



The Score is Not the Story

A Critical Reflection on
Sustainability Indexes and
Certifications in City Tourism
Management

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Score is Not the Story

In recent years, cities across Europe have increasingly turned to sustainability certifications and indexes as tools to demonstrate commitment, monitor progress, and enhance their positioning as sustainable destinations.

This whitepaper examines how such tools are being used in practice, highlighting both their contributions and the challenges they present. Based on a City Destinations Alliance (CityDNA) survey, comparative survey data, and 20 interviews with tourism professionals, academics, and sustainability strategists, the report provides an informed analysis of sustainability frameworks in urban tourism management.

The findings reflect a growing recognition that while tourism can support sustainable development, it is not inherently sustainable—nor are the methods used to assess it always comprehensive. Certifications and rankings can offer useful guidelines, foster benchmarking, and encourage collaboration among stakeholders. At the same time, they may not fully capture the diverse realities, complexities, and specific contexts of each destination.

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Strategic Implications

This paper proposes a shift in perspective: certifications and rankings should be seen as tools to support ongoing learning and improvement, rather than as end goals in themselves. When used thoughtfully, they can encourage self-assessment, inform internal strategies, and foster constructive dialogue. Their value lies not in generating visibility or comparison, but in helping cities reflect on what matters most in their local context—and how to respond accordingly.

In addition, evolving EU regulations—such as the Green Claims Directive and the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive—are likely to raise expectations around verified sustainability performance. Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) may need to adapt to a growing emphasis on transparency and accountability, as sustainability practices move from voluntary efforts to more formal requirements.

This whitepaper does not suggest abandoning sustainability frameworks. Instead, it encourages cities to engage with them in a more informed, context-sensitive, and reflective way. Progress in sustainability is not solely measured by a position in a ranking, but also by tangible outcomes—such as clean air, public trust, environmental stewardship, and community well-being.

This is why The Score is Not the Story. Scores and certifications can provide structure and direction, but they represent just one part of a broader narrative. The deeper story of a sustainable city lies in the relationships it builds, the challenges it addresses, and the long-term commitments it upholds—often beyond public recognition. High scores may offer external validation, but meaningful impact is ultimately measured by the lived experiences of people and the health of local ecosystems.

As one respondent aptly put it:



It's better to be too ambitious and fail, than to succeed in low ambition."



Content

Foreword	6
<hr/>	
Context	8
<hr/>	
Sustainability Rankings and Certifications	11
Sustainability Rankings for Cities	11
The Arcadis Sustainable Cities Index	12
Cities in Motion Index	12
Sustainability Frameworks and Certifications for Tourism	13
Global Destination Sustainability Index	13
Travel & Tourism Development Index	14
GSTC Standards Framework	14
GSTC Certification by Green Destinations	15
National Programmes	15
<hr/>	
Limitations: When Good Metrics, Miss Great Problems	17
The Geography Game: Why Location Still Matters	17
Blind Spots	17
From Self-Reporting To Self-Deception	20
When Sustainability Becomes a Paper Chase	22
The Risk of Greenwashing and Greenhushing	24

Content

Advantages: How Rankings Can Drive Real Change	25
Good Guidelines to Get Started	25
Measuring Progress: a Compass not a Competition	28
From Commitment to Momentum	32
Marketing & Brand	34
<hr/>	
Conclusion: Use The Tool, Don't Become It	38
<hr/>	
Lessons from Leading Practices	40
Helsinki	40
Gothenburg	42
<hr/>	
Quality of Life as the Heart of Sustainability	44
The Missing Voice: Residents	45
<hr/>	
Sustainable Will No Longer be Enough	48
What is next?	50
An Ongoing Concern for Managers	51
The Threat of Greenhushing	51
Certifying the Future or Certifying the Few?	51
<hr/>	
Acknowledgements	55
Copyrights & References	57

Foreword

The VivaCITY project (a CityDNA, Simpleview/Granicus partnership 2023) published this Whitepaper titled 'The Score is Not the Story' as one of the project publications within the VivaCITY learning lab.

For the execution of this project Simpleview/Granicus enlisted Place Generation, professional advisors for many DMO's across the globe.

This Whitepaper delves into the specific topic of 'sustainable tourism' and how destinations can become more sustainable. It explores the lessons learned from the use of sustainable indexes and rankings in tourism from the perspective of destinations. Initiated in part by leading sustainability destinations Helsinki (currently ranked first on the Global Destination Sustainability Index - GDS) and Gothenburg (previously ranked first on the GDS), this Whitepaper questions the pros and cons, the need for and impact of such instruments.

Some of Europe's leading sustainability experts are members of the CityDNA Knowledge Group on Sustainability. This group provides a platform for cities to exchange best practices, share experiences, and learn from one another.

This White Paper builds on that spirit of collaboration. It brings together reflections from several destinations on their participation in various sustainability indexes and rankings. By sharing the outcomes, benefits, costs, and trade-offs they have observed, the aim is to support other cities in navigating similar journeys and making informed decisions about their own sustainability strategies. While it includes expert opinions and may reference academic research or industry studies, it is not intended to be a scientific or statistically relevant paper. Moreover, it wants to start an honest and open conversation on sustainability in tourism in the future.



Key Findings



Good Guidelines

Indexes and certifications offer valuable guidelines and frameworks to support the development and monitoring of sustainability initiatives at tourism destinations. They can help structure efforts, identify key performance areas, and provide a roadmap for improvement—especially in the initial stages when destinations are beginning to formalise their sustainability agendas.



Measurability vs. Meaning:

Many indexes prioritise what is easily quantifiable, which can result in less attention to areas like social equity, resident well-being, innovation, and circularity. This focus may inadvertently shift efforts toward improving scores rather than driving deeper, systemic change.



Unfair Comparison

Indexes often provide rankings to enable destinations and other stakeholders to compare their progress in sustainability. However, destinations differ significantly in terms of context — political, social, economic, as well as geographic and demographic factors — making direct comparison or benchmarking challenging and, at times, misleading.



Commitment & Momentum

Indexes and certifications are relevant tools to encourage stakeholders to take action on sustainability, creating momentum and fostering commitment toward long-term goals.



Context

Tourism has historically not been inherently sustainable, and the challenges it faces today are both numerous and widely recognised. Scholars and climate experts emphasise the urgency of the current moment, suggesting that the world has a narrow window to fundamentally restructure industrial systems and societal lifestyles in order to avoid the most catastrophic consequences of climate change.

According to UN World Tourism (n.d.), sustainable tourism development should:

- Utilise environmental resources responsibly, preserving vital ecological functions while protecting natural heritage and biodiversity.
- Honour the cultural integrity of host communities by safeguarding their tangible and intangible heritage, upholding traditional values, and promoting mutual understanding and tolerance between cultures.
- Support long-term economic sustainability by delivering fairly distributed socio-economic benefits, such as stable jobs, income opportunities, and access to social services for local communities, while also playing a role in reducing poverty.

With the European Green Deal and the Transition Pathways, sustainability has been firmly placed on the agenda of European cities. The 2024 Urban Agenda for the EU report, *Striving for Sustainable Tourism in Cities*, frames sustainable tourism as an opportunity to strengthen European cultural values while delivering economic and environmental benefits to local communities. CityDNA's current strategy reflects a shift in the global visitor economy, with profound implications for how cities must navigate the tectonic shifts in our societies and adapt to restructuring.

Transitioning from a visitor economy to a visitor ecosystem, prioritising value over volume—shifting from cities delivering what visitors want to cities sharing what they have and what they stand for (CityDNA, 2023).

But are the Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) or city tourism boards truly prioritising sustainability in practice?

CityDNA's current strategy reflects a shift in the global visitor economy, with profound implications for how cities must navigate the tectonic shifts in our societies and adapt to restructuring.



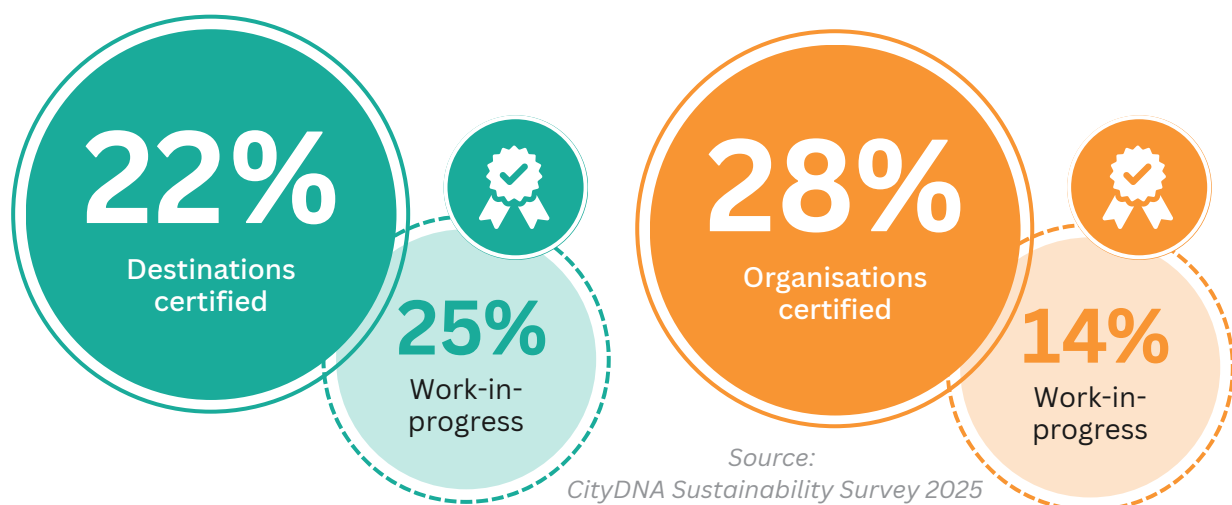
The majority of respondents reported that they have integrated some form of sustainability into their strategies. However, both the scope and the focus of these efforts vary significantly. For example: while 91% of the cities have embedded sustainability within their overall city strategy, only 70% have done so in their DMO strategy. In a self-assessment, nearly half of the cities describe themselves as “on the way, with room for improvement.” Strikingly, one in four cities admit they have not yet begun their sustainability journey at all.



