

# DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP STARTER KIT



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# ABOUT GSTC

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The GSTC is an independent and neutral organization, legally registered in the USA as a 501(c)3 non-profit organization that represents a diverse and global membership, including national and provincial governments, leading travel companies, hotels, tour operators, NGO's, individuals and communities – all striving to achieve best practices in sustainable tourism. It is a virtual organization without a main office, with staff and volunteers working from all six populated continents. Financial support from donations, sponsorship, and membership fees allows us to provide services at low costs and to create, revise, and make available the GSTC Criteria. GSTC is an ISEAL Community Member.

The GSTC establishes and manages global standards for sustainable travel and tourism, known as the GSTC Criteria. There are two sets: Destination Criteria for public policy-makers and destination managers, and Industry Criteria for hotels and tour operators. They are the result of a worldwide effort to develop a common language about sustainability in tourism. They are arranged in four pillars:

- (A) Sustainable management
- (B) Socioeconomic impacts
- (C) Cultural impacts
- (D) Environmental impacts

Since tourism destinations each have their own culture, environment, customs, and laws, the Criteria are designed to be adapted to local conditions and supplemented by additional criteria for the specific location and activity.

# GSTC DESTINATION CRITERIA

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The GSTC Destination Criteria (GSTC-D) have well proven their value as guides to good destination stewardship. Public sector tourism policy-makers and destination managers throughout the world turn to the GSTC Destination Criteria for guidance in developing policy, raising awareness and conducting training, and for use as a framework for national or localized sustainability standards. Application of the criteria will help a destination to contribute towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

## What are the Criteria for?

Some of the expected uses of the criteria by tourism management organizations include the following:

- Serve as basic guidelines for destinations that wish to become more sustainable
- Help consumers identify sound sustainable tourism destinations
- Serve as a common denominator for information media to recognize destinations and inform the public regarding their sustainability
- Help certification and other voluntary destination level programs ensure that their standards meet a broadly-accepted baseline
- Offer governmental, non-governmental, and private sector programs a starting point for developing sustainable tourism requirements
- Serve as basic guidelines for education and training bodies, such as hotel schools and universities



[Download the GSTC Destination Criteria](#)



# INTRODUCTION

## Why Destination Stewardship?

Destination stewardship is a process by which local communities, governmental agencies, NGOs, and the tourism industry take a multi-stakeholder approach to maintaining the cultural, environmental, economic, and esthetic integrity of their country, region, or town. In other words, to ensure that the destination retains and enhances the distinctive attributes that appeal to both residents and tourists.

Destination Stewardship requires a clear mandate, measurement of standards, community buy-in, and stakeholder collaboration. Practicing destination stewardship is crucial in ensuring that a destination remains attractive, authentic, and sustainable. Overcrowded, degraded, and unsustainable destinations can lead to a decline in tourism revenue, loss of biodiversity and cultural heritage, and a decreased quality of life for locals. On the other hand, a well-managed destination can attract repeat visitors who appreciate its uniqueness, leading to economic benefits for the local community, as well as protection of cultural and natural assets. Destination stewardship also fosters a sense of responsibility and pride among local residents who play a critical role in sustaining the destination.

The Destination Stewardship Starter Kit was developed to support destinations in their transition towards a stewardship approach. It is intended for destination managers, policymakers, and other stakeholders who are involved in tourism development and management, including private public and private sectors, community members, and non-governmental organizations. It is particularly relevant for destinations where there is external pressure to better manage tourism impacts. It is also useful when a government or destination management organization recognizes a shift to destination stewardship is needed, or when there is a need for resilience and recovery following a shock to the tourism system, such as a global pandemic or a natural disaster. The starter kit provides a practical roadmap to prioritizing governance and management strategy, creating a baseline for measurement, and setting achievable targets for sustainable tourism development.

