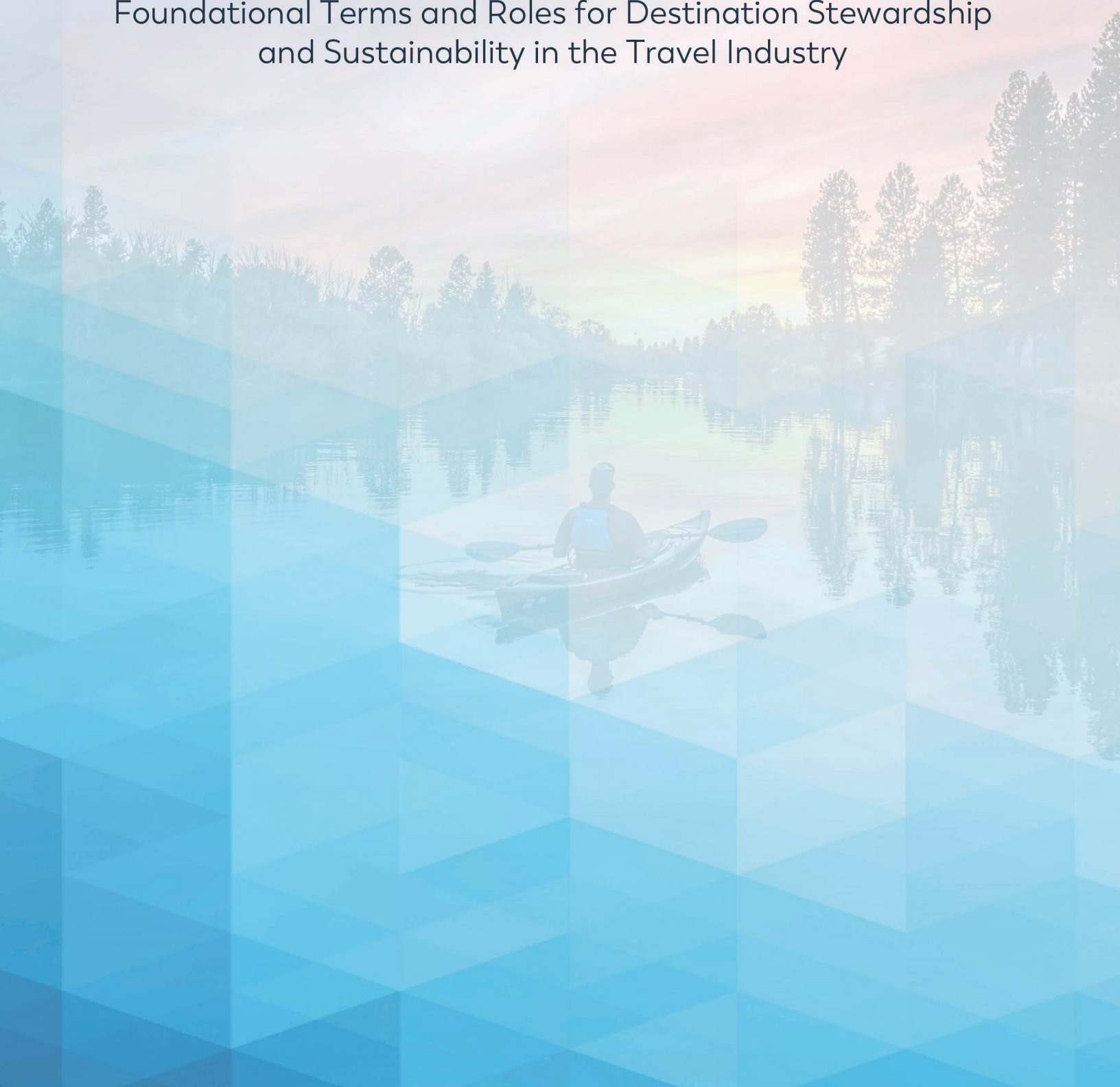# Destinations International

Building a Common Language:

Foundational Terms and Roles for Destination Stewardship and Sustainability in the Travel Industry

WE NEED A COMMON LANGUAGE

"Environmental sustainability is a top priority in some regions globally, but it's not even being discussed in others. There is a complete lack of consensus in our industry about how to address environmental sustainability and climate change. And this is one challenge that requires a unified global approach."