Source: CityDNA Sustainability Survey 2025

In this whitepaper, we focus on the most advanced destinations—the frontrunners within the CityDNA network—and explore what can be learned from their experiences. Specifically, we examine how certification programmes, indexes, and other sustainability rankings have contributed to the sustainability in their city.

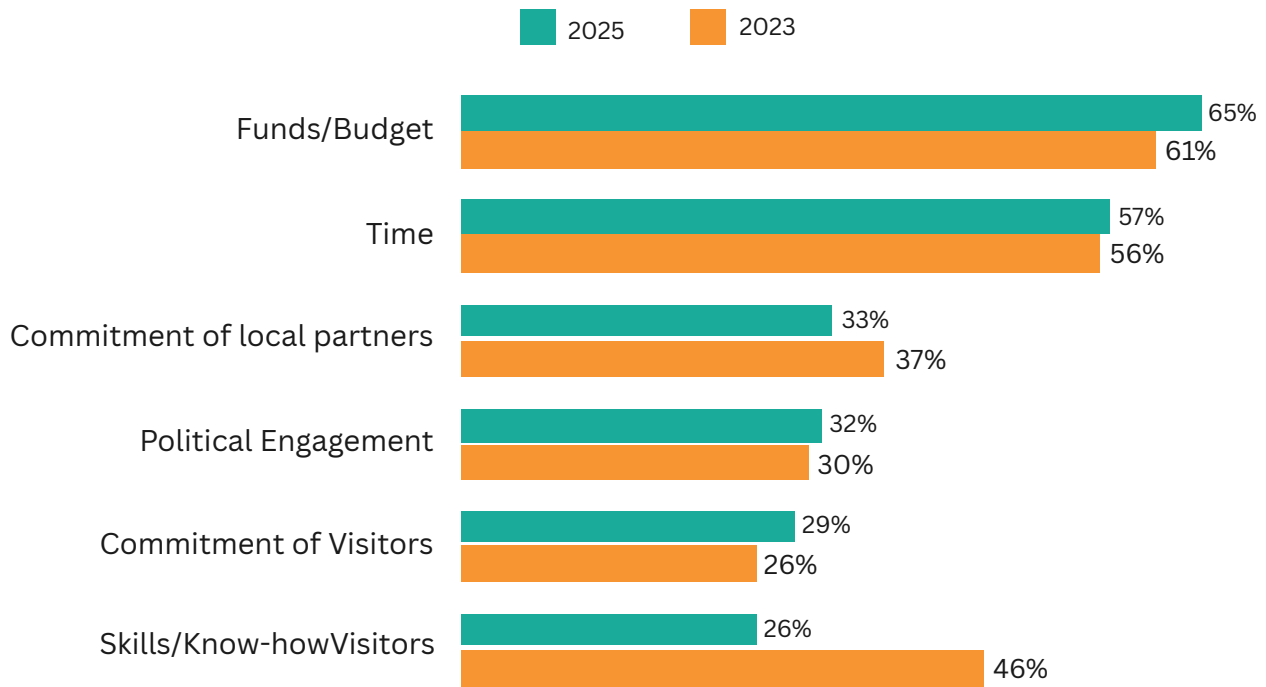
CityDNA Sustainability Survey 2025 data reveals that most city DMOs currently participate in at least one international sustainability programme. Notably, their efforts are not limited to the destination level: at least 28% have also focussed on making their own organisations more sustainable.



Source:
CityDNA Sustainability Survey 2025

When city DMOs were asked about barriers to advancing sustainability, budget and time remain the main obstacles. Encouragingly, skills and know-how have improved significantly, with only 26% citing them as a barrier in 2025.

Top 6 Barriers



Source: CityDNA Sustainability Survey 2025

If we look at the human resources investment in sustainability, we see a decrease over the last 2 years:

- **29%** have one or more full-time sustainability staff (down from 42% in 2023)
- **33%** have one or more part-time sustainability staff (down from 42% in 2023)
- **21%** have no dedicated sustainability employee (up from 13% in 2023)
- **6%** rely on external support (up from 2% in 2023)

This does not necessarily mean that there's less investment in sustainability efforts. It could be that this role has been taken up by other staff members, and has become a shared responsibility.

SENSE OF URGENCY



SENSE OF URGENCY



Source:
CityDNA Sustainability Survey 2025

Finally—and notably—**70% of European city DMOs continue to consider sustainability a high priority**, indicating that the issue remains firmly on the agenda despite varying levels of implementation.

Sustainability Rankings and Certifications

There are numerous sustainability rankings for cities, including some specifically designed for the tourism sector. These tools aim to offer a broader perspective on the diverse approaches and indicators used to assess sustainability. However, because each ranking applies its own set of indicators and methodologies, cities often receive varying scores across different systems.

Jørgensen (2024) highlights the importance of distinguishing between three key concepts:

- a **sustainability indicator**, which reflects the presence or intensity of a specific issue or phenomenon;
- a **certification**, which provides official proof that a product, service, or organisation meets a defined standard;
- and an **index**, defined as a pre-structured collection of measurable indicators.

This distinction helps clarify the specific roles and limitations of each tool, all of which are briefly discussed in the sections that follow.

Urban rankings and indices generally rely on two primary approaches to data collection. The first is based on independent research conducted by institutions or organisations, where city inclusion does not depend on an application process. Instead, data is gathered from a range of external sources, such as surveys, government records, and existing reports or studies. The second approach involves an application-based process, in which cities or destinations actively submit requests for inclusion, with much of the data being self-reported by the applicants.

Sustainability Rankings for Cities

These rankings evaluate cities based on a wide array of indicators, with tourism playing only a secondary or peripheral role in the analysis.

These tools aim to offer a broader perspective on the diverse approaches and indicators used to assess sustainability.



The Arcadis Sustainable Cities Index

Introduced in 2015, the Arcadis Sustainable Cities Index (SCI) acts as a reference for evaluating the environmental, social, and economic well-being of cities. **Built around three main pillars - Planet, People, and Profit - the index aligns closely with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), offering insights into urban progress toward these global objectives.** Each pillar is linked to specific SDGs, highlighting the interconnected nature of urban sustainability and global development. By assessing aspects ranging from air quality and waste management to social equity, livability, and economic vitality, the SCI presents a comprehensive picture of how cities are contributing to a more sustainable future (Arcadis, 2024). It is independent research conducted by the institution, in which cities do not apply to be included. In the SCI ranking for 2024, the top 3 cities were: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Copenhagen.

Cities in Motion Index

This index was developed by the Spanish business school IESE in 2013. The Cities in Motion Index (CIMI) incorporates nine dimensions to evaluate the quality of life, sustainability, and innovative capacity of major global cities. These dimensions include the economy, mobility, technology, urban planning, environment, human capital, social cohesion, international projection, and governance. According to CIMI (2025), the index serves not only as a tool for assessment but also as a strategic guide for cities seeking to develop more resilient and inclusive urban models. Drawn from independent research, where inclusion did not rely on applications. In the CIMI 2025 ranking, the top 3 cities were London, New York, and Paris.



Sustainability Frameworks and Certifications for Tourism

As a key component in many European cities, as we know tourism can be assessed through diverse approaches. Whether driven by the private sector, non-profit organisations, or public institutions, a variety of sustainability rankings have been developed to specifically address tourism-related impacts and practices.

Global Destination Sustainability Index

Established in 2016 through a collaboration between the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), City Destinations Alliance (CityDNA), the IMEX Group, and the global marketing agency MCI, the GDS-Movement originated from the Global Destination Sustainability Index (GDS-Index). Conceived as a performance improvement tool, the GDS-Index aimed to evaluate and support the advancement of sustainable practices within urban destinations. It provides a framework for assessing, benchmarking, and enhancing the sustainability policies, strategies, and initiatives of destination management organisations, municipal authorities, and actors across the tourism supply chain on a global scale (GDS, 2025). It follows an application-based process, where cities or destinations proactively pay for inclusion and data is provided through self-reporting, providing evidence. According to GDS (2025), the top ten destinations have recently revised their strategic approaches to managing the visitor economy and actively engage local residents in the monitoring and evaluation of these strategies. As shown in the 2024 report (see image below), the top three cities are Helsinki, Gothenburg, and Copenhagen.

