

A GUIDE TO
**SUSTAINABLE
PRACTICE**
FOR TOURISM
BUSINESSES





We believe everyone involved in tourism can play a significant part in helping destinations to thrive because of tourism and we exist to help them to do it

INTRODUCTION

Since the Travel Foundation was formed in 2003, we've been working with tourism businesses to help them embed sustainable practices into their organisations. For many it's a struggle to get started.

What difference can we make? Who will manage it?

We don't have the time; we've got holidays to sell and targets to meet. We understand this because many of us at the Travel Foundation have worked in the travel industry and have been there ourselves. We understand the complexities, getting the buy-in, and that meeting targets and quotas takes precedence, above all else.

We think it's a given now that anyone working in travel understands the importance of protecting environments and

culture and spreading tourism wealth more equitably in tourist destinations. Every travel business needs to take responsibility if they want their product to survive. However, they cannot see how they – a very small fish in an enormous sea – can make a difference. They cannot perceive how their operations alone can help to make significant change.

We know that if tourism businesses want to embrace sustainability, they must understand what change is within their reach, and possess the skills to achieve

it. But we also know that any approach to adopting sustainable practice needs to be simple, practical, engaging and fun and we continually strive to make it that way. The rewards can be great – happy and proud staff, higher quality products, better supplier relationships and satisfied customers.

If you want to demonstrate your commitment to sustainable tourism, then this guide is designed for that purpose, whether you are just getting started or want to test your current approach.

The UNWTO defines sustainable tourism as:

“Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities”



THE APPROACH

Add it on or integrate?

There are different ways to approach sustainability; having a separate sustainability strategy, a specialist team and a sustainability programme as an 'add-on' is one method. This is an approach some tourism businesses are taking; establishing programmes such as green champions and volunteering networks, providing financial support for charities, local community outreach work and perhaps some ventures into a portfolio of 'greener products'. These are great initiatives and can generate many benefits for the business in terms of staff and customer engagement and of course the support they provide to great causes enables them to make a positive difference through those organisations.

However, this guide is about embedding sustainability

throughout a tourism business and we have seen first-hand the difficulties of taking an 'add-on' approach in our work with partners – embedding real and lasting change can be a long and difficult process plus it often relies on individual champions that come and go. So, there are many reasons why integrating sustainability into your core strategy is the way to go if you really want to become a sustainable business...

Your core strategy shapes the direction of your business and keeps it thriving; it defines your products, markets, partnerships, risks and opportunities, what and how you measure. These **very same things also shape its impacts** on people, communities and the natural environment so why have a separate strategy?

Where will you apply the sustainability lens within your

performance management system, training and development, supply chain, product development, reporting and consumer messaging? And how will you integrate it?

Don't fall down the trap of making sustainability an 'add-on' to your day-to-day business, as this will require additional time and effort. Instead, make it a core part of your business strategy. Integrate sustainability practices and procedures throughout your business and along your value chain. Drive this from the very top of your business, assigning someone with board level responsibility for delivery.

(Source: White Paper 'The Survival of the Fittest.')



HOW DOES SUSTAINABILITY FIT WITHIN YOUR BUSINESS?

What should *we* do?

Taking that first bold step or changing up a gear can seem daunting as there are many decisions to make.

- Which tourism impacts do we prioritise?
- Which products or services should we focus on first?
- How do we communicate what we're doing?
- Do we have the skills and resources to do this?

Whilst these can seem like difficult questions, the answers all lie within the business – what drives it? Its purpose and mission and the business model itself. We work with businesses to help them to find what matters substantially to them, to their customers and to focus on what they can feasibly influence.

Mapping out your business model is a hugely valuable activity aside from stimulating ideas around

sustainability. It brings people from across the business together to share perspectives and use a common language to define its purpose, the activities and how it creates value.

Examining your business model will show where sustainability may be integral to your business and help to identify opportunities for creating more value as a company overall – social and environmental value as well as financial.

What is a business model map?

- It's not a strategy but can be used for devising strategies
- It's a static snapshot of your business at a point in time

Use supplier relationships to become a source for innovation.