# GETTING STARTED

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The aim of this starter kit is to provide a set of initial steps that destinations can take to shift towards a stewardship approach. However, it is important to acknowledge that the process is distinctive to each destination. The starting point for each destination may differ based on their specific needs and circumstances.

The steps offered in this starter kit serve as a guide and, therefore, it is not mandatory to follow them in a specific sequence.





# GETTING STARTED

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## 1 Build a Team and Identify Leader(s)

Get started by involving one or two individuals. Implementing a comprehensive sustainability program is challenging. There needs to be someone who leads the process and is dedicated to making it successful. Once the leader(s) have been identified, a planning team should be formed. Identify and bring together individuals who are passionate about sustainable tourism and committed to a long-term vision.

**Refer to Criterion A1: Destination management responsibility**



The team should consist of a small group who have a clear role and responsibilities.

Organized the team in a way that allows continuity, even if some members leave and are replaced by others.



## 2 Identify Key Stakeholders

Identify potential stakeholders and partners within the destination, including local government officials, tourism organizations, hospitality businesses, and community leaders. These stakeholders will play a vital role in developing and implementing sustainable tourism practices. Look at potential projects with partners that will have a big impact and are easy to get started.

**Refer to Criterion A1: Destination management responsibility**



This is not a comprehensive list, but rather a baseline of potential stakeholders. Each destination will have a variety of different stakeholders. Conduct stakeholder mapping to identify all the potential stakeholders that exist within your destination.



Establish a stakeholder committee that includes the public & private sectors, NGOs, and the community. Include marginalized stakeholders that may be left out of the planning process.

Many of the elements of sustainability plans are done by people outside tourism. Understand the work being done by those that can have a big influence.



### 3 Define Your Goals and Vision

Define your destination's sustainability objectives, goals, and overall vision. This can involve developing a mission statement, as well as identifying key priorities, opportunities, and areas of improvement. For a holistic focus, ensure that there is long-term vision and commitment. It will probably help to get a number of relevant representatives from across your organization to brainstorm this with you. Think about what you want to achieve socially, environmentally and economically. Align this with the wider goals and objectives of your organization and gain consensus to move forward.

**Refer to Criterion A1: Destination management responsibility**

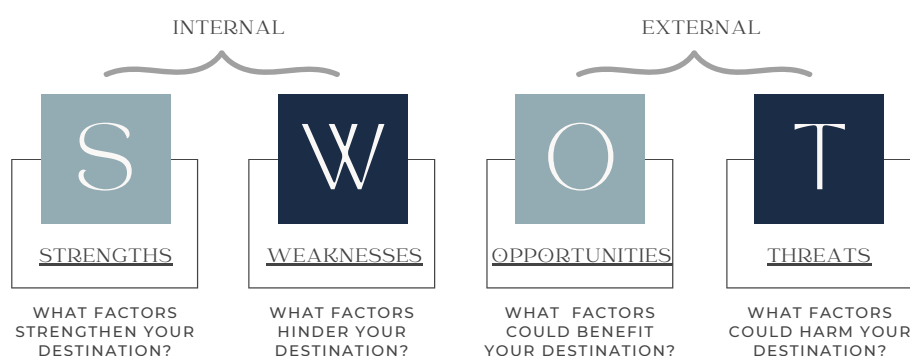


Identify easy objectives and quick victories to make improvements that are visible to the local community, tourism businesses, and stakeholders.

Identify SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, & Time-bound) goals.



Perform a SWOT Analysis to identify what areas to focus on.



## 4 Involve the Local Community and Engage Stakeholders

Raise awareness among the general public to ensure the active participation of the entire community. Involving the local community and relevant stakeholders helps to create a sense of shared responsibility for the long-term sustainability of the destination, which can lead to greater success in achieving sustainable tourism goals.

**Refer to Criterion A4: Enterprise engagement and sustainability standards & A5: Resident engagement and feedback**



Gauge how residents feel about tourism in their community through surveying and/or public forums.

Create a listening advisory council. Engage with a diversity of stakeholders and include specific key players who can bring value.

