Journal of Tourism, Culture, and Management Studies (JTCMS)
Vol. 2, No. 1, Jan – Mar 2025, pp. 62-68
ISSN: 3107-7307, DOI: https://doi.org/10.17051/JTCMS/02.01.06

Green Travel Reality Check for Tourist Destinations Actually Deliver on Sustainability

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Article Info

Article history:

Received : 07.01.2025
Revised : 14.02.2025
Accepted : 29.03.2025

Keywords:

Eco-Friendly Tourism;
Green Travel;
Sustainable Development;
Tourism Impact;
Travel Sustainability

ABSTRACT

The explosive growth of tourism has gone from 100 million international arrivals in 1950 to 1.442 billion in 2018. Even as green travel has become more and more common because of this growth, there is a sobering environmental cost to this. Transportation accounts for 70 per cent of a holiday's carbon emissions and the average hotel stay in the UK alone creates 31.1 kg of CO2 per night.Marketing promises that sustainable travel is a reality are often missed. With tourism accounting for an increase in more than 10 percent of global GDP, various destinations are increasingly promoting eco friendly initiatives for tourism but studies reveal that tourism development leads to its direct degradation. In reality, tourism's growth has a variance of 4.1 % in natural resource depletion and 3.9 % in pollution levels. In this article, we will tackle which of those tourist destinations actually do deliver on the sustainable promise, so you know where your euros are going when you visit next.

1. The Gap Between Green Marketing and Sustainability Reality

Sustainable travel demand rises as 77 percent of young people say that sustainability affects their travel decisions. Finally, tourism marketing has moved to promoting eco friendly and yet the reality often fails to match the advertised claims [1]-[5].

Understanding how destinations shape their eco friendly image Social media is key in destination marketing as 75% of Millennials, 81% of Gen Z travelers rely on them when choosing travel destinations. Engaging content, influencer partnerships, user generated content that highlight eco friendly experiences, and such helps destinations actively promote their sustainability efforts. Furthermore, many tourism businesses receive green certifications in order to boost their credibility, though their green certifications are incredibly diverse in strength and integrity [6]-[9].

Claim vs. practice of common sustainability claims of the tourism industry The tourism industry accounts for around 5 to 8 percent of the total global greenhouse gas emissions. However, a large number of places are using the buzzword sustainability to advertise themselves without making any real changes. As an example, some hotels claim eco friendly measures, e.g. allowing guests to reuse towels and linens but replace on daily basis without even being requested. Similarly, restaurants encourage people use compostable items where no recycling is available or industrial composting is an option.