“To get the most benefit from our ground agents’ local knowledge, I schedule time to ask what makes their trips responsible; and to discuss how trips could be improved to deliver more unique, responsible experiences.”

Meghan Devenish – former SE Asia Product Manager, Exodus Travels

Example of business model mapping questions – the six ‘C’s

- 1 Who are your key market segments and what matters to your **customers**?
- 2 What defines your company **culture**? What do you most care about?
- 3 Who are your key **contacts** (business partners, suppliers and networks) and what opportunities exist to strengthen relationships?
- 4 What are your **core** products / services/ activities and the impacts they create?
- 5 How do you **communicate** and interact with customers, suppliers, and distributors?
- 6 **Culpability** - what are your biggest risks and most material impacts?

Whilst this exercise should be led by senior management it will be most effective to involve

staff from across the business to explore how sustainability issues relate to different functions.

Building a sustainable supply chain

Your supply chain offers an enormous opportunity to demonstrate your commitment to becoming a sustainable business. Don't defer responsibility. Work with suppliers to understand systemic sustainability challenges and then find ways to overcome these together. The better they understand your organisation's long-term plans and vision the better they will be able to help you to improve. Using a sustainability lens at decision making points in product and services design lifecycles can help to innovate.

Some larger travel companies are taking this a step further by undertaking **materiality assessments**. This is the process of identifying, refining, and assessing numerous potential environmental, social and governance issues that could affect their business, and/or their stakeholders, and condensing them into a short-list of topics that inform company strategy, targets, and reporting.



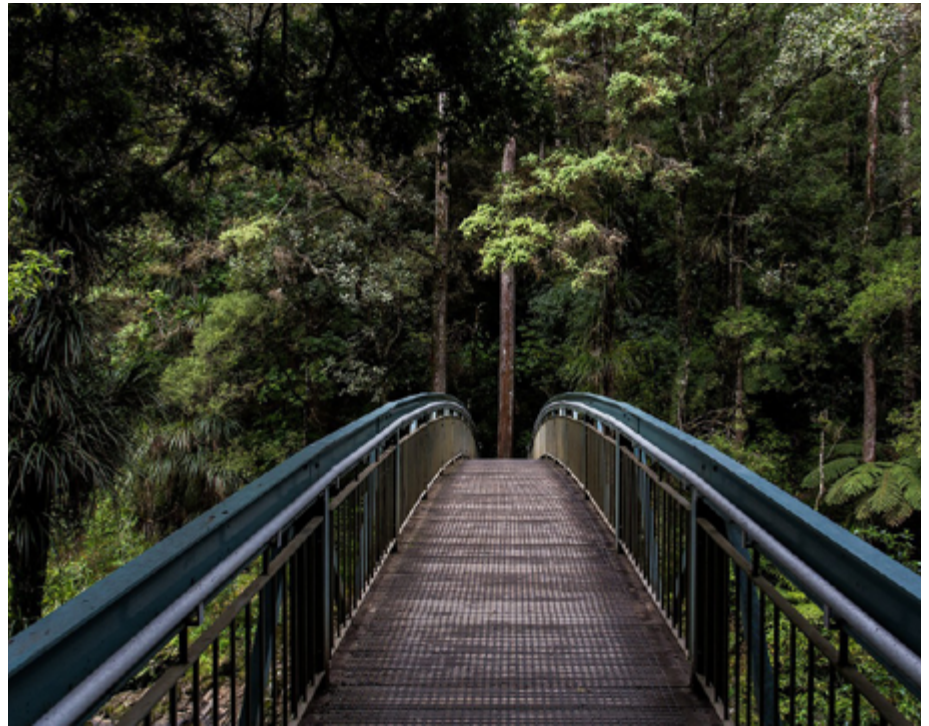
Case Study

Following a business mapping workshop, Travel Counsellors realised that their unique personal relationship with clients offered the opportunity to influence consumer choice in purchasing holidays. Their strategy is now focusing on identifying and promoting sustainable products and building the capacity of their team to understand sustainable tourism principles and application.

