

Global Sustainable Tourism Council

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Report 2025

April 2026

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01 Remarks from CEO

Over the past year, the GSTC Standards have continued to shape and inspire more sustainable practices across the travel and tourism sector. This third edition of our Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Report highlights the tangible progress and valuable insights gained through our collective efforts. Throughout this past year, we have witnessed both measurable and intangible impacts resulting from the application of the GSTC Standards.

Our internal evaluations reveal encouraging progress, but we also recognize that many of the positive changes influenced by the Standards extend beyond what data alone can show, reinforcing the broader movement toward sustainability that we are proud to support.

This report reflects not only our commitment to transparency and continuous learning but also the collective efforts of a diverse and dedicated community. We are deeply grateful to all who contribute their expertise, passion, and time to advancing sustainable practices across the travel and tourism sector.

To those already part of this journey, a heartfelt thank you for your unwavering dedication. And to those yet to join, we warmly invite you to connect with us and harness the power of the GSTC Standards to drive meaningful and lasting change in your own organizations. Together, we can make sustainability the true foundation of our industry.



Randy Durband

Chief Executive Officer,
Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)

02 Overview of GSTC

The GSTC is an independent, neutral organization legally registered in the USA as a 501(c) non-profit, representing a diverse, global membership. Financial support from donations, sponsorships, and membership fees allows us to provide services at low cost and to create, revise, and make the [GSTC Standards](#) available. The GSTC is an ISEAL Community Member, a Global Accreditation Cooperation Incorporated Stakeholder Member, and an IAAC (Inter-American Accreditation Cooperation) Associate Member.

The vision and mission of the GSTC are as follows:

Vision: Tourism fulfills its potential as a vehicle for social, cultural, and economic good while removing and avoiding any negative impacts from its activities in terms of environmental and social impacts.

Mission: To be an agent of change in the world of sustainable travel and tourism by fostering the increased knowledge, understanding, adoption, and demand for sustainable tourism practices.

The GSTC establishes and manages global standards for sustainable travel and tourism, known as the GSTC Standards. There are five sets:

- GSTC Destination Standard
- GSTC Hotel Standard
- GSTC Tour Operator Standard
- GSTC MICE Standard
- GSTC Attraction Standard

They result from a worldwide effort to develop a common language about sustainability in tourism. They are arranged in four pillars: (A) Sustainable management, (B) Socioeconomic impacts, (C) Cultural impacts, and (D) Environmental impacts. These standards are designed to be adapted to local conditions.

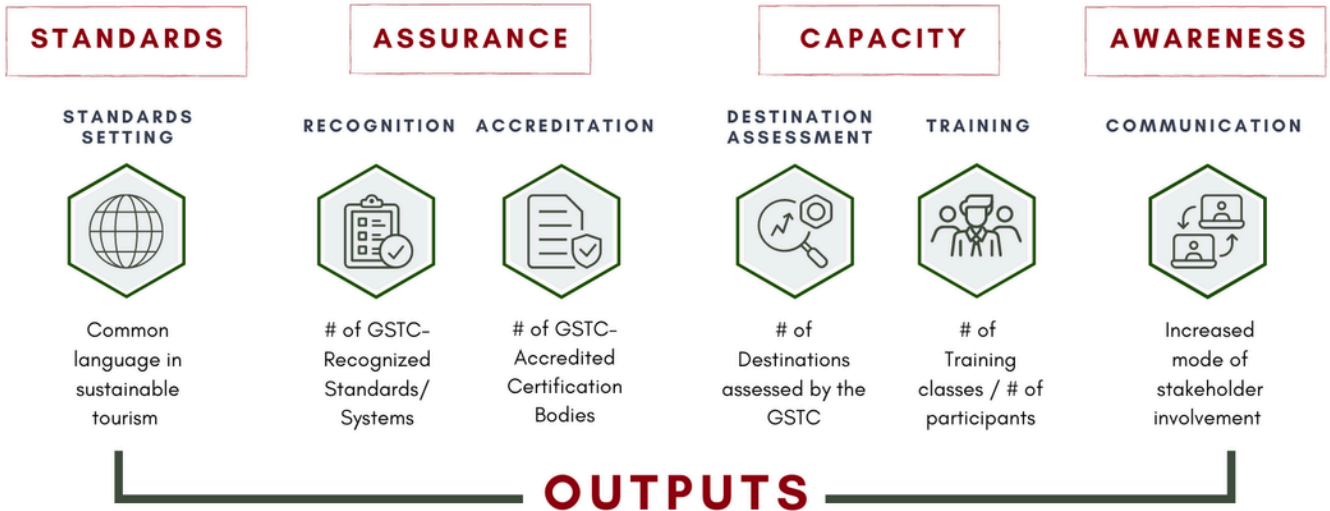
The GSTC advances sustainable tourism globally through two core pillars: capacity building through its Sustainable Tourism Training Program (STTP), and providing assurance services that safeguard credibility in the marketplace, including the recognition of standards aligned with the GSTC Standards and the accreditation of certification bodies (CBs).



