



# Sustainability challenges of tourism in island destinations

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Sustained growth is predicted for tourism in the forthcoming years, providing excellent opportunities for spreading prosperity worldwide, including island nations. Sustainable forms of tourism can be strategically important for preserving delicate ecosystems and biodiversity, providing a sustainable form of economic use as opposed to more aggressive industrial activities. There is also an increasing appreciation of the potential role of tourism in reducing poverty, through bringing a source of income, entrepreneurial potential and employment to poor communities. However, if not well managed, tourism can present considerable challenges and potential threats to the environment and local communities.

Most of the impacts of tourism, positive and negative, are the result of actions taken by both, private sector enterprises and the tourists. However, this does not mean to say that public agents are devoid of responsibilities regarding tourism; on the contrary, there is a clear need for governments to take a leading role, if truly significant progress is to be achieved in making tourism more sustainable.

Governments should provide an environment that enables and encourages the private sector, tourists and other stakeholders to respond to sustainability issues. This can best be achieved by establishing and implementing a set of policies for tourism development and management, drawn up in concert with others, policies that place sustainability at its centre. And, if the principles of sustainable development focus on local determination and implementation of policies and actions, this should be placed within a supportive national policy framework.

UNWTO and UNEP have worked together to produce a set of policy guidelines and tools aimed primarily at governments, at national and local levels. This work has been published under the title “Making Tourism more Sustainable: a Guide for Policy Makers” and it is also relevant to international development

agencies, NGOs and the private sector to the extent that they are affected by, and can affect, tourism policies and their implementation.

The sustainability of tourism is an issue of equal importance in both developed and developing countries, as well as in big or very small territories, like many Small Island Developing States (SIDS). However, the balance of priorities may vary between them, and each country should adapt or apply with different emphasis the policies and tools recommended to its own particular circumstances – social, economic, cultural and environmental – in terms of its overall development level, the size of its tourism sector, and especially the vision it has for its own future.

In islands, some of the main problems encountered and that affect the sustainability of tourism are the following:

- Difficult and often expensive access for tourists;
- High import costs of tourism industry inputs due to transport;
- Relatively high population density;
- Insufficient waste collection and treatment facilities;
- Reduced water storage capacity entailing dry periods and public health problems;
- Fragile and vulnerable ecosystems;
- Coastal erosion and vulnerability of coastal areas to extreme climatic events, etc.

Briefly stated, due to their size and isolation, islands concentrate practically all the challenges of sustainability. Improving tourism sustainability in islands will mean to learn how to overcome these challenges in the short term, but also to plan their tourism sector in order to take them up in the long term. The UNWTO/UNEP Guide for policy makers is meant to assist governments in this respect; it introduces some key principles and an agenda for more sustainable tourism, framed around the following 12 aims, all adaptable to islands specificities:

**1. Economic viability:** To ensure the viability and competitiveness of tourism enterprises, so that they are



able to continue to prosper and deliver benefits in the long term. In small economies, diversification must be aimed at, in order to reduce dependence on one or two economic activities. Tourism in small islands should be considered as only one of the components of the overall sustainable development strategy of the island, and should be fully integrated into it. The objective is to reinforce the capacity of islands to face crises that normally affect only some sectors of their economies;

**2. Local prosperity:** To maximise the contribution of tourism to the prosperity of the host destination, including the proportion of visitor spending that is retained locally. This is about reducing leakages, as well as developing linkages in the local economy. Islands are prone to economic leakages, but are also in a special geographical position to establish a better control on them.

**3. Employment quality:** To strengthen the number and quality of local jobs created and supported by tourism, including the level of pay, conditions of service and availability to all without discrimination by gender, race, disability or in other ways. Developing island states have often major problems regarding employment of local people in their dealings with big tourism companies. This is an issue in which international organisations and NGOs have a crucial role to play in terms of awareness raising about corporate social responsibility.

**4. Social equity:** To seek the widest possible distribution of economic and social benefits from tourism throughout the recipient community, including improving opportunities, income and services available to the poor.

**5. Visitor fulfilment:** To provide a safe, satisfying and fulfilling experience for visitors, available to all without discrimination, and including the local population. Visitor satisfaction often refers to the quality and authenticity of tourism facilities and infrastructures. In islands, tourism developers need to innovate and find local resources to meet these two requirements in order to avoid high imports of foreign goods and provide a local character to tourism facilities.

**6. Local control:** To engage and empower local communities in planning and decision taking about the management and future development of tourism in their area, in consultation with other stakeholders. All stakeholders and local communities should be involved in tourism development and management and reap benefits from tourism. In many islands, training and education in tourism at high level has to be reinforced to achieve this aim.