	2024	2023		2024	2023		2024	2023		2024	2023
Helsinki* 1	92.43	90.49	Aalborg 11	82.98	87.70	Cork 21	77.18	77.86	Barcelona 31	75.57	74.52
Gothenburg 2	90.83	94.64	Glasgow 12	81.88	87.47	Victoria 22	77.17	66.15	Svendborg 32	75.52	77.06
Copenhagen* 3	88.19	91.73	Zurich 13	81.08	84.35	Tampere 23	76.96	78.33	Brisbane 33	75.23	73.07
Bergen 4	86.49	90.15	Bilbao 14	80.27	78.83	Melbourne 24	76.61	77.53	Songkhla 34	74.89	79.56
Aarhus 5	85.68	88.64	Lyon 15	80.16	82.85	Galway 25	76.06	71.85	Faroe Islands 35	74.88	77.31
Bordeaux 6	83.37	87.10	Goyang 16	78.90	82.66	Berlin* 26	75.92	76.69	Montreal 36	74.54	75.12
Singapore* 7	83.37	81.83	Reykjavik* 17	78.28	82.16	Tirol 27	75.80	82.53	Quebec City 37	73.74	64.43
Oslo* 8	83.26	92.46	Middelfart 18	77.80	82.16	Clare 28	75.77	72.01	Limerick 38	73.51	71.39
Belfast* 9	83.14	86.40	Kerry 19	77.65	80.61	Dublin* 29	75.69	63.89	Horsens 39	73.06	62.03
Sydney 10	83.13	77.21	Paris* 20	77.24	80.12	Stockholm* 30	75.57	86.74	Odense 40	72.87	79.94

*Capital Cities

*Capital Cities

GDS-Movement Top Destinations 2024 (Source: GDS, 2025)

Travel & Tourism Development Index

In 2024, the Travel & Tourism Development Index (TTDI) was released for the second time as an updated version of the World Economic Forum's longstanding Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI), which was first launched in 2007 (World Economic Forum, 2024). The TTDI evaluates the various factors and policies that support the sustainable and resilient growth of the travel and tourism sector, which plays a key role in a country's broader development. Its main purpose is to act as a valuable benchmarking tool for stakeholders, helping them assess the sector's progress and shape effective policy and investment decisions (World Economic Forum, 2024), being an independent research-based index. By highlighting both strengths and areas needing improvement, the TTDI promotes a better understanding of the complex and interconnected dynamics of tourism development while also supporting strategic planning and collaboration among stakeholders to foster sustainable and resilient growth (World Economic Forum, 2024). Unlike many other indexes that focus on cities, the TTDI analyses the overall travel and tourism environment at the national level. According to the Index, the top three countries in 2024 were: the United States, Spain and Japan.

GSTC Standards Framework

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) is a standard-setting and accreditation body that developed the GSTC Standards, formerly referred to as the GSTC Criteria, which function as the internationally recognised benchmarks for sustainability in the tourism and travel sectors. (GSTC, 2025). They are applied in various contexts such as educational initiatives, raising awareness, shaping policies for businesses, governments, and other entities, as well as for monitoring, evaluation, and certification purposes (GSTC, 2025). Developed through a global collaboration, these Standards aim to create a unified understanding of sustainability in tourism (GSTC, 2025). They represent the foundational requirements, rather than the highest goals, that businesses, governments, and destinations should meet in pursuing sustainability across social, environmental, cultural, and economic areas. While it serves as a basis for certification, it does not constitute a certification in itself. The framework encompasses the GSTC Industry Standard, Destination Standard, MICE Standard, and Attraction Standard, each addressing specific sectors within tourism.

By highlighting both strengths and areas needing improvement, the TTDI promotes a better understanding of the complex and interconnected dynamics of tourism development while also supporting strategic planning and collaboration among stakeholders to foster sustainable and resilient growth (World Economic Forum, 2024).



GSTC Certification by Green Destinations

Considering that the GSTC does not directly issue certifications, it partners with third-party organisations that do, such as Green Destinations. In 2018, Green Destinations partnered with the GSTC to promote the sustainability and international visibility of destinations. This initiative functions as a certification programme rather than a ranking system. It includes regular evaluations designed to promote continuous improvement and provides accredited recognition for efforts in environmental, social, and cultural sustainability. Certified destinations are permitted to use official logos and receive promotional support through Green Destinations' digital platforms. Each year, Green Destinations publishes the "Top 100 Stories" list, which does not indicate that a destination is fully sustainable. Instead, it showcases destinations that have demonstrated significant progress toward more sustainable tourism and meet essential sustainability criteria. The list does not rank destinations, but rather highlights 100 innovative and impactful initiatives submitted by participating destinations. Once a year, the best stories from the Top 100 list are jury-selected for the annual 'Green Destinations Story Awards'.

National Programmes

Apart from global rankings and certifications, numerous destinations have established their own national sustainability initiatives. For example: The Sustainable Travel Finland and the Green Scheme by the Slovenian Tourism Board.

The Sustainable Travel Finland (STF) programme offers practical tools to help tourism businesses and destinations incorporate sustainable practices into their daily operations in a structured way. It's free and open to all tourism-related actors in Finland (Visit Finland, 2025). Built on a 7-step sustainable tourism development path (from commitment to continuous development to development of a plan, application and verification) that educates the user, each step is accompanied by criteria that comply with international standards. Those who earn the STF label benefit from a continuous improvement model, up-to-date insights on sustainable tourism, marketing assistance, and increased exposure through Visit Finland's platforms (Visit Finland, 2025). In order to obtain the label from STF, tourism suppliers are required to also possess a third-party certification.

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The Green Scheme of Slovenian Tourism (GSST) is a nationally developed tool and certification programme operating under the *Slovenia Green* umbrella brand. It coordinates efforts aimed at advancing sustainable tourism in Slovenia and provides destinations and tourism service providers with resources to assess and enhance their sustainability practices. To receive the Slovenia Green Destination label (Bronze, Silver, Gold, or Platinum), destinations must meet the criteria of the Green Destinations Standard. Service providers, on the other hand, must either obtain or present one of the internationally recognised sustainability certifications approved by Slovenia Green. The scheme encompasses a wide range of tourism stakeholders, including destinations, accommodations, parks, travel agencies, attractions, restaurants, and beaches.

The goal of this whitepaper is not to provide an exhaustive overview of the numerous sustainability indexes, certifications, and national programmes. Rather, these are mentioned selectively, primarily to illustrate key concepts.



Limitations: When Good Metrics, Miss Great Problems

The Geography Game: Why Location Still Matters

In sustainability rankings, cities do not always start on equal footing. Countries that are built on strong welfare systems and national sustainability policies—often in Northern Europe—tend to score higher because many of the highlighted criteria are already addressed at the national or city level. This means the tourism sector benefits from an existing foundation of infrastructure, public services, and data access, rather than shouldering the responsibility alone.

In practice, such rankings may reflect pre-existing advantages, such as accessibility and public services, rather than solely measuring sustainability efforts. The intention here is to highlight that when comparing destinations, it is essential to acknowledge that they operate within diverse historical, political, and socioeconomic contexts. These differences do not necessarily reflect a lack of effort by those currently involved but may stem from structural limitations, policy environments, or historical inequalities.

Moreover, most programmes apply the same criteria to all destinations—whether rural, urban, or island-based—without accounting for local context. A single reference point is often used to compare diverse places (Blancas et al., 2018), but this method can be skewed by differences in geography, tourism scale, and resource availability. As a result, evaluations may fail to reflect the specific realities of each destination. Blancas et al. (2018) warn that such benchmarking practices may offer little practical value for improving a destination's tourism model.

Blind Spots

Sustainability rankings sometimes reduce complex topics to numerical scores based on a predetermined set of metrics. Some programmes merely ask whether you have a plan—regardless of its implementation or outcomes. Others do request results, but don't always focus on what is most meaningful for your city. This can lead to a distorted picture, where superficial improvements are rewarded, while deeper and more complex issues—such as affordable housing, water scarcity, or local pollution—are overlooked.

“

Mary Isgro, Sustainable Tourism Consultant, puts it:

Even cities doing well in [indexes] [...] metrics might miss the most important local issue simply because it's not measured. By focusing only on [a index] [...] measurements, rankings risk missing what truly matters.”

In this quote, Isgro highlights how the specific needs of individual destinations may be overlooked by index methodologies, which often adopt a broad framework intended to ensure comparability across diverse contexts.

(Hyper)local Blind Spots

Sustainability indexes often fail to reflect the unique, community-specific issues that matter most locally. Cities might invest in infrastructure improvements in tourist zones to boost their ranking, while neglecting the needs of everyday commuters—residents—elsewhere. Willy Legrand, Professor at IU International University of Applied Sciences in Germany, highlighted:

“

While certifications and rankings have their place, overemphasis on standardisation can overlook local realities—sometimes even undermining the communities they aim to serve. The priority should always be action and implementation, not just appearing favourably in reports.”

– Willy Legrand, Professor at IU International University of Applied Sciences in Germany



Broader Policy Blind Spot

When programmes reward initiatives, they don't always take into account the broader policy framework. For example, Helsinki could receive a higher score on an index by levying a tourist overnight tax and reinvesting it into sustainability. But in Finland—where taxes are already high—this may not be politically or socially viable.

Lack of Responsibility for Global Trade Effects

Matias Thuen Jørgensen, Professor of Tourism Management and Head of the Centre for Tourism Research at Roskilde University in Denmark, shared his reflections on the responsibility for global emissions:



The largest climate impact of tourism—aviation emissions—is typically excluded from sustainability rankings, leading to an incomplete assessment of environmental impact.”

– Matias Thuen Jørgensen, Professor of Tourism Management and Head of the Centre for Tourism Research, Roskilde University, Denmark

Social and Cultural Blind Spots

In many (though not all) rankings, there is a clear emphasis on environmental factors (30.92%) over social ones (16.43%). As a result, key social issues in city tourism—such as fair wages and community attitudes—tend to receive limited attention (Jørgensen, 2024).