– Community Panel, DestinationNEXT Report, 2023

Photo Credit: Aspen Chamber

Many communities within travel destinations have identified sustainability as a critical priority. As a result, more people are demanding action from business and community leaders, including those in destinations.

Establishing a shared language is critical, because responding to the challenges brought by climate change and maintaining community support will require collaboration between businesses, industries and places. To lead our destinations toward prosperity, we will need a common understanding of what sustainability entails.

Sustainability is a responsibility for all of us, and it is now part of every role. Embedding sustainability into everyone's job is a form of systemic change that supports a Destination Organization's operations in every way. Making sustainable actions the norm is the path to a stronger economy, community and environment.

Building a Common Language: Foundational Terms and Roles for Destination Stewardship and Sustainability in the Travel Industry   2

Cover Photo Credit: Visit Spokane

WHY THIS MATTERS

As the global travel industry navigates increasingly complex environmental, social and economic challenges, the need for clarity, collaboration and shared understanding has never been greater. Sustainability—defined as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs—remains a core goal for destination organizations.

Yet achieving sustainability requires more than intention; it requires stewardship: the active, responsible management of a place's resources, culture and environment to ensure tourism benefits both communities and visitors.

This guide is designed to establish a common language around these essential concepts. By defining key sustainability terms and outlining the evolving roles that support stewardship within destination organizations, we aim to equip leaders with the shared vocabulary and framework needed to lead with purpose, accountability and impact.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This is an educational resource that promotes clear communication and organizational change related to sustainability in the travel industry.

Part 1 defines terms related to sustainability.

Part 2 provides job descriptions for dedicated sustainability roles, as well as an approach to making sustainability a standard across your entire organization.

CONTENTS

Part 1: Sustainability Definitions

Part 2: Sustainability Jobs

Sources

Part 1: Sustainability Definitions

This list defines several common terms related to sustainability. Use this set of terms and definitions as a guide to some of the key concepts that all destination leaders are grappling with today, particularly as they take on the roles of both strategist and steward in an increasingly complex landscape.

Methodology and Limitations
Destination Think generated this list of definitions for Destination International and the global destination management community following research and analysis of many publicly available sources of travel industry knowledge. Those included academic and industry sources not limited to North America. The terms were selected for their widespread use in the travel industry and for their relevance to the issues faced by destination leaders in their pursuit of sustainable and stewardship centered practices.

There are many existing and overlapping definitions for each term, and it was not necessary to invent new ones. Destination Think draws upon experience working with hundreds of destination organizations around the world, including many members of Destinations International. The company created this list following an analysis by linguistics researcher Susan Swolinksi, M.A., and in collaboration with Dr. Jonathon Day of Purdue University. The resulting definitions each reflect consensus across multiple sources, as well as relevance to the role of destination managers. Primary sources are listed under each definition, though several sources were studied in each case and often reinforce one another. Links are provided where possible. A complete list of sources is provided later in the document.

These definitions are intended to provide a foundation of common language for destination management organizations and their membership as part of the international business community and to support more aligned action in both sustainability and stewardship efforts. Some limiting factors need to be acknowledged. The definitions were adapted from the survey of existing definitions in the English language. There are gaps in input from minority communities with different languages and practices related to the environment. (Indigenous stewardship, as an example.) Consider this list the beginning of a knowledge resource that can be expanded.

Definitions

Carrying Capacity
The maximum number of tourists a destination can accommodate without causing harm to the environment, local community or visitor experience. Carrying capacity is dynamic and can be influenced by a range of factors, including infrastructure and stakeholder perceptions.

(Source: European Travel Commission, "Handbook on Sustainable Tourism", 2019)

Decarbonization
The reduction of greenhouse gas emissions across the tourism value chain, including transportation, accommodation and other tourism-related activities. Decarbonization aids in transitioning the tourism industry towards low-carbon or carbon-neutral operations.