03 GSTC Impact Pathway

IMPACT PATHWAYS

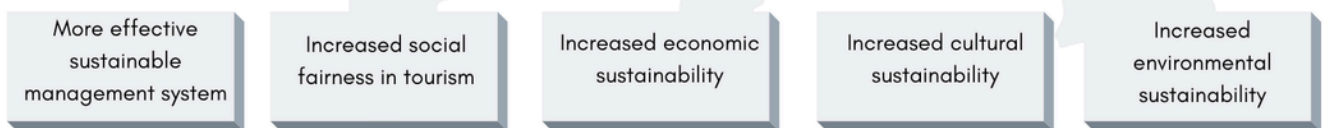
STRATEGIES



OUTPUTS



OUTCOMES



IMPACTS



04 Executive Summary

In 2025, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) strengthened its position as the global reference point for credible, evidence-based sustainability standards in tourism. Across membership, certification, training, standards development/revision, research, its destinations program, and assurance program, the GSTC achieved steady growth, expanded global reach, and deepened its impact, while using data and reflection to guide the organization's continuous improvement. The Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) report builds on the **Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E)** reports from previous years. The change in name highlights that the system goes beyond monitoring and evaluation, placing equal emphasis on learning as a key component.

The GSTC membership grew to **518 organizations and 129 individuals**, alongside a significant rise in member satisfaction, with **61% reporting that expectations were met or exceeded**. Digital engagement and communications continued to expand, reinforcing GSTC's global visibility. The **GSTC Global Conference 2025 in Fiji** convened participants from **42 countries** and achieved the highest satisfaction rate to date (**93.48%**), confirming its value as a key platform for global dialogue and collaboration.

Training and capacity-building efforts scaled substantially in 2025. Public training participation more than doubled, supported by new standards-specific courses and strong industry partnerships. Auditor training and accreditation also continued to grow, with **16 GSTC-accredited certification bodies (ACBs)** by year-end, strengthening the credibility and consistency of sustainability certification worldwide.

A major milestone was the completion of the **GSTC Industry Standard revision**, which led to the launch of the **GSTC Hotel Standard v4.0** and **GSTC Tour Operator Standard v4.0** in December 2025. There is a continued global expansion of certification, which utilizes the GSTC Standards, reaching **3,522 hotels certified by GSTC-ACBs**, alongside growing geographic diversification in tour operator certification. The **GSTC Recognition Program** evolved toward higher assurance, prioritizing quality and alignment with accredited certification systems. This demonstrates that the program has largely achieved its original objective of embedding UN-aligned sustainability definitions into tourism standards.

At the destination level, the GSTC expanded its tools and knowledge-sharing initiatives, including a destination self-assessment tool now used in **over 70 countries**, alongside assessments, stewardship reports, and capacity-building partnerships with governments.

Research and learning remained central to GSTC's approach. Studies from hotels/accommodations in Türkiye, including both certified and not-yet-certified as well as GSTC-certified hotels worldwide, confirmed the tangible value of certification—particularly in credibility and international alignment—while guiding more context-sensitive implementation.

The **2025 Lessons Learned Meeting** reinforced an impact-oriented culture and introduced a new engagement indicator to strengthen long-term impact. Overall, 2025 was a year of consolidation, growth, and strategic refinement. With stronger standards, expanding certification and accreditation, and deepened global engagement, the GSTC remains well-positioned to further amplify its impact and continue leading the transition toward credible and effective sustainable tourism.

05 GSTC Monitoring and Evaluation Indicators

Membership and Engagement

Members, webinars, web users, followers on social media, and conferences.

Public Training

Number of courses, participants, satisfaction, and authorized trainers.

Auditor Training

Participation, number of classes, and completion of courses.

Standards

Number of standards developed.

Recognition

Number of recognized standards for each standard.

Accreditation

Number of ACBs, number of applicant CBs, businesses, and destinations certified by ACBs.

Destinations

Assessed destinations, number of Destination Stewardship Reports published.

Research

Evaluating the Impacts of GSTC Certification*: Insights from the Türkiye Environmental and Cultural Sustainability Program**, GSTC-certified Hotels Share Insights on the Value and Impact of GSTC Certification and GSTC Certification and local communities. Evidence from the perspective of successful first-mover Destination Management Organizations (DMOs).