**7. Community wellbeing:** To maintain and strengthen

the quality of life of local communities, including social structures and access to resources, amenities and life support systems, avoiding any form of social degradation or exploitation. Small islands should consider not only the environmental but also the socio-cultural carrying capacity of the island in their tourism policy and strategy, and the maximum limits established – in terms of both number of tourists and built infrastructure – must be respected by all stakeholders;

**8. Cultural richness:** To respect and enhance the historic heritage, authentic culture, traditions and distinctiveness of host communities. Endemic cultures developed in islands represent an incomparable richness and a valuable input to diversify the tourism offer, which has often concentrated in one segment: sun and beach;

**9. Physical integrity:** To maintain and enhance the quality of landscapes, both urban and rural, and avoid the physical and visual degradation of the environment. Sustainable tourism in small islands requires the development and adoption of alternative building designs of tourism facilities, according to the characteristics and building resources of each island. In addition, all tourism infrastructure building plans should respect a minimum distance from the coast in order to avoid contributing to, or suffering from, coastal erosion;

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Diablos cojuelos (“limping devils”) are a ‘trademark’ of the La Vega Carnival in the Dominican Republic





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**10. Biological diversity:** To support the conservation of natural areas, habitats and wildlife, and minimise damage to them. Tourism planning should be based on a sound knowledge of the natural resources of the island, aiming also at their conservation, in particular avoiding the introduction of non endogenous species in such fragile ecosystems;

**11. Resource efficiency:** To minimise the use of scarce and non-renewable resources in the development and operation of tourism facilities and services. Development and adoption of eco-efficiency and cleaner production strategies and policies are required; in particular, the use of renewable energy sources and environmentally sound technologies should be considered in all building construction tourism projects. This allows reducing the energetic dependence of islands.

**12. Environmental purity:** To minimise the pollution of air, water and land and the generation of waste by tourism enterprises and visitors. The smaller the island, the more important are waste disposal problems.

In order to put these policies into practice, the Guide gives a detailed description of different and complementary tools:

**Measurement instruments:** these can be used in determining levels of tourism and impact and keeping abreast of existing or potential changes:

- Sustainability indicators and monitoring
- The identification of tourism limits

**Command and control instruments:** these are instruments through which government is able to exert strict control on aspects of development and operation, backed by legislation:

- Legislation, regulation and licensing
- Land use planning and development controls

**Economic instruments:** these are about influencing behaviour and impact through financial means and sending signals through the marketplace.

**Voluntary instruments:** these instruments provide frameworks or processes that encourage stakeholders voluntarily to abide by sustainable approaches and practices:

- Guidelines and codes of conduct
- Reporting and auditing
- Voluntary certification

**Supporting instruments:** These are instruments through which governments can directly or indirectly influence and support enterprises in making their operations more sustainable:

- Infrastructure provision and management

- Capacity building
- Marketing and information services.

Before concluding, it seems necessary to highlight one global challenge which is particularly relevant for islands and their tourism sector: climate change.

Firstly, because seaside tourism, especially in islands, seems likely to suffer damage from most of the direct and indirect effects of climate change, notably beach erosion, higher sea levels, coral bleaching, greater damage from sea surges and storms, and reduced water supply.

These destinations, therefore, need to adapt to the changing climatic conditions and consider alternative marketing strategies suited to changing consumption habits, alternative operational procedures of their tourism establishments, alternative energy management systems, and so on. Similarly, future tourism infrastructure developments in small island states need to recognise these territories' high vulnerability and relatively low carrying capacity and, therefore, adapt their design, location and overall physical planning to the predicted climatic changes.

Secondly, because tourism, like any other industry, is contributing to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions generated through the travelers' consumption of transport services (notably road and air transport), and high energy consumption in tourism establishments (especially through air conditioning, heating, lighting in hotels). Measures to be taken to mitigate these emissions are highly desirable, but in applying them, policy makers should take into account the strong economic opportunity that tourism represents for islands, especially the developing ones and those with high poverty levels.

In line with this, UNWTO is promoting that any mitigation measure to reduce GHG emissions be suitably balanced, in the case of SIDS and other developing countries, in order to ensure a better accessibility to those isolated territories, which is done mainly by plane, while at the same time reducing poverty levels in these, tourism-dependent economies.

In summary, the challenges facing the sustainability of tourism in small islands states, such as most in the Caribbean region, are numerous. These nations need to mobilise all its public and private sector tourism stakeholders to ensure that the above challenges are addressed in a coordinated fashion and in a timely manner, so that tourism continues to prosper and to offer sustainable economic development opportunities to their peoples. ■