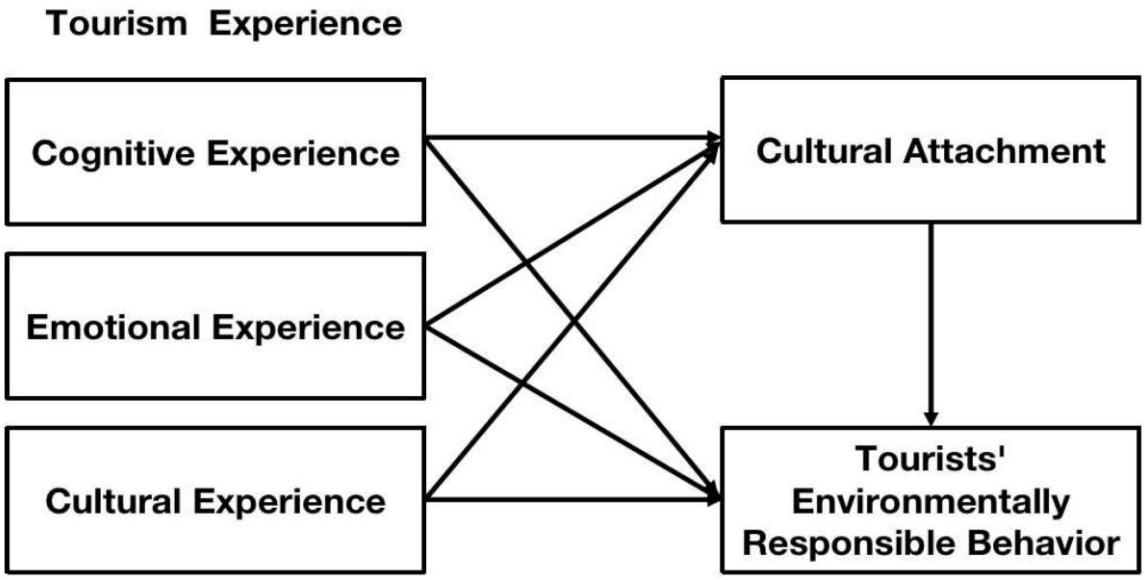

Fig 1. Understanding tourism sustainability certifications

These attempts to cash in on environmental awareness are manifesting themselves through greenwashing in tourism. The ways in which this deception is carried out — from language, and buzzwords to misrepresentation and exaggeration of sustainability — are many. Additionally, tourism supply chain is so complex to verify the sustainability claim of businesses, because it is very easy for businesses to say that the locals benefit without their benefits being maximized while profits are channelled to the originating organizations.

But there are over 200 different tourism certification standards in the world and more and more sites are seeking to be certified as sustainable. However, many of these voluntary schemes ask for a considerable financial investment, creating a paradoxical situation that some truly sustainable businesses couldn't afford being certified while at the same time we see many businesses get certified for public relations.

The indoctrination of greenwashing doesn't stop at individual shoppers. This misleading practice brings negative consequences to all the industry as regards to; environmental, social, economic and credibility. In addition, by greenwashing, it undermines the efforts of genuine sustainability leaders in tourism to create and unfair competitive arena that gives unbacked businesses the opportunity to attract eco conscious travelers willing to pay a premium for their services.

Wildlife tourism offers a particular example of a disconnect between marketing claims and real practice. While many of these so called 'sanctuaries' and 'eco tours' present themselves as conservation policies, they may in fact harm animals by practices such as forced breeding, separation from mothers and physical abuse. Just as there are some off the grid hotels that keep up an appearance of rustic, natural feeling, while using diesel generators for their energy versus renewable energy, the practice adds to air pollution and carbon emission.

However, tourist destinations with cultural heritage in particular present unique challenges that must be confronted, and face, by the management of authenticity in their efforts to render a destination sustainable. Even with its impact on tourist satisfaction and desire to come again, there is pressure to comply with visitor expectations, and in doing so, traditional cultures and customs themselves are being commercialized. This commercialization is against the basic principles of sustainable tourism, otherwise, tourism must preserve local cultures and uplift communities [10]-[15].

2. Environmental Impact Assessment Measuring What Matters

Environmental impact assessments of the tourism sector indicate worrying rates of growth as global tourism emissions have increased by 3.5 per cent annually from 2009 to 2019, twice the rate of the world economy. Tourism activities contributed 8.8% to the total global greenhouse gas emissions (5.2 Gt CO2-e) by 2019.

Carbon intensity of tourist spending: Measuring 30 percent less than other economic sectors and 30 percent higher than the global economy average. First, 21% of the direct tourism emissions trace back to aviation. Utilities such as electricity use 16%, and 17% comes from private vehicle usage. In fact, only twenty countries are responsible for almost ¾ of the world's tourism emissions.

Yet per capita carbon footprints shed light on this disparity in tourism's environmental impact.

Currently, the global average stands at 0.68 tonnes CO2-e per person. However, the baby steps nations in the very top and bottom of the travel footprints list are a difference of stark hundred folds. Mainly caused by the long haul international flights and the luxury accommodations [16]-[19].

Table 1: Sustainability Indicators in Tourist Destinations

Destination Type	Renewable Energy Usage	Waste Management Efficiency	Water Conservation Measures	Carbon Footprint Reduction
Coastal Resorts	Medium	High	Low	Medium
Mountain Retreats	High	Medium	High	High
Urban Tourism Hubs	Low	Low	Medium	Low
Eco-Villages	Very High	Very High	Very High	Very High
Heritage Sites	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium

Water usage and waste management realities Have a look at water management realities for tourist destinations in these regions. On average, hotels use around 1,500 liters per room per day, far exceeding local population use by over 8 times in resource constricted areas. This tension results from the disparity between the tourism demands for clean water and the community's right of access to clean water.

These challenges are highlighted in recent water crises. During severe water shortages, in 2018, hospitality in Cape Town lost more than USD 65 million. Such scenarios illustrate the resiliency of tourism dependent areas to resource variation. In addition, water quality is a concern affecting drinking water and recreational water bodies and therefore monitoring by destinations is important.

Water intensive hotels' operation includes swimming pools, laundry services, food preparation and recreational facilities. These demands can be very unfaire in areas where the water is scarce and often an entire community won't have access to the water at all. Currently, only half of the hotels on the globe compost their food waste, and it contributes 21 times more methane than carbon dioxide.

