



ADVENTURE TRAVEL
TRADE ASSOCIATION



High Moments, Low Impact: Rethinking Adventure Travel's Sustainability Efforts

With Sustainable Examples from Switzerland
September 2021

FOREWORD

Sustainable tourism is essential to travel's survival. Not only for the sake of the natural world, but also its people. This means we must immediately take actions based on a comprehensive view of sustainability as it relates to the environment, societies, and economies. I am reminded of something Anna Pollock once said:¹

"Change will come from a collective effort conducted at the grassroots – in communities where tourism hosts commit to ensuring that their economic activity benefits all stakeholders; where they take responsibility for minimizing the environmental footprint and work actively to ensure that local cultural values are maintained and, in some cases, rejuvenated."

We hope this report will inspire and guide the adventure travel community in our efforts forward toward a more sustainable future.

- Christina Beckmann, Vice President of Global Strategy, ATTA and Co-Founder, Tomorrow's Air

There is no future for tourism, especially adventure travel, without sustainability. The pandemic gave us the impetus to rethink and better understand the meaning of sustainability in travel. The Swiss tourism industry had long before the pandemic understood the concept in a very holistic way with all its ecological, social, and economic dimensions.

Value and respect for nature, and a focus on authenticity and local production, ensure economic welfare and durability. Since always, sustainability is part of our Swiss DNA; therefore we gave our Swiss sustainability movement the name "Swisstainable."

We are happy to share our passion with ATTA and with our community, as these research reports are nourished with some of our Swisstainable best practice examples.

- Letizia Elia, Head of Business Development, Switzerland Tourism

¹2nd UNWTO Ethics and Tourism Congress, September 12th, 2012

CONTENTS

01 INTRODUCTION

Introduction	5
--------------------	---

02 SUSTAINABILITY IN TOURISM: OVERVIEW AND COMPLEXITIES

Sustainable Tourism is Complex	9
Sustainable Tourism has Gone Mainstream	11
Sustainable Tourism can be Affordable	14

03 SUSTAINABILITY IN ADVENTURE TRAVEL

Sustainable Adventure Tourism	17
Elements of Sustainability	18
Environment	19
Economy	22
Society	26

04 CURRENT INITIATIVES

Tourism + Conservation Issues	31
Conservation Programs	32
Consumer Pledges	33
Destination-Level Program	35
Sustainability Certifications	36

05 LOOKING FORWARD

Simplifying Sustainable Tourism	39
Sustainability is a Shared Responsibility	40
Investing in Sustainable Tourism	41
Behavior Change + Sustainable Tourism	42
Sustainability is Local	45
Diversifying Tourism Offerings is Key	46
Measurement Matters: Start Now	47

06 CONCLUSIONS

Sustainable Tourism Resources	52
Conclusion	53

A dark, atmospheric landscape featuring two people standing on a frozen body of water. The scene is set against a backdrop of rugged, snow-covered mountains under a heavy, overcast sky. The water is dark and reflective, mirroring the figures and the surrounding environment. The overall mood is somber and expansive.

Part I:

Introduction

INTRODUCTION

This report is the first in a series from the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) and Switzerland Tourism that discusses how the adventure travel industry can use the current interruption in tourism to reassess their impact on the world around them and put sustainability first. The purpose of this series is to identify where the industry is now, what initiatives are happening, and where it needs to go to make tourism sustainable for the future of our planet and people.

The World Tourism Organization defines sustainable tourism as, ***“Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities.”***¹ Sustainable tourism development must bring together all relevant stakeholders to maintain the continuous process of development and correction. A balance must be found between making optimal use of environmental resources, respecting and valuing the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, and ensuring viable, long-term economic operations for the local people. Complementing this, creating a meaningful sustainable experience for tourists raises their awareness of sustainability issues and practices.¹

Sustainability in travel and tourism is not a new concept; it has been around since the 1970s. For decades, however, the impact of travel and tourism on societies was thought to be overwhelmingly positive, as it brought income to the local economy. However, little attention was paid to how travel and tourism was shaping the social, environmental, and holistic economic systems.

¹ <https://www.unwto.org/sustainable-development>

INTRODUCTION

The arrival of low-cost airlines, a new global air infrastructure, and new technology changed everything for travel. The size of tourism markets increased globally, at a rate of almost four percent a year.¹ The number of US tourists for instance, doubled from 2000 to 2019, while the number of outbound Chinese tourists went from 10 million to 155 million during the same period.²

Growth resulted in increased revenues and millions of new jobs around the world. By 2019 (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic), according to the World Travel and Trade Council (WTTTC), ***one in every 10 jobs was affiliated with travel and tourism***, with the industry being in some way responsible for the creation of one in every four jobs in the previous decade. Travel and tourism has become one of the five largest sectors worldwide, accounting for US\$9.2 trillion annually, of which US\$1.7 trillion came from international visitor spending.³

The rate of development, however, came at a cost. The inundation of tourists placed extraordinary pressures on destinations and their people. By 2019, concerns of overcrowding and the impacts of ‘overtourism,’ defined as “the maximum number of people that may visit a tourist destination at the same time, without causing destruction of the physical, economic, and sociocultural environment and an unacceptable decrease in the quality of visitors’ satisfaction,”⁴ were beginning to dominate industry headlines. Anti-tourism movements emerged in Venice, Amsterdam and Barcelona. Climbers were photographed queueing in the ‘Death Zone’ on Everest. The famous beach of Maya Bay on Koh Phi Phi Leh in Thailand was forced to close after 80 percent of its coral reef system was destroyed by boat anchors and tourists’ sunscreen.

¹<https://www.unwto.org/international-tourism-growth-continues-to-outpace-the-economy>

²<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ST.INT.DPRT>

³<https://wttc.org/Research/Economic-Impact>

⁴<https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284420070>

INTRODUCTION

The impact of rapid development is coupled with rising concerns over the industry's contributions to climate change. Heightened availability of air travel at more affordable rates meant that air emissions increased significantly. Air travel accounted for 2.4 percent of global greenhouse gases (GHG), and **up until the outbreak of COVID-19, total air emissions were expected to triple by 2050**. By 2019, demand for air travel was far exceeding any advancements in air travel fuel efficiency and sustainable technology.¹ Water-scarce regions worldwide are threatened by infinity pools and spas, golf courses drain precious water and infuse chemicals into the ground, and demand for meat and imported foods negatively affects the local ecosystem and economy. The closure of international borders and decline in travel volume has delayed the convergence of these crises, giving travel a moment of pause.