### Case Study

#### Visit Park City's Resident Sentiment Situation Assessment

A situation assessment on resident sentiment was conducted as part of the destination's planning process. Community buy-in ensures that local residents and stakeholders are aware of the scope. [Read the full report.](#)

## 5 Develop Strategy and an Action Plan

Once goals have been identified, develop a comprehensive strategy and action plan. Include specific steps to achieve each goal. It is important to think in medium and long-term when developing strategies and implementing your action plan. Create a timeline to track your progress. The initial timeline should be short and not more than a few years. Secure adequate funding beyond one project or activity. It's important to solidify the activities and budget, express intent, and have the leader(s) express their commitment to the strategy and action plan.

**Refer to Criterion A2: Destination management strategy and action plan**



Focus on prioritizing activities that are achievable and have a greater impact. Store ideas to be revisited in the future.

Consider partnerships to keep costs low in the initial stages in order to get started.

## 6 Provide Education and Training

Provide training and workshops for internal staff on sustainable tourism for both policies and practices, as well as guidance and encouragement to stakeholders and tourism businesses. Educate residents and visitors (ie. sustainability code of conduct). Create ongoing educational opportunities for local businesses to operate more sustainably (ie. webinars, workshops). If possible, take the opportunity to learn from what others are doing and the impact of their training.



Gain in-depth knowledge by taking a training course, such as the GSTC Sustainable Tourism Course.



## 7 Communicate Your Progress

Develop a plan to create awareness and promote what you're doing. Document the process so the information is accessible. Communicate your progress and successes with stakeholders, residents, businesses, and visitors. Continuous engagement helps to establish trust and transparency, creates momentum in achieving continuous improvement and demonstrates the impact of your initiatives.



Create a staff toolkit to support training and development, while ensuring consistency in communication efforts.

Identify terminology for your organization. Use resources, such as the GSTC Sustainable Tourism Glossary for reference.



## 8 Monitor and Measure Your Progress

To ensure that your sustainability initiatives are effective, you'll need to measure and monitor progress. Often what gets tracked gets accomplished. Establish a baseline by identifying your current sustainability performance then create a monitoring tool for future impacts and results. Consider implementing a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system.

### Implementing an M&E system allows you to:

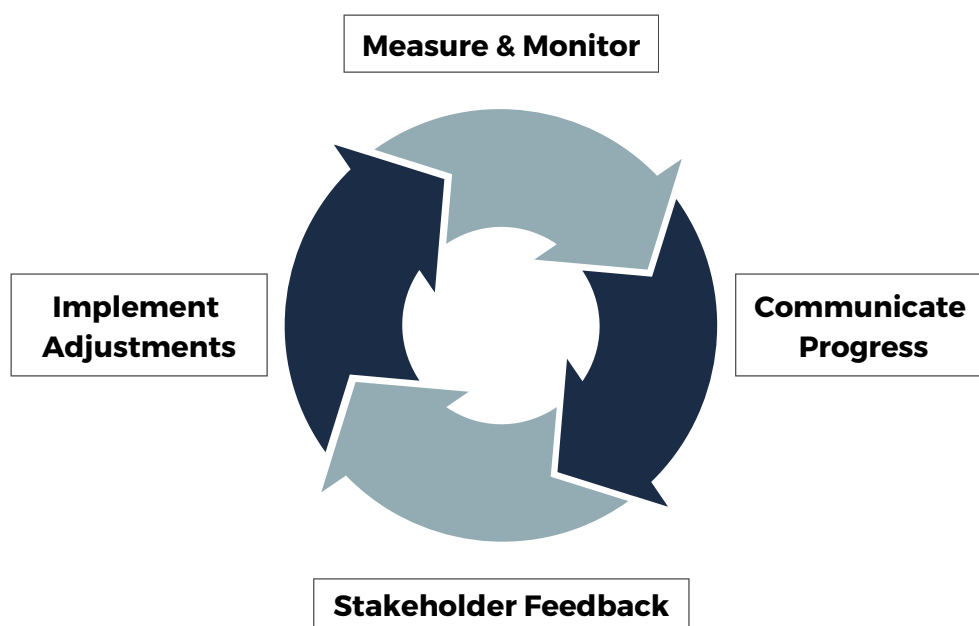
- Build capacity by learning from experience
- Inform strategy regarding policy decisions
- Provide accountability to stakeholders
- Earn credibility through publicly sharing results