Carbon rich ecosystems are often under threat from tourism development. Often driven out of existence by seaside resorts, beaches and marinas, mangrove forests can store four times more carbon than typical tropical forests. That destruction unties stored carbon, added to the atmosphere and accelerating climate change [20]-[23].

LCA of hotels indicate different environmental impacts depending on hotel star ratings. But what is interesting is that two star hotel actually produce higher carbon footprints than three star hotels — going against the logic of luxury hotel is bad for the environment. Regardless of the accommodation type, fossil fuel consumption stands out as the main contributing element consistently.

By examining projections on tourism emissions into the future, emissions in 2025 could reach some 6.5 billion metric tons, up from 4.5 billion metric tons in 2013, an increase of 44%. aligning with the Paris Agreement's target of keeping warming under 1.5°C will pose serious challenges to this trajectory. To attain this goal, the tourism sector would have to decrease its 5.2 Gt CO2-e emissions at an annual rate exceeding 10% from 2050 onwards.

3. Economic Priorities vs. Sustainable Travel Practices

Key to the world economy, tourism contributes 7.6% to the annual global GDP, worldwide. As such, there is a complex dynamic between the constraints of profit driven decision and their coupling with the act of environmental stewardship.

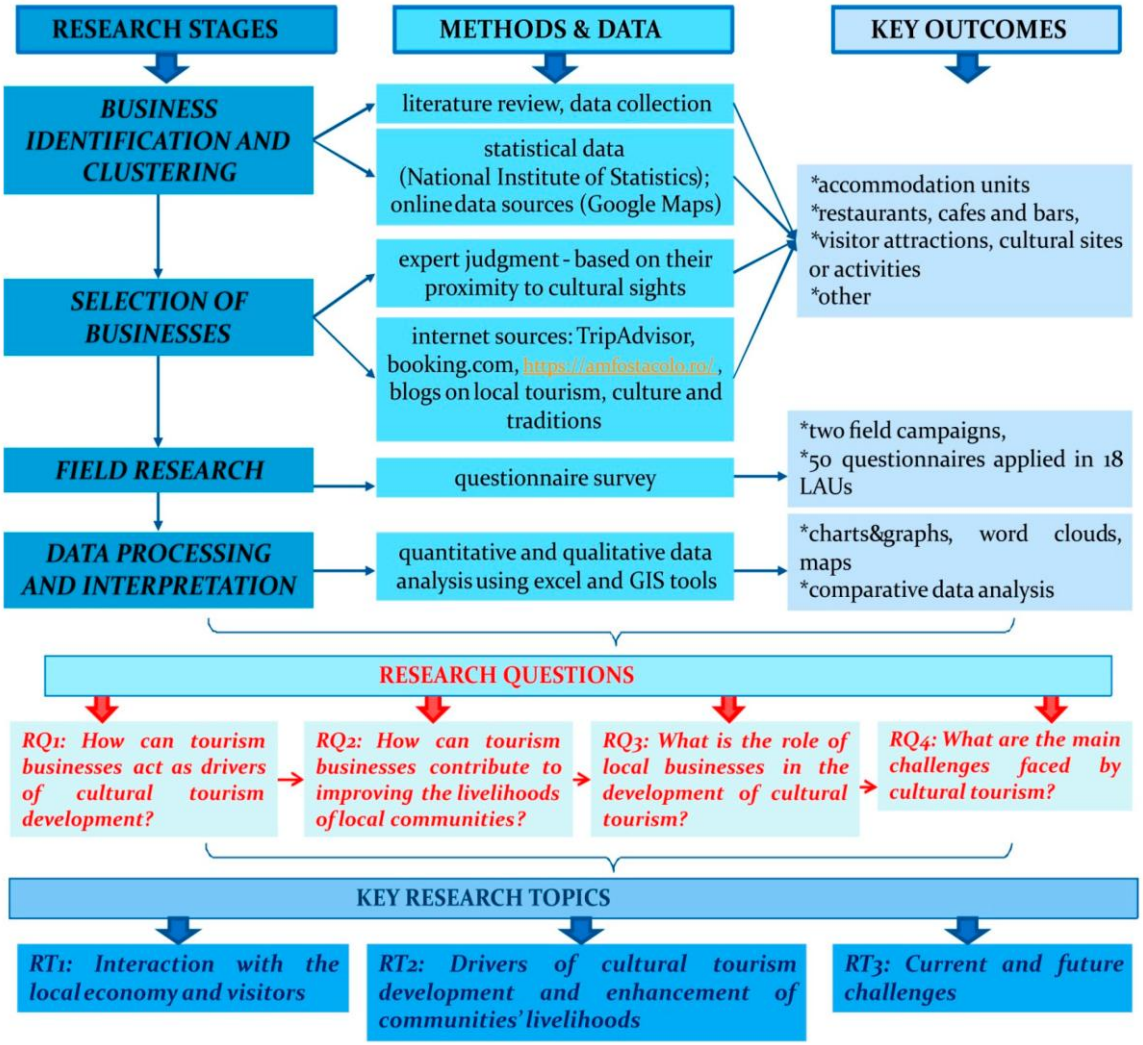

Fig 2. Tourism revenue pressures on environmental decisions

The revenue generation for the tourism industry sustain lives of people either direct or indirect held by the sector provides job opportunities and boosts infrastructural development. At present, the sector employs 319 million people, 10 percent of the world's total employment. Yet, despite this economic success, there is normally a high environmental price.

Nevertheless, tourism expansion turns out to be particularly deleterious to ecological systems even as it provides socio-economic benefits to host communities. There are many ways in which local pollution at tourist destinations can be observed at the ground level, including, air emissions, noise, solid waste, littering, sewage discharge and architectural disruption. And the industry is usually happy to let environmental or biodiversity interests be overlooked in favour of business as normal [24]-[26].

It is found that the economic environment of tourism growth and development is expected to 8.8% variance. In many areas with small industrial or agricultural endowment, natural and cultural heritage assets come to serve as their most valuable economic endowments. For example, the Kenyan government has put considerable conservation measures, creating national parks and reserves which are yielding huge revenue to conserve wildlife.

The tourism industry faces a huge obstacle in containing the tension between immediate financial gains and sustainable practices. The results of study also show that 71 percent of travelers has indicated their intention to travel more sustainably. Nevertheless, there is a significant gap between intent and action, given that cost is a major factor.

