidance:** Destinations are creating innovative and exciting campaigns that welcome visitors and help them be better guests. Some of these campaigns embrace destination branding and reflect the community's care for their special places, while others encourage visitors to commit to traveling responsibly during their stay.
- **Marketing Campaigns:** Many marketing campaigns are designed to meet goals that will increase sustainability. Examples include Buy Local campaigns, seasonality campaigns, and signature experience campaigns, which often feature unique local suppliers.
- **Capacity Building and Industry Development:** Tourism is a "team sport." When the whole destination is committed to responsible travel, visitors soon appreciate its importance. DMOs can help encourage responsible travel behaviors by providing tools, resources, and training for the destination's tourism products.
- **Destination Development:** DMOs can influence town planners and government to incorporate best practices (e.g., behavioral economics, placemaking techniques) in the design of public spaces and attractions to encourage responsible travel behaviors.

Of these approaches, promotion and education of travelers is the most common method of encouraging better behaviors. The Travel with Care team assessed the websites of more than two hundred destination

marketing and management organizations (DMOs) across North America, Europe, and a selection of other countries to determine which had responsible traveler education and marketing efforts. We looked for all types of content designed to help visitors travel more responsibly. Our analysis of 208 DMOs highlighted that, as of May 2024:

- 33% have robust responsible traveler education and marketing content, including visitor codes, significant online content, and video and multimedia assets.
- A further 22% of DMOs have limited responsible traveler content, including simple online articles, blogs, or social media posts.



Palau is the first country to require visitors to sign a passport pledge committing to ecologically and culturally responsible behavior to protect the environment for future generations. Photo courtesy of Travel with Care.

## BUILDING A COMMUNITY COMMITTED TO ENCOURAGING RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

The Travel with Care initiative is committed to creating a community of practice committed to supporting destinations that are encouraging responsible travel behaviors. The Travel with Care site provides examples of best practices currently in the marketplace. Travel with Care is also committed to bridging the gap between academic research and real-world practitioners. The site features easily digestible research insights from leading academic researchers as well as highlights of industry-based research. It is important that we – the tourism industry – learn from each other and grow together as stewards of our communities.

Website: [www.travelwithcare.org](http://www.travelwithcare.org)

LinkedIn: [Travel With Care Tourism Industry Group](https://www.linkedin.com/company/travel-with-care-tourism-industry-group/)





# CULTIVATING STEWARDSHIP

BY DR. IVANA DAMNJANOVIĆ  
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, SINGIDUNUM UNIVERSITY

VOLUME 5, ISSUE 2

Would you like to transition from herding tourists to stewarding travelers? If so, Ivana Damnjanović has some ideas. Underlying them lies the reality that tourism focused on authentic experience is beneficial for destinations. Here she addresses travel entrepreneurs.

## TIPS FOR TRAVEL PROFESSIONALS

Transformational tourism, as I define it, is an approach to both the design and experience of travel. We need an invitation to actively enhance ourselves, the natural world, and the communities we visit and belong to.

Despite guidelines and significant efforts invested to make sustainable travel a global priority, the gap between intention and outcomes remains striking. Knowing what needs to change is one thing. Implementing change is another.

In today's volatile and complex world, resistance to transformation is human nature—businesses and organizations are, after all, just people. Sustainable practice demands not only operational adjustments but a fundamental shift in mindset. It can feel overwhelming, especially in isolation.

What's missing, perhaps, isn't another Power-Point presentation of sustainable principles but a human-centered approach—one which focuses on guiding businesses through the messy, uncomfortable, iterative process of change. By practicing the adage of prioritizing the journey over the destination, we can

support travel professionals as they navigate uncertainty, embrace reinvention, and embed sustainability at the heart of their operations.



The Municipality of Solčava in Slovenia welcomes participants outside a traditional barn with local artisan foods including goat cheese and jams, a local gin tasting and a traditional Slovenian musical performance. Hosts and their families shared the stories of the land, the valley and their connections to the place. Photo courtesy of TTC.