Neglect of Circular Economy and Innovation

Mireia Guix observes that most indexes do not account for progress towards a circular economy or encourage innovative solutions. Instead, they favour compliance with existing (often outdated) criteria. Jeremy Sampson, CEO of the Travel Foundation, shared:



The box-ticking mentality means that compliance becomes the goal, rather than genuine progress or innovation.”

– Jeremy Sampson, CEO, The Travel Foundation

However, as Jukka Punamäki, Senior Advisor in tourism in Helsinki, points out that not all destinations begin by innovating new sustainability measures.



In the end, saving the planet is hard work and it requires some - usually universal - actions.”

– Jukka Punamäki, Senior Advisor in tourism and destination management unit, Business Helsinki

No Inclusion of Genuine Local Feedback

Few indexes systematically incorporate feedback from residents or local businesses—missing out on vital perspectives for meaningful change.

Sustainability indexes and certifications rarely capture the whole truth about what makes a place truly sustainable. While many programmes are regularly updated and do consider feedback to improve accuracy, they still tend to emphasise certain aspects of sustainability—sometimes quite arbitrarily (Jørgensen, 2024). This selective focus can steer destinations to prioritise what the index measures, rather than what their community truly needs.

From Self Reporting to Self-Deception

Much of the data used in sustainability certifications and rankings is self-reported, making results highly dependent on how organisations assess their own performance. While urban sustainability ratings are often praised for their apparent transparency and objectivity (Elgert, 2018), critics emphasise that these tools are shaped by social and political choices—not by neutral science. As Albert Salman, CEO of Green Destinations, notes:



You have a lot of incomparable data in the global context.”

– Albert Salman, CEO and Founder, Green Destinations



Results are typically presented as simple scores, with little explanation of how they are calculated. Consequently, a city's ranking can vary significantly between different systems, depending on the methods used. As Saez et al. (2020) argue, "There is a growing need to... rank the rankings."

The simple scores also mostly proof your sustainability efforts. A review of 20 years of academic research in sustainability in destinations shows results are lacking or show inconsistencies regarding financial benefits and actual environmental or social improvements.

These limitations matter less when rankings are used for honest self-reflection and improvement. But they become problematic when the primary goal is simply to reach the top.

As with many rankings, one must always examine the full list and question how it was compiled. Often, participation is voluntary—open to all, but only those who apply can be ranked. This does not make the results representative. Some indexes are little more than lists of paying clients or members. Especially when issued by commercial entities, such rankings risk implying that non-clients are not sustainable—which neither helps the industry nor informs the public, nor the clients.

Case: Booking.com

In spring 2024, Booking.com discontinued its "Travel Sustainable" programme after criticism from the Dutch regulator. The scheme was deemed misleading for implying that 'only affiliated accommodations' were sustainable, and other accommodations - that didn't have a contract with Booking.com - would not be sustainable. Booking.com now uses recognised third-party sustainability certifications as the basis for labelling properties—making verifiable standards the new foundation for sustainability claims on its platform (Fox, 2024, March 26th).



**BOOKING.COM DROPS "TRAVEL
SUSTAINABLE" PROGRAM**

When Sustainability Becomes a Paper Chase

A Sustainability Manager is not a Secretary of Forms. As the experiences of Helsinki and Gothenburg show, achieving a certification can be a time-consuming, labour-intensive, and therefore expensive process.



Case: Helsinki's High Efforts (2024)

To meet the requirements of various certification schemes, Helsinki responded to a total of 760 questions:

- **For the national programme Sustainable Travel Finland:** 209 questions
- **For the Green Destinations Certification (accredited by GSTC):** 83 main questions and 286 sub-questions, resulting in a 119-page report
- **For the GDS-Index:** 77 main questions and 265 sub-questions



It's a huge job for us. We have a lot of work collecting the data, filling in the forms, and making sure everything is correct. For the Green Destinations, it took me about two months full time just to get all the documentation together. The complete process took close to two years."

– Jukka Punamäki, Senior Advisor in tourism and destination management unit, Business Helsinki

Jukka Punamäki highlights that although certifications and indexes can be time-consuming, they also offer advantages worth considering:



The indexes and certification are time consuming, that much is true. But to build up all the required knowledge on your own would be even more time-consuming. So in the end, the certifications might save time.”

– Jukka Punamäki, Senior Advisor in tourism and destination management unit, Business Helsinki

This perspective encourages a reassessment of how such tools are integrated into planning and evaluation, viewing them less as administrative burdens and more as assets for strategic development. At the same time, each destination must evaluate these tools in light of their own context and capacities, weighing both the potential benefits and the practical challenges they may present.

CityDNA's survey 2023 indicates that over 50% of city DMOs in Europe have either no dedicated sustainability staff or just one part-time employee working in that role. None of the experts interviewed considered these efforts a waste of time.

But all agreed: certification and reporting should not take up all of a sustainability manager's time, especially considering that the process typically requires a few months of focussed work each year.

“Most time should be spent on action and implementation,” emphasises Willy Legrand, while **Mary Isgro** underlines the importance of **community engagement** as a core responsibility of sustainability teams.



The GDS-Index, for example, requires a lot of data from different departments. It takes weeks of collecting, coordinating, and checking everything before we can even start filling in the forms. And then there are always follow-up questions. For us, it's at least several weeks of work every year, and that's just for one ranking.”

– Katarina Thorstensson, Sustainability Strategist & Destination Development, Gothenburg



Very often, we've seen boards hiring people specifically to work on rankings and certifications. I think it's necessary—but the responsibility shouldn't fall solely on that person. The first job of any sustainability manager should be to embed sustainability into everyone's job description. If all the responsibility falls on one person, you'll never make real progress.”

– Xavier Font, Professor at University of Surrey,
Editor in Chief at Journal of Sustainable Tourism

The Risk of Greenwashing and Greenhushing

High scores on sustainability indexes can create a false sense of accomplishment. This can lead to two problematic responses: greenwashing, where destinations overstate or exaggerate their environmental efforts for reputational gain; and greenhushing, a more subtle strategy in which destinations selectively communicate only their successes while keeping persistent challenges or failures out of the spotlight. In both cases, the risk is that the focus shifts from genuine, ongoing improvement to image management. Rather than being motivated to address deeper structural issues, destinations may become preoccupied with maintaining their public profile.

This is not the case for certification programmes that provide you with the evidence, to avoid greenwashing. That's why the EU Green Claims Directive focusses on certificates.

Advantages: How Rankings Can Drive Real Change

Good Guidelines to Get Started

While the concept of sustainability enjoys broad appeal, a clear and universally accepted definition remains elusive. As Turcu (2018) notes, terms like sustainability and sustainable development are often used to reflect a wide range of perspectives and priorities. Despite ongoing debate, the concept continues to hold a central place on both public and private agendas.

Most commonly, sustainability is understood as a multidimensional construct—encompassing economic growth, environmental protection, social equity, and increasingly, governance and cultural context. But this very complexity makes it difficult to translate the idea into concrete action.

That's where certification systems and indexes come in: they attempt to **operationalise broad ideals** into specific, measurable indicators. When used well, these tools can help decision-makers move from aspiration to implementation—guiding improvements and benchmarking progress over time.

As **Margrét Wendt**, project manager at **Visit Reykjavik**, puts it:



There's always stuff that we're not doing — or not doing yet. And that serves as a great kind of push to think, 'Oh, we need to do that too. Why aren't we doing that yet? And how can we make it happen?' That's really great, I think. When you look through all these different questions and aspects, it gives you inspiration for how you can do better in terms of sustainability. It can also help with prioritising, because sustainability can sometimes feel a bit overwhelming."

– Margrét Wendt, Project Manager,
Visit Reykjavik

Wendt's insight reflects how frameworks like indexes and green certifications not only help identify gaps, but also inspire action and support prioritisation.

In contexts where market failures or weak regulation persist, certification schemes become even more crucial. As Mzembe et al. (2020) describe, these are voluntary, market-based mechanisms that define sustainability standards and practices—enabling organisations to self-regulate and demonstrate commitment in the absence of strong policy frameworks.

For businesses, the benefits are multifaceted. According to Elhoushy et al. (2025), organisations engage with certification programmes to reduce operational costs, optimise resource use, build internal expertise, and gain access to incentives. Such schemes not only enhance competitiveness by strengthening internal capabilities, but also offer a structure for continuous improvement—assessing current performance, setting strategic goals, and implementing effective sustainability actions (Elhoushy et al., 2025).

Beyond individual businesses, these frameworks have become strategic tools at city and destination level. They support long-term planning and resilience, while helping destinations distinguish themselves through measurable sustainability achievements. Elhoushy et al. (2025) note their role in fostering innovation, enhancing environmental accountability, and guiding urban transformation.

On the ground, green certification schemes are often seen as practical enablers. As **Alenka Soršak**, Sustainability Manager at **Ljubljana Tourism**, explains:



I would say that these are important resources for us, because when you start working as a sustainability manager, you don't really have clear rules or guidelines. These kinds of tools help us understand what sustainability involves, who is included, which projects might be relevant and so on. I see these tools as, let's say, helpers or practical guides —something you can learn from if you approach that mindset. You shouldn't think, 'Okay, we have another label, so we're the best,' but rather use them to learn, to reflect, and see how others are doing, to compare and improve."