While pioneers of sustainable tourism have long been calling for antidotes to travel's negative effects, the movement has been growing in the past decades. As it gains traction, positive changes are being made, but more awareness and action are needed. On the industry side, there is a lack of global industry standard, so multiple systems have emerged, many of which are not enforced or controlled. There is also a lack of market awareness on the consumer side. Most tourists simply do not know about the indicators associated with sustainable tourism, and the complexity of measures of sustainability makes it difficult for consumers to make educated and informed decisions.

To this end, the ATTA is collaborating with Switzerland Tourism on this research report series, the goal of which is to support the travel community with case studies, lessons learned and best practices from Switzerland and abroad.

¹<https://www.eesi.org/papers/view/fact-sheet-the-growth-in-greenhouse-gas-emissions-from-commercial-aviation>



Part II:

Sustainability in Tourism: Overview and Complexities

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IS COMPLEX

The definition of sustainable tourism is complicated; there is no single, universally accepted understanding of the term. The UNWTO, for instance, defines sustainable tourism as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities." The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), however, defines it as ***“a level of tourism activity that can be maintained over the long term because it results in a net benefit for the social, economic, natural and cultural environments of the area in which it takes place.”*** To complicate matters further, new terms have emerged in recent years. Terms like ‘regenerative travel,’ ‘good tourism’ and ‘responsible tourism’ are being used interchangeably across the industry.

Beyond the definition of sustainability is the complexity of its dynamics. To date, there is no single set of indicators or measures that are globally accepted and universally applicable. There are, however, several standardization and certifying bodies for sustainable tourism, each with their own set of indicators of sustainability and definitions. These include Earthcheck, ISO 37120-3 and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC). Capturing the complexity of sustainable tourism requires a technical understanding of issues relating to economics, society, and the environment, not to mention the development of indicators and sensors required to capture the dynamics of each system.

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IS COMPLEX

The confusion around the correct use of the term sustainable tourism and the complexity of its dynamics has had a direct impact on tourists. In 2017, a study that assessed the importance of sustainability benchmarks for travelers found that most simply were not aware of sustainability-related benchmarks and could not differentiate between various types of certification.¹ Additionally, tourism's "Invisible Burden" puts destinations at risk by not recognizing the hidden costs of tourism, such as infrastructure for energy, waste, wastewater and the protection of natural and cultural resources.²

Together, these findings point to three distinct challenges for sustainability in travel and tourism:

1. There is a lack of global industry standard in sustainability of travel and tourism. In the absence of a single standard, multiple systems have emerged. The extent to which these standards are enforced or controlled isn't always clear.
2. There is a lack of market awareness in the industry and among tourists. Most tourists simply do not know about the indicators associated with sustainable tourism. Even among those that do, the complexity of measures of sustainability make it difficult for tourists to understand.
3. Destinations must account for the hidden costs that tourism demands from a local economy. Ideally, increasing sustainability efforts will minimize these impacts, and tourism can financially support the infrastructure maintenance and resource protection that is needed.

¹D.A. Tasci, A. (2017), "Consumer demand for sustainability benchmarks in tourism and hospitality", Tourism Review, Vol. 72 No. 4, pp. 375-391.

²<https://www.thetravelfoundation.org.uk/invisible-burden/>



SUSTAINABLE TOURISM HAS GONE MAINSTREAM

The concepts of sustainability in travel and tourism have been around since the 1980s. The most well-known derivation of sustainable travel is arguably ecotourism, which is defined as “tourism directed toward exotic, often threatened, natural environments, intended to support conservation efforts and observe wildlife.”¹ The principles of sustainability are clearly present in other forms of travel, such as voluntourism and adventure travel, both of which place an emphasis on conservation and the local environment. These sectors have traditionally been perceived as costly sub-sectors that fail to appeal to larger tourism markets. However, this is no longer the case.

Demand for sustainable travel has increased significantly over the last few years. According to a study by Booking.com, 83 percent of global travelers think sustainable travel is vital, with 61 percent saying the pandemic has made them want to travel more sustainably in the future. Despite three out of four accommodation providers saying they implemented at least some kind of sustainability practices at their properties, almost **half (49 percent) of travelers still believe there are not enough sustainable travel options.** This can partially be explained by the fact that only one-third of properties actively communicate about their sustainability efforts proactively to potential guests.²

¹<https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/ecotourism>

²<https://globalnews.booking.com/bookingcoms-2021-sustainable-travel-report-affirms-potential-watershed-moment-for-industry-and-consumers/#>

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM HAS GONE MAINSTREAM

According to a 2021 report from Euromonitor International, consumers are in the midst of a great behavioral reset. Their attention has shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic from slower-moving environmental threats such as climate change and single-use plastics, to more immediate and urgent social priorities like the wellbeing of their local communities.¹

A 2019 study by the ATTA found that social impact is an important consideration in all things. *Three-quarters of all types of travelers look for immersive local community experiences. Among adventure travelers, this number is almost four out of every five tourists.* Over half of all tourists describe themselves as being 'very interested' in ecotourism.

The desire for more sustainable travel options is even reflected in search engines. Research conducted by the data firm Equator Analytics highlighted an increase in interest in sustainable travel, even amidst a pandemic. Despite the closure of borders around the world, *the search term 'sustainable travel' was twice as popular in 2020 than in 2015.*²

¹<https://go.euromonitor.com/white-paper-EC-2021-Top-10-Global-Consumer-Trends.html>

²<https://www.equatoranalytics.com>

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM HAS GONE MAINSTREAM

Even though travelers are demanding sustainable options, suppliers are often still reluctant to make the investment. Until recently, there was not clear evidence for interest in sustainable tourism, resulting in a limited number of offerings (and therefore, a lack of data). With suppressed options, the total market valuation potential of sustainable tourism appeared lower than it was in reality. It was not that sustainable tourism was not popular, but without more data and information, the industry did not know how popular it was.

Another reason critics have used to diminish the importance of sustainability in travel is that even when people do signal their interest in sustainability, their intentions are not always followed through in practice. For example, in 2015, research conducted by Roy Morgan Research found that ***while 21.6% of Australians (some 4.2 million people) agreed with the statement, “For my next holiday, I’d really like a total ecotourism experience,” just 1.1% of Australian holidaymakers go on eco-friendly travel experiences. This phenomenon is known as the ‘attitude-behavior gap.’***¹ Understanding and addressing this gap is key to encouraging travelers to actually take action on their interests and attitudes.