## SUSTAINABILITY MEETS TRANSFORMATION

After nearly two decades in academia, last year my passion for sustainable travel and experience design found me mentoring and collaborating with nearly 80 tourism businesses around the globe. I led transformational travel design courses which ushered each entity through a process to mitigate the adverse

effects of tourism. In navigating the shift from taming visitors to nurturing stewardship, these businesses showed that real change begins with how we perceive our role in fostering a more conscious and caring travel industry.

Sustainable and transformational approaches to tourism share a symbiotic relationship: If you want to design an experience for a more conscious, responsible future, it will require the same inward transformation of business and of traveler.

The growth-oriented nature of thoughtfully designed experiences, in both education and travel, uncovers deeper, often overlooked issues. Collaborative learning environments foster active sharing and co-creation, as they reveal subtle concerns and barriers to the adoption of sustainable practices.

## ASPIRATION VS. UNCERTAINTY

Many tourism organizations face the dual challenge of being competitive while also practicing sustainability. And they need to do so as they create meaningful, responsible travel experiences that not only meet customer expectations but also reflect their values and commitment to the destinations they serve

- If you are concerned that you are small and powerless, think again. Small organizations have both the unparalleled uniqueness and capacity to respond to subtle market needs. Travelers want to journey with a sense of purpose. And they desire immersive, local, out-of-the ordinary, community-centered experiences ([com, 2024](#); [Black Tomato, 2024](#); [Design Hotels, 2024](#); [Forbes, 2024](#)). [Booking.com](#) says that in 2025, travelers will seek authentic, sustainable, nature-based adventure experiences, and [Design Hotels](#) notes that they will want to increase their community capital by nurturing high-quality relationships. One example is [Rebecca Adventure Travel](#) who cater to small groups and different travel styles. Rebecca Adventure Travel demonstrates the concept of guiding the traveler through a journey in which they can explore and educate themselves. While many entrepreneurs lack the resources—time, budget, or skill—to dive into extensive research, staying informed is essential. Think of it not as an expense but as an investment.
- Stay inspired as you identify market gaps. Keep up with trends and align them with your unique strengths to uncover opportunities. An example of this is [Walking Mentorship](#), a business which uses

nature, walking and a mentorship program to transform individual travelers.



In Logarska Valley, Slovenia, travel professionals discuss how forward-thinking leadership in responsible travel and tourism can impact the world positively. Photo courtesy of TTC.

## THE BACKBONE

Destination stewardship requires connection, understanding, compassion, and care before entities can act responsibly. Course participants have highlighted the following takeaways.

Professional community: Both travelers and industry members value community. A dynamic network of like-minded professionals serves as a knowledge hub and a source of support against uncertainty and isolation.

- Through co-creative collaboration in a symbiotic system, we move beyond competitiveness to foster responsible travel behavior.
- A shared sense of belonging and “speaking the same language” inspires experience design, guides travelers, and encourages continual evolution through collaborative discovery.

Never underestimate the power of community creativity to drive innovative solutions. Many organizations cultivate vibrant professional communities. For instance, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council and [Inner Development Goals](#) have dedicated academic or professional circles. And the Transformational Travel Council brings together travel journalists and professionals. One course group even self-organizes regular micro-events billed as Transformational Campfire to share ideas, ask questions, spark creativity, collaborate, and simply offer mutual support.

*Know yourself:* Our business values, purpose, uniqueness, and personality shape everything we do. Course cohorts consistently report greater clarity, determination, and confidence as they pursue their goals.

*Masterful educators:* Course mentors who guide with intention and care can help you adopt sustainable practices or tackle specific environmental or social challenges while respecting your vulnerabilities and fears. Seek them out.

## A CLIENT'S PERSPECTIVE

While trends guide us, every traveler's reasons for embarking on a journey are unique. To meet travelers where they are, and to fulfill the purpose of thoughtful stewardship, two fundamentals stand out:

- Seamlessly embed sustainability into experience designs to support both travelers' and businesses' responsible travel aspirations.
- Recognize that responsible travel requires a mindset shift. Design experiences that resonate with each traveler—explore, listen, and learn their story, then coauthor a new narrative. Engage them with games, volunteering, or novel—even uncomfortable encounters. Help them grow long after the trip ends.