Mainly, it is because of conflicting expectations among different stakeholders. Those who invest focus on the quarterly earnings and increasingly want immediate returns from executives. The focus on near-term finishes may neglect the earning potential for innovation and better resilience in the more distant term.

In many locations tourism is a lifeline for the economic well being, particularly for remote or

islands locations. Their economies with the revenue are strengthened and the revenue is used to help fund essential services and infrastructure projects. Paradoxically, these same destinations are in many cases the most vulnerable to impacts of climate change.

It is a concept called 'sustainable profitability', where businesses can make steady profits by investing in future growth. This provides a more holistic approach to decision making, allowing decision makers to view financial and socially good and environmentally sound as mutually reinforcing, rather than antagonistic [27]-[28].

Table 2: Tourist Perceptions vs. Actual Sustainable Practices

Sustainability Claim	Tourist Belief Accuracy	Verified Practice Level	Gap Identified
"Zero-Waste Accommodations"	High	Medium	Moderate
"Carbon Neutral Transportation"	Medium	Low	High
"Locally Sourced Food"	High	High	Low
"Eco-Friendly Certifications"	Low	Medium	Moderate
"Wildlife Conservation Support"	High	Low	High

There are several companies that have been able to balance these competing priorities. Therefore, in responding to the challenge, the response offered is that of Unilever through its 'Sustainable Living Plan,' one that separates growth from environmental impact, all the while maintaining consistent shareholder returns. Like, Microsoft is also determined to become carbon negative by 2030 while scaling its main businesses.

However, to implement sustainable practices, there is significant initial investment needed in research and development, modern technologies, and operational changes. Particularly, it is difficult for small firms with limited resources to strike this balance. However, such costs can be mitigated through strategic planning and gradual implementation, and then long term savings can be achieved.

ESG metrics now affect much of corporate strategy and investment decisions. Corporate responsibility and financial performance are evaluated together, and companies are urged to become more sustainable in operations. Continuing stakeholder trust, support for long term initiatives as well as fostering trust requires regular updates of progress in both financial and sustainability goals.

4. Certification Programs: Who's Really Monitoring?

Environmental claims made by the tourism industry can be validated by certifications that are part of the landscape of such certifications, but this landscape is complicated and often very confusing to travelers who wish to find genuine eco friendly travel experiences. As an alliance, the Tourism Sustainability Certifications (TSCA) represents more than 19,000 travel and tourism enterprises across 175 countries in different continents that are unified in their commitment to minimized environmental footprints.