(Sources: UN World Tourism Organization (now UN Tourism), "Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals" report, 2019, page 25; "Decarbonizing Tourism: A Systematic Review and Future Directions" by H. Lee, et al., Published in the Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 2020)

Destination Development

The process of planning, creating and managing tourism activity in a way that enhances visitor experiences, contributes to the local economy and ensures long-term sustainability. Destination development strives to protect the natural, cultural and social environments belonging to a place.

(Source: World Travel & Tourism Council, "Destinations 2030" report, 2019, page 15)

Destination Stewardship

In short, Destination Stewardship can be defined as the responsible management of a place's resources, culture and environment to ensure that tourism benefits both the community and visitors – now and in the future.

(Source: Dr. Jonathon Day, "A Practical Guide to Destination Stewardship and Sustainable Tourism", 2023)

Economic Leakage

The proportion of tourism revenue that is not retained within the local economy. Economic leakage is an indicator that travel is providing reduced economic benefits to the host destination. The causes may include profits collected by foreign-owned companies and imports of goods and services that meet visitor demand.

(Source: Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), "GSTC Industry Criteria for Hotels & Tour Operators", 2021)

Ecotourism

A type of travel that emphasizes responsible visitation by minimizing the negative impacts on the natural environment, society and culture while providing benefits to local communities. Travelers involved in ecotourism tend to focus on experiencing and learning about nature and cultural heritage.

(Sources: UN World Tourism Organization (now UN Tourism), "Ecotourism" and "Sustainable Development" webpages, 2022)

Photo Credit: Aspen Chamber

Environmental Conservation

Within tourism, environmental conservation involves protecting and preserving natural resources, biodiversity and ecosystems, while promoting sustainable tourism practices.

(Source: Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), "Sustainable Tourism: A Guide for the Tourism Industry", 2012)

Externality

An economic term that refers to a side effect of activities that is not reflected in the market price of products or services. Tourism creates externalities which impact parties outside the tourism industry, including the environment, communities or individuals. Environmental harm, displaced communities and cultural homogenization are negative examples; an increase in jobs, tax revenue and community pride are positive examples.

(Sources: UN World Tourism Organization (now UN Tourism), "Sustainable Tourism for Eliminating Poverty (ST-EP) Initiative", 2004 p. 15; Global Sustainable Tourism Council, "GSTC Criteria for Destinations, Version 2.0", 2020)

Indigenous Tourism

Travel experiences and activities that are owned and/or operated by Indigenous communities or members of those communities. These experiences introduce visitors to Indigenous cultural heritage and contemporary ways of life. They showcase and preserve these cultures and traditions while providing economic and social benefits to Indigenous communities.

(Sources: UN World Tourism Organization (now UN Tourism), "Sustainable Development" webpage, 2022; Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada (ITAC), "Indigenous Tourism in Canada: A National Strategy for Sustainable Growth and Economic Development", 2019)

Photo Credit: Discover Puerto Rico

Placemaking

The process of creating and enhancing public spaces that reflect the unique character and identity of a destination and that provide a sense of place and community for visitors and locals alike. This can include the development of public art, cultural events and community-led initiatives that celebrate the destination's heritage and culture and support the well-being of people and the environment.

(Source: Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), "Destination Marketing Handbook", p. 42, published 2019)

Regenerative Tourism

A form of sustainable tourism that goes beyond minimizing negative impacts to actively restoring and regenerating the natural, cultural and social systems of a destination, with the aim of creating a net positive impact and long-term resilience.

(Source: UN World Tourism Organization (now UN Tourism), "Sustainable Development" webpage, 2022)

Resident Sentiment
Refers to the attitudes and perceptions of local residents towards tourism development and its impacts on their community, including their perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks in economic, social and environmental aspects.

(Sources: UN World Tourism Organization (now UN Tourism), "Report on Resident Sentiment", 2019; Destinations International, "Resident Sentiment Study", 2018)

Resilience
Resilience is the ability of a tourism destination or business to withstand and recover from crises, such as natural disasters, economic downturns, health emergencies, political turmoil and other social disruptions.

