



Opening remarks from Luigi Cabrini, GSTC Chair.

April 2026 | GSTC2026 Global Sustainable Tourism Conference in Phuket, Thailand.

Honorable Minister, Governor of TAT,

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends,

Welcome to the 2026 Global Sustainable Tourism Council conference!

And welcome to Phuket, one of the best-known and visited destinations in Southeast Asia, with tourism playing an essential role by providing a vital economic income, creating jobs, and catalyzing the development of many related sectors. The island's picturesque beaches, the marine activities, the rich cultural heritage attract millions of visitors each year. But as many other coastal destinations, Phuket faces several challenges due to the impact of large tourism flows compounded by the consequences of global warming.

Hosting the 2026 GSTC Conference is a clear sign of your engagement toward a more responsible and sustainable tourism. The topics of the event, the debates around strategies, and the connections with global

networks will certainly enhance the capacity of Thai tourism operators to integrate sustainable practices into their businesses. Hopefully, the conference will provide concrete input that can be translated into local action.

We very much recognize the commitment of the Phuket authorities to seriously engage in strategies that place sustainability as a priority and look forward to continuing our cooperation. There is no magic formula, but a step-by-step approach to pursue what we define as “continuous improvement”.

By the end of 2025, international tourism grew 4% more than its pre-pandemic levels, with many destinations registering the highest number of visitors ever. Tourism is back as an essential activity, a creator of jobs and a tool for development, providing social, economic, and environmental benefits. Sadly, the conflicts that ravage various regions of the world, and in particular the Middle East war, provoke human losses and destruction, and are also impacting tourism flows. Tourism promotes peace, but also needs peace to thrive.

There are also other threats inherent to the way tourism is managed: the increasing overtourism when the negative impacts are perceived, by the communities where it develops, as overcoming its benefits; the slow progress in reducing tourism contribution to global warming; the working conditions in the sector, often below acceptable standards, and plastic pollution, food waste, biodiversity loss, just to name a few... Congestion at destinations and extreme weather hazards have become, for the first time, important factors in travel decisions.

At GSTC, we are focusing our efforts on promoting and driving change toward more responsible, respectful, and sustainable ways of traveling.

It was 18 years ago, in 2008, when the Global Sustainable Tourism Council created and disseminated the first version of the Global Criteria for Hotel and Tour Operators.

Since then, we have published standards for Destinations, MICE, Attractions, and, soon to be announced, our new GSTC Food and Beverage Standard. Our aim is to create a comprehensive framework and the tools to progress toward more sustainable tourism by maximizing benefits and reducing unwanted impacts across the whole tourism chain.

Time has shown that GSTC filled a gap by making available a system that can serve both the private and the public sectors to achieve higher levels of sustainability. Our role in establishing and managing global standards is now widely recognized.

Given the transverse nature of tourism and its linkages with many other economic and social activities, the global standards are also an effective instrument for implementing the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

With the support and engagement of our members, we were able to develop several programs, support destinations, and companies in advancing towards more sustainable models.

Through our accreditation program (the only one in tourism), we aim at multiplying the number of hotels, destinations, and other tourism companies that gain a credible certification, and at making them effectively competitive in the market.

We maintain that tourism certifications must abide by international standards, even if our sector is more complex than others, with a supply chain involving many components such as accommodation, transport, excursions, restaurants, handicrafts, food production, waste disposal, water management, etc.

Many surveys show that the demand for sustainable tourism is higher than the offer, a call to all of us to do more. But dispelling any doubts of greenwashing is essential to build trust and credibility. Our system provides this assurance, and this is why many certification programs are approaching GSTC seeking accreditation. The commitment is also increasing from the accommodation side as top hotel chains engage in a pathway leading to GSTC certification.

The GSTC membership continues to grow and includes government agencies and NTOs (public entities at the national, regional, or municipal level) representing 48 countries, together with leaders of the private sectors, NGOs, universities, destinations, and many others, with a total of 496 member organizations. We welcome this variety as a strength for GSTC, where the tourism sector is represented in its multiple facets and interests.

Our organization has grown and evolved since its early days, when we were able to work thanks to the funding and support of United Nations Agencies. GSTC has since been able to gain self-sufficiency and financial independence, while maintaining and integrating in its DNA the universal values of the United Nations.

We have reached a stage where we can expand our horizon by establishing long-term goals. Soon after the conference, our board will approve a strategic plan defining our priorities for the next 10 years.

GSTC, guided by the SDGs and stewarding its global standards, envisions tourism that fulfills its potential as a vehicle that maximizes social, economic, cultural, and environmental benefits while minimizing harmful effects from its activities.

We envision a GSTC acting as a global leader and convening authority for sustainable tourism, driving measurable improvement and accelerating the transition from extractive to sustainable tourism.

We set 6 strategic goals for the next decade:

1. GSTC recognition is globally expanded, and GSTC Standards are adopted worldwide.
2. A credible Assurance Program is widely applied, and GSTC is acknowledged as the global leader in assurance and accreditation for sustainable tourism.
3. Measurement and Reporting tools are integrated and utilized in all tourism segments.
- 4 Inclusive, Fair, and Community Supported Tourism is promoted, supported, and included in tourism strategies.

5 Awareness, knowledge, and professional skills based on the GSTC standards and programs are disseminated throughout the tourism community.

6 Market Transformation toward growing demand for sustainable products and experiences is achieved.

It is an ambitious task, but we believe it can be achieved, thanks to the recognition, support, and encouragement received by the tourism community, represented by you here with us today.

I wish to conclude by warmly thanking the Phuket Province, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB), and the Sustainable Tourism Development Foundation (STDF) for the exceptional organization of this event and the warm welcome we received. We have reached more than 550 participants and 55 countries represented.

I wish you all a fruitful, engaging, and active participation and a wonderful time in Phuket! Thank you!

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