¹<http://www.roymorgan.com/findings/6394-eco-holidays-still-rare-for-australian-travellers-201508172251>



SUSTAINABLE TOURISM CAN BE AFFORDABLE

The tension between development and the costs of sustainability is not a new thing; it was observed by leading scholars as early as two decades ago. This tension, however, appears to be shifting. In a study by The Nielsen Company in 2015, which surveyed 30,000 online consumers across 60 countries, data suggested that “despite high unemployment rates and low wages, millennials are willing to spend more for products that are environmentally friendly.”¹ ***In fact, 66% of global respondents—up 11% from the previous year—noted they would “pay more for products and services from companies committed to positive social and environmental impact.” However, as discussed earlier, the attitude-behavior gap means that organizations need to invest time and money into converting consumer thoughts about sustainability into actually making more sustainable travel choices.***

Sustainability can represent a significant investment for businesses and destinations, but small changes can also make a big difference. For governments, it means going beyond measures of financial and economic dynamics, towards an integrated understanding of the impact of travel and tourism on economic, social and environmental systems. While destinations can learn from the measures and best practices of others, each destination has its own unique dynamics and therefore needs its own distinct determinants of sustainability.

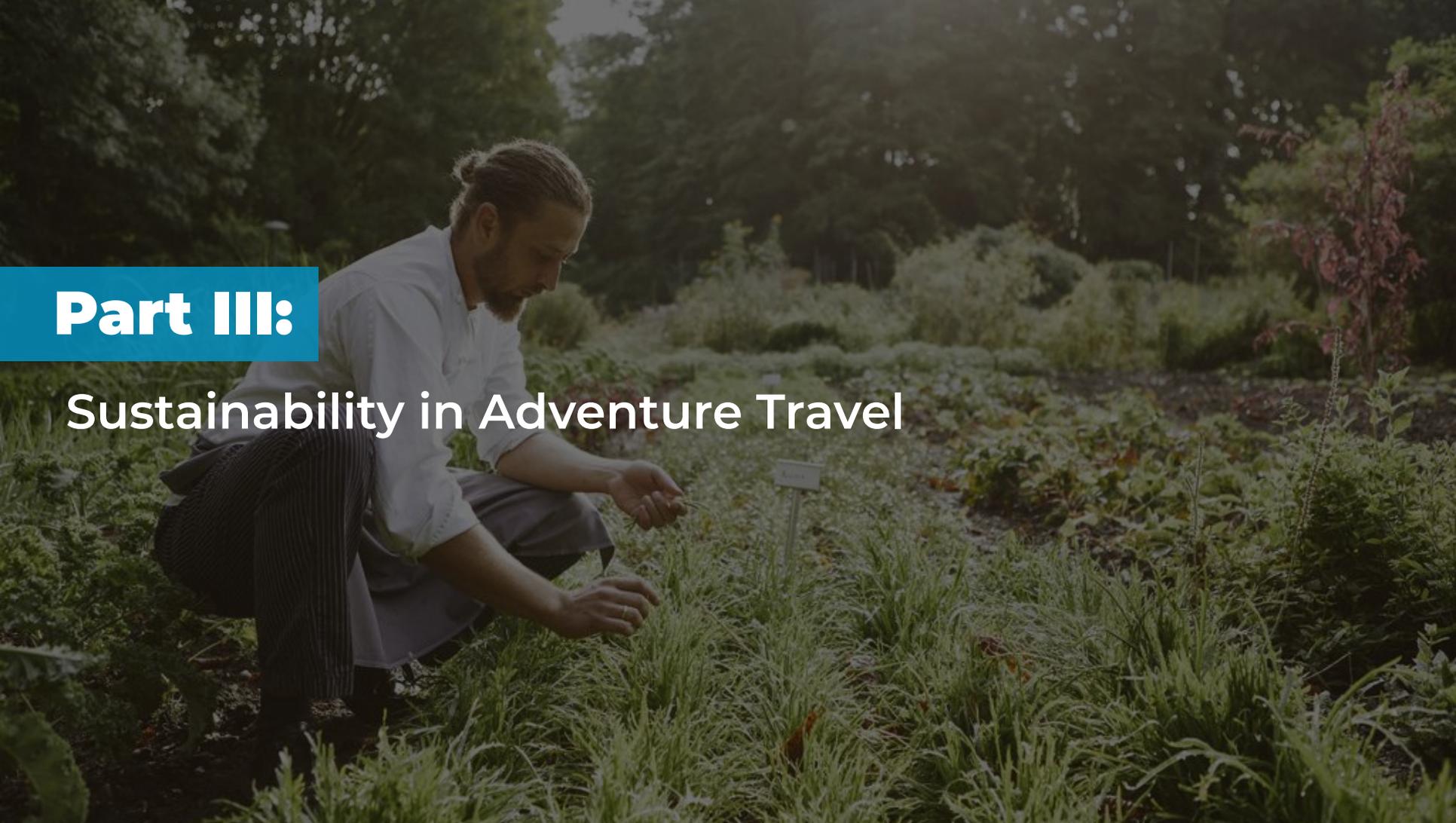
¹https://www.nielsen.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/04/Global20Sustainability20Report_October202015.pdf



SUSTAINABLE TOURISM CAN BE AFFORDABLE

Environmental concerns in the arid climate of Petra, Jordan for instance, are going to be different than those in Eyjafjallajökull, Iceland. Not only that, but governments have to examine what sustainability means for regulation, policy and standards. Are the regulations established in the 1990s still applicable today? What are the socio-economic implications of tax breaks and financial incentives for entities that demonstrate higher standards of sustainability? And what are the priorities for sustainable investment in the local travel and tourism sector?

For businesses, sustainability presents its own set of unique challenges: *Tour operators, for instance, may need to integrate more local businesses into their tour routes, so that local businesses in communities are supported and more local jobs are created. Restaurants may need to diversify menus away from water-intense products and toward local ingredients, while hotels should invest in smart sensors to reduce energy consumption.* Sustainability reporting will also become more commonplace, requiring new investment to measure and analyze environmental, social and economic impacts.



Part III:

Sustainability in Adventure Travel



SUSTAINABLE ADVENTURE TOURISM

There are many components to the terms sustainable travel. This complexity means not all of them can be covered in detail in this report. Instead, focus will be placed on the primary three as defined by the UNWTO: economy, environment and society, and how they are impacted by adventure tourism.