(Sources: Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), "GSTC Destination Criteria", 2021, accessed June 2023; World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), Travel & Tourism Resilience Report, 2020.)

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
A set of 17 overarching goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a call for action by all countries – poor, rich and middle-income – to promote prosperity while protecting the planet. The SDGs recognize that ending poverty must go hand-in-hand with strategies that build economic growth and address a range of social needs, including education, health, social protection, and job opportunities while tackling climate change and environmental protection.

Learn More about (SDGs): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XTBYMfZyrM&t=38s

(Source: UN World Tourism Organization (now UN Tourism), "Sustainable Development" webpage, 2022)

Sustainable Tourism
A type of tourism that takes full account of its current and future environmental, social and economic impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities. Achieving sustainable tourism requires wide participation and consensus building through strong political leadership and the informed participation of all interested parties. Sustainable tourism practices can be applied across all parts of the tourism system, from destinations to individual businesses. They can be applied in all tourism settings including rural and urban locations. Responsible tourism is a synonym.

(Sources: Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), "GSTC Destination Criteria", 2021, accessed June 2023; Dr. Jonathon Day, "A Practical Guide to Destination Stewardship and Sustainable Tourism", 2023)

Part 2: Sustainability Jobs

Sustainability In Every Role
Sustainability is a responsibility for all of us. Embedding sustainable planning and behavior in all that we do is vital for today and the future. Practicing stewardship – actively managing our resources, culture and community impact – is how sustainability moves from intention to action. Inserting sustainability into everyone's job is a form of systemic change for a destination organization. It may start with adding sustainability responsibilities to job descriptions, but really bringing sustainability to life means making it a normal way of working:

- Do your strategies include sustainability assessments?

- Does your reporting include changes in environmental, economic and social indicators?

- Do you have sustainability resources for different industry sectors?

- Do your promotional programs aim to reduce negative impacts from travel, excessive water use or inappropriate behaviors?

- Are your own office supplies and systems energy efficient and low waste?

These are a few examples for changing how we work that are not dependent on any one role. Adopting sustainable frameworks can quickly extend sustainability to everyone's job and provide a destination organization with an effective way to model stewardship and the kind of change our communities need.

Dedicated Sustainability Roles
For Destination Organizations wanting to add specific sustainability roles, these are the jobs focused on the environmental, economic and social impacts of an organization's operations. They are professional roles filled by individuals with the knowledge, skills and experience to guide the development and implementation of sustainable strategies that deliver positive impacts aligned with relevant local, national and international sustainability regulations.

A Destination Organizations sustainability strategies include plans for the destination organization own activities plus its role and programs for supporting the industry's sustainability goals. Stewardship-focused roles like these reflect the growing need for intentional leadership that balances visitor experience, community wellbeing and long-term resource protection.

For a small destination organization, a single sustainability manager or specialist may be the only dedicated role on staff. Larger destination organizations for major cities, states or countries could have a team of professionals to plan, implement and monitor sustainability initiatives. The roles defined here cover the range and division of responsibilities.

Chief Sustainability Officer (CSO)

As an executive management role, the CSO works with other executives to ensure that sustainability is part of the organization's strategy and operations. This is the highest level of accountability for sustainable activities and all specific sustainability roles would ultimately report to this executive. For a Destination Organization, this role would consider how sustainability is integrated in the destination organizations activities and how the destination organization supports the industry with its own sustainability efforts.

Responsibilities:

- Possess extensive, current knowledge of sustainability practices and relevant laws or regulations that affect the organization and industry.

- Ensure organizational objectives consider and integrate environmental, economic and social issues.

- Develop sustainability strategies aligned with the organization's objectives.

- Identify a tactic that has the greatest positive impact for the organization to directly execute and use as a model and rallying point.

- Oversee budget for sustainability team and initiatives.

- Hold accountability for the team, programs and projects that implement sustainability strategies.

- Establish goals and indicators for the progress and success of sustainability initiatives.

- Serve as the sustainability subject matter expert and advisor to executive management and stakeholders.

- Engage with internal and external stakeholders in pursuit of any cooperation, collaboration and partnership around sustainability initiatives.

