

## Opening Speech at the GSTC2022 Sevilla Conference

Luigi Cabrini, Chair, GSTC

Seville, Andalusia, Spain, 13 December 2022

Distinguished authorities,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends,

Welcome to the Global Sustainable Tourism Council conference!

We could not hope for a better setting for our first post-pandemic global event than Seville, a city rich in history, culture and art.

A city whose name resonates in the imagination of people all over the world. Did you know that in the course of three centuries, 150 operas inspired by Seville were composed, and that four of them are among the most performed in the world?

Those of you who come for the first time will be amazed and fascinated by the heritage that the different civilizations have left behind, and those of us who return will discover new facets of this unique city!

On behalf of all of the participants I wish to thank you the tourism authorities of Sevilla for hosting us these three days!

A warm welcome to delegations and participants that joined us from 61 countries in five continents! A truly global conference!

It is wonderful to get together again after such a long time!

The covid pandemic has been a tough, unprecedented and unexpected experience that has affected our lives as never before. And while for many of us it is already a memory of the past, its impact continues to be felt.

As most other sectors, during 2020 and 2021 tourism has suffered an unprecedented crisis with a drop of over 70% of its international flows. Never before has such a loss been recorded. Millions of people lost their jobs, thousands of enterprises went bankrupt, destinations dependent on tourism struggled to survive.

We were watching, astonished, the images of deserted cities around the world, of empty airports and train stations, of museums and attractions shut down. In those difficult months we realized that, in the era of globalization, tourism has become an

inherent feature of our society; we understood the value of our freedom to travel, at a time when this was restrained,

However past experiences show that tourism rebounds as soon as the conditions return to normal and current trends indicate a clear improvement. Many destinations are returning almost to normality, as people are eager to travel again, after lockdowns and travel restrictions.

But the outlook is still not quite rosy as we are facing new economic and geopolitical challenges.

The brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine is a risk to global security and triggers obstacles to international commerce and high costs of energy and food. A two digits inflation and a general economic stagnation are also slowing down the recovery pace of international and domestic tourism.

And while Europe is leading the rebound, let's not forget that in some regions travel restrictions are still in place: China, for example, the country that recorded the highest number of international and domestic tourists as well as a top destination, applies a strict covid control policy that reduces the movement of people to a minimum.

In this uncertain context, international tourism, globally, is not expected to return to pre pandemics levels before 2024 at the earliest.

Tourism will certainly regain its place as a sector that can drive development, create jobs, reduce poverty, and protect biodiversity. A sector that generates 10% of GDP and 1 every 11 jobs worldwide.

We must however seize the opportunity inherent in any crisis not to repeat the same mistakes that fueled an increasing antagonism to tourism. Environmental degradation, pollution, social disruption and loss of cultural identity, are perceived by many as direct consequences of a model that prioritize quantity over quality.

*"Will tourism become more sustainable after the pandemics?"*

We often hear this question, and it is probably too early to give a final answer, but from the GSTC perspective we saw a genuine interest as well as commitment and determination from many tourism leaders to invest time and resources in improving their levels of sustainability.

Our organization is now 15 years old.

Starting from the first version of the Hotel and Tour Operators Criteria in 2008 we expanded and consolidated a system of standards that is now recognized as the main international reference.

The Criteria for the Tourism Industry and for Destinations identify the key issues that define tourism sustainability and provide the tools to progress toward a better balance between the positive benefits that a well-managed tourism can generate and its negative impacts.

While the criteria were designed mainly for the private sector, for Destination Management Organizations and for Certification bodies, many central and regional Governments see in this framework an instrument to inform their strategies. The GSTC membership today includes tourism authorities of over 20 countries, together with leaders of the private sectors, NGOs, universities, destinations and many others.

This variety is a strength for GSTC, as different views, experiences and interests guide us to set priorities and strategies aimed at practical responses to real needs.

Though we remain a small organization, our influence is spreading and we are proud of the results achieved in the search for to fill the gaps that prevent an effective pursuit of sustainable tourism.

GSTC supports destinations and companies to achieve the higher standards of sustainability. Our focus is on innovative actions such as the accreditation program (the only one in tourism) that enhances the value of certifications and expands their scope.

The key for a real shift is to build a system where the number of hotels, destinations and other tourism businesses that gained a certification reach a critical number making them effectively competitive in the market. We work closely with some of the more relevant Online Travel Agencies to build a system where travelers can easily identify a product that is truly sustainable and to book it.

Many tourists, as responsible citizens, make choices based on their ethical values and are ready to spend more when an hotel or a destination cares to save energy and water, to promote protection of biodiversity or respect for local cultures.

But sustainable tourism is also likely to offer better quality products by being more experiential and emotionally engaging. We need to unlock its market potential to effectively mainstream it.

Dear friends,

As I mentioned before we believe that the forced reduction of tourist movements is an opportunity to review previous practices and to define future plans taking into account the lessons learned in the past, or in short: Build back better

I referred to the obstacles to tourism recovery but there are also serious challenges to its sustainable growth.

Climate change is probably the one that has more impact and no easy solution. Tourism generates emissions and at the same time is threatened by global warming. But let's be honest: unfortunately a substantial reduction of human influence on the climate is not likely to happen soon. The 27<sup>th</sup> conference on climate change ended again without a meaningful agreement between the parties.

And we also need to address *overtourism*, plastic pollution, water scarcity, food waste.

We have to prevent sexual exploitation, to promote decent work, to increase accessibility.

And while the number of Governments and businesses committed to sustainability has increased, many still do not believe in its necessity nor are acting accordingly.

We are now 8 billion people in the planet. The symptoms of major eco system changes are quite strong and dramatic: fires, floods, droughts, heat waves, lethal hurricanes.... It is beyond doubt that human behavior is a main cause of these disruptions. Tourism is in a good position to lead the way toward patterns more respectful of the environment, of people and culture, and , in doing so, it also stands to benefit from this evolution.

I wish to conclude by expressing our gratitude to the tourism authorities of Sevilla for inviting us, for providing the resources to make this conference a success and for their hospitality and friendliness.

Let me also thank my GSTC colleagues for all the work and passion they have put into its preparation and execution.

We have tried to cover the central themes in the current debate around sustainability in tourism and we hope that this event will meet your expectations.

I wish you all a fruitful conference, active participation and a happy stay in Seville.

Thank you very much!