THE SUSTAINABILITY BASICS

The urgent need for change, and the basics of sustainability explained
Welcome to this knowledge booster on sustainability concepts.

We know it can sometimes feel like there is a lot of jargon used when talking about sustainability, and the issues can seem overwhelming. You don’t need to be an expert on sustainability, but this knowledge booster will cut through the complexities and give you a handle on the basics, so you can feel more confident about taking action. You will find answers to questions such as:

• What (and when) is Earth Overshoot Day?
• What is the basic premise of sustainability?
• What are the SDGs and how do these relate to tourism?
• What are the three pillars of sustainability?
• What is meant by the triple bottom line?
• What is the invisible burden of tourism?
Part one: THE URGENT NEED FOR CHANGE

Ecological Debt
Climate change
Biodiversity collapse
We are consuming more resources than our planet can create, creating a “debt” that future generations will have to pay.
We have known that the quality of the Earth’s natural environment has been declining for some time and many have seen this as the inevitable consequence of human development. The global population (of 7.8 billion people in 2020) are now utilising natural resources far beyond the capacity of ecosystems to replenish them.

How many earths do we need?
Earth Overshoot Day marks the date when humanity has exhausted nature's budget for the year. For the rest of the year, humans are maintaining our ecological deficit by drawing down local resource stocks and accumulating greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. The date of Earth Overshoot Day has moved up two months over the past 20 years.

Source: [https://www.overshootday.org/](https://www.overshootday.org/)

According to a 2019 report from WWF and The Global Footprint Network, if everyone in the world had the same environmental impact as the average EU resident, 10 May would be the date by which humans would have used as much from nature as the planet can annually renew. The EU uses almost 20% of the Earth's “biocapacity”, even though it comprises only 7% of the world population.


In 2020, Earth Overshoot Day was 22nd August

“Above all, we have to bear one thing in mind - every single mouthful of food and every breath we take, depends on a healthy planet.”

Sir David Attenborough
2. Climate change

The world is heating up because of carbon dioxide and other gases in our atmosphere created by human activity.
There is a strong scientific consensus that Earth’s climate is changing and that humans are responsible. The key natural assets of European destinations are under threat of deteriorating, and in turn their ability to support local livelihoods and attract and satisfy visitors.

In Europe we are seeing the environmental impacts of climate change, through more frequent heatwaves and droughts, regular forest fires (even in northern latitudes), sea level rise and more frequent storms causing flooding across the continent.

We are also seeing the social impacts of climate change, with the heavily climate change impacted nations of sub Saharan Africa and the water scarce regions of the Middle East leading to conflict over resources and subsequent migration for both economic and security reasons.

‘Global warming is a crisis facing the entire world and, as one of the world’s leading economic sectors, tourism must take its fair share of the responsibility and must act responsibly.’

UNWTO
Tourism is estimated to account for about 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions. The main greenhouse gas contributing to global warming is carbon dioxide (CO$_2$). In tourism these emissions are generated from transport (75%) of which air travel counts for 35%, energy usage in accommodation (21%) and other activities (4%). Food production for tourism is a significant contributor to greenhouse gases, including transportation of food and the methane gas which is released as food waste decomposes.

The UN Convention on Climate Change has committed to limiting emissions from aviation from 2020 through carbon neutral growth.

Alternative ground transport options such as cycling, electric or hybrid vehicles, and walking can become tourism products themselves.

The potential for energy savings (and corresponding financial savings) in new and existing buildings are great and the technologies are now well understood. Key areas for more efficient accommodation include integrated renewable energy systems such as solar power, as well as energy efficient lighting, heating, cooling and other appliances.

Further reading
The EU is fighting climate change through ambitious policies and has put forward a plan to cut emissions by at least 55% by 2030. By 2050, Europe aims to become the world’s first climate-neutral continent.

The European Green Deal is an ambitious package of measures ranging from cutting greenhouse gas emissions, to investing in research and innovation, to preserving Europe’s natural environment. 


Tourism Declares brings together businesses, destinations and other organisations and supports them to declare a climate emergency and take action to reduce their climate emissions.

Visit Scotland became the first NTO to “declare”, in November 2020.

https://www.tourismdeclares.com/
3. Biodiversity collapse

Nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history.
Exacerbated by climate change and not helped by the increase in formerly wild areas used for tourism development worldwide, the crisis resulting from the increasingly catastrophic loss of biodiversity is the other principal phenomena threatening human survival.