The following pages provide best-in-class case studies and a deeper dive into each of these three main categories of sustainability in travel.





ELEMENTS OF SUSTAINABILITY

While sustainability is important for many companies and market segments, specific concepts are more relevant than others to the adventure travel industry. These are components that are used to support the tourism infrastructure, so they can be affected negatively or positively in the long term. Here are some of the primary categories, but your organization may need to consider others:

- Transportation*
- Food and Beverage*
- Natural Resources*
- Fair Treatment of Local People*
- Local Culture and Traditions*
- Locally-Made Products*
- Treatment of Animals*
- Ethical Distribution of Assets*



ENVIRONMENT

Key components of environmental sustainability:¹



1. Acting on a long-term commitment to the conservation and sustainable use of the natural environment
2. Respecting sensitive natural habitats and protected areas, and minimising damage to the landscape
3. Reducing waste and resource consumption and focusing on environmentally friendly mobility

¹<https://www.myswitzerland.com/en-us/planning/about-switzerland/sustainability/>



CASE STUDY | ENVIRONMENT

Swiss Alpine Club (SAC) and the Monte Rosa Hut: The Mountain Hut of the Future

Swiss Alpine Club (SAC) and the Monte Rosa Hut: The Mountain Hut of the Future

The Swiss Alpine Club SAC owns 153 huts at alpine altitudes with around 9000 beds. It attaches great importance to sustainable and resource-saving building technology as well as sensitive embedding in the landscape. ***Between 2000 and 2019, one third of all SAC huts were converted, renovated or newly built to become more environmentally friendly.***

Almost all huts are stand-alone facilities without grid connection. On-site renewable energy sources are primarily used to supply energy, with solar energy playing a central role and supported by newly installed photovoltaic and solar thermal systems. To manage waste, new dry toilets with worm composting have been installed in numerous cabins.

One alpine hut within the club stands out: the Monte Rosa Hut. It is 90% self sufficient, earning the MINERGIE®-P Label from the Swiss Confederation due to the provision of the “high-grade, air-tight building envelopes and the continuous renewal of air in the building.”

The investments by SAC in renewable energy and sustainable waste management have reduced not only their environmental footprint, but running costs too, becoming a market differentiator for the SAC and a global standard in design.¹

¹<https://www.sac-cas.ch/en/huts-and-tours/>



ECONOMY

Key components of economic sustainability:¹

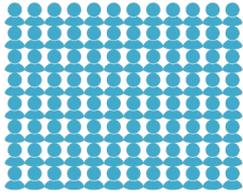


1. Giving preference to local products and partnerships, thereby strengthening regional cycles
2. Offering attractive jobs and involving employees in the sustainable further development of offers
3. Embedding sustainability efforts in a corporate strategy and defining and implementing measures in a targeted manner

¹<https://www.myswitzerland.com/en-us/planning/about-switzerland/sustainability/>

ECONOMY

Generating \$10,000 USD in the local economy takes:



Cruise Tourists



Overnight Package Tourists



Adventure Travelers

Mass Tourism

14%

of revenues remain in the country

1.5

local jobs per \$100,000 USD

Adventure Tourism

65%

of revenues remain in the country

2.6

local jobs per \$100,000 USD



CASE STUDY | ECONOMY

**Rancho Cacachilas: Economic Benefits with
the Soul of Conservancy**

Rancho Cacachilas: Economic Benefits with the Soul of Conservancy

Named after a poisonous fruit, Rancho Cacachilas is a 16,000-hectare destination in Baja California Sur, Mexico, where everything has a purpose. The five farms that comprise Rancho Cacachilas have organic orchards, bees, goats, mule rides, mountain biking and hiking trails, and so much more. Although the primary goal of the ranches is environmental conservancy, their commitment to the local economy and people sets them apart.¹

Beyond purchasing most of their supplies from local markets and acting as an educational and event facility, Rancho Cacachilas is well known as a responsible and caring employer. ***Ninety percent of the ranch employees are from the local area, and they take pride in caring for their own land. Written employment contracts commit to better than average pay and full reporting of earnings to the government, which means eligibility for social programs and a fair and accurate salary history in case government support is needed in the future.***

Rancho Cacachilas also respects workers' vacation time, employment schedules, and holidays. Employees get paid holidays or receive double pay if they are required to work. Time is spent educating the local community about conservation, gardening, and other lifestyle changes. According to one employee, it is truly a community, where skills and knowledge are respected regardless of hierarchy, everyone helps anyone in need, and kindness is embraced at all levels. Because of this, Rancho Cacachilas is a core stabilizing factor in the community, and a stellar example of supporting the local area and people economically.

¹<https://www.ranhocacachilas.com/>



SOCIETY

Key components of social sustainability:¹



1. Addressing, cultivating and promoting regional culture, and enabling exchange between visitors and local people
2. Responding to guests' specific needs, such as accessibility or family-friendliness
3. Transparently informing guests about the commitment to sustainable development, and motivating them to act considerately

¹<https://www.myswitzerland.com/en-us/planning/about-switzerland/sustainability/>



CASE STUDY | SOCIETY

Pioneering Sustainability in Youth Hospitality: How the Swiss Youth Hostel Industry is prepping for the NextGen Traveler

Pioneering Sustainability in Youth Hospitality: How the Swiss Youth Hostel Industry is prepping for the NextGen Traveler

The Swiss Youth Hostels (SYH) have a long-standing dedication to sustainability. The organization has won numerous awards for its work in sustainability and is widely recognized for its commitment. For example, they are a member of 'Cause We Care,' a movement dedicated to climate protection and sustainable tourism in Switzerland. This helps SYH calculate the carbon emissions of their bookings and measure the emissions offset.

One of the Swiss Youth Hostels' most notable commitments is to social sustainability. ***According to their 2021 Sustainability Report, “prices are set in such a way that services remain affordable whilst nevertheless guaranteeing good quality and fair wages.”*** This attention to not only their product and guest experience, but also the welfare of their employees, demonstrates one way they care for the society around them. What's more, the hotel has invested in ensuring that the hostels are accessible to persons of all physical abilities.

These investments in both environmental protection and social accessibility are market differentiators for SYH. It sets the organization apart from its competitors, becoming not just a leader for Swiss hostels, but a positive representation of the impact of hostels worldwide.