- Be an internal champion and educator about the importance of sustainability and best practices that should guide operations.

Sustainability Director

As a high-level management role, the director is the bridge between the strategic concerns of the CSO and the implementation details overseen by a Sustainability Manager. The director contributes to strategic planning, sets operational goals for sustainability initiatives and provides guidance to the team directly executing projects and programs.

Responsibilities:

- Possess extensive, current knowledge of sustainability practices and relevant laws or regulations that affect the organization and industry.

- Translate organizational sustainability strategies into operational initiatives.

- Set priorities and provide guidance to team members about implementing programs and measuring success.

- Communicate regularly with other directors and departments to ease collaboration and provide insight needed to properly integrate and support sustainability initiatives.

- Report on sustainability project and program performance to internal and external stakeholders.

- Stay up to date on developments in sustainability practices to inform work in the role and others in the organization.

- Ensure changes in sustainability practices are considered as new programs are established and ongoing programs are refreshed.

Sustainability Manager

The Sustainability Manager leads the implementation of sustainability programs and projects. This role could be the only implementation-level job or could manage a team of specialists and coordinators. The manager works closely with the Sustainability Director to ensure the integrity of sustainability initiatives is maintained and stays well aligned with the organization's objectives and plans.

Responsibilities:

- Possess knowledge of sustainability best practices and relevant laws or regulations that affect the organization and industry.

- Oversee the day-to-day integration of sustainability in the organization, whether through specific projects or programs or helping sustainable behaviors gain wide adoption across the organization.

- May manage a team of specialists and coordinators who deliver assigned tasks and components of sustainability programs and projects.

- Collates and prepares performance data for all initiatives being managed.

- Works with other managers to resolve any challenges around sustainable aspects of the organization's activities.

- Delivers presentations or other educational materials that help the whole staff understand how sustainability is a part of daily work.

Sustainability Specialist
The Sustainability Specialist is responsible for supporting the organization's sustainability initiatives and programs. This role works closely with the Sustainability Manager and other teams supporting sustainability initiatives.

Responsibilities:

- Possess knowledge about specific aspects of sustainability and serve as a subject matter expert about how it can be applied operationally.

- Work with significant independence in delivering assigned responsibilities within a program or project.

- Report on progress of the program or project areas being delivered.

- Support the Sustainability Manager in sharing and explaining the role of sustainability in daily work and in dedicated projects.

- Contribute to sustainability performance reports produced for stakeholders.

- Stay up to date with changes in sustainability best practices to recommend the most effective methods for programs and projects.

Sustainability Coordinator
The Sustainability Coordinator works closely with Sustainability Specialists to assist with the implementation of programs and projects.

Responsibilities:

- Possess a fundamental understanding of sustainability best practices and an eagerness to learn more.

- Have well rounded skills in communication and analysis to be able to support completion of project tasks and reporting.

- Apply organizing and collaboration skills to coordinate activities with internal and external team members and stakeholders.

- Maintain and update any sustainability documents and resources for the organization.

- Be the initial point of contact for questions about sustainability initiatives.

Sources

Destination Think studied communications and research from the following sources in the creation of this guide:

- African Tourism Board
- Australian Tourism Export Council
- Caribbean Tourism Organization
- Council on Foreign Relations
- Destinations International
- Dr. Jonathan Day, Purdue University
- European Centre for Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism
- European Tourism Association
- European Travel Commission
- Global Ecotourism Network
- Global Sustainable Tourism Council
- Green Tourism Certification
- in2destination
- Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada
- International Ecotourism Society
- International Tourism Partnership
- International Tourism Trade Association
- Journal of Sustainable Tourism
- Pacific Asia Travel Association
- Sustaining Tourism (sustainabletourism.net)
- Sustainable Tourism International
- The Long Run
- Tourism Industry Aotearoa
- Tourism Industry Association of Canada
- Tourism Management Perspectives
- Travel Foundation
- UN Tourism (formerly UN World Tourism Organization)
- United Nations Development Programme
- World Health Organization
- World Travel and Tourism Council