



Luigi Cabrini, Chair, Global Sustainable Tourism Council

GSTC2024Sweden, Stockholm, 24 April 2024

Your Royal Highness

Dear participants

It is a privilege for the 2024 GSTC Conference to be hosted by Sweden, a country with a long tradition of democracy, innovation, and sustainability, as well as a unique destination. We are also greatly honored by the presence of Her Royal Highness.

International tourism has almost reached its pre-pandemic levels with Europe leading the recovery, and some destinations are registering the highest number of visitors ever. Tourism has regained its potential as an essential economic activity, a creator of jobs, and a tool for development.

At the same time, international tensions are high and wars are ravaging in different regions of the world. It seems a paradox that when globalization and the opening of borders make it possible for people to travel freely around the continents, conflicts that we thought would never occur again, are spreading, with their corollary of human loss and destruction.

Tourism from its very beginnings has been defined as a way of promoting mutual understanding, respect, and tolerance. But its full potential as an instrument for peace clearly remains to be realized.

There are however other areas where tourism can have a positive impact on people's lives and wellbeing, and at GSTC we are focusing our efforts to promote and drive a change toward more responsible, respectful, and sustainable ways of traveling. Tourism can provide social, economic, and environmental benefits or otherwise be antagonized for its negative impacts, both real and perceived, by the communities where it develops. Last week over 60,000 people held a simultaneous demonstration in the seven Canary Islands demanding a change in the tourism model. Every year more tourists visit this destination, but poverty is increasing, house rentals are more expensive, gentrification spreads, natural spaces are contaminated. A very recent example showing that is not the quantity but the quality a real measure of success.

During this last year, our organization made important steps forward and the recognition of our role in establishing standards for sustainable tourism has expanded. We launched a new set of global criteria, strengthened the assurance program by taking over the accreditation function in-house, extended the scope and size of the training program, assessed more destinations worldwide.

Our Secretariat has grown substantially to respond to the increasing requests of support that we are receiving, and GSTC can now count on a strong team of capable, dedicated, and committed staff.

It has been a long journey since a small group of stakeholders met in 2007, supported by United Nations agencies, with the goal of providing added value to the many other organizations already engaged in sustainable tourism. I have been part of this process from its early stages, and we had to overcome serious difficulties as it was not easy to reach the financial self-sufficiency indispensable for the independence of the organization's choices and decisions.

All the achievements that GSTC accomplished so far would not have been possible without the support of our membership, that represents the whole spectrum of the tourism sector.

The increasing number of Governments joining the organization reflects the evolution of the GSTC programs. Addressed originally to the private sector, in particular hotels and tour operators, the framework around the criteria proved to be an important reference tool for tourism strategies at the national and regional level.

As a remarkable example, I wish to mention here Türkiye, the host of our last GSTC Conference, who is successfully implementing a program of hotel certifications nationwide, based on the GSTC assurance program.

In Sweden, the GSTC Criteria are widely used by many Destination Management Organizations and several of them joined as members.

Some of the major hotel chains, tour operators, cruising companies, as well as small and medium tourism enterprises, believe that our tools help them to improve their management by considering the environmental, social, and economic aspects of their operations.

One of the obstacles to a faster implementation of sustainability in tourism is the lack of confidence from travelers on “green” claims that are not adequately proved. This is why many certifications’ programs are approaching GSTC seeking a recognition of their standards or an accreditation.

We maintain that tourism certifications must abide by international standards even if our sector is more complex than others, as the supply chain involve many components such as accommodation, transport, excursions, restaurants, handicrafts, food production, waste disposal, water management, etc.

GSTC’s guiding principle is that there are no shortcuts to achieve real improvements. Often it entails efforts and sacrifices, and to exit from the comfort zone of the “business as usual”, but the rewards

are worthwhile. A company or a destination allowed to display the GSTC logo has completed a journey that provides them credibility and visibility in the market.

We work with Online Travel Agencies with the aim of offering to travelers the option to identify and possibly choose products that meet international standards. Their platforms reach millions of clients and many of them are inclined to travel responsibly if offered options to do so. Sustainable tourism is likely to offer better quality products by being more experiential and emotionally engaging. And many surveys show that its demand is higher than the offer, a call to all of us to do more and to do it faster.

I wish to conclude by warmly thanking Visit Sweden for the exceptional organization of this event and the warm welcome we received. We have reached a record number of 500 participants with over 50 countries represented.

And for the first time, we will enjoy an itinerant conference where the museums hosting the different sessions will provide not only a venue but also inspiring spaces!

I wish you all a fruitful, engaging, and active participation and a wonderful time in Stockholm!

Thank you!