Part IV:

Current Initiatives



CURRENT INITIATIVES

People around the world are becoming more aware of the impact tourism has on the environment, economy, and society. Adventure travel in particular is well-suited to a more sustainable future, due to its focus on and respect for the natural world and its cultures. For destinations and businesses creating or expanding on their sustainability plans, this section provides an overview of the leading approaches from tourism organizations on the topics of:

Tourism and Conservation
Consumer Pledges
Destination-Level Programs
Certifications

TOURISM + CONSERVATION ISSUES

When asked which tourism and conservation issues they believe deserve the most attention, respondents to ATTA's 2021 Adventure Travel Industry Snapshot survey identified the following as their top concerns:¹

1 

CLIMATE CHANGE

2 

WILDLIFE PROTECTION

3 

COMMUNITY LIVELIHOODS

4 

HABITAT RESTORATION

5 

MITIGATING OVERTOURISM

6 

PERMANENT LAND PRESERVATION

¹<https://www.adventuretravel.biz/research/2021-adventure-travel-industry-snapshot>

CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

There are many examples of conservation organizations happening around the globe. Such programs are dedicated to protecting and improving the natural world and its heritage; some focus on mitigating climate change and other environmental issues, others on safeguarding wildlife, and still others on cultural preservation of peoples and their traditions.

There are destination-level programs, consumer-facing programs like pledges, and sustainability certifications. Adventure travel-specific third-party organizations like the [Adventure Travel Conservation Fund](https://adventuretravelconservationfund.org/) exist, which are dedicated to awarding funds to deserving and vetted conservation projects worldwide.¹ ‘Voluntourism’ is also increasingly popular, where travelers can experience a local community in a more authentic way while also volunteering their time and skills to improve the area they are visiting.

Sustainable tourism doesn't mean doing without, but rather traveling with greater awareness and appreciation.

¹<https://adventuretravelconservationfund.org/>

CONSUMER PLEDGES

Over the last decade, travel companies and destinations, many of which are popular with adventure travelers, have developed pledges encouraging or requiring visitors to treat their resources with respect.

The goal of all of these pledges, to bring travelers' attention to the impact of their actions on the natural world and communities they visit, aligns with adventure travel's inherent commitment to sustainability.

Responsible tourism pledges are beneficial for informing travelers about expectations and appropriate behaviors. They can make visitors feel welcomed into the community they are visiting, and like they are contributing in a positive way. However, the ultimate success of responsible tourism pledges falls on destinations, not travelers.¹ Destinations need to be very clear about what is right and wrong, and must back up their assertions with enforcement. Some critics have claimed that pledges are superficial and do not have sufficient power to elicit any meaningful behavior change. However, research has identified that pledges can serve as a tool for tourism businesses, a platform to begin conversations around responsible behavior with visitors.²

¹<https://www.adventuretravelnews.com/success-of-responsible-tourism-pledges-falls-on-destinations-not-travelers>

²<https://www.adventuretravelnews.com/successful-tourism-pledges-are-only-one-part-of-a-sustainable-destination-strategy>

CONSUMER PLEDGES: IN PRACTICE

In June 2017, Iceland launched the Icelandic Pledge, asking consumers to commit to being responsible by leaving places as they found them, staying within boundaries, and otherwise respecting the natural environment. The second destination to implement a consumer pledge, and the first to make it compulsory, was the tiny island nation of Palau. As of December 2017, when visitors enter the country, they are required to sign a passport pledge vowing to act in an ecologically and culturally responsible manner while on the island. This is done for the preservation of the island's natural resources and cultural heritage for the sake of Palau's children and future generations of Palauans. Other destinations such as New Zealand, Hawai'i, Big Sur, Aspen, and others have since followed with similar pledges.

Adventure tour operators and industry associations are also creating pledges designed to encourage sustainable and ethical travel. The ***"Make Travel Matter"*** pledge developed by the Treadright Foundation and the Travel Corporation focuses on respecting the planet, people, and wildlife. Sustainable Travel International's ***"Travel Better"*** pledge asks visitors to lighten their footprint, conserve wild places and wildlife, support the local people and communities while celebrating them authentically and respectfully, and to be an advocate for sustainable tourism.

DESTINATION-LEVEL PROGRAM: SWISSTAINABLE

In addition to getting consumers involved, some destinations are implementing guidelines for their suppliers and stakeholders to join the sustainability mission. For example, the [Swisstainable program](#) is designed not as yet another certification process, but with the intention of providing guidance for travelers. At the same time, its purpose is to create a movement in which the entire industry can get involved. The program is open to all companies and organizations involved in Swiss tourism: companies that already have a comprehensive sustainability certification and also companies that now want to embark on a more sustainable development.



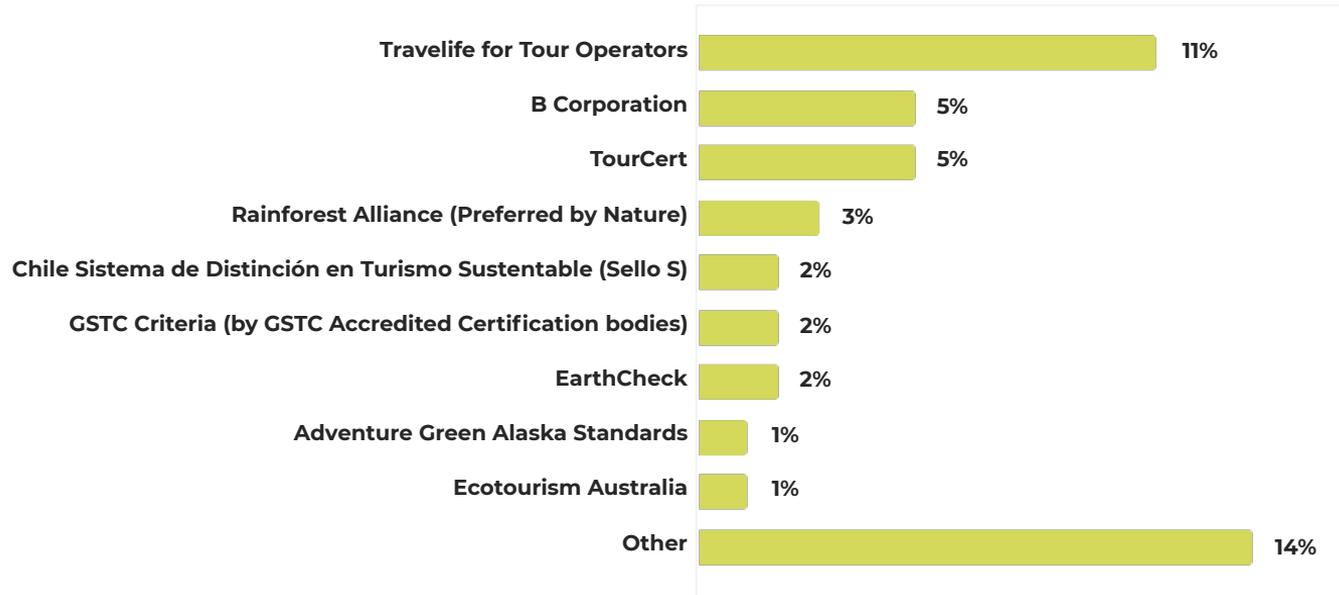
The program is divided into three levels:

1. **Committed.** Level I is aimed at companies that do not (yet) have any certifications or other proof of sustainability, but are committed to sustainable corporate governance and would like to continuously develop their company in the direction of sustainability.
2. **Engaged.** Level II also requires a commitment to sustainable corporate management and continuous further development. In addition, certification or other evidence in at least one sustainability area must be presented for this level.
3. **Leading.** Level III is designed for companies that already have a comprehensive, recognized sustainability certification. Certifications are taken into account that cover all dimensions of sustainability and are regularly checked externally.

Other destinations can learn from this program by recognizing where their local partners are in their sustainability journey, acknowledging progress, and helping all companies and organizations work through challenges together.

SUSTAINABILITY CERTIFICATIONS

Forty percent of tour operator respondents to ATTA's 2021 Adventure Travel Industry Snapshot survey already have or are working toward a sustainability certification (the remaining 60 percent are not).¹



¹<https://www.adventuretravel.biz/research/2021-adventure-travel-industry-snapshot>

A scenic landscape photograph featuring a large, calm lake in the center. In the foreground, a person wearing a bright orange jacket and dark shorts stands on a large, grey rock, looking out over the water. The lake is surrounded by dense evergreen forests. In the background, majestic mountains with patches of snow and rocky peaks rise against a hazy sky. The overall atmosphere is serene and natural.

Part V:

Looking Forward

LOOKING FORWARD: TAKING ACTION

There are many ways that tourism can work together toward a more sustainable future. This section discusses some examples of how adventure travel organizations can take action.

Simplifying Sustainable Tourism
Sustainability is a Shared Responsibility
Investing in Sustainable Tourism
Behavior Change Can Drive Sustainable Tourism
Sustainability is Local
Diversifying Tourism Offerings is Key
Measurement Matters



SIMPLIFYING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Taking action to be more sustainable does not have to be extreme; even small changes can make a big difference. Try making some quick and easy changes now:

1. Add a line to your standard email template reminding upcoming guests to help protect your region and leave no trace (e.g., by bringing their reusable water bottles).
2. Arrange an employee family picnic or another way to bring together your staff in a social (and safe) way. This type of support and bonding is important for the social aspect of sustainability.
3. If applicable, adjust your business's thermostat a degree or two in the energy-saving direction (lower when it is cold outside, higher when it is hot outside). Your guests may not even notice, and the economic and environmental impacts add up.
4. In marketing, frame more sustainable options as positive. Point out which ones specifically are better for the environment, or which ones are the most popular. You can start this today with some new social media posts.
5. Ask your suppliers for more sustainable offers. When they feel the demand, the supply will follow.

For bigger changes, make a plan! It does not have to happen all at once. How can you incorporate more locally produced products into your operations? How could you reduce food waste? Talk to your employees—what ideas do they have to make their area of expertise more sustainable? How can your business better support your local community? Can you get guests involved in this, for example a weekly beach clean-up that visitors are encouraged to join? Think about all three aspects of sustainability: the environment, economy, and society, and what your organization can do to make a difference.

SUSTAINABILITY IS A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

In order to be effective, sustainable tourism cannot be implemented by any single entity. Governments, businesses and tourists can only do so much on their own. Recycling is not going to have much impact on the environment if it is not properly regulated and managed. Conservation efforts funded by tourism are not going to be effective if there are not any tourists to support revenue generation.

Only by working together, toward a single vision of sustainability, will the industry make progress toward sustainable development goals and ensure that tourists leave behind a better world than they themselves found. The emphasis for sustainability should be on establishing a balance between stakeholders with shared responsibilities.

At the individual level, tourists should be encouraged to take steps like reducing their waste, and given options or incentives to book eco-friendly hotels or to travel with socially responsible operators. Firms can ensure their supply chains support their local economies and invest in energy efficiency and waste management systems. Governments can affect systemic change by regulating environmental standards and incentivizing the responsible practices in the private sector through tax breaks or other financial means.



The Swisstainable program works to connect all members of the Swiss tourism ecosystem in a way that strengthens and promotes sustainability efforts.

In the program, Switzerland Tourism is responsible for communication and marketing of the program, and the partners design and implement the experiential offerings.

Everyone who joins the movement and takes part in the program can use the Swisstainable logo, and [certified service providers](#) are listed on the [Swisstainable program website](#).

INVESTING IN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Rather than associating sustainability with cost, businesses and governments should consider it as an investment: a market differentiator that appeals to a growing pool of consumers and travelers alike. In Indonesia, the Misool Eco Resort worked with local communities to establish a no-take marine protected area encompassing 828 square kilometers in Raja Ampat, a spectacularly biodiverse area within Indonesia's West Papua province. Since the protected area was established, fish abundance and size has increased dramatically, with benefits for the coral reefs that surround the nearby islands. The number of tourists has increased significantly, with the region becoming one of the most well-known diving spots in the world.

In Scotland, on the Isle of Mull, a study by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) explored the importance of White Tailed Eagles to the island and its community. The report demonstrated that birds are worth protecting, not just for biodiversity reasons, but as a means of generating revenue for the local communities. In fact, the prospect of seeing an eagle among tourists generated an estimated 7.75 million USD for the local economy. This valuation has not only helped justify further conservation efforts to protect the eagles on the Isle of Mull, but across the UK.

This valuation isn't limited to the diversity of flora or fauna. It can be ascribed to activities too. In 2017, a study published in the *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing* looked into the impact of hiking in the area of Berguedà, in Catalonia, Spain. The study found that hiking contributed over 5 million euros (over 6 million USD) to the community, with a cost-benefit ratio of 4.92. Ultimately, for every euro invested in hiking in Berguedà, €4.92 is created for its local community.