Allow flexibility and cocreate tailored, meaningful experiences with travelers. This approach creates ripple effects that extend far beyond the destination and the time spent traveling.



An outdoor workshop where participants discussed the emerging transformation economy in which the field of travel and tourism resides. Photo courtesy of TTC.

## A PRACTICAL VIEWPOINT

Transformative travel experiences encompass the pre-, during-, and post-travel phases, offering endless opportunities to create meaningful and impactful journeys.

*Pre-Travel Phase:* This phase helps travel professionals understand the client's aspirations and challenges, define the journey's personal goal, and prepare travelers for the experience. Goals often revolve around major life events or personal growth, such as coping with loss, recovering from burnout, or building confidence. Tools like questionnaires, interviews, and activities such as quizzes or writing tasks enable travelers to co-create their journey by selecting purposeful activities and rhythms.

*During Travel:* Travelers immerse themselves in authentic, local experiences that align with their goals and the business's values, such as sustainability. These might include staying in family-run accommodations, dining locally, farming with residents, learning a skill, or crafting souvenirs.

*Post-Travel Phase:* This phase focuses on helping travelers integrate their transformations into daily life. Businesses foster trust and long-term relationships through guided reflections, story-sharing, online meetups, or peer-accountability groups for sustainable behaviors.

Travel holds transformative power, what we do matters, how we do it is vital, and why we do it is essential. Explore purpose-driven initiatives by visiting the following websites: Costa Rica [collective](#) or [expedition experiences](#), or those in [Kenya](#), [Japan](#), [India](#), destination [Wyoming](#), [long intentional](#) or [connection-centered journeys](#), [B Corp certified organizer](#), a [destination management tool](#), an [accommodation](#), [mentoring through walking in nature](#), [solo sabbatical](#), [experiential travel community](#).



# CHAPTER 5

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## NAVIGATING INDUSTRY DYNAMICS AND STEWARDSHIP CHALLENGES



*Balancing complexities, overcoming challenges, and shaping  
industry dynamics for a more resilient future.*



# UXUA'S TALE – COPING WITH POLITICAL HOSTILITY

BY BOB SHEVLIN  
CO-OWNER, UXUA HOTEL

VOLUME 5, ISSUE 2

You are creating a sustainable, lovely, fair-labor beach resort in the state of Bahia, Brazil. Unfortunately, a less-than-fair local establishment doesn't appreciate it – stressing their point with an act of demolition. The Uxua hotel's co-owner Bob Shevlin describes the process then needed to rework community relations.

## **"GOING IT ALONE" WITH YOUR NEW RESORT MAY NOT BE WISE**

International hoteliers do not like to see their new business knocked down by a bulldozer. For any reason, let alone because they practiced sustainable tourism. But we learned that anything is possible when you attempt to go it alone against well-entrenched cycles of corruption.

In my defense, the goal was to do something disruptive in a new industry and a new place. We were trying to set an aspirational conservation example so that it might catch media attention for the very fact of it being so unlikely. How I arrived at this challenge is a bit of a roundabout story.

## **TESTING OUR SUSTAINABILITY VISION**

In the midst of a 20-year run in the fashion industry in Europe, marked by good luck earning royalties from corporate partners like the Italian brand Diesel, we recognized that we were having less luck with overdue environmental initiatives in the industry such as prioritization of organic fabrics and dyes and non-polluting production methods.

So designer-partner Wilbert Das and I sought an opportunity to focus our skills on projects closer to those values. We turned our sights to a climate and culture we loved: Bahia, Brazil and a segment new to us, travel and hospitality design.



Town of Trancoso, Bahia, Brazil

There we began an entrepreneurial adventure.

Decamping to the sub-tropical coast of Bahia and restoring centuries-old fishermen houses in the heart of a colonial fishing village called Trancoso, we began to execute experiments which merged antique craftsmanship with contemporary design twists. We used reclaimed materials and added a dose of best environmental practice – which by now should be standard practice – by investing in a solar farm and incorporating it into our own organic farm.

We opened the Uxua Casa Hotel & Spa in late 2008 to substantial media acclaim for the delivery of a project that could boast both legitimate sustainability credentials and innovative and impactful design. Uxua scooped a 12-page feature in Vogue magazine and the cover of Architectural Digest among others.

