

## Answering the questions:

- What can I take to leadership/employees to get started?
- I just need a document to get me started.
- What are other strategies out there and what should we be doing first, 2nd, etc?
- Our organization has various sustainability initiatives but no all-encompassing strategy to explain or make progress on our journey.



## SAMPLE SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY

### INTRODUCTION

This sample sustainability strategy provides a framework for a Tour Operator to integrate sustainability principles into its operations and offerings, addressing environmental, social, and economic aspects of sustainability. Tailoring the strategy to the specific context and priorities of the tour operator will be essential for its successful implementation. This document was created as a guide for developing a full management strategy to ensure the sustainability of your business, and the travel and tourism industry. It includes examples and tools to assist Tour Operators in reaching their sustainability goals.

Throughout this document, you will see the \* symbol. This indicates that there are resources and tools available that directly relate to the related section and can be used to help you create and/or expand your organization's sustainability strategy. These resources and tools can be found on the [USTOA SIR Resources Hub](#). The links provided in each section will take you directly to the corresponding section of the hub.

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## Sustainability Strategy for [Tour Operator Name] Sustainable/Responsible Tourism Policy At [Tour Operator Name]

*“We are committed to promoting responsible and sustainable tourism practices that minimize negative impacts on the environment, support local communities, and enhance the overall travel experience for our guests. Our sustainability strategy outlines our goals, initiatives, and actions to achieve this commitment.”*

As you will see on the Sustainability Resources Hub, there are many ways to structure your sustainability strategy. They can be presented as a climate action plan, sustainability plan or impact plan ([\\*MEMBER SUSTAINABILITY PLANS](#)). There are common elements to each example ([\\*GETTING STARTED](#)) and every company needs to determine what is important to their specific goals to guide the focus of their strategy. You must decide on your own sustainability ambitions as a first step before you can sensibly start creating a plan.

Many companies choose to use a sustainability framework to serve as guidepost and provide relevant indicators to create their strategies. Examples include the UN Sustainable Development Goals for Tourism ([\\*GETTING STARTED](#)) and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) ([\\*CERTIFICATIONS](#)) tour operator criteria.

Most plans are organized around the following 4 pillars:

1. Sustainable management
2. Socioeconomic impacts
3. Cultural impacts
4. Environmental impacts (including consumption of resources, reducing pollution, and conserving biodiversity and landscapes)



## STEP 1. Stakeholder Engagement

Identification of key stakeholders, including local communities, government agencies, NGOs, and customers, and strategies for engaging them in sustainable tourism efforts.

### STAKEHOLDER MAPPING AND PRIORITIZATION

An important preliminary exercise in developing a Sustainability Strategy involves mapping your tourism stakeholders. This process helps companies better understand the influence and opportunity a sustainability strategy provides to your business.

Identifying and prioritizing your tourism stakeholders can bring many benefits for your tourism management and planning. Gaining a better understanding of your tourism environment, building trust, rapport, and collaboration with your stakeholders, leveraging their resources, skills, and knowledge, anticipating and managing risks or conflicts, and aligning your goals with their interests are all positive outcomes of recognizing the importance of your tourism stakeholders. Doing so can create shared value and benefits for all parties involved.

A good tool for mapping tourism stakeholders in a sustainability strategy plan is a Stakeholder Analysis Matrix. This tool helps identify and analyze the various stakeholders involved in or affected by the tourism activities of a particular destination or organization.

Another important step after mapping your stakeholders is to conduct an issues or **materiality assessment**. Materiality assessments are a key tool for identifying and prioritizing the most relevant sustainability issues for your organization and stakeholders. They help you align your sustainability strategy with your core values, risks, opportunities, and expectations. This involves looking at a variety of factors through two particular lenses: potential impact on your organization and importance to stakeholders.

Create and utilize a Stakeholder Analysis Matrix and conduct a Materiality Assessment. for your sustainability strategy plan in the context of tourism. \*[GETTING STARTED](#)



## STEP 2. Identify Goals and Objectives

Clear, measurable goals related to environmental conservation, community engagement, cultural preservation, and economic development.