### Refer to Criterion A3: Monitoring and reporting

Align your actions with your goals and examine your learnings and experiences. Review, modify, and adapt your plan as necessary.

Share your progress with stakeholders to inform them on planning and development. Alternate between steps 7 & 8 to ensure consistent monitoring and communication of progress.

Make adjustments based on feedback from stakeholders. Adjust your plan on a continuous basis.



## Complete a Self-Assessment

The self-assessment process involves reviewing and evaluating the sustainability practices of your destination against the GSTC Destination Criteria, which includes performance indicators designed to provide guidance in measuring compliance with the Criteria.

### Conduct a self-assessment of the GSTC Criteria in order to:

- Better understand your sustainability performance
- Identify areas for improvement
- Develop action plans to enhance sustainability practices
- Demonstrate your commitment to sustainable tourism practices
- Work towards achieving certification

**The document required for conducting a self-assessment of the GSTC Destination Criteria is included in the annex.**



If possible, have the self-assessment reviewed by the highest level of local authorities.

Consider a GSTC Destination Assessment.

## What is a GSTC Destination Assessment?

GSTC Destination Assessment is designed to introduce the destination management team to the core elements in developing sustainable policies and practices by applying the GSTC Criteria to the specific destination. Examples of GSTC Destination Assessments:

- [Destination Assessment of Summit County, Utah, USA](#)
- [Destination Assessment of Dubrovnik, Croatia](#)
- [Destination Assessment of Heraklion, Greece](#)

Interested in learning about destination assessments? Contact [destinations@gstcouncil.org](mailto:destinations@gstcouncil.org) or [visit our website](#) for more information.

# NEXT STEP

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## 10 Adhere to the GSTC Destination Criteria

Have plan in place to manage destination stewardship efforts and to ensure ultimate compliance with the full set of GSTC Destination Criteria. Against each of the Criteria, one or more of the 17 SDGs is identified, to which it most closely relates.



Start by choosing 5-10 key criterion to examine. Build up slowly by focusing on key areas, such as sustainable management and governance.

Learn from other destinations who have gone through a similar process.

### Case Studies

These case studies offer examples from destinations across the world that have implemented the GSTC Destination Criteria at different stages. They demonstrate how the Criteria can be applied in diverse contexts to promote sustainable tourism practices.

- [Bahamas' Destination Stewardship Council Initiative](#)
- [Jackson Hole's Journey Toward Sustainability](#)
- [Japan Sustainable Tourism Standard for Destinations \(JSTS-D\)](#)
- [Mauritian Standard on Sustainable Tourism](#)
- [Singapore Certified to the GSTC Destination Criteria](#)
- [Moldova Commits to Sustainable Tourism](#)
- [Switzerland's Swisstainable Program](#)
- [Chilenko, Chile Offers Sustainable Tourism](#)



# AREAS OF FOCUS

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There are 38 Criteria within the GSTC Destination Criteria. While they are all important and interrelated, Section A on Sustainable Management is foundational when it comes to holistic approach to destination stewardship.

Criterion A1, which summarizes the importance and composition of a highly inclusive planning group, is essential. It is inclusive in terms of a “whole-government” approach and in terms of ongoing and meaningful engagement with stakeholders from the community and from tourism-related businesses.