BEHAVIOR CHANGE CAN DRIVE SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Building green hotels, enforcing recycling, and carbon offsetting are all important steps towards a sustainable tourism model, but they have their limitations. They place the burden of responsibility on the supply-side; meaning the hotels, operators and government have to make a significant investment.

Instead, a combination of supply- and demand-driven approaches should be adopted. Demand-driven approaches involve targeting tourist segments that are more informed about sustainability, offering market incentives to promote best practice, and educating tourists on the impacts of their trip help them better understand the effect their visit has on the destination (whether good or bad). It involves changing the behaviors of tourists to impact long-term sustainability. Switzerland Tourism makes the following recommendations to travelers as part of their Swisstayable approach: enjoy nature up-close and at first hand, experience local culture in an authentic way, consume regional products, and stay for longer and delve deeper.

Alternatively, by reducing supply choices and making the only option available to travelers a sustainable one, consumers are being more educated through their experiences. The world has become so accustomed to growth-oriented thinking that seeing a shift in traveler behavior will take time. Fortunately, there are already positive changes being made. Even small changes can go a long way to improving sustainability.



BEHAVIOR CHANGE CAN DRIVE SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

The field of behavioral economics is dedicated to helping people make better decisions, but the vast amount of information about the topic can be overwhelming. Here are a few useful key facts and methods about how behavioral economics works, and how it can influence sustainability in travel:

There are two very basic ways that people make decisions, System 1 and System 2. System 1 is fast, subconscious, and automatic; this is often used for commonplace choices but can lead to mistakes caused by not thinking through a decision. On the other hand, System 2 is slow, conscious, thorough, and effortful, and is often used to make complex decisions. So how does this work with sustainability in adventure travel?

When faced with multiple options, especially when it is not a risky decision, people will often use heuristics, or rules of thumb, as a mental shortcut to help them make a quick choice. One way this is enacted is choosing the middle-of-the-road option. For example, when choosing between a small, medium, or large drink, many will opt for the medium. This is a quick and non-risky decision, and is very likely to provide an acceptable outcome. Adventure companies can keep this in mind when developing or modifying products. If three different periods of time are offered for paddleboard rentals (e.g., 1 hour, 2 hours, 3 hours), it is likely that most people will choose 2 hours. This can help the company make good advance decisions about sustainable staffing, pricing, and equipment.



BEHAVIOR CHANGE CAN DRIVE SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Another mental shortcut often used by consumers is following the choices of others. One of the biggest areas of concern in sustainable tourism is the impact of food choices. For example, when faced with different options for lunch, using the more complicated System 2 thinking means people will thoughtfully consider vegetarian vs. meat options, locally grown vs. imported produce, etc. Conversely, the System 1 process generally leads to quicker decisions, often based on environmental cues. If all other members of someone's dining party chooses the vegetarian meal option, the last person to order will probably make the same decision simply because it requires less thinking.

Service companies can also use awareness to encourage more sustainable choices. For example, third-party tools like CarbonAte can be used by food and beverage providers to accurately measure the impact of food choices on the environment, and provide a way to label restaurant menus with this information to help consumers make more informed decisions.¹

¹<https://carbodata.carboncloud.com/carbonate/>



For more information about behavioral economics and sustainable tourism, Västmanland Tourism of Sweden has compiled an excellent manual of behavior-smart tactics for tourism organizations (not only in Sweden), which can be accessed here:

<https://vastmanland.sidvisning.se/smartways/html5/index.html>



SUSTAINABILITY IS LOCAL

Each destination is different. What matters for sustainable tourism in a city, for instance, is going to be different in a small rural village. Access to water, the sensitivity of environments and the proximity of local communities to tourism circuits are unique to each destination. Consequently, the indicators and measures for 'sustainable tourism' are going to be specific. Measures need to take into account the sensitivity of different ecosystems. Larger cities, for instance, will be able to manage far more tourists than small villages. Destinations near plentiful freshwater resources may have higher tolerances than those in water-scarce destinations.

The localization of sustainability means that its dynamics can only be determined by continuous engagement with local communities, local businesses and local or municipal governments. They are at the heart of sustainable tourism. Developing the processes and platforms for locals to engage in policy-making and contribute to the development of their local tourism industry will ensure that each destination builds its own unique approach to sustainability, adapted to the needs of its environment, society and economy.



DIVERSIFYING TOURISM OFFERINGS IS KEY

Diverse offerings in tourism is vital to its sustainability. It lessens the burden on any single tourism attraction, destination or experience. This relieves crowding and congestion, and reduces the threats of overtourism.

This is one of the major advantages of sustainable adventure travel. It is, by nature, a diverse exploration of a destination and offers a wide variety of choices and options for travelers. Destinations and businesses should look to building a diverse set of tourism products and services as part of their sustainability strategy.

This can be achieved by fostering an environment that encourages innovation and entrepreneurship. Programs should be created that encourage tour operators to take their tourists off the beaten track. Destinations should actively market the lesser-known or visited sites, firms and services. By dispersing tourists in a range of activities, the destination can lessen the burden on any single system, thereby reducing the potential threat of overtourism or extractive tourism.



MEASUREMENT MATTERS

In a recent survey of over 500 national tourism indicators, research firm Equator Analytics found that just 10% were dedicated to either the environment or society.¹ Sustainable tourism requires that we understand the impacts travel has on a destination, whether social, economic or environmental.

Governments, businesses and communities need to invest in localized measurement systems that capture the impact of travelers on their economic, social and environmental systems. These measures will help the destination improve its management systems and identify potential threats, but also inform tourists as to the impact they are having throughout their trip.

Investing in measures that capture the number of local employees in a company, or the solid waste produced by a hotel, or even simply having an environmental pledge as part of the tourist experience are critical to furthering the goals of sustainable tourism. These systems do not have to be costly either. There are a range of solutions (some of them mentioned above) that can be effective measures of sustainability.

¹<https://www.equatoranalytics.com>



MEASUREMENT MATTERS: START NOW

The concept of sustainable tourism is without doubt a complex one. But that should not be a deterrent to tackling the issue; now is a great time to start. Following are some guidelines that can help stakeholders in their journey towards supporting more sustainable tourism.