Lessons Learned

Lessons from 2025 research and activities.

**The term "GSTC Certification" is a shorthand for "Certified by a Certification Body that is GSTC-accredited."*

***Namely Türkiye Environmental and Cultural Sustainability Program since November 2025.*

06 GSTC Activities and Impacts

6.1 GSTC Membership

In 2025, the GSTC membership grew to 518 organizations, including 87 new members, a 5.5% increase from 2024. This growth reflects sustained global interest in the GSTC framework and the role of the GSTC as a global platform for advancing sustainable tourism. While the overall membership renewal rate was lower than in previous years, this trend highlights an opportunity to deepen member engagement and further enhance the value proposition of the GSTC membership.

The GSTC Members Survey in 2025 indicates a significant improvement in member satisfaction, with 61% of respondents reporting that GSTC significantly or extremely met their expectations, up from 43% in the 2023 survey. Europe (35.91%) and Asia (30.89%) continue to represent the strongest regional membership bases. The increase in satisfaction scores suggests that members increasingly value GSTC’s efforts to understand and respond to their needs. Moving forward, the GSTC will focus on strengthening engagement across all regions to ensure that membership benefits continue to expand and deliver value globally.



indicator	2023	2024	2025
Organization members	437	491	518
Renewal of membership	87%	88%	73%
Members’ satisfaction	43%	—	61%
Number of webinars	26	28	32
Number of webinars participants	634	1,261	1,245

6.2 GSTC Engagement

In 2025, the website recorded 298k users through Google Analytics, indicating continued interest in GSTC’s work. During the year, approximately 376 online mentions of GSTC were recorded via Google Alerts (indicative estimate). As of December 2025, GSTC’s official social media channels (Facebook, X, LinkedIn –page and group, Instagram, and YouTube) reached a cumulative total of 115,480 followers, representing the total audience size at year-end. Since 2023, these figures show an increase in GSTC’s digital reach and media presence, consistent with the ongoing development of its communications activities. Overall, these indicators provide an overview of GSTC’s digital and media performance during the reporting period. The Communications Department is proud of the progress achieved and remains committed to delivering clear, accurate, and consistent communications in line with GSTC’s mission.

indicator	2023	2024	2025
Web users	236k	276k	298k
Followers on Social Media*	90,827	101,109	115,480
News articles published**	330	350	376

**Note: This indicator reflects the cumulative number of followers across all official social media channels as of December 2025. It represents the total audience size at year-end.*

***Note: This figure is an estimate based on media mentions captured via Google Alerts in 2025. While Google Alerts provides broad coverage of online publications, it does not guarantee full capture of all media content; therefore, the number should be interpreted as an indicative estimate rather than an exhaustive count.*



6.3 GSTC Conference

The GSTC Global Conference in Fiji in 2025 brought together 350 participants from 42 countries, showing strong global interest in sustainable tourism. Participants came from a wide range of organizations, including government agencies, tourism bodies, non-profits, businesses, and academic institutions, making the conference a useful space for exchange across different parts of the tourism sector.

Participant feedback was very positive, with 93.48% of respondents reporting satisfaction with the conference. Overall, the results suggest that the event delivered relevant content and valuable opportunities to learn and connect, while also identifying areas that can be improved in future editions.

indicator	2023	2024	2025
Participants in the GSTC Global Conference	351	1,027*	350
Satisfaction with the GSTC Global Conference	87%	88%	93.48%

*Note: In 2024, we had two global conferences, one in Sweden and one in Singapore. In 2023 and 2025, we had only one conference each year.

6.4 GSTC Public Training

In 2025, the GSTC Training Program significantly strengthened its practical relevance and global reach.

6.4.1 Expanding practical and standards-based training offerings

To enhance the applicability of sustainability training, we developed and launched several new courses, including the Sustainable Hospitality Course (Criterion-by-Criterion version), the Tour Operator Course, the Destination Stewardship Course, and the Sustainable MICE Course. These new courses were designed to provide more actionable, role-specific learning aligned with the GSTC Standard.

6.4.2 Strengthening industry collaboration through branded training programs

The GSTC deepened collaboration with leading tourism companies to co-develop branded training solutions tailored to their operational contexts:

- A. In partnership with **Agoda**, the GSTC launched the Online Sustainable Academy, targeting the Asian market, delivering hotel sustainability training in five languages: English, Indonesian, Thai, Malay, and Vietnamese.
- B. Together with **easyJet holidays**, the GSTC developed and delivered online sustainable hospitality training for their Europe-based hotel partners.
- C. In collaboration with **JTB Corp.**, the GSTC designed customized internal online training programs focused on sustainability principles and the GSTC Standards.
- D. In partnership with **RNT HOTELS**, the GSTC designed and delivered highly customized internal online training programs founded on key sustainability principles and fully aligned with the GSTC Standards.