## **Criterion A1:**

### **Destination management responsibility**

*The destination has an effective organization, department, group, or committee responsible for a coordinated approach to sustainable tourism, with involvement by the private sector, public sector and civil society. This group has defined responsibilities, oversight, and implementation capability for the management of socio- economic, cultural and environmental issues. The group is adequately funded, works with a range of bodies in delivering destination management, has access to sufficient staffing (including personnel with experience in sustainability) and follows principles of sustainability and transparency in its operations and transactions.*

## **GSTC Criterion A1 Performance Indicators:**

- a.** Documentary evidence showing relevant make-up and responsibilities of the group.
- b.** A financial plan and budget showing current and future funding sources.
- c.** Evidence of links and engagement with other bodies.
- d.** Records of permanent staff and contracted personnel, indicating relevant experience.
- e.** Management guidelines and processes, which demonstrate awareness and adherence to sustainability principles and transparency in operations and letting of contracts.

## What does the governing body look like?

Criterion A1 takes care not to prescribe the structure of a council, whether it be an effective organization, department, group, or committee. A model destination council should comprise an area with permanent inhabitants and multiple stakeholders. It may or may not be the official DMO, but should incorporate DMO participation. Council activities should also involve a diversity of destination stakeholders and encourage the engagement of local communities.

### The ideal governing body would:

<b>Be able to meet the five GSTC A1 indicators</b>
<b>Incorporate representation for all destination assets</b>
<b>Apportion membership by mixing public, private, and civil society</b>
<b>Encompass strong capacity for visitor and destination management</b>
<b>Adopt mission and goals that balance sustainability, authenticity, economic development, and responsible promotion</b>
<b>Conduct activities that help local communities to discover and value their own unique cultural and natural characteristics</b>
<b>Function with a degree of regularity</b>
<b>Withstand changes of government leadership</b>

## What destinations have taken a holistic approach to tourism management and stewardship of their destinations?

### Criterion A1 stories featured in the Destination Stewardship Report:

- Big Bay, Michigan, a remote Upper Peninsula community, inaugurates a destination stewardship council
- Snæfellsnes, Iceland unites the five municipalities of a long skinny peninsula within day-trip range of Reykjavík
- Pennsylvania Wilds, a block of sparsely populated counties in northwestern Pennsylvania, USA
- Community conservancy #Khoadi-≠Hôas, Namibia
- Crown of the Continent region, comprising Rocky Mountain portions of Montana, Alberta, and British Columbia
- Columbia Gorge Scenic Area, Oregon/Washington, USA
- Thompson Okanagan region of British Columbia, Canada
- The historic town of Tequila, Jalisco, Mexico





## Additional Recommendations:

In addition to Criterion A1, A2 and A3 are the additional Criteria we recommend prioritizing when taking a systematic approach to destination stewardship and compliance to the GSTC Destinations Criteria. Note that adhering to Criterion A1 will help with A2 and A3.



### Criterion A2:

#### Destination management strategy and action plan

*The destination has established and is implementing a multi-year destination management strategy and action plan that is publicly available, is suited to its scale, was developed with stakeholder engagement and is based on sustainability principles. The strategy includes the identification and assessment of tourism assets and considers socio-economic, cultural and environmental issues and risks. The strategy relates to and influences wider sustainable development policy and action in the destination.*



### Criterion A3:

#### Monitoring and reporting

*The destination is implementing a system to monitor and respond to socio-economic, cultural and environmental issues and impacts arising from tourism. Actions and outcomes are regularly monitored, evaluated and publicly reported. The monitoring system is periodically reviewed.*

The outlined criteria and steps in the starter kit serve as a starting point for destinations to adopt a stewardship approach. It is important to note that destination stewardship is a continuous process of growth and improvement, and not simply a one-time checklist. Ultimately, prioritizing holistic governance, a multi-year management strategy, and continuous monitoring with adaptations will help kickstart your sustainability journey.

# RESOURCES

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## **Translation of the GSTC Criteria**

The GSTC Industry Criteria and the GSTC Destination Criteria have been translated by volunteers into several languages and are available to the public for education, training, and awareness purposes.