CHOOSING YOUR DIRECTION AND THE DIFFERENCE YOU WANT TO MAKE

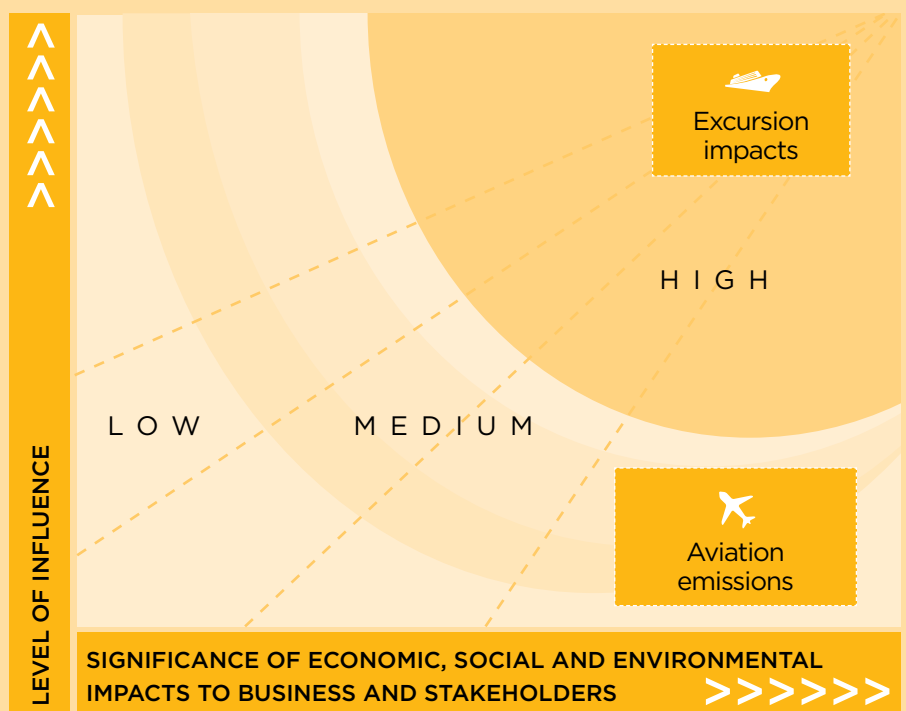
Mapping your business model will provide a greater understanding of the resources that the business relies upon as well as the environmental and social costs and benefits (impacts). This could potentially raise a high number of sustainability issues to address and the next challenge is to prioritise one or two initially.

It makes sense to prioritise issues/impacts that are of high importance to your business (and its stakeholders), and that you have a good level of influence over.



Example of an Outbound Tour Operator

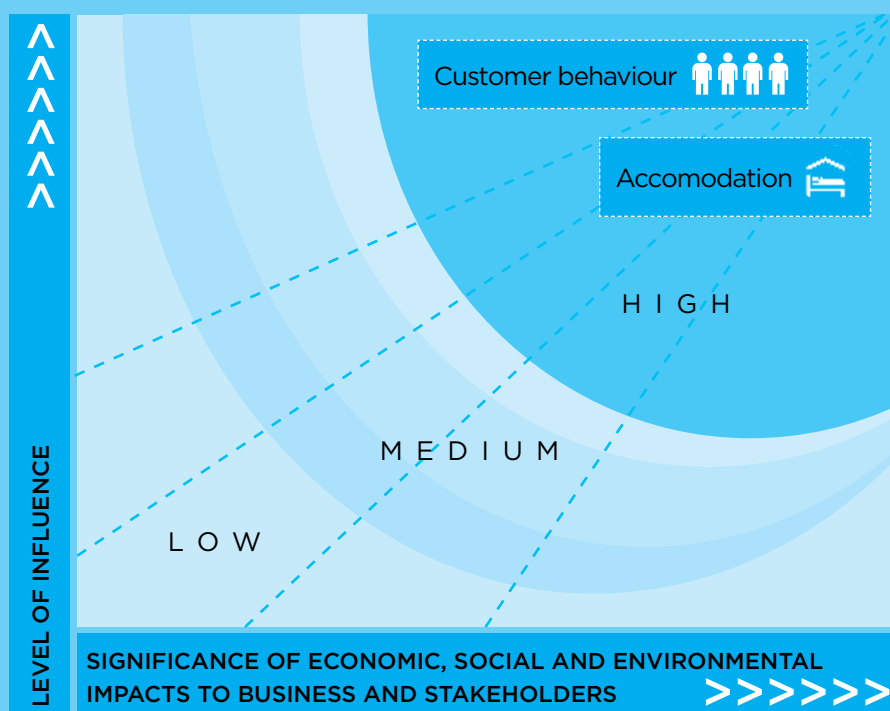
Quality Tours has a very close, longstanding relationship with their ground agent in Thailand. They are also a key client in terms of the proportion of business they bring to the ground operator. Excursions are a core product. This means there is great potential to work together to increase positive impacts of excursions and reduce negative impacts. Additionally, their customers really value authentic community experiences. Together, the high levels of importance and influence amount to sustainable excursions being a priority. They are also concerned about aviation emissions but recognise that they have a very low level of influence. They decide that they will start to research this to decide on the best course of action.