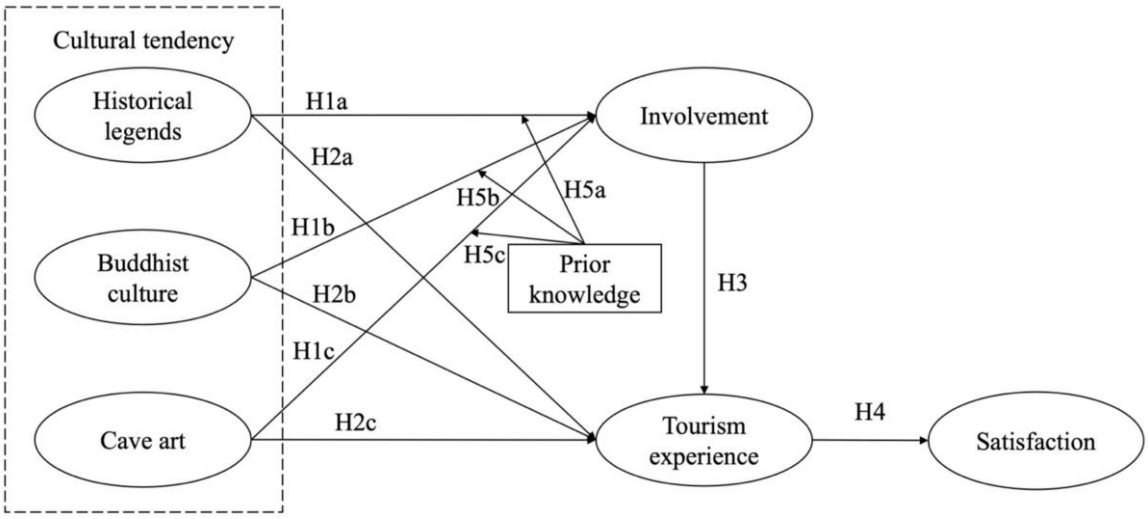

Fig 3. Short-term profit vs. long-term sustainability

The gold standard for sustainable tourism certifications, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) focuses on the following four areas: sustainable management, socio-economic impacts, cultural impacts and environmental impacts. Interestingly, GSTC does not certify organizations directly but accredits certifying bodies to assess that they follow strict standards.

Founded in 1987, EarthCheck is a benchmarking, performance assessment and third party auditing program of international standing defined by scientific precision that enables sustainable tourism certifications. Meanwhile, the European Union's Ecolabel for tourist accommodation ensures that certified properties have optimised the environmental management and have reduced energy consumption and reduced water consumption as well as minimized transport emissions.

5. The varying standards behind eco-labels

Today there are hundreds of different sustainable tourism standards that business and consumers alike get lost deep in a world of options. About 800 EU Ecolabel certified accommodations are available in the EU countries which have this certification common.

There has been the application of minimum sustainable tourism standards because of the widespread quality of certification within the sector. These baseline requirements have the effect of ensuring consistency and integrity in sustainability management as you go about different certification programs. Through this unified system, the tourism business will be helped in according with the new consumer protection legislation, EU Green Claims Directive which will stop green washing practices.

Currently, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council offers the most credible global standards from an inclusive development process. This provides for their rigorous accreditation program that raises initiatives around the world and places the hospitality sector on the road towards a unified vision on sustainable development.

The standard of excellence for environmental responsibility that is set by the Foundation for Environmental Education's Green Key program is an example of accountability. The assessment of lodging facilities in this certification is based on the commitment to improving fiscal and environmental performance.

6. CONCLUSION

Typically, any certification procedures are also thorough in the auditing and laboratory testing of environmental claims. For example, in Malta the ECO certification program covers a number of criteria intended to enhance environmental performance and between 15% of the hotels on the Maltese Islands have been, through certification.Such monitoring mechanisms do have an effect on the effectiveness of certification programs. Environmental and sustainability education programs of the Audubon International mandate individuals to meet specific performance requirements through regular assessments. Like EarthCheck, since 1987 we have been helping businesses, communities and governments around the world to deliver clean, safe and healthy destinations for continuous monitoring and evaluation.Going forward, the TSCA system remains streamlined and has been refined in the criteria, benchmarks and standards of reporting pertaining to certification. The intention is to consolidate to provide wider access for more tourism businesses to certification while providing travel consumers with options to purchase independent green credentials, which are audited with documented evidence.

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