### SAMPLE GOALS

#### 1. Develop a more Sustainable Supply Chain.

Because of the nature of the Tour Operator business, most of your impact on sustainability (and the health of your business) lies within your supply chain. The 4 pillars detailed above are primarily encompassed in your supply chain, therefore making supply chain management in tourism more sustainable is crucial for reducing environmental impact, supporting local communities, and ensuring long-term viability of the industry.

Tour operators wield significant influence over sustainable supply chains in tourism through their procurement decisions, through strategic partnerships, and operational practices.

#### **\*RESPONSIBLE SOURCING & MEANINGFUL SUPPLY CHAINS**

Your product is the travel experience - delivered in communities where people and wildlife live and coexist. By prioritizing suppliers and vendors committed to environmental conservation, social responsibility, and cultural preservation, tour operators can drive positive change across the entire supply chain by how you deliver your product and with what partners you develop your product.

Through **collaborative initiatives** and capacity-building programs, tour operators can partner with community impact organizations, local and national governments, and empower suppliers to adopt sustainable practices, reduce their environmental footprint, and enhance their social and economic contributions to destination communities. By promoting transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement, tour operators can create a ripple effect that fosters sustainability throughout the tourism supply chain, creating a true tourism value chain (**\*GETTING STARTED**) benefiting both travelers and destination communities.



**\*\*The following sample goals are interconnected to creating a sustainable supply chain:**

## **2. Institute Environmental Stewardship Policies/Create a Climate Action Plan:**

Minimize your environmental footprint and address climate impacts by reducing resource consumption, waste generation, and carbon emissions.

**\*DECARBONIZATION**

**\*WASTE REDUCTION**

## **3. Incorporate Nature Positive Tourism and Responsible Wildlife Policies** into all aspects of the business involving nature through biodiversity preservation, regenerative initiatives, and ethical wildlife policies. Partner with and incorporate conservation organizations into tourism itineraries and through suppliers. Encouraging responsible interactions with wildlife, including avoiding activities that harm animals or their habitats, and supporting conservation efforts.

**\*NATURE POSITIVE TOURISM**

**\*ANIMAL WELFARE**

## **4. Community Engagement:**

Every traveler eats, sleeps, shops, tours, and needs transport and every one of those touch points is an opportunity to advance the social, and by extension environmental sustainability of a destination. Supporting and empowering local communities through economic opportunities, capacity building, and cultural preservation can build a more resilient community and tourism product.

Build collaborative partnerships - collaboration with other sustainable businesses, government agencies, NGOs benefit local communities to leverage resources and expertise in sustainable tourism development can all contribute to a more sustainable destination which benefits all stakeholders.

**\*PARTNERSHIPS**

Tourism has often been developed in exclusion of marginalized populations and created cultural exploitation. DEI is a fundamental aspect of sustainable tourism in local tourism communities and where substantial progress on DEI efforts can be achieved by promoting social equity, cultural preservation, economic empowerment, and accessible tourism practices. DEI principles are essential for achieving sustainable tourism goals. By prioritizing the participation and benefit-sharing of marginalized communities in tourism development, community-based tourism initiatives can contribute to more equitable, sustainable, and inclusive tourism economies.

**\*DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION IN TRAVEL**

**\*PARTNERSHIPS**



## 5. Promote Ethical Tourism:

Commit to and encourage travel practices that are respectful to local cultures, and economies. Ensure ethical business practices and transparency policies that include adherence to human rights, combating human trafficking, instituting a travel industry wildlife policy, support for indigenous rights, ChildSafe policy, orphanage tourism, Fair Trade, Living wage, and fair labor standards.

**\*DESTINATION STEWARDSHIP**

## 6. Set Sustainability Targets:

Meet or exceed international sustainability standards and indicators that contribute to global efforts against climate change, biodiversity loss and community well-being using industry vetted and/or science-based targets.

**\*CERTIFICATIONS**

**\*DECARBONIZATION**

## 7. Develop a Sustainable Tourism Communication Strategy:

Communicating your sustainability process and progress truthfully and transparently is essential to earn trust and credibility from your stakeholders and to lead others to operate more sustainably – you all sell the same places and no one company alone can create the change needed.

**\*RESPONSIBLE MARKETING**

## 8. Establish Clear Organizational Roles and Responsibilities for Implementation:

Turning a strategy into more than words will require leadership and a culture shift. It needs a team of people who all understand and buy into it, along with the resources/internal training that will allow them to take the required action.