– Alenka Soršak, Sustainability Manager,
Ljubljana Tourism



A certification, by itself, demonstrates limited value. However, when applied thoughtfully, it becomes a strategic tool, not only for accountability and reporting but also for driving meaningful progress. This perspective underscores that sustainability frameworks are not merely symbolic. When used effectively, they promote organisational learning, facilitate peer benchmarking, and support informed, long-term decision-making.

Xavier Font, Professor at University of Surrey and researcher in the field, emphasises how certifications and rankings can offer an overview within a framework of what has already been achieved and what remains to be addressed, while also fostering a shared sense of motivation:



We just have the facts, but then we need to ask: Okay, so what's missing? What are the projects that are lacking here? Obviously, you need to tick a certain number of boxes when applying for one of these. So, the first step is to look at what you've got and how many of the boxes you already tick—like, we've got good data here, right? Then you identify the boxes that are still missing. That will determine whether you're ready to apply this year or next, and how to put together an action list—what you need to do next. But the key starting point for creating any of this change is self-efficacy. [...] Self-efficacy—the shared belief that we can create change—is essential.”

*– Xavier Font, Professor at University of Surrey,
Editor in Chief at Journal of Sustainable Tourism*



Rankings and indicator-based indexes also play a vital role in guiding improvements at the destination level. As Blancas et al. (2018) note, these tools help pinpoint the key areas a destination needs to address in order to strengthen its sustainability performance.

By revealing performance gaps and highlighting opportunities for more efficient management, indexes support the creation of targeted strategies and foster a culture of continuous benchmarking and improvement. Metrics alone don't move a city—but they can show it where to start walking.

Measuring Progress: a Compass not a Competition

As noted in the previous section, certifications and rankings provide a valuable framework for building sustainable strategies, especially by helping destinations identify where improvements are needed. In interviews conducted for this whitepaper, tourism stakeholders consistently emphasised the value of sustainability certification schemes as practical tools for monitoring progress, both by comparing performance across destinations and by tracking change over time within the same locality.

Randy Durband, CEO of Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), highlights the particular value of rankings in the early phases of a destination's sustainability journey:



Along with our pass/fail certification, a numeric score-based ranking holds great value, especially in the early phases. Because first of all, you can compare yourself to both your earlier self and to So if you start at 28 [points] out of 100, then you know you need to do better. Then when you reach 65 [points] and you're feeling better, then you're like, oh, but those guys are 72 [points] and those guys are 83 [points] I think both have tremendous power, one, just to see how we're doing against the number 100 ourselves, and then secondly, how we do compared to others.”

– Randy Durband, CEO,
Global Sustainable Tourism Council

Used with care, rankings offer a baseline and a direction—not a verdict, but a beginning. **Mireia Guix**, Lecturer in Tourism & Hospitality at The University of Queensland, highlighted the versatility of rankings as management and engagement tools:



The rankings are a good measurement tool. They allow you to benchmark yourself against your past performance, to measure yourself against others and reflect and improve. Rankings provide comparable data across cities and DMOs. They can serve to identify strengths and weaknesses. They can help set priorities and goals and track progress. Rankings can be used for engaging different stakeholders, not only externally, but also within the broader city management team. Hopefully, they can be a tool for learning and building internal capabilities. Some rankings provide access to networks where you can access expert knowledge on sustainability and informal expertise from peers. The ranking score can also serve to build support, which can potentially attract more funding to progress sustainability and climb in the rankings over time.”

– Mireia Guix, Lecturer in Tourism & Hospitality,
The University of Queensland

Thomas Laurell described how the Stockholm region has used the Global Destination Sustainability (GDS) Index not as a competitive ranking, but as a tool for continuous development:



We are using GDS as a tool to track our development, but also to get ideas about what we need to work on in the future. That's the main reason we're using it. We're not focussed on rankings at all. For us, it's more interesting to look at the index and to review the reports we receive after each yearly evaluation—to see what we can assess and improve for the following year.”

– *Thomas Laurell, Chief of Staff,
Stockholm Business Region*



In Gothenburg, **Katarina Thorstensson** emphasised the index's instrumental role in shaping long-term strategies:



I mean, in some ways it's a good way to measure, because if it's fairly consistent, you can measure against yourself and see progress. But on the other hand, you have to understand and interpret the instrument—I see it as a tool. You have to understand it to 'play' it. It's really about what you make of it.

I think there are definite benefits, but of course, there are downsides as well. For us, it's been very helpful; it has helped us accelerate. I honestly don't think we would be where we are today without it. But again, you need to be aware of the weaknesses and the blind spots.

– *Katarina Thorstensson,
Sustainability Strategist & Destination Development,
Gothenburg*

Thorstensson's reflection underscores the need for careful interpretation when using such tools. Like any index, it must be adapted to the specific context of the locality. To be truly effective, it requires an honest understanding of both its strengths and limitations—ensuring that its use aligns with local priorities and realities. It's not the score that matters- but what cities learn from each other along the way.

From a European Commission perspective, **Ramunė Genzbigelyte-Venturi** stresses that indexes should not be seen merely as competitive instruments, but also as platforms for sharing knowledge and scaling up good practices:



It's always good to have an overview—not so much for comparison, but to highlight good examples and best practices. It helps us see how we can support the cities that want to move in the direction of sustainability, building on successful experiences.”

*– Ramune Genzbigelyte-Venturi,
Policy Officer for Tourism,
European Commission*

Measuring progress is essential to understanding the direction and impact of sustainability efforts. Quantitative indicators can provide valuable snapshots of a destination's performance and development over time.

Yet, as discussed in the previous chapter, numbers alone can be limiting. They often miss the depth and nuance needed to grasp the social, cultural, and contextual layers of sustainability. Metrics may show what is happening, but rarely why.

Sustainability isn't just a trend line, it's a lived reality, best understood in both numbers and narratives. That's why it's crucial to complement quantitative data with qualitative approaches. Stories, lived experiences, and local perspectives help unpack the complexity behind the numbers, offering a more holistic and meaningful understanding—especially when deeper insight is required. When metrics meet meaning, better decisions follow.

From Commitment to Momentum

The importance of sustainability in destinations is widely acknowledged, not only in environmental terms, but also in its social and economic dimensions, especially given the role tourism plays in many regions. As previously discussed, sustainability must be embedded across all aspects of destination management.

But turning that principle into practice is not always straightforward. One of the greatest challenges lies in engaging diverse stakeholders and aligning their interests around a shared, long-term vision. Tools may open the door, but it takes collaboration to walk through it.

Xavier Font illustrates how certifications and rankings can act as powerful catalysts, sparking immediate action and helping to mobilise stakeholders towards collective sustainability goals:



Individuals needed the validation of a process—the fact that these awards would provide recognition for a certain city at the European level. This person essentially understood what different stakeholders needed in order to take action. They already had the motivation, but they had to find a way to get others to say, I’m going to act now. " I'm going to put in the effort —whether that meant making a final change, providing data, or at least showing up to the events where we were going to discuss the proposal.”

– Xavier Font, Professor at University of Surrey,
Editor in Chief at Journal of Sustainable Tourism

Font further highlights how these certifications and rankings support the learning process and foster networking among stakeholders, facilitating the collection of necessary data for green schemes:



What we're basically seeing through our studies is a massive—but often unreported—process of learning that happens as destination stakeholders talk to one another. These awards or indices give them an excuse, a reason, to knock on the door of another government official or industry association. The first step toward empathy and understanding is simply talking to each other. People who never talk will never be able to understand another person's point of view. These systems are brilliant for creating situations and opportunities where people have to engage with one another. That doesn't mean they'll agree, but they begin to recognise and acknowledge each other's positions—and that puts them in a place where they can start to listen to counterfactuals.”

– Xavier Font, Professor at University of Surrey,
Editor in Chief at Journal of Sustainable Tourism

Margrét Wendt shares her experience in Visit Reykjavik, emphasising how these tools can drive action:



I think that's why it's such a good tool to really push forward, and it does also help put a little bit pressure on the people that are our partners and the people that we're working with, because we can tell them, like, look, there's this tool that we have which ranks, you know, or benchmarks different cities when it comes to sustainability, and we

would really need you to do this thing so that we, you know, can advance in the ranking, because everybody sees kind of the general benefit of having a good ranking.

– Margrét Wendt, Project Manager,
Visit Reykjavik

While stakeholders often come with different priorities and perspectives, sustainability certification schemes can serve as a unifying point of focus—offering a shared objective that sparks collective action. These frameworks create opportunities to align diverse interests, providing structure and direction for integrating sustainability across sectors.

Yet their real value goes beyond motivation. Their true potential depends on the willingness of stakeholders to embrace them not just as checklists, but as tools for deeper engagement, shared learning, and lasting transformation. The certificate may light the path, but it's the shared commitment that keeps us moving forward.

Marketing & Brand

High sustainability scores are often expected to strengthen a destination's brand and attract positive media attention—with the hope of drawing more visitors.

Jørgensen (2024) cites a global study of 11,000 consumers in 11 countries: 90% of travellers say they actively seek sustainable options, and 70% have avoided destinations or transport perceived as unsustainable. Similarly, a 2025 Booking.com survey of over 32,000 travellers reports that 93% want to make more sustainable choices when they travel.

But good intentions don't always translate into action. The familiar say-do gap looms large—so we turned to real-life practitioners to ask what happens on the ground.