7. Consider what sustainable tourism means to you, your staff, your destination, and other stakeholders. What challenges is your community facing because of tourism or overtourism? What programs and practices currently exist in your local area? How can you get involved and work with others to move the topic forward? The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) offers a list of criteria in four primary categories to help you get started:

Sustainable Management
Socio-Economic Sustainability
Cultural Sustainability
Resource Management

The fully comprehensive GSTC criteria lists can be found [here for tour operators](#)¹ and [here for destinations](#).²

¹<https://www.gstccouncil.org/gstc-criteria/gstc-industry-criteria-for-tour-operators/>

²<https://www.gstccouncil.org/gstc-criteria/gstc-destination-criteria/>



MEASUREMENT MATTERS: START NOW

2. After selecting a few top priorities to begin with, think about a set of specific indicators that are most relevant to your destination or business that you can measure to track progress. Start with a few indicators that are manageable, familiar, and practical. Within each of the categories mentioned on the previous page, GSTC offers a number of indicators for [tour operators](#)¹ and [destinations](#).² The full list can be found on GSTC's website at the links provided, but here is one example of a criteria and its accompanying indicators relevant to adventure travel:

GSTC “Destination Criteria B3: Supporting local entrepreneurs and fair trade” indicators:

- a. Advice, finance or other support – available in the destination for tourism-related SMEs.
- b. Assistance with market access for local tourism-related SMEs.
- c. Action to encourage and assist local tourism enterprises to purchase goods and services locally.
- d. Initiatives to help local farmers, artisans and food producers to engage in the tourism value chain.
- e. Local produce and crafts identified, promoted and available for sale to visitors in the destination.

The five indicators (a-e) describe ways in which the local community can work together to better support their local entrepreneurs and encourage fair trade practices.

¹<https://www.gstcouncil.org/gstc-criteria/gstc-industry-criteria-for-tour-operators/>

²<https://www.gstcouncil.org/gstc-criteria/gstc-destination-criteria/>



MEASUREMENT MATTERS: START NOW

3. After choosing a few categories to target as a community, and the indicators to measure them, develop a plan. A group of local people with expertise in these areas could be assembled to make a plan and share their knowledge with their tourism ecosystem. This may sound complicated and technical, but you are not alone—a sustainability strategy will only be effective when all members of the community, plus visitors, join together in the effort.

The GSTC certification is one end goal for adventure tourism companies looking to build their sustainability efforts in a comprehensive way, but there are other local programs and options available. While these certifications offer helpful guidance on the process, many often set stringent standards. Remember that a certification is not required to do something to help the environment, economy, and society; everyone can do something.

4. Finally, track your effort made towards sustainable tourism, and present them to stakeholders in a simple, accessible way. Use visualizations to tell the story of impact, and wherever possible, make it relevant to the tourist. Make references they understand and share the information in places they are looking, like on your website and social media. Maybe a consumer pledge of some sort would be appropriate in your situation, or some other way to give visitors a stake in the long-term sustainability of your local community.

Part VI:

Conclusions





SUSTAINABLE TOURISM RESOURCES

The following resources offer additional information on other great programs and initiatives:

- [The Global Destination Sustainability \(GDS\) Index](#)
- [Euromonitor's Top Sustainability Countries Report](#)
- [The European Travel Commission's Report on the Changing Tourism Environment and European National Tourism Organizations](#)
- [The European Travel Commission's Sustainable Tourism Implementation Framework and Toolkit](#)
- [WTTC x Harvard Learning Insights: Behavioural Economics](#)
- [Tourism for Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\) from UNWTO](#)



CONCLUSION

Following a difficult few years, the travel and tourism industry is beginning once again to find its feet. As destinations and hotels across the globe begin to welcome tourists back once more, there is an opportunity to build towards a more sustainable future of travel and tourism.

This is no easy task. Sustainable tourism is a complex topic that will require a major shift in thinking, planning and behavior by the entire tourism industry. Nevertheless, there are practical steps to be taken that can reduce the environmental, social and economic pressures impacting destinations. With the right investment, destinations can transform tourism into a value-generating activity, becoming a regenerative, supporting sector that creates jobs, supports livelihoods, protects the environment and conserves heritage and culture.

To this end, the ATTA and Switzerland Tourism are partnering to promote sustainability in adventure tourism. The joint activities between the two organizations will lead to further inspiring the global community to use successful tools and insights and lean on the industry's experience when applying sustainability practices as they prepare their reopening strategies.



Switzerland.

Switzerland Tourism & Swisstainable.

Switzerland Tourism is the Swiss National Tourism Board with the mandate to promote Switzerland as a premier travel, holiday and convention destination. Based in Zurich, Switzerland, Switzerland Tourism is present in 22 markets worldwide, employing around 240 people. Swisstainable is the new sustainability initiative of the whole Swiss tourism industry. To learn more about Switzerland and Swisstainable, [visit MySwitzerland.com](https://www.myswitzerland.com).

About the ATTA

Established in 1990, the Adventure Travel Trade Association is the largest global network of adventure travel leaders. Our community is made up of ~30,000 individual guides, tour operators, lodges, travel advisors, tourism boards, destination marketing and management organizations, outdoor educators, gear companies and travel media who share a belief and commitment to sustainable tourism. The connections and creativity of this vibrant community come together both virtually and in person to create and deliver the solutions that propel our businesses and our communities toward a responsible and profitable future.

About our Research

The ATTA strives to produce regular reports that take the pulse of the industry through our membership as well as the global travel industry. In addition, consumer research studies lend insight into the fast paced and changing world of travel and travelers' perceptions of it. At adventuretravel.biz, our Research Reports can be located that dive deeply into the motivations of adventure travelers, the size of the industry, the landscape and health of the industry at large, as well as other targeted reports on subjects ranging from Travel Agents to adventure travel in specific destinations.

The ATTA's Web Properties



ADVENTURE TRAVEL
TRADE ASSOCIATION

The ATTA's homepage online
at adventuretravel.biz



ADVENTURE
Travel News

The adventure travel
industry's source of trade
news online at
adventuretravelnews.com



ADVENTURE
.TRAVEL

The traveler's guide to finding
adventure at adventure.travel



ADVENTURE
HUB

ATA's Online Members
Community at
members.adventuretravel.biz



ADVENTURE TRAVEL
TRADE ASSOCIATION



ADVENTURE
360™

For more information or media queries, please contact:

Heather Kelly
Senior Research Manager, ATTA
heather@adventuretravel.biz