6.4.3 Significant growth in training participation

GSTC Training participation increased substantially, from 2,365 learners in 2024 to 9,744 learners in 2025, reflecting growing global demand for credible and practical sustainability training.

6.4.4 Multilingual and locally delivered training worldwide

The GSTC Training was delivered in 11 languages and in 21 countries in 2025 through collaboration with expert local trainers, ensuring both linguistic accessibility and regional relevance.

6.4.5 Building institutional and workforce capacity through partnerships

- A. The GSTC established a partnership with **NTUC LearningHub (Singapore)** to train local trainers qualified to conduct the Accessible and Inclusive Travel Course (AIT) and Sustainable MICE course in support of regional capacity building.
- B. Additionally, through collaboration with **California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB)**, the GSTC provided sustainability training for both academic audiences and industry stakeholders, further strengthening the link between education, research, and practice.



indicator	2023	2024	2025
Regular courses	78	73	81
Training participants*	1,810	2,365	9,744
Participants who are satisfied with the courses**	99.5%	99%	72.6%
Participants who passed the exam	57%	81%	81.74%
Authorized trainers	44	49	79

**Note: In 2025, 3,622 JTB staff completed the course, with 86% reporting a clear understanding of the GSTC Standards. Awareness and comprehension of the GSTC Standards have significantly improved. The majority of evaluations were growth-oriented and positive, highlighting that the content was "systematic/clear," "practically applicable," and "desirable for further study." This e-learning initiative, a collaboration between JTB and GSTC, has contributed significantly to building a foundation for internal consensus and the promotion of sustainable tourism.*

***Note: In 2025, while branded trainings increased participation, their self-paced format reduced trainer interaction, likely contributing to lower satisfaction compared to non-branded trainings, which maintain very high satisfaction rates (99.86%). Introducing blended elements such as live Q&A and discussions is recommended to improve engagement. The low survey response rate limits the reliability of findings. Integrating surveys into the training process, simplifying questionnaires, and sending reminders can help increase participation.*

6.5 Auditor training

In 2025, GSTC’s Auditor Training Program continued to demonstrate strong growth, reinforcing GSTC’s mission to strengthen the credibility and global adoption of sustainable tourism standards. A total of 16 auditor training courses were delivered in 2025, reaching 398 participants worldwide. As many attendees are not auditors, these trainings contributed more broadly to GSTC’s mission by supporting tourism businesses, destinations, and practitioners worldwide in gaining a deeper understanding of sustainability principles and best practices, regardless of size or location.

By the end of 2025, cumulative completions reached 523 auditors for the GSTC Hotel Standard and 322 auditors for the GSTC Tour Operator Standard. These results support GSTC’s mission by ensuring that sustainability standards are assessed by qualified professionals, reinforcing the integrity and consistency of certification processes, and supporting the global transition toward more responsible and sustainable tourism.

The notable increase in GSTC Destination Standard participation highlights growing global interest in destination-level sustainability and reinforces GSTC’s role in providing guidance that supports informed leadership, improved practices, and more credible sustainability efforts across the tourism sector.

indicator	2023	2024	2025
Auditor training classes	10	12	16
Participants in Auditor Training classes	170	350	398
People who completed (attended) the GSTC Auditor Training Hotel Standard Course (From 2016 to December 31 2025)	143	345	523
People who completed (attended) the GSTC Auditor Training Tour Operator Course (From 2016 to December 31 2025)	44	136	322
People who completed (attended) the GSTC Auditor Training Destination Standard Course (From 2016 to December 31 2025)	56	106	179
% of satisfaction with the Auditor Training	—	89.70%	88.78%

6.6 GSTC Standards

The GSTC Industry Standard v3.0 revision was concluded. The process began in 2024 and was carried out through an inclusive and global approach, engaging individuals from 93 organizations across all five continents through three formal consultation rounds. The revision was completed on December 30, 2025. One of the key outcomes of this process was the development of two distinct standards—the GSTC Hotel Standard v4.0 and the GSTC Tour Operator Standard v4.0—which replaced the previous “umbrella” Industry Standard v3.0. With the separation, the GSTC aimed at improving clarity for stakeholders and increasing adoption by hotels and tour operators, as the revised standards and indicators are clearer, more specific, and more measurable. The expected impact of this revision is an overall improvement in global sustainability performance across hotels, all types of accommodation, and tour operators.