## AIMING FOR CHANGE

Trancoso at the time had tourism principally only during the New Year's period. With the summer high season being extremely short, very little formal employment existed across the sector. We aimed to change that.

From the get-go we offered our 50-person team permanent contracts and benefits such as healthcare. To my surprise, far from earning us appreciation in the village, it earned us a few enemies. We upset a couple of neighboring businesses owners who'd worked for years to convince the local workforce that formal employment was a trick to steal their money via taxation. Job protections guaranteed by government to registered workers, they said, was no more than fool's gold.

Our image as destabilizers cost us significantly over the next few years. We wanted to advance our vision to the next stage and create effective community-based environmental and educational nonprofit institutions. None of that materialized. While we attracted some incredibly talented collaborators and one or two motivated donors, we were also ignored by most stakeholders and potential partners. For many in the local tourism industry, we were seen as too extreme—gringo idealists who didn't see the local political dynamic through a realistic lens.

*"We were seen as too extreme—gringo idealists who didn't see the local political dynamic through a realistic lens."*

This was true even though almost all the initiatives we had supported were sustainable-tourism basics. Our view was that rudimentary planning and fundamental rules are required for all "green" destinations.

The isolation we found ourselves in meant that for every successful environmental action achieved by our nonprofit conservation allies, our own business would suffer reprisal. Most of the gains were related to preventing public officials from selling illicit development licenses within protected areas. Those in local government who felt threatened by the

environmental movement treated the Uxua Casa Hotel & Spa as something of a piñata. They attacked Uxua with endless fiscal raids, sanitary inspections, rejections of operating licenses, and every form of harassment imaginable.

Then, in December 2014, they arrived with a city-owned tractor to destroy our beach club in front of shocked employees and clients. They bulldozed a structure voted the No. 7 Beach Lounge in the world by CNN. It was in perfect harmony with nature and the local culture, and had been featured in Condé Nast Traveler, Travel & Leisure, and the Times of London as a showcase sustainable destination.



Demolition of the Uxua beach club in 2014

A successful civil action against the municipal government in 2017, led by the sustainable tourism NGO Association Despertar Trancoso, which we had supported, led to greater disruption than the damage to our beach business. Our brand and personal names began to appear in political propaganda and media across the region.

We endured nearly a year of fake news about "foreign activists here to destroy jobs and suffocate the economy." Newspaper stories claimed that the 16th century village church would be torn down to accommodate an expanding Uxua. And the entire historical center of town would only be accessible to "rich tourists." Lies.

## NEW STRATEGY

While 2017 was a low point in terms of harassment, we were embarking on a new tactic that grew from seeds planted a few years prior - building trust and alliances with local travel industry partners.

Taking advantage of international media interest in our project - old contacts from our years in the fashion world delivered for us - we began to prioritize PR opportunities for neighboring businesses.



Instead of talking about ourselves in interviews, we talked about our community, giving generous praise to others, often crediting them with inspiring us. That was legitimate. We would not have settled in Trancoso if we hadn't fallen in love with its countless tourism attributes in the first place.

As I learned the histories of neighboring businesses, I started to spot unique details. I shared with them what I thought would be good marketing opportunities. And so we became partners in telling the stories of other hotels and restaurants, and of the many artisans and artists who work in Trancoso. To this day the Uxua website has a section called Arts & Artisans that publishes the work of craftsmen, photographers, and other area creatives.

Building the promotional narrative as a collective story led to a run of great destination pieces by major travel media and in-flight magazines. All recounted a charming tale of a kind of "utopia." Eventually Li Edelkoort, a former Parsons Design School professor who created the school's sustainability program published a 288-page art book titled *Uxua Utopia, A Very Gifted Guesthouse*. The book is dedicated to the spirit of the circular economy we advocate and features many of our neighbors and collaborators.



Demolition of the Uxua beach club in 2014

## A LOCAL FESTIVAL KICKS OFF A NATIONAL ALLIANCE

A community-wide manifestation of this collective work became what is the now renowned Organic Festival Trancoso. Any business could participate free of charge and with the guarantee of visibility in national media stories about sustainable tourism. The central thread: Branding Trancoso as a destination of

green-spirited, democratic collaborators, all extending goodwill to each other.