As **Katarina Thorstensson** puts it:

“

When it comes to attracting business events, we can see that there's a business case for us. But for leisure tourists, I'm not sure they choose a destination just because it's sustainable. Still, it is fundamental to our brand—part of building the story of Gothenburg.”

– Katarina Thorstensson,
Sustainability Strategist & Destination
Development, Gothenburg



Thorstensson adds: *“Since sustainability is very much about caring, even in the details, I believe it enhances the quality of the experience and the destination. In the long run, that makes you more 'chooseable' for leisure tourists”.* This suggests that while a high ranking in sustainability schemes may not directly attract more leisure tourists, the underlying sustainability efforts—such as attention to quality, care, and responsibility, can still positively shape the visitor experience and influence destination appeal over time. Sustainability should be embedded within the tourism experience.

Findings from Place Generation’s perception research underline this nuance. In Helsinki, 7% of all online conversations about the city explicitly reference the city’s sustainability efforts (see: Helsinki’s Identity research, 2025). Travellers often praise its clean and efficient public transport, commitment to green spaces, and sustainable practices—even in restaurants. Even if sustainability doesn’t sell tickets, it builds trust—and that may be worth more in the long run.

Jukka Punamäki shared that since the city reached the top spot on the GDS-Index 2024, they have seen a notable increase in media attention:



We received 456 media hits from the 'GDS #1' press release, making it the most successful press release of the past year. It had an estimated reach of 21 million and a value of €7.9 million.”

– Jukka Punamäki, Senior Advisor in tourism destination management unit, Business Helsinki

This media response illustrates how strong performance in sustainability indexes and certifications can directly enhance a city's image and visibility, amplifying its messaging across international media outlets. Punamäki highlights that there is a correlation between Helsinki’s sustainability efforts and how the city is perceived by visitors. However, it remains difficult to determine whether those who do visit are motivated by the city’s top position.

Aiming for a top position in sustainability rankings should not come with inflated visitor number expectations. A high score might earn you a brief spotlight, but the attention rarely lasts more than a few weeks. Real sustainability doesn’t trend—it takes root. If your city is truly committed to sustainability, it must be woven into the fabric of your brand. It should shape every product and service you offer, inform every narrative you share—not just your official story, but all the stories told within the city.

And since many of those stories come from residents, sustainability has to breathe through them. If it doesn't yet—as it does in Helsinki—you'll need to work on that. Often, this means helping residents realise that: 'what's normal to them may already be exceptional elsewhere'. You can't afford to let that humility slip into greenhushing, where silence cancels out credibility.

In the end, the founders of certification schemes remind us that these tools were never meant to be marketing assets in the first place. It's not about being seen as sustainable. It's about becoming a place that is. As Albert Salman, founder of Green Destinations, puts it:



I think they are quite irrelevant for visitors, and even for residents. But they are very important for those involved in destination management.”

*– Albert Salman, CEO and Founder,
Green Destinations*

Randy Durband CEO of GSTC: “Indexes and rankings are better viewed purely as management tools—not marketing practices”. He highlights:



You know, everybody defines it [sustainability] differently, so therefore it's almost meaningless, and it does very poorly in marketing. What really works in marketing sustainability is talking about specific elements. When you talk about locally sourced food, that resonates. When you talk about friendly people in our community who welcome you with open arms, that resonates. So to really market it, you have to make it more human, more storytelling-based.”

*– Randy Durband, CEO,
Global Sustainable Tourism Council*

Responding to Change

Sustainability is not a fixed state—it evolves.

As discussed earlier, it is a process of continuous adaptation. Many interviewees highlighted how sustainability indexes and certifications have shifted over time, responding to new priorities, emerging challenges, and the growing maturity of those involved.

Margrét Wendt reflects on her experience with the GDS-Index, emphasising how its regular updates push Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) to keep improving. For her, the value lies not just in the score, but in the movement it creates.



Once all of the destinations [involved] have achieved something[...] it just becomes this basic thing which they're not even asking about anymore in the GDS. And they take that question out.[...] if everybody, let's say, already has a sustainability policy. And the question is, no longer, do you have a sustainability positive policy? No. Then the question becomes, does your sustainability policy include this, this, this and this. And then it pushes you to do it better, and even more in depth”

– Margrét Wendt, Project Manager,
Visit Reykjavik

In this way, the evolving nature of these indexes pushes organisations to not only meet existing standards but to continuously innovate and improve. It's not just a tool for evaluation—it becomes a process of transformation.

Guy Bigwood, CEO and Founder of the GDS-Index, elaborated on this adaptive approach, contrasting the flexibility of indexes with the more rigid nature of certifications:



The index is nimble and organic. For example let's look at a question - Do you have a Sustainable Mobility Plan? Maybe in two years' time, that question won't even be valid anymore. As soon as we get close to a 100% 'yes' answer to a question, we remove it, and we move on to the next set of relevant questions.


I don't know of any certifications who can do that because they have a more complex governance process for establishing standards. It takes two to three years to create a standard, and it may need accreditation, so the process is much slower.”

– Guy Bigwood, CEO and Chief Changemaker,
Global Destination Sustainability Movement

Conclusion: Use The Tool, Don't Become It

It has become clear that sustainability indexes and certifications can serve as valuable instruments in the pursuit of more sustainable destinations. They offer structure, generate momentum, connect local actors, and sharpen our view on what urban sustainability could become. They are not without merit—but neither are they without limits.

What they offer is a beginning, not a blueprint. These schemes should never be mistaken for ends in themselves. Their value lies in their capacity to initiate—not to define—transformative change. They expose blind spots, highlight gaps, and provide a shared vocabulary. But real sustainability begins where their reach ends: in the difficult, daily work of rethinking systems, redistributing power, and reconnecting people to their place.



As Miller and Torres-Delgado (2023) rightly caution, metrics must never replace judgement. Numbers are helpful—but they do not think. They do not listen. They do not weigh the ethical or the unexpected. Sustainability cannot be reverse-engineered from a dashboard; it must be rooted in local knowledge, relational insight, and courageous decisions that resist the pull of convention or convenience.

What's needed is a shift from measurement to meaning—recognising that sustainability is not a fixed destination, but an ongoing, relational process that is often complex, context-dependent, and at times uncomfortable. While systems thinking and critical reflection should take precedence over simplistic box-ticking, sustainability schemes and healthy competition can still play a constructive role when they motivate action, foster innovation, and drive continuous improvement.

Let us be clear:

- It's a starting point, not a finish line.
- A management tool, not a marketing stunt.
- A way to track your own journey, not to outshine your neighbours.
- It's a proof of your sustainability efforts, not evidence to call yourself a sustainable city.
- A shared responsibility, not the burden of one sustainability officer.

A tool. Just a tool. But wielded wisely, it can help you remake the city from within.

The future of tourism is not in the index or certification.

It's in the intention: Use the tool—don't become it.

Ultimately, it is up to the users of these tools to recognise their limitations and actively supplement them with local knowledge and context. Relying solely on scores risks overlooking what really matters for your place. True progress comes from making sustainability meaningful and relevant to your own—not just place ticking the boxes that earn points.

Start by writing about what matters to you and your place. Begin telling your story.

But what does it take to write the full story of a place, especially in the context of tourism? In the next chapters, we turn to Helsinki and Gothenburg to share their learnings and local insights. Alongside these stories, several experts emphasize the importance of quality of life as a core component of truly sustainable development. Some argue that to understand the full story of a place, we need to adopt a regenerative lens: one that not only sustains, but restores, enriches, and empowers both people and ecosystems. The future of tourism is uncertain, but one thing is clear: legislative frameworks will play a defining role in shaping how destinations evolve. These ideas and possibilities will unfold in the pages ahead.

Lessons from Leading Practices

Helsinki

Jukka Punamäki, Senior Advisor in tourism in Helsinki, shared some insights gained along the sustainability journey and through the use of sustainability schemes.

Sustainability Tools as Governance and Communication Instruments

- Sustainability indices (like the GDS-Index) are used not only as internal tools but also for accountability and visibility to political leadership. They're tied to **institutional reporting and legitimacy**.
- These tools **signal progress** and align the city with global sustainability standards.

Benefits of Sustainability Frameworks

“Certifications and indexes provide a framework. They bring up questions we might not normally consider, giving us a more holistic view. And nobody said saving the planet is easy, it's hard and it takes time.”

- Frameworks help provide **structure, benchmarking, and external validation**.
- They push local stakeholders to think beyond their usual scope by introducing **new questions** and promoting **systems thinking**.
- There's **recognition of difficulty**—sustainability isn't a quick win but a long-term, effortful process.

Focus on Tourism Companies' Maturity

“The majority of tourism happens in the tourism companies. So our main focus has been on trying to make our tourism companies as sustainable as possible.”

Efforts are concentrated on **making businesses more sustainable**, implying a **bottom-up or private-sector-oriented** strategy.

Resident Engagement: Institutional but Limited

“Helsinki has been pioneering in resident engagement. Not only in tourism, but on a city level. Helsinki has a citizen engagement unit whose sole purpose is to engage with the locals. For example, Helsinki has so called borough liaisons whose purpose is to communicate with the locals in many different ways. So Helsinki has a really good connection with the locals. But to be honest, when it comes to tourism specifically, there aren't many residents participating in the town hall meetings where tourism is discussed. It would be great to have more locals interested in tourism development.”