The [process of the revision](#) has been consolidated into a report and is available on the GSTC website. This report documents GSTC’s adherence to the transparency and stakeholder engagement standards defined by the ISEAL Code of Good Practice for Sustainability Systems.

Below is a table of the number of standards developed (including the revision) throughout the years. The numbers are accumulated numbers.

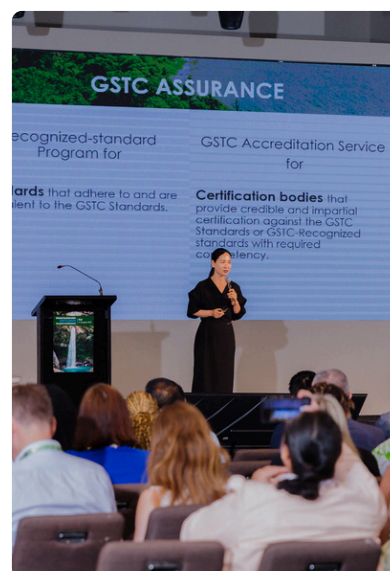
indicator	2023	2024	2025
GSTC Standards	2	4	5

6.7 GSTC Accreditation

In 2025, the GSTC Accreditation Program continued to demonstrate strong progress, with the number of ACBs increasing to 16, up from 11 in 2024. This growth underscores the continued relevance and impact of GSTC’s accreditation framework in strengthening trust, consistency, and adoption of sustainability practices across the tourism sector.

indicator	2023	2024	2025
GSTC-accredited certification bodies	8	11	16
Applicant certification bodies	8	14	7
Total	16	25	23

In 2025, the GSTC hotel certification continued to expand both in scale and geographic reach, reflecting growing global momentum toward sustainability in the hospitality sector. A total of **3,522 hotels** were certified by GSTC-ACBs as of Q4 2025, with notable growth concentrated in Türkiye, China, Italy, Thailand, and Singapore, underscoring strong uptake in both mature and emerging tourism markets. At the same time, certification extended into 19 new countries/regions, going from 37 countries/regions with certified hotels in 2024 to 56 countries/regions at the end of 2025, going from including destinations across the Caribbean, Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Oceania – from the Bahamas and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines to Laos, Pakistan, and New Zealand. This widening footprint highlights not only an increase in certified properties, but also a broader, more diverse global commitment to credible sustainability standards in hospitality.



In terms of GSTC Certification for tour operators, 2025 marked an important phase of geographic diversification, with certified operators emerging in 24 new countries and regions worldwide. This included a wide mix of destinations across Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas, reflecting growing interest from both established and emerging tourism markets. The overall number of certified tour operators was 55 as of Q4 2025. Activity was most visible in Southeast Asia (SEA), where certification efforts have begun to take clearer shape. Together, these developments point to a steadily expanding foundation for sustainability standards within the tour operator sector.

indicator	2023	2024	2025
GSTC-certified* Hotels	947	1,760	3,522
GSTC-certified* Destinations	33	46	56
GSTC-certified* Tour Operators	7	12	55

**"GSTC-certified" is shortened to "Certified by a GSTC-accredited certification body." GSTC does not directly certify any products or services, but provides an accreditation program to accredit certification bodies.*

6.8 GSTC Recognition

GSTC Recognition continues to designate sustainable tourism standards that are aligned with the GSTC Standards, providing a globally accepted baseline for sustainability practices in tourism. Recognition applies exclusively to the standard itself and does not extend to the organization, certification activities, or verification processes.

A major milestone was reached in 2025, with the formal implementation of the GSTC Recognition eligibility requirements. As of the year 2025, GSTC-Recognized Standards used for certification purposes may only be applied within the GSTC Certification framework, meaning certification must be conducted by GSTC-ACBs in accordance with GSTC Accreditation requirements. This development significantly strengthens assurance, ensuring that certification against GSTC-Recognized Standards follows rigorous, independently accredited conformity assessment processes.

While the total number of GSTC-Recognized Standards decreased in 2025 compared to 2024, this reduction reflects a positive shift toward higher assurance. A growing number of Recognized Standards are now embedded within GSTC-accredited certification systems, demonstrating stronger alignment with GSTC’s rigorous accreditation and oversight mechanisms. In 2025, three standards were granted the GSTC-Recognized Standard status, further reinforcing the program’s focus on quality and credibility over volume.