From the success of the Organic Festival was born the nationwide Futuri Regenerative Tourism Alliance, launched in 2020 with Conservation International Brazil, where I was a board member. Futuri's aim was to make sustainability a philosophy relevant to all segments of the tourism industry and its supply chain, not just for wealthy businesses able to invest in recycling and solar panels.

Futuri recruited some 200 member-partners in its first year, gaining media attention across all of Brazil including in top economic newspaper, *Valor Economico*.

*"The message for all is that coalition building in tourism is the path for affecting change."*

This national momentum supported the founding in 2024 of a commercial association for our by-now influential destination: Organização Turismo de Trancoso. OTT is our most effective local tool to date, with a manifesto based on the most progressive sustainability practices and standards. In my opinion, OTT is truly world class.

## FROM PARIAS TO PARTNER

The Organic Festival, the national weight of the Futuri Alliance, and the founding of OTT marked a moment of change for local public officials. The overwhelming union of leading businesses, satellite sectors of retail and arts, and multiple third sector partners simply made it impossible for opponents to continue fighting sustainability. Suddenly, instead of campaigns of harassment, our associations were offered seats on tourism councils and were issued grants for projects.



The Trancoso Organic Festival

Going from pariah to public partner seemed a miracle. The message for all was that coalition building in tourism is the path for affecting change. We had learned that while setting a lone example might be noble, it risks being perceived as an announcement of superiority in conservation credentials or values. That can alienate the community instead of selling sustainability.

Humility, generosity, investing in relationships and sharing prosperity – always avoiding the appearance of wanting to “possess” the word sustainable – is the way to make it a label that everyone wants to share.

Alliances of course take time to nurture. For us, it took ten years of focused work from the 2014 destruction of our beach club. The process required a lot of insight and trial and error, a lot of listening and learning. Sustainable tourism principles may be easy to understand, but it’s not so easy to identify how to sell its advantages to different stakeholders, each with their own personal motivations and biases.

It worked. By 2024, local businesses were working in close collaboration on sustainability, even financing a delegation to represent Trancoso at COP30 in Belem, Brazil, in October 2025.

## BACK TO THE BEACH

Our beach club is thriving today. The promotor (a kind of Brazilian public prosecutor) who ordered it

demolition using bogus documentation has been recently removed from office. As part of an investigation nicknamed the Justice League, he and other officials were taken out, charged with multiple counts of corruption for selling illicit building licenses and various other environmental crimes.

In 2014, we rebuilt our beach club in just six weeks – a very public gesture of resistance. It now is the site of one of Trancoso’s most well-known annual events, the Organic Festival Trancoso Luau. Held to celebrate the end of each year’s festival, the party involves the entire community. Celebrity musicians come and donate a free show. Last year 2,000 attended and celebrated our collective sustainability mission. It was one of the most inspiring things I’ve seen in my work, a real symbol of hope for the future.





# THE ENCOURAGING IF UNEVEN RISE OF DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP

BY JONATHAN TOURTELLOT  
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## COMMENTARY BY THE EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Jonathan Tourtellot first began promoting the idea of destination stewardship around 2002 during his days at National Geographic Traveler magazine. He's been at it ever since. Here's what he likes – and doesn't like – about the new rise in popularity of the approach.

### THE CONCEPT IS GAINING TRACTION, AT LEAST IN PART



Quite a few years ago, I was shown photos of a new beachfront resort development in Mexico. Doesn't matter where. The developer and government participants proudly pointed out that the buildings were all LEED certified. Energy efficient.

In my defense, the goal was to do something disruptive in a new industry and a new place. We were trying to set an aspirational conservation example so that it might catch media attention for the very fact of it being so unlikely. How I arrived at this challenge is a bit of a roundabout story.

*Nada.*

So, what does this have to do with destination stewardship? Just that any tourism-related project, no matter how well-intentioned, needs to take into account the broader picture. That principle applies

whether building something new, restoring something old, mitigating climate change, or engaging the community.