- The city has **structural mechanisms** for community participation—dedicated units, budgeting tools, and district representatives. Helsinki also has an action plan for citizen engagement in the development of the tourism and event sectors.
- However, there's a **disconnect**: people are **not particularly interested in tourism development**, perhaps due to a **lack of visible problems**.

Town hall meetings are most populated by **insiders**, not everyday citizens.

Tourism companies in Helsinki stand out with exceptional sustainability certification rates. An impressive 99% of hotel rooms in Helsinki (in hotels with over 50 rooms) are certified, compared to just 9.3% across Europe, according to a recent study. Certification rates are also high across other key sectors: all conference venues (100%), the top 15 attractions (80%), the airport and port (100%), and 83% of event agencies meet recognised sustainability standards. This demonstrates Helsinki's strong, city-wide commitment to sustainability and places the city in an excellent position to respond to the EU's tightening regulations on greenwashing (Helsinki, 2025).

Reaching this level has required years of dedicated collaboration with companies. It has taken motivation, workshops, funding, and a range of other tools to get here. Still, hundreds of businesses remain uncertified—particularly in the restaurant sector, where additional support and momentum are needed (Helsinki, 2025).



Göteborg

Katarina Thorstensson, Sustainability Strategist and Destination Development in Göteborg, reflected on key lessons learned from advancing sustainability practices and engaging with sustainability certification programmes.

Sustainability Tools as Both Useful and Limited

“It's [rankings and certifications schemes] sort of fairly constant, you can measure against yourself, and you can see progress. But on the other hand, you have to understand and interpret this instrument [...]. You have to understand it to play it. So it is like what you make of it”

- Sustainability tools (indexes, certifications) are instruments: they're useful only if you know how to interpret and apply them. This metaphor suggests that success depends on human understanding and agency, not just the tool itself.
- It's a learning process in itself. As colleagues get involved, they often develop new ideas. Along the way, the process generates valuable data and insights that can be used not only for evaluation, but also to tell meaningful stories; things happen in the process of reporting.

“It gives you a framework and you measure and see, evaluate where you are. It doesn't say anything that much about the quality of everything [..]”

- While helpful for **tracking progress**, these tools may **oversimplify** complex realities. There's a critique of **bureaucratic burdens** and **misalignment**: some metrics may push action that isn't truly relevant just for the sake of scoring well.

Tools as Accelerators, Not Drivers Alone

“It has helped us to sort of accelerate. I don't think that we would be where we are today without this, to be honest. But then again, you have to know where, what are the weaknesses and sort of the blind spot”

Despite their limits, sustainability frameworks have provided **direction and momentum**, especially in early stages.

Importance of Dialogue and Grounded Action

“You can't just sit with a certification or an index like that. You have to be out, among your colleagues, among your partners, to actually understand and listen to what, how are you talking about these things and and what is, [...]. [...] play gently, like a piano.”

- Sustainability is not only about formal frameworks but also about engagement, listening, and collective action. The metaphor of playing the piano “gently” highlights the need for sensitivity and adaptability.

Strategic Communication and Patience

“Be patient and persistent. [...] celebrate the small wins”

- Acknowledges that sustainability takes time, and motivation can come from celebrating progress, however small.

“It's not always just for the greater good. You have to, depending on who you talk to, try to communicate the business case when you talk to partners and see sort of other benefits than the greater good.”

- Tailor your message: to gain real buy-in, sustainability needs to resonate with daily business interests, not just abstract ideals

Gothenburg, known for its sustainable ambitions, must now pay a fine of 150,000 kronor (around 14,000 euros) for missing its renewable energy targets. This fine is related to a 'sustainability-linked loan' (SLL) the city took out in 2022. An SLL ties annual sustainable goals to the loan's interest rate; meeting the goals results in a discount, while failing to do so incurs a fine.

Gothenburg set four ambitious goals: becoming energy-neutral, reducing energy consumption in public buildings, electrifying its service vehicle fleet, and improving the poorest neighborhoods. The city is now being fined for not meeting one of these targets due to delays in renewable energy investments.

Fredrik Block, who oversees the project for the city, acknowledges the setback but emphasises that Gothenburg remains committed to being emission-free by 2030. The high ambitions are intentional, driving the entire organisation towards the same objectives. Despite the fine, the financial benefits over three years have been significant.



Quality of Life as the Heart of Sustainability

Quality of life isn't a side note in the sustainability conversation—it's the core. Rather than treating tourism, urban development, and environmental policy as separate silos, several experts underscored the value of a holistic approach that puts residents' lived experiences at the center. Across our interviews, quality of life consistently surfaced as a powerful, human-centred lens for interpreting what sustainability truly means in a destination. For residents, it captures the interplay between social well-being, economic opportunity, environmental health, and governance. When viewed this way, quality of life becomes not just a consequence of sustainable development, but a compass guiding it. The following dimensions illustrate how this perspective can inform practice.



Quality of life of residents [...] do they like their city, and do they have a good life? [...] you have to break it down”

*– Katarina Thorstensson, Sustainability Strategist
& Destination Development, Gothenburg*

Thorstensson emphasises the need to consider lived experience as a multidimensional and nuanced component of sustainability, alongside with environmental indicators.



To really make a city attractive to visitors is to make it attractive to residents”

*–Randy Durband, CEO,
Global Sustainable Tourism Council*

Durband stresses that quality of life is positioned as a shared benefit: investments that serve residents (e.g., greenways, public space) also enhance the visitor experience, highlighting the interdependence of tourism and urban well-being.

The Missing Voice: Residents

Tourism plays a critical role in the economic and social vitality of rural, coastal, remote, as well as urban and central areas. It contributes to the maintenance of essential services, generates employment—particularly in regions with limited alternative opportunities—and supports the preservation of cultural heritage and traditional ways of life. When considering quality of life, it is essential to include residents' representation, as sustainable tourism cannot exist without the participation of those who live in the destination. However, fostering meaningful and inclusive engagement remains one of the most persistent challenges in urban governance and tourism planning. This raises a key question: how can DMOs effectively contribute to empowering community influence and fostering co-ownership in tourism and local development?

Stakeholders and experts consistently pointed to the difficulty of generating broad-based participation. As Matias Thuen Jørgensen notes, the people who show up are often the same ones:



What we see with many of these initiatives is that the residents who get involved are typically the usual suspects—those who are perhaps bored, have something to gain, or are dissatisfied. As a result, it does not lead to broad-based resident involvement, but rather to a situation where only a few voices are heard.”

– Matias Thuen Jørgensen, Professor of Tourism Management and Head of the Centre for Tourism Research, Roskilde University

While opportunities for participation must be available, Jørgensen stresses that this alone is not enough. A more effective approach may be to design tourism strategies with residents in mind **from the very beginning**—not as an afterthought, but as a central reference point.

In the interview, Mireia Guix emphasised that one key issue lies in the approach used to engage local communities. Often, residents are treated as a homogeneous group with similar characteristics, which does not reflect reality. She elaborated:



Engaging locals is a very tricky challenge. First of all, do residents even want tourism? I think strategies need to be targeted. When we talk about residents, we often treat them as a unified group, but they are not.

Some have a stake in tourism and benefit directly from it; others do not. We need to find ways to engage both groups. How do we do that? We can be as creative as possible—and that will also depend on where the city is located.”

– Dr. Mireia Guix,
Lecturer in Tourism & Hospitality,
The University of Queensland

Insufficient local engagement poses a significant barrier to the development of sustainable tourism strategies, which must be rooted in the needs and aspirations of the host communities.

As Randy Durband notes, “If there's a council in place, there's likely a direct correlation with good performance at a destination. That's because if you have those two essential ingredients—a whole-of-government approach and a regular mechanism for private sector and community engagement—you're on the right track.

What we advocate is holding regular public meetings three or four times a year, where community leaders and any interested individuals are welcome to participate.”

This raises a key question: how can we effectively engage local communities?

Jukka Punamäki describes the different approaches used to engage residents in Helsinki, as well as the challenge of incorporating their voices into tourism, a topic that is not often felt as relevant by locals:



First of all, we conduct a large survey every two years, which includes thousands of people from the city. [...] Then, regarding the event at the town hall, for example, it's not easy to get people interested in tourism development—mainly because we don't really have any major issues with tourism. [...] Here, locals don't usually think about tourism in their daily lives, likely because it's not as visible or disruptive. That said, Helsinki has been a pioneer in resident engagement. At the city level—not just in tourism—we have an entire unit dedicated solely to engaging with residents. There are people specifically appointed to different districts in Helsinki, and they interact with locals in a variety of ways.”

– Jukka Punamäki, Senior Advisor in tourism and destination management unit, Business Helsinki

These examples highlight that genuine resident engagement is not a communication campaign—it is a structural element. It requires consistent investment in social infrastructure, in listening, and in the rhythms of everyday life. When residents feel heard, connected, and proud of their place, they are more likely to support tourism—not as passive hosts, but as co-authors of the destination's identity. Only then does a city become not just visited, but truly shared.

Sustainable Will No Longer Be Enough: Regenerative Approaches

In some corners of the tourism world, a quiet revolution is brewing. More and more voices are calling for a move beyond "sustainable tourism"—a term that, while noble in intent, increasingly feels like the bare minimum. Inspired by movements in other sectors—regenerative agriculture, regenerative design—a growing number of thinkers and practitioners are asking: What if tourism didn't just aim to do less harm, but actively set out to do good?

Not everyone is on board. Critics of the regenerative turn say we haven't even achieved real sustainability yet, and they have a point. But if this whitepaper is about thinking beyond indexes and certifications—beyond the checkboxes—it's worth pausing here and considering what regenerative tourism might offer.