## **GSTC Destination Assessment**

GSTC Destination Assessment is designed to introduce the destination management team to the core elements required for them to develop sustainable policies and practices by applying the GSTC Criteria to the specific destination.

## **Destination Stewardship Report**

The Destination Stewardship Report is a collaboration between the Destination Stewardship Center, Center for Responsible Travel, and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council that provides practical information and insights useful to anyone whose work or interests involve improving destination stewardship.

## **Certification for Destinations**

Achieving certification from a GSTC-Accredited Certification Body signifies that the destination complies with the highest social and environmental standards on the market. This enhances the destination's reputation and credibility among tourists, businesses, and stakeholders. [See here](#) for a map of certified sustainable destinations.

## **Sustainable Tourism Training Program (STTP)**

The GSTC Sustainable Tourism Training Program (STTP) offers practical insights and expert guidance to assist tourism destinations and businesses implement effective steps and achieve tangible performance goals.

## **Glossary of Sustainable Tourism Terms**

Words and phrases can often convey different meanings depending on circumstances, application, and several other factors. This particular glossary clarifies many of the concepts illustrated in the GSTC Criteria.

# TESTIMONIALS

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## **Switzerland:**

"To develop a fruitful sustainability strategy, a multi stakeholder approach is key. No other organization than GSTC stands for such a diverse and global group of sustainable tourism players. Besides consulting with many other stakeholders, the regular exchange with GSTC has significantly helped us to strengthen our approach and to learn from the best practices of the international network GSTC unites. We are very happy to be part of this valuable network," said Samuel Wille, Interim Head of Business Development, Switzerland Tourism.

## **Türkiye:**

"Thanks to our work with GSTC, our visitors will have the chance to enjoy a responsible holiday in Türkiye, and our industry and partners will have the necessary tools to achieve responsible tourism," said Türkiye Tourism Promotion and Development Agency (TGA).

## **Park City, USA:**

"After inviting GSTC to perform an assessment last year, we launched a community-wide project to develop a Sustainable Tourism Plan. Today, we are thrilled to join GSTC as we move forward with adoption and implementation, a logical and powerful next step in which we are confident will benefit Park City and Summit County," said Jennifer Wesselhoff, President and CEO of the Park City Chamber & Visitors Bureau.

## **Mauritius:**



[Interview: Lindsay Morvan, Director, Mauritius Tourism Authority](#)



# TESTIMONIALS

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## **Sonoma County, USA:**

"Joining the Global Sustainable Tourism Council provides Sonoma County Tourism with valuable resources as we move through our destination master plan," says Claudia Vecchio, President and CEO of Sonoma County Tourism. "Resiliency and sustainability continue to be a key focus as we thoughtfully map out our destination's future and accelerate our industry's recovery."

## **Corfu, Greece:**

"As the majority of generated income comes from tourism, the Municipality is thankful to CLIA, and is encouraging and supporting the cooperation with GSTC in an effort to ensure the sustainability of tourism development in the destination on a long-term basis. Such a perspective will ensure a better living environment and quality in services both to the locals as well as to the visitors and tourists. Our municipality has decided to invest in proper tourism planning and balanced growth for the next generations" - Mayor of Central Corfu and Diapontia Islands, Mrs. Meropi Spyridoula Ydraiou.

## **Lake Llanquihue, Chile:**

"Chile's participation in the GSTC Early Adopter Program is part of our national strategy to position ourselves as a sustainable destination. It is a tremendous challenge for the region and posed an extraordinary opportunity for the four municipalities, the private sector and all Lake Llanquihue stakeholders to lead the development of sustainable tourism," said Fernando Ortúzar, Regional Director of Tourism Los Lagos.

## **Valsugana, Italy**



[Interview: Stefano Ravelli, ATP Valsugana Destination Manager](#)

# CONTACT

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Be an agent of change by fostering increased knowledge, understanding, adoption and demand for sustainable tourism practices