## STEP 3. Develop Strategies and Initiatives to achieve goals

### 1. Sustainable Supply Chain:

**Survey Suppliers:** An important first step in creating a sustainable supply chain is to survey your suppliers. Start with one country, region, or sector and then progress. Surveying suppliers for sustainability aligns with both ethical imperatives and business interests, enabling tour operators to operate responsibly, mitigate risks, and capitalize on opportunities for growth and differentiation.

The very act of surveying can change a supplier's practices. Simply receiving a survey from a tour operator can raise suppliers' awareness of sustainability issues. Many suppliers may not have previously considered the environmental or social impacts of their operations. The survey prompts them to reflect on their practices and encourages them to think about ways to improve. Suppliers may also feel pressure to improve their sustainability practices when faced with requests or inquiries from tour operators.

While surveying suppliers alone may not guarantee immediate or complete transformation of your sustainability practices, it can serve as a catalyst for positive change by raising awareness, applying pressure, fostering collaboration, leveraging market incentives, and providing support and resources.

#### \*RESPONSIBLE SOURCING & MEANINGFUL SUPPLY CHAINS

### 2. Create an Environmental Stewardship/Climate Action Plan:

- Implement a comprehensive waste management system, including food and plastic waste reduction, recycling, and proper disposal practices.
- Reduce energy consumption by investing in energy-efficient equipment and promoting energy-saving practices among staff and guests.
- Reduce carbon from internal operations and what can't be reduced, invest in offsets, a carbon fund that supports projects with local communities on climate action, or direct carbon removal of all other emissions from operations and encourage guests to offset their travel emissions voluntarily.

#### \*DECARBONIZATION

#### \*MEMBER SUSTAINABILITY PLANS

- Promote sustainable transportation options in itineraries, such as walking, cycling, and public transit, whenever feasible.

#### \*GETTING STARTED

- Collaborate with accommodation partners to encourage eco-friendly practices, community engagement, and certifications.

#### \*HOTEL SUSTAINABILITY

- Develop an Oceans Health Program to include partners/suppliers working on coral restoration, fish sanctuaries, reef safe sunscreen campaigns, mangrove protection, plastics pollutions, turtle preservation, and blue economies.

#### \*ANIMAL WELFARE

#### \*WASTE REDUCTION



### 3. Incorporate Nature Positive Tourism and Responsible Wildlife Policies:

- Develop partnerships to foster responsible interactions with wildlife, including avoiding activities that harm animals or their habitats, and supporting conservation efforts.
- Adopt an animal welfare policy.

\*NATURE POSITIVE TOURISM

\*ANIMAL WELFARE

### 4. Community Engagement:

- Partner with local community-based tourism initiatives, local changemakers, and social enterprises to develop and offer authentic cultural experiences that provide economic benefits and promote cultural preservation and exchange. Invest in and partner with community development projects and nonprofits with a tourism revenue stream.
- Prioritize the hiring of local guides, drivers, and suppliers to ensure that tourism revenue directly benefits local residents to address tourism leakage.
- Respect and honor indigenous rights and traditions, seeking permission and guidance from indigenous communities when visiting their lands and partnering or investing in ownership opportunities. Avoid performative and exploitive experiences.
- Ensure social well-being, inclusivity, and accessibility for travelers by incorporating DEIA practices and guidelines into all programs.

\*PARTNERSHIPS

\*DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION IN TRAVEL

### 5. Promote Ethical Tourism:

- Get certified in ChildSafe Training, Exit from orphanage tourism and interactions with children.
- Ensure there is no financial incentive to unsustainable and harmful practices by your guides, guests, and accommodation providers.
- Seasonal and Carrying Capacity Management: Manage tourist flows and activities to prevent overcrowding that creates burden on residents and minimize pressure on fragile ecosystems, especially in popular destinations.

### 6. Set Sustainability Targets and Measure Progress:

Sustainable tourism strategies involve a commitment to ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and improvement. This includes setting targets, tracking performance metrics, and adjusting based on feedback and changing circumstances.