Overall, 2025 marks a transition from Recognition as a primarily equivalency-based designation toward a model more clearly anchored in credible, accredited certification if they are used for certification. Through strengthened eligibility requirements, updated core standards, and closer integration with GSTC Accreditation, the Recognition program continues to support transparency, integrity, and global consistency in sustainable tourism certification.

The Recognition Program is applicable only to the standards for hotels/accommodations, tour operations, and MICE. For MICE, only standards created prior to the GSTC MICE Standard release are eligible.

indicator	2023	2024	2025
GSTC-Recognized Standards for Hotel	38	52	31
GSTC-Recognized Standards for Tour Operator	20	21	13
GSTC-Recognized Standards for Destinations	15	16	14
GSTC Recognized Standards for MICE	0	1	1

6.9 GSTC Destinations program

The GSTC Destinations Program grew in 2025, offering new resources and undertaking new initiatives to foster collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and sustainable practices across its global network.

In April, the GSTC launched a Destination Self-Assessment Tool for destination managers, allowing users to evaluate and track their progress against the GSTC Destination Standard. Practitioners from over 70 countries have started or completed their self-assessments, demonstrating the global applicability of the GSTC Standards.

The GSTC published three Destination Stewardship Reports and one Destination Stewardship Yearbook in 2025, compiling case studies of good stewardship from destinations around the world. These were completed in partnership with the Destination Stewardship Council and the Center for Responsible Travel (CREST).

During the year, GSTC senior team members, through the Destination Assessment Program, completed five destination assessments (in Birgi and Side in Türkiye; Phuket, Thailand; the Cook Islands; and Palm Beach County, USA), bringing the total to 53 destination assessments to date. The GSTC also supported destinations through high-level workshops on specific topics, including in Türkiye; Lanzarote, Spain; Washington, DC; Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia; Asser Province, Saudi Arabia; and others.

Furthermore, in partnership with the Bahamas' Ministry of Tourism, Investments, and Aviation (BMOTIA), the GSTC supported the formation of two new destination stewardship councils on the islands of Inagua and North Andros. With training and guidance provided by the GSTC, the BMOTIA has successfully created eight destination stewardship councils to date to manage their island destinations.

indicator	2023	2024	2025
Destinations assessed*	6	8	5
Destination Stewardship Reports published	3	3	3
Destination tools launched**	1	0	1
Destination supported through workshops and advisory services***	—	—	8

*Note: Started prior to 2025, and finalized in 2025.

**Note: New indicator as of 2025.

***Note: New indicator as of 2025.

07 Insights from Impact Research

7.1 Evaluating the Impacts of GSTC Certification in Türkiye

This research, commissioned by the GSTC and conducted by Boğaziçi and Cappadocia Universities, examined Turkish hotels' attitudes toward sustainable tourism certification. Its primary objective was to understand the factors influencing hotels' decisions regarding certification, as well as the perceived benefits, challenges, and barriers to implementation. The study drew on a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from structured, closed-ended survey questions with qualitative insights from open-ended responses. A total of 902 valid responses were collected, with the survey distributed to hotels through the Türkiye Tourism Promotion and Development Agency (TGA).

An important contextual factor shaping the findings is that sustainability certification in Türkiye is mandatory. This mandatory framework appears to influence how hotels perceive the certification process and its benefits.

On the positive side, hotels generally recognized the value of sustainability certification. Many viewed it as necessary or beneficial for achieving international recognition and aligning with global tourism trends. Participants also acknowledged concrete benefits, including improved environmental practices, increased staff awareness of sustainability issues, and better alignment with international tour operators' expectations. Importantly, responses reflected a genuine commitment to sustainability, with many participants expressing a desire to operate their businesses in accordance with sustainability principles.

At the same time, significant concerns were raised. High financial costs and procedural complexity were among the most frequently cited challenges. Many hotels felt insufficiently prepared to meet the requirements, noting a lack of education, technical guidance, and financial assistance. This reinforced calls for more accessible training and clearer guidance on implementing the sustainability certification system.

There were also some concerns about inequity. Smaller, independent, and rural hotels consistently reported feeling disproportionately burdened by the administrative and financial demands of certification, particularly when compared to larger hotels or chains. This perceived imbalance has prompted ongoing discussions within GSTC about alternative approaches, including more tailored or specialized certification pathways for small businesses.

Finally, respondents emphasized the need for a more holistic approach to sustainability. They argued that meaningful sustainability outcomes cannot be achieved by hotels alone, but require coordinated action from suppliers, local governments, consumers, and public infrastructure.