Example of Travel Agency

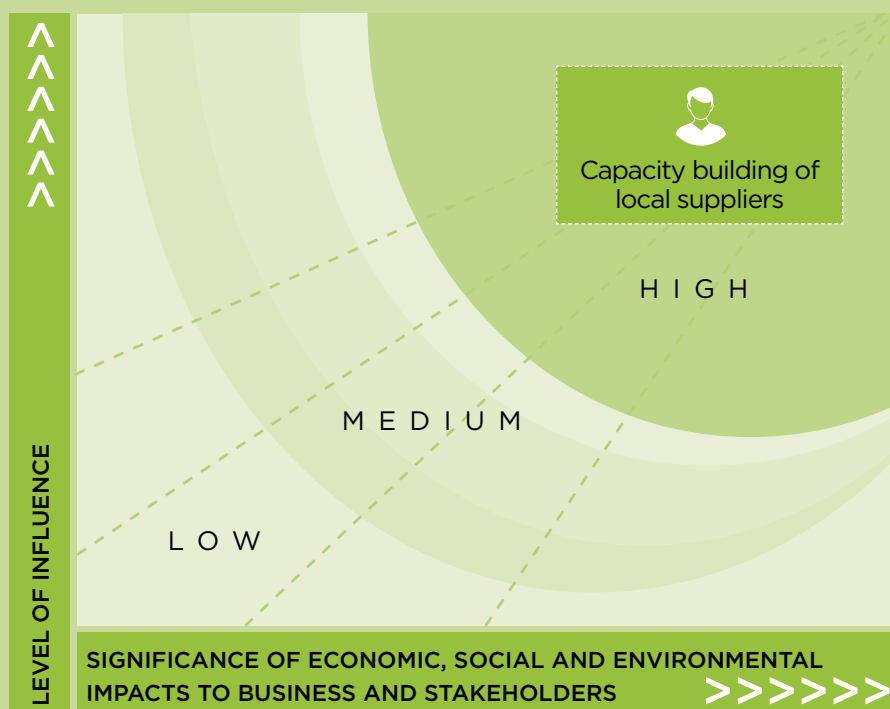
High Street Holidays primarily sell package holidays from a wide selection of travel companies. They have an opportunity to influence customer behaviour in terms of responsible travel and encouraging local discretionary spend through their interactions with customers.

Helping customers to select accommodation is a key element of their proposition and is therefore important to the business. However, they don't have direct relationships with properties, so the extent of their influence is in product selection and promotion.



Example of an Inbound Tour Operator

Homeland Tours is an established Destination Management Company in the Caribbean. They have a large international portfolio of clients. Regional statistics indicate that over 80% of tourism money coming into the region is going to foreign owned businesses rather than local ones. An important part of their ethos is to spread the benefits of tourism locally and help to preserve each island's unique identity. They have a high level of influence with both their suppliers and their buyers. They decide to prioritise building the capacity of local suppliers to meet the quality and sustainability standards of their buyers and to prioritise promotion of these products to their buyers. It's a long-term strategy starting with those products nearest to market readiness.



ADVOCACY AND COMMUNICATIONS

Your business model mapping will also help you to decide how you want to position yourselves.