This shift doesn't mean abandoning the good work already underway. It means reimagining our goals. CityDNA (2023) strategy report stresses that "we champion the holistic idea of regeneration [...] tourism must positively add to the natural, social, cultural, and economic resources of our communities and cities" (p.7).

Regenerative tourism is not a checklist. It's a mindset. And while it's still emerging—and yes, sometimes vague—it opens up the possibility that tourism might one day mean more than just transportation and consumption. It might mean care. It might mean reciprocity. At least it might mean so much more than tourists 'giving back'...



Regeneration is more than just giving back. It is an approach of systemic transformation. It forces us to see how we can break the system and rebuild it, to make it better. It is hard work, and complex. It won't happen overnight. it requires courage and long term commitment."

– Guy Bigwood, CEO and Chief Changemaker,
Global Destination Sustainability Movement



The certificate
does not
make the
garden grow

At its core, regeneration is not just another label. It represents a paradigm shift in how we relate to place, to time, and to each other. Sustainability asks us to slow the damage. Regeneration asks us to heal. Sustainability seeks balance; regeneration seeks vitality. The sustainable city endures—perhaps quietly. The regenerative city is alive, co-creative, adaptive.

Regeneration is rooted in seeing the world as a network of living, interconnected systems that require relationship, observation, and care rather than just technical fixes. It differs from sustainability in many ways:

		SUSTAINABILITY	REGENERATION
1	PARADIGM	Mechanistic, reductionist, and some belief in technology to improve	Whole, human, living systems
2	INTENT	Modification, invest to improve	Systems change
3	FOCUS	Doing, action	Being, inner state
4	ORIENTATION	Problem solving	Possibility, potential, capability
5	PURPOSE	Extraction, but compensating for it	Generative, thriving, flourishing
6	PARTICIPATION	Individual, competitive	Collective, collaborative
7	GEO FOCUS	Global, generic	Place specific
8	HUMAN NATURE	Homo Economicus with a growing conscious	Homo Curitans
9	POWER	Top down, concentrated	Bottom up, distributed
10	ATTITUDE	Damage limitation, and a little more attention to social equality	Aspirational, caring
11	TERM	Short-term target	Lifelong thinking
12	OPTIMAL BALANCE	Decided by government/market	Decided by the community
13	TRADE VALUE	'a bit more conscious' consumption	Meaningful exchange

Overview of differences between sustainable tourism and regenerative tourism.

Souce: Tourism is dead: long live the traveller (2022)

Regenerative tourism doesn't whisper reform—it demands metamorphosis.

It's not about fresh labels or greener checklists. It's about a radical rewiring of intent. It asks, with uncomfortable insistence: Are we nourishing life, or merely extracting from it with a better conscience? It refuses to confuse efficiency with ethics, or growth with goodness.

Regeneration is not a strategy; it's a stance. Fiercely place-based, defiantly unscalable, it resists the seductions of standardisation. You cannot certify what must be cultivated. Regenerative tourism grows in soil, not spreadsheets. It takes root in humility, in listening to land and people before acting, in slowing down enough to notice what is already living, already wise. It invites us to stop managing places like products and start seeing them like ecosystems—with patience, reciprocity, and reverence.

What is Next?

A Moment of Uncertainty

We are currently in a transitional phase. EU directives have been announced, but their implementation, enforcement, and interpretation remain unclear. Legislators, certifying bodies, and businesses are still working together to define how these rules will function in practice. Until then, grey zones will persist.

At the time of writing, the Green Claims Directive is on hold. In June 2025, the European Commission announced its intention to withdraw the proposal, primarily due to political pressure and disagreements regarding the inclusion of micro-enterprises (businesses with fewer than 10 employees and under €2 million in revenue, which represent approximately 96% of all EU companies). The future of the Directive remains uncertain, and it is unclear whether it will ultimately become law.

Nevertheless, even in the absence of the Green Claims Directive, companies operating in the EU must continue to comply with stringent requirements on environmental claims under existing legislation—most notably, the Empowering Consumers for the Green Transition Directive (Directive (EU) 2024/825). This Directive entered into force in March 2024 and must be transposed into national law by March 2026. Its provisions will apply from September 27, 2026.

For tourism businesses and destinations, this creates uncertainty: what complies today may fall short tomorrow. DMOs will need to stay informed, adaptable, and ready to support local stakeholders as the rules evolve.

An Ongoing Concern for Managers

Certification is already a demanding process—long, costly, and resource-intensive. What if it withdraws from the process entirely? What if costs rise sharply, or your team doesn't have enough time for implementation?

These concerns are real. Without clarity and support, even the most committed sustainability managers may find their efforts at risk of losing momentum.

The threat of Greenhushing

Faced with legal uncertainty, some destination managers may opt to say nothing at all. Fearing they can't fully back up their claims—or afraid of future scrutiny—they remain silent. This silence can have unintended consequences: **genuinely sustainable businesses may retreat from the conversation**, while less committed players continue to dominate public perception.

Although the EU encourages businesses to actively communicate their sustainability efforts, the fear of missteps may discourage them. This phenomenon is known as **greenhushing**: when integrity leads to invisibility. And it could undermine the very transparency the new legislation seeks to foster.

Certifying the Future or Certifying the Few?

The coming years will bring a fundamental shift in how sustainability is communicated, verified, and regulated across the EU. For tourism destinations and businesses, this means the time for vague green claims is over—and the time for legal accountability has begun.

A Fog of Labels—Soon to Clear?

Today's consumers are overwhelmed by a tangle of eco-labels and sustainability claims—many of which are misleading, unverifiable, or outright false. In response, the European Commission has introduced legislation aimed at cracking down on greenwashing and reinforcing consumer trust. The goal: ensure that sustainability claims are transparent, science-based, and independently verified. However, the exact implementation of these directives is still unfolding. We are in a liminal moment—laws have been drafted, but their consequences remain just over the regulatory horizon.

The Coming Wave: How EU legislation Will Reshape Tourism

In general we expect to see three major shifts:

From Voluntary to Mandatory:

Under the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), large companies are now obliged to report their Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) performance. While smaller tourism businesses may not be directly targeted, those within the supply chains of larger organisations will still need to comply.

Funding Will Follow Compliance:

Public procurement and grant criteria are changing. While sustainability conditions are not yet systematically enforced, destinations and tourism businesses will increasingly need to demonstrate compliance to qualify for funding and partnerships. And eventually for clients, as we are already seeing in the MICE-sector.

Corporate-Controlled Labels Under Fire:

The age of DIY eco-labels is ending. Self-declared, in-house, or consultancy-run schemes will no longer meet EU legal standards. Only certifications accredited through independent, internationally recognised standards (such as ISO/IEC 17065) will remain legitimate in the eyes of the law.

Randy Durband, CEO of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), does not mince words:



We believe there are now around 350 entities in the world that call themselves certification bodies. None have ever undergone any external review. Most don't even know how to properly audit or certify... If you coach an entity to improve and then turn around and audit and certify them, that's an incredible conflict of interest."

– Randy Durband, CEO,
Global Sustainable Tourism Council



This wave of regulation aims to clean up the marketplace. The **Green Claims Directive**, in particular, mandates that any environmental claim—such as “climate-neutral” or “eco-friendly”—must be backed up with verifiable data. This could restore integrity to sustainability discourse, rewarding those who do the hard work, while forcing the rest to fall silent—or shape up.

As **Ramunė Genzbigelyte-Venturi**, Policy Officer for Tourism at the European Commission, explains:



We want to reduce—and, if possible, eradicate—the greenwashing, protecting both consumers and companies. There will be a clear advantage for businesses: providing a level playing field and more legal certainty.”

*– Ramunė Genzbigelyte-Venturi,
Policy Officer for Tourism,
European Commission*

A Risk of Justice Lost?

Yet not everyone is cheering. Several experts warn of a new sustainability gap—one not based on commitment, but on capacity. Small, rural, or family-run businesses often lack the resources to navigate complex certification processes or pay for professional audits. Xavier Font puts it bluntly:



There’s going to be a problem with distributive justice. Small, rural, family-owned properties won’t become certified—they simply can’t afford it. And yet, via online travel agents, they will lose the ability to communicate their sustainability work. That’s not right.”

*– Xavier Font, Professor at University of Surrey,
Editor in Chief at Journal of Sustainable Tourism*

Font points out that most certification schemes have quietly drifted toward certifying large urban hotels—where audit costs are lower and returns are higher. In remote areas, where sustainability might be more embedded but less branded, certification is retreating. The risk? A system where only those who can afford time and/or budget to be visible get to be recognised.

The Choice Ahead

The EU's new directives hold great promise for restoring credibility and trust in sustainability claims. But without attention to equity and access, we may end up certifying the loudest, not the most committed. As the rules tighten, so must our resolve: to build systems that reward substance over show, and ensure that sustainability doesn't become a luxury brand, but remains a shared societal goal.

The question is no longer whether regulation is coming. It is: **for whom will it work and who will be left behind?**

In response to rising social, environmental, and economic pressures, the EU is developing a new sustainable tourism strategy—building on the Transition Pathway for Tourism and the European Agenda for Tourism 2030—to enhance the sector's resilience, competitiveness, and cohesion, and is now consulting stakeholders across the tourism ecosystem to define key priorities and actions. You can take part in the consultation via the following survey:

<https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/runner/TourismStrategy>

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