Given the mandatory nature of the program in Türkiye, the program owners, the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and TGA, have supported implementation through a set of practical tools, which can be considered good practice in addressing challenges faced by accommodation facilities. Within the phased structure of the program, for Stage 1 and Stage 2, which are not considered under GSTC Certification, guidance manuals have been published free of charge to explain the technical and operational requirements of the criteria. In addition, a sample documentation system has been made available to support facilities in establishing basic management and record-keeping processes. A call center service has also been introduced to respond to technical questions from accommodation facilities. Furthermore, due to the technical nature of Criterion D2.1 – Greenhouse Gas Emissions, a voluntary Carbon Footprint Calculation Tool has been developed and provided free of charge to facilitate compliance without the need for external consultancy.

Overall, the study found that larger hotels and chain-affiliated properties tend to perceive greater benefits and fewer challenges from sustainability certification than smaller, independent, and rural hotels. While commitment to sustainability is evident across the sector, the findings highlight the importance of context-sensitive implementation, capacity building, and differentiated approaches to ensure that certification systems are both effective and equitable.

7.2 Perceived Values and Impacts of GSTC Certification shared by GSTC-certified Hotels Worldwide

The report *GSTC-certified Hotels Share Insights on the Value and Impact of GSTC Certification* highlights the strong credibility and trust that GSTC Certification brings to certified properties, while also identifying clear opportunities to further amplify its impact. Based on responses from 133 GSTC-certified hotels, the findings show that the certification is already delivering meaningful value on the ground.

The most significant benefit reported by hotels is enhanced customer trust and credibility. An overwhelming 80.17% of respondents indicated that GSTC Certification strengthened guests' confidence in their sustainability claims, making it the most tangible and widely experienced advantage of certification. This confirms that GSTC's rigorous standards translate into real reputational benefits for certified properties and reinforce their commitment to credible, globally aligned sustainability practices.

At the same time, the findings point to opportunities to better communicate this value to the market. Hotels recognize GSTC as one of the most rigorous and demanding sustainability certifications in the tourism sector, requiring significantly greater effort than many alternative schemes. However, this high level of ambition is not always fully visible to guests, who often perceive sustainability certifications as broadly equivalent. As a result, the additional work undertaken by GSTC-certified hotels is not always reflected in stronger market differentiation. Respondents consistently highlighted the potential for stronger, centralized promotion of GSTC Certification to increase awareness among consumers and industry stakeholders. Many hotels stated that greater visibility and global marketing would help ensure that the credibility of the GSTC Standards is more clearly understood and recognized, rather than relying primarily on individual hotels to communicate the value of certification. Increased awareness would also support certified properties in using GSTC more effectively as a differentiator in their marketing and communications.

Overall, the findings reinforce that GSTC Certification is already highly valued for the trust and credibility it delivers, while also underscoring the opportunity to further strengthen its impact through enhanced communication, visibility, and consumer-facing recognition.

7.3 Research Study on GSTC Certification and Local Communities. Evidence from the Perspective of Successful First-Mover DMOs

A case study of destinations impacted by the GSTC and its activities comes from a research study titled "GSTC Certification and local communities. Evidence from the perspective of successful first mover DMOs". The study examines how three Italian destination management organisations (DMOs) successfully achieved and maintained **GSTC-D (Global Sustainable Tourism Council – Destination Criteria)** certification and involved local communities in the process. Using a qualitative case study approach based on interviews and desk research, the authors analyse three early-certified Alpine destinations: Valsugana, Tarvisiano–Sella Nevea–Passo Pramollo, and San Vigilio Dolomites.

The research is structured around three main focuses :

- A. **Motivations and process** (the past) – DMOs pursued certification to strengthen sustainability strategies, gain a competitive advantage, and improve coordination among stakeholders. They organised public meetings, stakeholder engagement initiatives, and awareness activities, while facing challenges such as limited data availability, mobility management issues, and difficulties engaging private actors.
- B. **Maintaining certification** (the present) – Certification requires ongoing compliance with 38 criteria across four sustainability pillars: sustainable management, socio-economic sustainability, cultural sustainability, and environmental sustainability . DMOs reported improvements in coordination and public-sector engagement, but continued challenges in monitoring emissions, managing mobility, and sustaining holistic collaboration .
- C. **Future expectations** (the future) – DMOs believe that certification strengthens destination identity, enhances community well-being, improves strategic coordination, and reinforces destination image. Communication of certification achievements is directed both internally (to local communities) and externally (to tourists).

Overall, the study confirms the pivotal role of DMOs in coordinating fragmented, non-hierarchical multi-stakeholder destinations . GSTC-D certification is presented not merely as a sustainability label but as a managerial tool that fosters structured collaboration, community participation, and long-term sustainable tourism development.