In 2019 the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) report into the impact of humans on nature showed that nearly one million species risk becoming extinct within decades. The report, prepared by 150 leading international experts concluded that the loss of species and habitats poses as much a danger to life on Earth as climate change.

“The health of the ecosystems on which we and other species depend is deteriorating more rapidly than ever. We are eroding the very foundations of economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide. We have lost time. We must act now.”

Robert Watson, IBPES Chair
Biodiversity loss is not confined to the species rich habitats of coral reefs and rainforests. According to the IUCN European Red List, wildlife is rapidly dying out across Europe. Around one in four species is endangered as natural habitats are invaded by urban sprawl, intensive agriculture, alien species and commercial forestry. WWF reports that only 23% of species and 16% of habitats under EU Nature Directives are in good health.

https://www.iucn.org/regions/europe/our-work/biodiversity-conservation/european-red-list-threatened-species
In May 2020, the European Commission released the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2030. This strategy, along with the EU Farm to Fork Strategy, is a potential game changer for EU nature, food and farming policies. The strategies propose a new wave of essential and long overdue targets on topics such as:

- protected areas
- restoration of nature
- organic farming
- the reduction of agricultural chemicals.

Part two: SUSTAINABILITY EXPLAINED

Sustainable Development Goals
The “three pillars”
Resource efficiency
Responsible Recovery
“Sustainability” usually refers to an approach which focuses on meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. There is no one universally agreed definition, but there are consistent themes:

‘Sustainability is a dynamic process which enables all people to realise their potential and to improve their quality of life in ways that simultaneously protect and enhance the Earth’s life support system.’

Forum for the Future (2018)

“Development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”

Brundtland Commission, 1986

“Development that’s not sustainable is not, in fact, development. It’s a short-term loan against a long-term debt to the future.”

Edward Norton, UN Goodwill Ambassador for Biodiversity
Sustainable tourism… responsible tourism… regenerative tourism…?

Some people use the term sustainable tourism, others prefer the term “responsible tourism” as this emphasises the responsibility of those who take the decisions in tourism - and the impacts created as a result. More recently, “regenerative tourism” has been increasingly used, which emphasises that tourism isn’t just about managing negative impacts, but ensuring a place with tourism is better than it was without.

In practice these phrases (and many others!) are often used interchangeably. Essentially, it does not matter too much which of these terms are used, it is more important that the concepts are implemented.

"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“

UNWTO
It’s tempting to consider sustainable tourism as a niche activity – perhaps related to ecotourism (tourism with environmental conservation at its core) or outdoor/adventure tourism. However, sustainable tourism principles and management practices are applicable to:

• ALL forms of tourism
• In ALL types of destinations
• Including mass tourism and niche segments

Sustainable tourism requires:
• Informed participation of ALL stakeholders
• Strong political leadership
• A continuous process and constant monitoring
4. Sustainable Development Goals

All sustainability efforts can be brought under the themes of the UN’s 17 global “SDGs”
The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as the Global Goals, were adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030.

The 17 SDGs are integrated—that is, they recognize that action in one area will affect outcomes in others, and that development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability.

Source: www.UNDP.org
Tourism can and must play a significant role in delivering sustainable solutions for people, the planet, prosperity and peace. Tourism has the potential to contribute directly or indirectly to all 17 SDGs, however it has been specifically included as targets in Goals 8, 12 and 14.

Harnessing tourism’s benefits will be critical to achieving the sustainable development goals and implementing the 2030 development agenda. Tourism is one of the top four export earners globally, providing one in ten jobs worldwide. Decent work opportunities in tourism, particularly for youth and women, and a strong and diverse local supply chain can enhance tourism’s positive socio-economic impacts.

The tourism sector needs to better manage its energy, water and land use, and reduce waste. It can be the driver to improve infrastructures in destinations, and to protect ecosystems. Tourism development must be a part of Integrated Coastal Zone Management in order to help conserve and preserve fragile marine ecosystems and promote a blue economy, contributing to the sustainable use of marine resources.

www.tourism4sdgs.org
5. The three pillars

Sustainability doesn’t just mean caring for the environment.
Sustainability experts often refer to the “three pillars” of sustainability. These are:

- Environmental
- Social
- Economic

These principles are also often categorised as People, Profit, and Planet (or the 3Ps), in the private sector and referred to as the Triple Bottom Line.

