

Excerpt from the book: “IL TURISMO CHE NON PAGA” by Cristina Nadotti

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An Excursion in the Jungle of Certifications

While greenwashing remains a common practice, much is being done to offer tourists reliable and recognizable labels to determine whether businesses—or even tourism destinations—are truly committed to reducing the carbon footprint of their activities.

According to the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), an international body that establishes and manages global standards for sustainable travel and tourism, it is crucial to distinguish between ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and responsible travel. The first refers to a niche segment of tourism in natural areas; the second is an aspiration to make all types of tourism sustainable for future generations; and responsible travel refers to the behavior and style of individual travelers.

Setting standards, as the GSTC does, means defining a set of guidelines that help organizations—companies, local authorities, public and private associations—develop, manage, and monitor their activities, products, services, and systems. The certification process checks whether an organization, product, or tourism service meets specific standards, providing written assurance (a logo, a label) that allows customers to identify what is being offered as a superior quality service. Sustainable certification ensures that the product or service results from a process centered on environmental commitment.

Sustainability certification in tourism covers a wide range of entities—restaurants, tour guides, destinations, transportation services—since tourism involves various products and services. However, many different organizations offer sustainability certifications, create their own certification rules, and focus on specific types of businesses.

Besides the GSTC, there are examples such as Rainforest Alliance (focused on biodiversity conservation, community welfare, and reducing environmental impact), Fair Trade Tourism

(focused on ethical tourism with fair wages and cultural conservation), and QualityCoast – Green Destinations (for coastal and marine tourism).

A good certification is defined by precise and measurable standards, a rigorous process for awarding the label, and, crucially, must come from an independent third party. This is why labels like “Sustainable Communities” or “Most Beautiful Villages in Italy,” which are granted upon association membership, have little value beyond promotion and marketing.

Since 2014, the GSTC’s Board Chair has been the Italian Luigi Cabrini, who explains why the organization has such widespread recognition: “We were founded in 2007 under the auspices of the UN to establish global criteria and standards for credible certification. We are impartial because we’re a self-sufficient NGO, with no industry funding. Certification often requires effort and sacrifice, but for businesses willing to move beyond ‘business as usual,’ the rewards are real.”

He notes that the hospitality sector, the largest in travel and tourism, long ignored sustainability standards, leading to a proliferation of labels and vague use of the term “certification.” European policies are now pushing for credible sustainability certifications. Over 40 countries support GSTC’s program—but Italy is not among them.

Yet Many Italians Are Involved

Italy’s lack of formal government support hasn’t prevented municipalities and companies from seeking GSTC Certification*. Diego Gallo, a consultant with Etifor, confirms that tourism promotion companies are evolving into territorial management organizations. For example, Siena became the first Italian art city to be certified as a sustainable destination after approving a Strategic Tourism Plan aimed at shifting from unmanaged to managed tourism, involving citizens, entrepreneurs, and local authorities. Surrounding municipalities were also involved to expand certification to the “Terre di Siena.”

Other cases include Badesi in Sardinia, San Vigilio/San Martin – Dolomites in South Tyrol, Valsugana (the first certified destination in Italy), and over 20 hospitality operators in Garda Trentino pursuing certification in early 2025.

Italy Working Group was also created—an association of public and private tourism actors working to disseminate GSTC Standards nationally. Although certified destinations are geographically concentrated (especially in Trentino-Alto Adige), this reflects the region's tradition in environmentalism and tourism planning.

Developing DMO (Destination Management Organizations) and encouraging shared planning are key to facing climate crises and overtourism. Tourism can no longer simply mean bringing more people to popular spots—it must be rethought or risk collapse.

*Note: * The term “GSTC Certification” is a shorthand for “Certified by a Certification Body that is GSTC-Accredited.”*