What do you want to stand for?

Is there anything you feel strongly opposed to selling? Taking a long and hard look at what really matters to your business will help you to establish your position and help you to identify the reasons for taking it. There may be some hard questions to answer. How will you reconcile your impacts on destinations where your activities could be perceived as putting the destination at risk? What about air travel? How can you position yourself as a sustainable business if you are selling long-haul travel?

Businesses like responsibletravel.com are addressing this head on by creating a manifesto for the future of tourism. The first chapter is on aviation and climate crisis. The



first thing they say is “we are a travel company; we are not anti all flying. However, we believe we must urgently find ways to travel more responsibly to protect the environment”. They then go on to state the facts and what they think the plan should be.

Addressing issues head on can help businesses to establish leadership, encouraging others to join in and work collaboratively to find solutions. But it’s not always straight-forward...

Many tour operators are now boycotting elephant riding, but this does not guarantee an end to elephant cruelty. An elephant that does not undertake riding can still be exposed to harmful training and what’s going to happen to all those elephants now they are no longer a tourist attraction?

<https://www.elephantstandards.com/post/congratulations-you-boycotted-an-elephant-camp-now-what-happens>



So any positioning needs careful research and examination from every angle. If you are prepared to stick your neck out, you will need to be able to justify why and avoid any possibility of greenwashing.

Any reporting should be completely transparent making information available about plans, decisions, policies, standards, and performance. This is time consuming work and will need someone within the business to take responsibility for it.

Taking a long-haul flight generates more carbon emissions than the average person in dozens of countries around the world produces in a whole year, a new Guardian analysis has found. The figures highlight the disproportionate carbon footprint of those who can afford to fly, with even a short-haul return flight from London to Edinburgh contributing more CO2 than the mean annual emissions of a person in Uganda or Somalia.
The Guardian 19th July 2019

Greenwash Definition

Disinformation disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image.

LEADERSHIP, ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

‘It’s a good thing to do’ vs ‘It’s my job’

Once you have developed your plan you will need to decide who is going to lead, where responsibilities will sit and what the roles will be.

In our experience you will have a much better chance of achieving the desired results if you build leadership competencies to drive awareness and sustainability performance. If leadership comes from the top, then this will emphasise the importance of the plan throughout your organisation. The responsibility for sustainability is then absorbed right through the business and success is not reliant on the goodwill of staff to carry out extra tasks because ‘it’s a good thing to do’.

Build new leadership

competencies to drive awareness and reprioritise sustainability. Align incentives with sustainability performance. Rewards and incentives can be excellent motivators but despite this very few travel companies reward their staff for their achievements in meeting sustainability goals.

Develop coalitions to advance progress on sustainability challenges

Through your business mapping you may have identified challenges that are hard to influence; as a relatively small business your voice may not be heard. By leading similar, like-



minded companies to advocate change e.g. travel businesses collaborating to prevent the destruction of rainforest, you can

demonstrate how you are taking responsibility and taking the lead by working and influencing others.

G ADVENTURES URGES TRADE PARTNERS TO HELP END PLASTIC SCOURGE

15 NOV 2019 BY JAMES CHAPPLE

G Adventures is urging the trade to join its Plastic Partnership Project and help end the scourge of single-use plastics on the tourism sector.



<https://www.ttgmedia.com/news/g-adventures-urges-trade-partners-to-help-end-plastic-scurge-20114>

BUILDING THE SKILLS

Skills for sustainable development are central to innovation and vital for a productive, adaptable workforce. Companies need employees at all levels, across all functions, who understand how social and environmental issues affect organisational goals, and who are prepared to take action to address them. Businesses can gain a competitive advantage by equipping their employees with the skills and knowledge needed to make the most of the opportunities ahead.

The first step will be to assess what skills your team will need and whether they have the skills and knowledge required to deliver against your plan. It's better to embed sustainable development skills and knowledge within existing development programmes, rather than seeing it as a separate, specialised subject area.



Once you have identified those needs you can start to plan for building capacity. This is where it gets exciting. Here are some of the things we've seen work well.