Over the past decade or so, the "destination stewardship" concept has taken off. In 2022, the World Travel and Tourism Council issued a report on the concept, with an emphasis on collaborative governance. A wide-ranging November 2023 symposium in Quebec was devoted to the topic. GSTC maintains a Destination Stewardship Working Group. Los Angeles Tourism has switched from being a DMO to declaring itself a "Destination Stewardship Organization", with a focus on serving all Angelenos (see accompanying story by its CEO, Adam Burke).

Often, it is citizen complaints about overtourism that have prompted business and government leaders to peek over the tourism-industry parapets and acknowledge that the domain below actually provides their sustenance.

In the U.S., Lake Tahoe (California/Nevada) is using a destination stewardship approach to cope with overtourism and other issues, as is heavily visited Taos, New Mexico. Tourism pressures in the Rockies



have spurred Colorado to establish a statewide Office of Destination Stewardship and plan.



Recent headlines attest to the growing interest in destination stewardship, but interpretations of the concept may vary from one place to another.

For various reasons, other places have also been adopting their own destination stewardship plans: Ottawa, Canada; Big Sur, California (again, for overtourism); and Chelan County, Washington, among others. And, turning to the other hemisphere, Horsburgh Atoll in the Maldives is launching its own unique approach (featured in an accompanying story).

Whatever the terminology, more and more bright spots are shining through the worn lacquer of tourism-equals-money (therefore, “more is more”) simplicity, a mindset that has long hidden the complex, dynamic relationship between tourist and destination.

Having been a proponent of destination stewardship for more than two decades, I find all this progress great, really! And yet –

And yet I worry.

## STEWARDSHIP IS A BIG TENT

With evermore destinations adopting plans and policies under the destination stewardship flag, it’s important that practitioners understand and embrace just what the term means – or at least, what it should mean.

Various organizations, including our own, have offered detailed, reasonably compatible definitions for “destination stewardship.” But the simplest way to think of it is: *The process of caring for places where tourism occurs.*

That encompasses a multitude of moving parts. Good destination stewardship incorporates more than mitigating overtourism and adopting some basic environmental reforms. To be effective, destination stewardship must extend beyond the tourism industry and the transactions that define it. Various branches of government, portions of civil society, and even non-tourism businesses often have roles to play.

A closer look at what’s been going on confirms my reluctance to break out the champagne just yet. For one thing, many of the destination stewardship plans so far are just that – plans. True change often seems cast in the future, in terms that are sometimes pragmatic, sometimes dreamy. Action steps and funding still await resolution.

In other cases, there may be a tendency to focus on the cause *du jour* – climate, DEI, water use, etc. – to the near exclusion of other stewardship components.

The purpose of this column is not to critique individual plans, but rather to issue a word of caution to destinations developing or evaluating their stewardship plans: *Don’t miss this opportunity!* This is a chance to set a precedent for holistic thinking about places.

## EIGHT MANDATORY CONSIDERATIONS

The very nature of destinations – each like a diamond with different facets – suggests that in general, a complete stewardship plan requires checking these boxes:

1. ☐ Prosperity from tourism, adequate and well-distributed
2. ☐ Thoughtful tourism management
3. ☐ Natural habitat conservation
4. ☐ Preservation of the past
5. ☐ Living culture
6. ☐ Community benefit
7. ☐ Respect for the planet
8. ☐ Destination identity

Let’s look at these facets and how a thoughtful destination stewardship plan might address each.

#1: Money. Any tourism plan addresses economics, but the more enlightened ones look beyond “make money” to “who gets the money?” To the extent possible, the answer should be local people and businesses.

#2: Tourism management is also addressed in any plan, but does it focus more on the quality of tourism

and less on the quantity of tourists? And what about the pros and cons of short-term rentals? Most important, is there a collaborative council or committee to coordinate the plan, as called for in GSTC Destination Criterion A1?

#3: Nature. Even in urban places, conservation counts. Nature tourism may not be significant, but healthy ecosystems are. Rampant habitat loss endangers the holistic integrity of a place.