- Train all staff and partners on sustainable tourism principles and practices to ensure consistent implementation across all aspects of our operations. From your finance department to your HR and administrative staff, all levels of the organization should be invested in the principles and policies of the Sustainability Strategy. An effective strategy must be resourced through its budgets and its employees.
- Regularly assess and review your operations to identify areas for improvement and implement best(ter) practices in sustainable tourism management.
- Creating systems for tracking progress towards sustainability goals for impact measurement, collecting feedback from stakeholders, and adjusting as needed are critical to understanding progress.

\*DECARBONIZATION

\*IMPACT MEASUREMENT





## 7. Sustainable Communications:

- ✦ Publish sustainability plan on website and integrate into marketing efforts.
- ✦ Offer educational opportunities during tours, such as local environmental issues, cultural workshops, climate impacts on locals and wildlife, and visits to conservation projects, to deepen guests' understanding of local issues and initiatives.
- ✦ Encourage guests to minimize their environmental impact by packing light, avoiding single-use plastics, and respecting wildlife and natural habitats.
- ✦ Provide pre-trip information to guests about sustainable travel practices, cultural sensitivities, and environmental conservation efforts in the destinations they will visit.

### \*RESPONSIBLE MARKETING

## 8. Organizational Roles and Responsibilities:

- ✦ Create KPIs that ladder up to the goals – perhaps with a “Supporting” and “Accountable” role per KPI. This also ensures sustainability is decentralized across the business and the Sustainability Lead isn't working in a silo. This is especially helpful for teams to know exactly what they needed to do, and by when. Identifying roles and responsibilities can often be overlooked or assumed and calling them out ensures progress is tracked accordingly and goals are met.
- ✦ Examples include:
  - A Director of Operations may be responsible for ensuring 100% of animal welfare experiences meet the Animal Welfare Policy.
  - Sales teams need to know how to discuss train rather than flight options, or to sell the benefits of a hotel run on solar energy or one with great links to the local community or a locally owned restaurant that supports women entrepreneurs.
  - Marketing needs to be guided on the kinds of images and language they should be using.
  - Everyone with a company credit card/purchasing account needs to understand how what they buy relates to the strategy.
  - Product developers should be charged with having XX% of their itineraries be community-based tourism experiences.
- ✦ Ensure when hiring sustainability managers or directors that they are not siloed or charged with implementing sustainability goals on their own. Goals must be companywide and directed by leadership.

## STEP 4. Execute an Implementation Plan

### Short-term Actions

- Conduct a Materiality Assessment and Map your stakeholders.
- Survey your suppliers.
- Identify potential partnerships with conservation and community impact projects.
- Conduct a carbon footprint assessment.
- Launch traveler awareness campaigns on sustainable practices.
- Train employees on Sustainability 101 and incorporate goals into the onboarding process.
- Task leadership to identify sustainability KPI's for managers based on goals.

### Mid-term Actions

- Implement carbon reduction initiatives.
- Audit Itineraries to comply with Animal Welfare policy and ChildSafe certification.
- Develop partnerships with conservation and community impact projects into your product development.
- Enhance supply chain sustainability criteria with measurements and metrics for progress.
- Institute sustainability KPI's in all performance reviews.

### Long-term Actions

- Launch partnerships with conservation and community impact projects into itineraries and operations.
- Achieve significant carbon reduction or neutrality.
- Establish a sustainability program for incorporating community projects into product development KPI's to integrate traveler participation into itineraries.
- Evaluate and adapt strategies based on sustainability metrics and feedback.
- All employees have sustainability imbedded in their roles and performance evaluations.



## Institute Monitoring and Evaluation

- Establish key performance indicators (KPIs) and targets for each of your sustainability goals and regularly track progress against these metrics. These may include metrics such as carbon emissions reduction targets, water and energy consumption levels, waste diversion rates, employment and income generated for local communities, and satisfaction levels of stakeholders.
- Conduct regular audits and assessments of your operations to identify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement.
- Engage with stakeholders, including staff, guests, local communities, and partners, to gather feedback and assess the effectiveness of our sustainability initiatives.
- Publish an annual sustainability report to transparently communicate our progress, achievements, and challenges to stakeholders and the public.

## Sample Conclusion

- By implementing this sustainability strategy, [Tour Operator Name] is committed to creating meaningful and memorable travel experiences while contributing positively to the destinations we visit, and the lives of the people and the ecosystems who call them home,
- Through these strategies, we work to ensure that future generations can continue to enjoy the benefits of tourism without compromising the integrity of destinations.



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