This phrase was first used in 1994 by John Elkington, the founder of the British consultancy, SustainAbility. His argument was that companies should move beyond traditional accounting to prepare three separate ‘bottom lines’. Including a measure of how socially responsible an organisation has been throughout its operations (People) and how environmentally responsible it has been (Planet) as well as the standard measure of corporate Profit—the “bottom line” of the profit and loss account. In this way the Triple Bottom Line can measure the financial, social and environmental performance of the corporation over a period of time.
In tourism, we are typically concerned with issues affecting our destinations such as:

- Low margins
- Overcrowding
- Overconsumption
- Overdependence
- Fragile environments
- Economic leakage
- Seasonality
- Exclusion and inequity

Each of these issues can be thought of as having social, environmental and/or economic “costs” for the host community. These costs are rarely accounted for, and so are referred to as the invisible burden of tourism.

The invisible burden costs associated with the additional demand of visitors might include:

- additional infrastructure required to transport, feed, accommodate, provide energy and water, and manage the waste of tourists and those employed in the sector.
- protecting/maintaining shared environmental & cultural assets

Destinations at Risk: The Invisible Burden of Tourism was published by EplerWood International, Cornell University and the Travel Foundation in 2019.

[www.invisibleburden.org](http://www.invisibleburden.org)
In the late 20th century, consumers dismayed with the long-term damage to the environment, caused by the corporate focus on short-term profits, turned sustainability into a mainstream concept able to ruin a company’s reputation and profits with well timed public exposure. Such campaigns became increasingly easy to organise as social media networks multiplied and expanded. The corporate response was to employ staff to look at how the business could improve its social and environmental impacts (in the best cases) or cover them up with effective PR (in the worst). In the last decade in particular, climate change has become impossible to ignore and is an additional reason that an increasing numbers of companies have developed Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies.

The growth in CSR has brought with it a range of global initiatives including:

- certification standards e.g. Earthcheck.
- reporting standards e.g. the Global Reporting Initiative and support e.g. the UN’s Global Compact.
- rankings e.g. the FTSE4Good Index, which is considered to be a guide for ethical shareholders.
6. Resource efficiency

The waste hierarchy and the circular economy.
Tourism can be a very wasteful activity, in areas such as food waste, energy loss and single-use plastics. Resource efficiency is based on reducing the amount of waste (and costs). The waste hierarchy guides practitioners with the goal being to prevent waste and reuse resources as much as possible.

From this year (2021) single use plastic straws, food containers, plates and cutlery, and cotton bud sticks will be banned across the EU. Countries will also have to collect 90% of their plastic bottles by 2029.
A circular economy is based on the understanding that our world has finite resources. In nature, nothing is wasted, yet a linear economy assumes waste and sometimes even encourages it (with single-use products for example).

Tourism businesses such as hotels with significant buying power have great potential to influence supply chains through sustainable procurement polices and practices and currently this is where circularity is gaining most traction within tourism. For example, single-use plastic eradication and reduction by hotels across whole destinations and countries.

The project ‘Keep our sand and sea plastic free’ in Cyprus is a good example of this and more support for the tourism sector is available from the One Planet Network.

“A circular economy is based on the principles of designing out waste and pollution, keeping products and materials in use, and regenerating natural systems.”

Source: Ellen Macarthur Foundation
7. Responsible recovery

Finding opportunities to “Build Back Better” following the COVID-19 pandemic.
The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted the tourism industry, and its effects will be felt on businesses and communities for years to come – particularly on the people and places that are most dependent on tourism.

There is evidence that the “pause” has accelerated the existing trend towards greater interest in sustainability among travellers, residents and businesses. As NTOs restart and regrow their visitor economy over the coming months and years, there is an opportunity to do this differently. Sustainable principles can be used to underpin development, so that it brings lasting benefits that balance the needs of people, profit and planet.

Sustainability must no longer be a niche part of tourism but must be the new norm for every part of our sector

UNWTO
The Future of Tourism Coalition sets out a vision for a more sustainable tourism recovery, that puts communities and destination needs at its centre.

It has 13 guiding principles, and has created a global support-network of destinations, businesses and other organisations who are signed up to this vision.

www.futureoftourism.org