#4: Built heritage. Historic and archaeological sites also belong in the plan, even if history isn't currently a major feature of the destination brand. Things could change. Preserving vernacular architecture retains a valuable sense of place. Unlike many natural habitats, once a remnant of the past is gone, it's gone forever.

#5: Living culture – authentic music, cuisine, folkways, architecture, arts and crafts – are the very things that tourism should help sustain. Highly self-aware places – New Orleans, Newfoundland, Scotland – are good at this; they enjoy showcasing who they are and diligently protect their culture. But places where local ways are disappearing under the rising tide of mass culture are those that most need to include such factors in a stewardship plan.

Note that numbers 3, 4, and 5 reflect the UNESCO World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage programs. But a place doesn't have to meet UNESCO's "outstanding universal value" criterion to find natural, historic, and cultural aspects that contribute to its identity (see number 8, below).

#6: Engaging the community, even if only with better communication about tourism activities, is a start. Stewardship plans dealing with a skeptical public do tend to be sensitive to this. Among the underlying questions are: Are all communities at the table? Are they benefiting from tourism more than being disrupted or commodified by it?

#7: Planet. It's hard to say how many destinations effectively address such planet-wide problems as plastics, climate, and exotic species in their stewardship plans, but it's easy to identify those that don't: U.S. jurisdictions under right-wing political sway. To borrow from the Dutch story, these places not only fail to put a finger in the leaking dike, they may actually forbid it. Movements in parts of Europe aim to do likewise. More often, though, political challenges are simpler: Why devote a portion of our scarce resources to nonlocal problems? Answer: The planet

on which we ride is local. In most places, supportive evidence to that effect abounds.

#8: Distinctiveness of place. This frequent omission concerns me. Globalization and corporatization have been replacing distinctiveness – the delight and value of travel and authentic experiences – with logo-driven sameness. It is important that destinations zoom out and ask themselves "What things are unique to our place?" And then act to protect them and build an identity or "brand" upon them.

Dr. Jonathon Day of Purdue University (author of the accompanying column) ticks all eight of these boxes in his compact Practical Guide to Destination Stewardship and Sustainable Tourism, developed in 2023 for the state of Maine tourism office. Take a look. We'll see whether Maine will follow his advice.

### A Note about Jasper



*Jasper, Alberta, gateway to Canada's great national park of the same name, suffered enormous damage from 2024 wildfires. No deaths, but a third of the beloved town was destroyed.*

*Just last year, Jasper adopted a 10-year Destination Stewardship Plan based on "Place, People, Planet, Prosperity, Policy," each "P" with actions to be executed in cooperation with the park. Their definition of stewardship is spot on: "holistically taking care of the environmental, sociocultural, economic, and governance systems that define the unique character of Jasper."*

*Jasper must now add "wildfire" and "regeneration" to that list. We wish them well in employing their plan as a guide for rebuilding.*

Santa Rosa, California has literally asked citizens, "What's special about our place?" Exactly the right question. Holistic inventories reveal what makes a destination different from all others. Commercially, the combination becomes the destination's unique selling point; spiritually it bolsters community morale, building pride in place and respect for assets that locals may have previously dismissed as unremarkable and routine.

Indeed, delving into destination character is where the fun lies, where opportunities hide that thoughtfully creative tourism can develop into enriching experiences not only for visitors but for residents as well.

The tourist office for the Faroe Islands seems to understand that, having created what amounts to a destination stewardship plan with the simple title Heim, Home. In other words, "tourism here is all about our place and who we are."

Good destination stewardship, then, must encompass more than environmental sustainability. More than equity and inclusion. More than historic preservation or nature conservation. More than climate mitigation. These attributes and many more are truly and absolutely important, but none alone comprises the precious whole – the place and the people who live there.





# OPINION: CRUISE CRISIS

BY ARILD MOLSTAD  
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VOLUME 5, ISSUE 2

Things in the cruise world are getting dire, even in progressive Norway, where a CEO suggests a tax on his own passengers. Journalist and consultant Arild Molstad offers his own thoughts.