¹Buffa, Martini, Masotti, De Santis. (2025). GSTC Certification and local communities. Evidence from the perspective of successful first mover DMOs. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, Vol 38. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2212571X25000460?ref=pdf_download&fr=RR-2&rr=9d27db583932386d

08 Lessons from the Year 2025

8.1 GSTC Core Team Meeting on Lessons Learned in 2025

The 2025 Lessons Learned Meeting of all GSTC staff members held in January 2026, provided an opportunity to reflect on the year's work through a renewed focus on impact—examining not only what the GSTC team delivered, but also what changed as a result and why those changes matter. The discussion centered on impact indicators, key lessons emerging from 2025 activities and research, and the introduction of a new engagement indicator, reinforcing a shared commitment to continuous improvement.

As a first subject, Dr. Mihee Kang, Chief Assurance Officer, revisited the foundational concepts of output, outcome, and impact, offering a common framework to guide reflection across the team. She emphasized outputs as the activities delivered, outcomes as the changes or achievements resulting from those activities, and impact as the broader transformation created over time. This clarification helped anchor the discussions that followed and supported a more consistent, impact-oriented approach to measuring the team's work.

Natalia Sanin, Associate Accreditation Manager, shared key lessons from the report *Attitudes of Hotels Towards Sustainable Tourism Certification: A Survey of Turkish Hotels*. Her presentation highlighted how research insights can inform both strategic decision-making and practical improvements, demonstrating the value of evidence-based learning in strengthening the relevance and effectiveness of sustainability certification.

Erel Ben Dor, Auditor Training Program Manager, presented key insights from the first auditor training delivered in Spanish in Mexico. This milestone underscored the importance of regional adaptation and the lessons to be learned when delving into new territories.

Joonsik Son, Head of Accreditation Operations, and Rita Kuan, Market Strategy Manager, jointly shared lessons learned from the report [GSTC-certified Hotels Share Insights on the Value and Impact of GSTC Certification](#). Their reflections highlighted how certified hotels perceive and experience the value of GSTC Certification, providing practical insights to inform future communication, engagement, and strategic priorities.

The meeting concluded with Rita Kuan introducing a new indicator focused on GSTC team engagement in events, which will be measured starting in 2026. This new indicator reflects a growing emphasis on understanding and strengthening how the GSTC team connects with stakeholders and translates activities into meaningful, long-term impact.

Overall, the 2025 Lessons Learned Meeting reinforced a culture of reflection, learning, and continuous improvement, setting a strong foundation for more impact-driven measurement and engagement in the year ahead.

8.2 Lessons Learned from Case Study of GSTC impact: Kazakhstan

One case study of a destination influenced by the GSTC, despite lacking formal engagement, is Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan has introduced a new national ecotourism standard, set to take effect on June 1, 2025, aimed at reducing the environmental impact of tourism while protecting the country's ecosystems and landscapes. Developed under the UNDP Biodiversity Finance Initiative (BIOFIN), the standard aligns with international sustainability frameworks, **drawing on recommendations from the GSTC** and other certification systems, as well as ecotourism practices from several countries.

The standard provides a comprehensive framework for ecotourism services, covering areas such as eco-tour classification, energy efficiency, waste management, biodiversity conservation, and visitor safety. It also emphasizes efficient resource use and aims to create consistent service quality, strengthening consumer trust and attracting foreign investment. A key feature is the strong focus on local community involvement, encouraging residents to participate in tourism development while supporting the preservation of Kazakhstan's natural heritage. Through this initiative, Kazakhstan seeks to position itself internationally as a sustainable and eco-friendly tourism destination.²

09 Plans for 2026

Launch of Futures Lab for Sustainable Tourism in 2026

Starting in 2026, the GSTC launched the GSTC Futures Lab for Sustainable Tourism, a new initiative aimed at strengthening the role of research, data, and evidence-based insights in advancing sustainable tourism globally. The goal of the Futures Lab is to support GSTC's mission of increasing knowledge, understanding, and adoption of sustainable tourism practices. It's focus is on translating research into practical, scalable solutions that can be applied by destinations, tourism businesses, and other stakeholders across the sector. It will also play an important role in knowledge sharing and stakeholder engagement, as well as in supporting academic and collaborative events, including the GSTC Academic Symposium.

²Omigazy, D. (2025, March 26). Kazakhstan Introduces National Ecotourism Standard to Promote Sustainable Tourism. *The Astana Times*. <https://astanatimes.com/2025/03/kazakhstan-introduces-national-ecotourism-standard-to-promote-sustainable-tourism/>

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