- **Build your approach** into induction training including the importance of dealing with social and environmental issues, using it as an opportunity to engage staff from the very beginning.
- **Skilling up leaders** – they will need a global mindset, a systems approach, critical thinking, problem-solving and collaboration skills.
- **Sustainable Familiarisation Trips** – explore destinations by examining both the good and bad impacts of tourism with your local suppliers. The focus is then on exploring what actions can be taken to reduce the negative impacts and enhance the positives.
- **Train the trainer programmes** – work with your local operators to train their suppliers in quality, health and safety and customer service.
- **Design tools to support sustainable practice** e.g. checklists for sustainable excursions – building in environmental, social, economic and quality criteria.

ACTION PLANNING

Once you have carried out these exercises it's time to write a plan. The simpler the better. Once again it will work best if it fits with other processes within your business, but for each area of focus you will want to make sure that it includes a clear objective, preferably outlining your desired outcomes.

OBJECTIVE - what do you want to achieve?

DESIRED OUTCOMES - what will it look like?

ACTIONS REQUIRED - what activities will you need to carry out in order to achieve the objective?

INDICATORS OF SUCCESS - how will you know you have achieved the objective?

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES - who is going to make sure it happens?

TIMEFRAME - how long will it take to achieve the objective and what are the milestones to getting there.



MONITORING AND REPORTING

If you are taking action you will want to demonstrate your achievements and the only way to do this is by measuring the effectiveness of your activities. All of this will help to ensure that everything is going to plan, inform future planning, facilitate communications and ensure accountability.

High Street Holidays wanted to increase the percentage of hotels sold with sustainability certification and this responsibility was allocated to the sales teams. They decided to develop the product knowledge and skills of sales staff so that they could confidently identify and promote these to customers. Sales reports were configured to capture sales of certified hotels. To measure the embedding of sustainability into the customer experience, questions were integrated into customer feedback surveys alongside quality criteria.

Quality Tours decided that they wanted to increase the number of contracted hotels that have sustainability certification and their first step was to carry out an audit of the current contracted suppliers to establish a baseline and set realistic goals. The product team were given this responsibility as they have close working relationships with the hotels and could easily integrate sustainability alongside quality and safety standards. Once the baseline was established targets were set and a dashboard reporting system was implemented for annual reports.

Homeland Tours

Following a series of workshops and a mentoring programme to raise the quality of local businesses, Homeland Tours are monitoring and reporting on increase in revenue to local businesses and the difference that it is making to local lives and the environment.





SING IT OUT

Over the years we've seen many fantastic examples of how sustainability has engaged both staff and customers. People love working for companies innovating in sustainable tourism, so embrace it with competitions, social media, internal comms and tell your staff when the company is taking the lead and making a difference.

This has 'opened my eyes' to the impact tourism has on a destination. This can be extremely negative if managed incorrectly, or extremely positive for the local community and environment if managed well.

**Christine Smith, Personal Travel Agent
(Go Greener Online Training)**

I honestly cannot talk about how much I love this company enough! The business itself is amazing with great core values. The whole business is heavily involved in doing extra work for the companies chosen charities which is so great to see. Caring really is at the heart of the business. Personally, I have been given a lot of opportunities to develop my skills with learning paths built around self-improvement instead of "This is what the business want", it's all been about helping me be the best version of myself. **Travel Counsellor**

Research reveals almost three quarters (72%) of travellers believe that people need to act now and make sustainable travel choices to save the planet for future generations.

Travel companies have an important role to play here in the eyes of travellers: 71% of travellers think that travel companies should offer consumers more sustainable travel choices

Booking.com 2019 sustainable travel report

TOP TIPS

- Don't run before you can walk! Take one issue / one destination / one supplier at a time!
- You can't do it alone! Work hard to inspire, engage and motivate staff, suppliers and customers to create more value for society and the environment.
- From the very beginning look for ways to align and integrate sustainability with other success criteria this way it becomes business as usual.
- Have fun!




FIND OUT HOW WE CAN SUPPORT YOU TO EMBED SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES WITHIN YOUR BUSINESS...

If you would like some advice on the next steps to take please get in touch:

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