## A MODEST PROPOSAL TO TAMP DOWN CROWDING

Norway's long coastline, always a popular cruise destination, is now joining other such places in experiencing a massive increase in traffic. Part of the reason is affordability due to a surprising decline in the Norwegian krone. The other is Putin's war with Ukraine, turning the Russian frontier into a no-go "red zone" for cruise ship operators. The lure of the fjords became an obvious choice for revamped ship itineraries.

There was only one hitch. Norway had decided, starting 2026, to ban polluting big-cruise traffic in its most spectacular fjords: The narrow, vulnerable and iconic Geiranger- and Naeroyfjords, both of them on the UNESCO World Heritage list.

Now the western coast landscape, with its soaring mountains, glaciers and waterfalls, is becoming a battleground between concerned conservationists and cruise promoters.

The cruise lobby has won the first round, when the Norwegian Parliament agreed to delay the ban for six years – a major letdown for those increasingly worried about overtourism and reputational damage for the nation's image abroad. Leading politicians

and spokesmen for environmental organizations are calling for sustainable measures that can help the local communities manage mass tourism's negative impacts.

As with many popular places worldwide, there has been growing pressure on Norway's ruling government coalition to introduce tourism taxes and regulations, yielding only vague promises for an "action plan" that is yet to appear. Meanwhile countries around the world are launching measures based on the "polluter pays" principle inspired by the Paris climate accords.

## CRUISE CEO ASKS FOR A PAX TAX



A call for urgent action came in October from a surprising stakeholder. In a speech to students at Norway's leading business school in the World Heritage city of Bergen, cruise-industry leader Torstein Hagen, owner of Viking Cruises, advocated the launch of a tourism cruise tax.

His pioneering and controversial wake-up call for action was instantly picked up in the media. A September issue of *Bergensavisen*, a Norwegian newspaper, quotes Torstein Hagen as saying "Mass

tourism is a complex issue. Popular destinations should be able to tax visitors in order to regulate tourism demand.” He adds that he is critical of Norway’s tax system, and that he would welcome a tax per cruise passenger, which is a way to identify visitors willing to contribute.

It is a timely call. A more thoughtful and greener dialogue is sorely needed between cruise companies and coastal destinations. Both have much to gain by finding common ground in ways that protect the environment and the integrity of fragile places and ports of call plagued by overtourism.

The seasoned, 81-year old tourism pioneer has surely noticed that a growing portion of the international traveling public are beginning to understand the need to tax vulnerable attractions worldwide. Many of these travelers want to become part of the solution, not the problem.

The timely and refreshing proposal for a tourism tax from none other than a cruise company owner sets a good example.

Like the iconic World Heritage city of Bergen, known as “the gateway to the fjords,” a multitude of destinations from Venice and Greece to New Zealand and Caribbean islands are considering, applying, or increasing tourist fees to fund measures that conserve their unique attractions and reduce wear and tear on local infrastructure and cultural heritage.

In contrast, Norway has yet to implement such regulations. Many coastal municipalities in Norway, already facing severe economic challenges, are often left footing the bill for welcoming big ships to their harbors, even as they observe huge cruise revenues escaping to foreign accounts, undermining the local economy’s sustainability.

At the time of writing, economists in Norway are looking at the application of a “nature dividend” to tax the “super-profits” generated by the cruise ships’ presence. A similar dividend tax was in 2023 applied to fish farming’s excessive use of a limited natural resource in the pristine fjords.

Can we look to Norway to find a new holistic coastal tourism model that combines short-term needs with long-term visions? Perhaps Torstein Hagen’s bold stance will show the way.



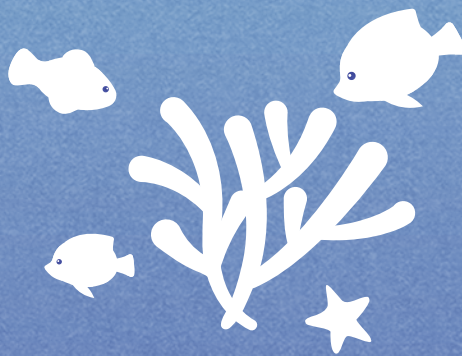
For years, cruise crowds and air pollution have degraded Geirangerfjord, Norway. Photo: “Harboring Tourism”, World Monuments Fund



# DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP

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